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# Intuition and fretboard intimacy : approaching improvisation on the guitar

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INTUITION AND FRETBOARD INTIMACY:  
APPROACHING IMPROVISATION  
ON THE GUITAR

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Music

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Don A. Balistreri

December 1995

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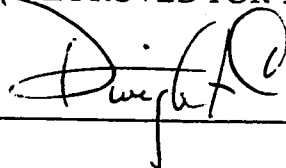
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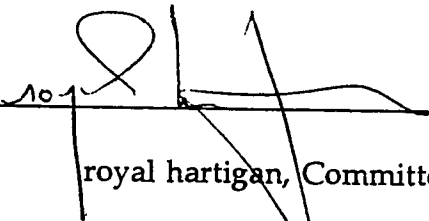
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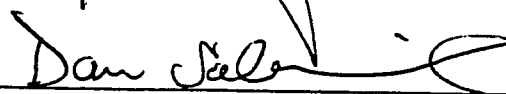
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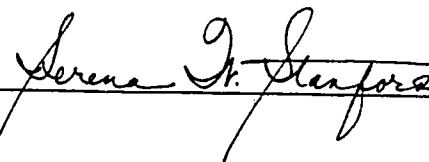
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## ABSTRACT

### INTUITION AND FRETBOARD INTIMACY: APPROACHING IMPROVISATION ON THE GUITAR

by Don A. Balistreri

This thesis details a modern approach to improvisation on the guitar. It features concepts for developing the intuitive aspects of musical improvisation in conjunction with a scheme for complete fretboard comprehension. The overall approach outlines specific techniques, activities, and guidelines for progressing guitarists to improve their improvisational skills, primarily within the jazz, blues, and rock idioms.

The information in this essay centers around my research and personal experience in the field of guitar improvisation, and emphasizes a balance between the technical and intuitive aspects of musical improvisation.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to Professor Dwight Cannon for expanding my view of improvisation and for helping me achieve the best results from my effort.

This thesis is dedicated to my wife Monica in appreciation of all that she has done to help me complete it.

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## PREFACE

The focus of my thesis is on the *conscious* level of guitar improvisation, knowing full well that there are many other dimensions (e.g., life experience, attitude, the phenomenon of those guitarists who play exceedingly well without having any formal musical training). *Intuition* and *fretboard intimacy* are only two aspects of this immensely large area of study. I consider myself a student of guitar improvisation—not an authority—raised in the academic world of musical improvisation, now currently in pursuit of the human, instinctive, and intuitive qualities of musical improvisation; this essay is a culmination of what I have learned so far.

The focus of this work then is limited to the *tools* of guitar improvisation and does not delve heavily into the unconscious or subliminal aspects of improvisation. Improvising guitarists who, like myself, have experienced formal musical training, and who are now interested in discovering the intuitive aspects of improvisation and expanding their mechanical skills will be among those who favor the concepts presented in this work.

## INTRODUCTION

Improvising on the guitar depends largely on how well we understand musical improvisation itself and how well we know our instrument. Research completed for this thesis indicates that guitarists are not provided the opportunity to learn improvisation in a complete manner: a great majority of the method books available (many surveyed for this essay, including the *Complete Guitar Method and Scale System* by Sal Salvador, *A Modern Method for Guitar* by William Leavitt, and *Progressive Lead Guitar* by Gary Turner and Brenton White) are not concerned with helping players increase their *overall* comprehension of improvisation on the instrument. Compounding the problem is the fact that many guitar teachers are products of these methods.

Guitar methods, such as those named above, describe a system of how to accomplish specific improvisational tasks (e.g., scale and chord application, creating a solo) but do not lead to a growth and understanding of how improvisation functions *in our minds and on the guitar*. Many of the methods investigated actually led to a narrowing of possibilities because the reader was not challenged—one only had to follow a set of instructions. In many cases the method appeared more important than the music it was supposed to facilitate.

This essay, as far as my research suggests, is the first to *link* the intuitive aspects of improvisation with essential technical skills needed to improvise on the guitar in either a jazz, blues, or rock style. It has been

written in response to the need for such a work.

Having access to an approach such as this would have been of immeasurable value for me while I was learning the various stages of improvisation on the guitar. In my own teaching experience these concepts have proven very helpful for students of guitar improvisation.

### Purpose and Scope

This document presents information, attained through graduate research and personal and professional experience as an improvising guitarist and teacher, in a way that is new: it combines the intuitive and guitar related aspects of improvisation into one coherent writing. The concepts presented in this work are designed to assist guitarists enhance their improvisational skills. The scope of this work is limited to jazz, blues, and rock improvisation primarily because these styles are akin to the guitar; however, it is necessary to emphasize that the field of improvisation extends greatly beyond these three specific genres.

This essay is not intended to be a strict guide for guitar improvisation but rather a modern approach that will lead to a well-rounded understanding of guitar improvisation, both mentally and physically. The results and success of readers pursuing these concepts will be based on individual experience, present knowledge, interests, and creativity.

## Methodology

This work is divided into two sections: the first is concerned with the intuitive aspects of improvisation (concepts relating to the development of human sensory systems, e.g., visualization, awareness, and detachment) which enable us to improvise in accordance with the natural tendencies of the music; the second part is concerned with specific finger mechanics on the guitar itself (i.e., the various ways notes can be played and memorized on the guitar fretboard).<sup>1</sup>

The information is not intended for the beginner but for the guitarist who has preliminary knowledge of the guitar itself, improvisation, and related terminology (i.e., familiarity with theory, technique, etc.). Traditional music notation, tablature, and fretboard diagrams have been used so as not to alienate those guitarists who do not read music (such players are numerous). References to “activities” and “guidelines” are provided to help the reader better understand and apply the concepts presented in this work; for this reason *you, we, us, and, our* have been used to include the reader. The overall “approach” is presented in a manner that reflects the process in which I have learned, adapted, taught, and utilized these ideas.

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<sup>1</sup> In the first section of this work reference is made to “human sensory systems.” This phrase commonly refers to the five human senses (seeing, hearing, touching, etc.) but within the context of improvised music its definition can be greatly expanded to include the elements of attitude, emotion, feelings, self-confidence, and many others. My treatment of the phrase “human sensory systems” extends beyond the five basic human senses but does not encompass the entire concept.

## PART I: INTUITION AND OTHER HUMAN SENSORY SYSTEMS

Sequential order and physical movement are regulated by those parts of the brain that govern analytical function. It is this mode of functioning which produces and controls our ability to become intimately familiar with the guitar fretboard (as outlined in part two). By contrast, we use those parts of the brain that govern intuitive insights into the style, emotion, and meaning of the music we play. It is this mode of functioning which provides the creative, dramatic, and interpretive qualities of our playing, which in turn brings naturalness and flexibility to our improvisations.

By emphasizing the importance of such functions as spontaneity, creativity, and awareness, and balancing these functions with the analytical equivalents—discipline and accuracy of musical parameters—we can expand our approach to the improvisation of jazz, blues, and rock on the guitar. By allowing our instinctive mode to function, guitarists benefit from using no more effort than is necessary to produce the desired musical results. Aligning ourselves with the basic functions of our intuitive self is the underlying theme of part one.

Intuitive applications in musical improvisation do not implicate idle practice habits. The intuitive approach involves effort, but effort that consists of finding more efficient (and often more enjoyable) ways of practicing and improvising. It also permits us to remove excess tension, movement, and mind-chatter to do just what is necessary to improvise.

The underlying concept, then, enables us to improvise and interact in



accordance with the music, the guitar, our minds, and our intuitions, and not to limit ourselves only to technique—we can become a part of the music by moving beyond the technical and by bringing it to life. This approach to improvisation does not have to be viewed as mystical or obscure, but rather as a practical, realistic manner of addressing improvisation on the guitar. Five specific areas will be addressed to help promote these necessary skills: resources for improvisation, awareness and the present moment, visualization, energy from others, and the guitar and the self.

## RESOURCES FOR IMPROVISATION

Many of us play the guitar without realizing the enormous potential of the mind. We imagine an assortment of limitations: concern about what others will think, fear of playing “wrong” notes, fear of losing control, and so on. These are mind sets that inhibit our sense of trust—we doubt our inner abilities. It is important for improvising guitarists, regardless of style, to realize that there is an incredible improviser within. The ability to improvise is invariably present and may simply need to be uncovered. If we believe we *cannot* improvise, we are correct; if we believe we *can* improvise we are also correct.

### Detachment

Imagine consuming a salad. Think of the many chores that our bodies must complete for proper digestion and nourishment. Saliva automatically enters our mouths to aid the chewing process. We do not think out salivation; it happens automatically. When we swallow the lettuce, we do not actively flex the muscles in our throats to coax the lettuce downward rather than upward. It happens without any mental interference. We do not direct the lettuce into our bloodstream, the nutrients from the lettuce proceed where they are *supposed* to without our having to complete the process.

The above example illustrates that our bodies know exactly how to digest food without our deliberating over it. Similarly, our bodies know

exactly how to improvise, particularly when we are not excessively thinking about it or forcing it to happen. It becomes necessary to detach ourselves from the improvisational process, i.e., let go and allow it happen. Whether we are digesting food or tapping into musical improvisation, releasing doubts, fears, suggestions, corrections, and images of what is supposed to work is essential. Detaching ourselves occurs when we are able to loosen conscious control and allow ourselves to receive and transmit the musicality of our intuitive self.

### Discovering Detachment

- Imagine that you are your favorite improvising guitarist, many years from now. Begin improvising on the guitar but do not be concerned with playing everything correctly; play as if you were the performer of your choice.
- Improvise a short piece but disregard the notes and the guitar. Instead, allow your personality and mood to shape the sound and emerge through the music.
- Imagine that the fretboard is merely a block of wood with several buttons, each note is a different button. While improvising, press the various "buttons" without reference to melody, scales, or chords.
- "Ask" your fingers and body what they would like to accomplish while improvising. Allow your hands body to supersede your mind.
- While improvising glance outside a window, or about the room, for scenes and objects that can incite a deeper experience of the sounds being created. Become immersed in the sights and scents of your surroundings. Allow the

surrounding environment to influence your playing.

- Improvise over a tune or twelve-bar blues progression. Imagine your teacher overtaxing you with instructions (correct tone, articulation, note choice) on how to play the piece. List these instructions; then, discard the list and improvise over the piece.
- Experience movement (dance) while improvising. Play with the guitar behind your back, behind your head, or while lying down. Detach yourself from any and all preconceived notions of how the guitar is “supposed” to be played and trust your intuition to create music.
- Play the guitar extremely fast. Do not be concerned with proper technique, attempt the impossible. Improvise with “reckless abandon” and again, *trust* yourself to make music.

### Discovering Improvisation

The following activity is particularly suited for those who have had little or no previous success improvising on the guitar:

- Hold the guitar in playing position. Allow your hands and arms to hang loosely from your shoulders (a guitar strap may be necessary). Breathe freely and naturally with eyes closed.
- Begin to gently sway back and forth. Allow your sense of weight to transfer itself from your body and into your hands. Continue to sway with a pulse as you begin to play the guitar. Play a single note and continue swaying.
- Play additional notes; consistently be aware of your breathing and any tension that your body creates. Notice if the sound changes as your body

becomes more or less tense. Determine if the tone and/or the notes reflect your mood (happy, sad, angry, romantic, playful).

- Begin to combine notes at different tempos. Play intervals. Notice the *feeling* of the sounds created when two or three notes are combined together.
- As additional notes are played, with different durations, volume, and timbre, follow your instinctive impulses. Allow the sense of music within to direct your playing. Become aware of rhythmic shaping, melody, or texture while playing.
- Begin to experiment with larger spontaneous phrases. Again, note how the sounds reflect your feelings.
- Play a riff that you are familiar with and allow new ideas and improvised variations to emerge from it.
- Use visual imagery to stimulate imagination: imagine different scenes, colors, atmospheres, or personal experiences, and allow your playing to express them.
- Allow your fingers to speak for your body rather than your mind. Play what you hear and feel rather than what you know.

### The Intuitive Self

By way of the above exercises we may discover something greater than the external activity and boundaries of the physical self—a silent but powerful counterpart—the intuitive self. The part of us that hums, whistles, and improvises is inherent and unconscious, and is the same natural and

intuitive human sense that many great jazz, rock, and blues guitarists tap into when they play. Focusing on this part of ourselves is beneficial. This hidden aspect of our lives may have many names (the subconscious, the spirit, the soul); however, the name is unimportant because the full experience cannot be captured in words. It is the subtle, hidden unchanging basis of our existence that is found deep within. Although it may difficult to describe in words, this fact that our bodies have a different way of knowing than our minds, whether we call it intuition, gut response or an inner feeling, the musical sense that comes from this core of our being has an undeniable power. The more we gain a stronger sense and trust of intuition, the more we can utilize its influence.

This silent part of ourselves can also be regarded as an unlimited source of creativity—quite conceivably the source of musical improvisation. While this may be perceived as partially abstract, the reality of this concept need not be taken on authority. As we hear this inner voice speak through our fingers, we will know it is genuine.

## AWARENESS AND THE PRESENT MOMENT

Although an improvising guitarist may have a working knowledge of the fretboard and music theory, these skills may be of reasonably less value if we are marginally aware of what is happening in our minds, bodies, and the music. All that we can do to become more aware of ourselves and our playing is beneficial. When self-awareness is active it becomes easier to find the most efficient way to utilize our intuitive side.

It is advantageous to cultivate the concept of focusing our attention in an unbiased and unforced way on the present moment; to gain the most from an improvisational setting it is necessary to experience what is happening *now*. Our full attention needs to be on the guitar, our hands, and what we are sensing. We can become *fully present* by paying close attention to sight (e.g., watching our fingers move), to sound (e.g., truly hearing each subtle nuance we create), to our feelings (those that the music express and those that we ourselves create). Focusing on the present moment enables us to react effectively in an improvisational setting; it is when we are distracted by past regrets or future concerns that we typically find something wrong in our improvisations and when we feel as though we are not playing well.

Immersing ourselves in what is happening *now* is a direct way to increase self-awareness. Settling the mind and relaxing our bodies before playing can also be efficient ways to increase self-awareness, especially when practiced on a regular basis. Settling the mind (through meditation or yoga) can reduce mental activity to a quiet level, then awareness can become clearer

and sharper. When our minds are free from excess thoughts we can perceive conditions as they really are and interact with the music more readily.

Physical relaxation is a natural outcome of settling the mind and as a result, relaxing the body (through exercise or relaxation tapes) can also heighten self-awareness. When our bodies are at ease and rested, we can better sense how we feel, and apply our skills without forcing or straining. For guitarists, such increased body awareness can additionally lead to the removal of excess tension commonly created by unconsciously hunching up our shoulders and over-flexing our arms and hands.

When our minds and bodies are still, we can become acutely aware of the entire guitar playing/improvisational process. It becomes simpler to follow our intuition. In addition, we can become more aware of the subtleties we express in our playing. When we are improvising and trying too hard to produce results we should stop *trying*, and alternatively focus our awareness on a single element of our movement or a single element of our sound. We can then observe our bodies shift to more relaxed state.



## VISUALIZATION

Approaching improvisation on the guitar involves a great deal of time spent with our hands. However, our hands have a much lighter task when we use the intuitive abilities of our mind. Many guitarists believe that by acquiring ample finger exercise through endless repetition of drills and musical examples, our playing will improve. This strenuous approach can produce some results, but can also be an exhausting and inefficient use of energy. Most of us can hear musical ideas in our minds that are beyond what our fingers can immediately produce and can include all sounds that are possible on the guitar. Visualization aims at developing our innate ability for mental imaging so that we can materialize these imagined musical ideas.

Visualization is based on the premise of whatever we can see in our minds, we can do—whatever we can hear in our inner-ear, we can play. For the conscious mind to fully utilize visualization it is helpful to have an integration of the body and the subconscious mind.

### Discovering Visualization

- Before improvising on the guitar, clearly envision a desired musical effect in your conscious mind.
- Put the conscious mind into the background and allow the intuitive intelligence of your body and subconscious mind to help carry out your musical ideas.

- We can trust that our bodies and subconscious mind will do exactly what we want them to.
- There is no need to force our ideas, with only a mental picture and a minimum of prompting from the conscious mind we can perform satisfying improvisations on the guitar with a minimum effort.
- After a clear vision is established, begin to improvise on the guitar.

## ENERGY FROM OTHERS

It is a significant experience to share improvisation on the guitar with others, and to feel a bit apprehensive about doing so (performance anxiety has a purpose). Although improvising while unaccompanied is a practical activity, it can be more beneficial to improvise with and for others. The additional benefit stems from a unique *energy exchange* between ourselves, the other musicians, and the audience. Everyone involved receives energy and typically feels uplifted after the performance. The performers feel edified, rather than drained by the effort. This energy exchange can occur in an intimate setting or in a large auditorium with many people. Performing with and for others additionally provides us with an opportunity to surpass what we believe to be mental and physical limitations.

Another one of the many values of collective improvisation (improvising within an ensemble) is that it teaches us to balance our playing with others and yet maintain the unique character of our individual part. It helps us to listen more intently to the sounds created around us, and how to musically react to, and communicate with them.

## THE GUITAR AND THE SELF

Improvising on the guitar is an exceptional form of self-development. Through musical improvisation we can learn to concentrate better, improve memory skills, improve mind and body coordination, perform while remaining relaxed, cooperate with others, and to balance ourselves with our environment. Improvising on the guitar is a discipline that can help us unravel our full potential, balance our personal lives, and can help us become less at odds with ourselves and our surroundings. Consequently, just as improvisation on the guitar can improve our personal lives, what we do to improve our personal lives can also be reflected in our improvisations.

When we touch music in the moment and instant of improvisation, and it happens in a deep and meaningful way, we begin to see ourselves in an entirely different perspective to the rest of the universe, different from any other time in our lives. It is in that moment that we begin to see ourselves and our ego in true perspective.

As we grow in experience as human beings and as improvising musicians, we begin to think and feel on the level of the music and gradually become less concerned about doing what is "right" or what we assume others are thinking we should do. These eventually become concerns of the past. Improvising on the guitar can help us to transcend the limits of our ordinary selves.

## PART ONE CLOSING THOUGHTS

- Patience is important. Learning concepts unfolds at its own pace and typically takes a while—it is unimportant how long it takes. I have found it best to work on what needs to be done and practice what needs attention. Striving to produce results is usually unnecessary. By working on what needs work, results produce themselves.
- Having *fun* while practicing can enable us to learn more and perform better. It is not necessary to be serious or tense in order to learn.
- It is helpful to learn how to “play the guitar” without using our hands, i.e, to develop a complete mental image of all the sounds that are available on the guitar.
- When we are unsatisfied with the way we are playing we can practice changing our attitude rather than changing what we are playing.
- “Good” improvising cannot be forced. It is something that simply happens, when we are prepared to let it happen.
- Frequently perform an “inspection” to see if there is anything important in music that may have been overlooked.
- A long walk can clear the mind. While walking we can assimilate the sounds of nature and apply them to our improvisations.
- New strings and a polished guitar can have a substantial effect on the way we play and improvise.
- It is important to find the appropriate emotional energy for whatever it is being played.
- In music, our greatest sense of identity ordinarily occurs when we feel as

though we are barely present, i.e., when we have “removed” ourselves from the stresses and strains of musical parameters.

- Music comes from life. Many times we can learn more about improvisation from life than from music.
- A useful attitude toward musical improvisation might be to consider that no one who is listening, not even yourself, knows what is going to be played next.
- If the sounds we create are favorable and/or feel suitable, we are improvising “correctly.”
- Relax, enjoy, be spontaneous, permit creativity, and be in the moment.

## PART II: FRETBOARD INTIMACY

The second section of this essay focuses on five essential concepts that will enable the improvising guitarist to better understand the guitar fretboard (a chief area of concern for many guitarists): position playing, horizontal playing, playing in string sets, combination playing, and listening. Each is designed to help the player more fully comprehend the guitar fretboard in order to approach the *technical* aspects of jazz, blues, and rock improvisation more efficiently.

While methods for position playing have existed for some time and are more commonly known to guitarists, concepts for playing horizontally are rare. When position playing is *combined* with horizontal playing the improvising guitarist is able to attain a higher level of fretboard intimacy—the ability to know where and what pitches are available at any given moment.

## POSITION PLAYING

On the guitar, a position is defined as a section of the fretboard spanning six frets across all six strings. The melodic range of a position is two octaves and a perfect-fourth (a total of twenty-nine half-steps). Within these thirty-six frets every note in the chromatic scale is available. Twenty-four of the available pitches have one location while the other six pitches have two locations.

### Notes Available in the *Third* Position

	F <sup>#</sup> G <sup>b</sup>	G	G <sup>#</sup> A <sup>b</sup>	A	A <sup>#</sup> B <sup>b</sup>	B	
	C <sup>#</sup> D <sup>b</sup>	D	D <sup>#</sup> E <sup>b</sup>	E	F	F <sup>#</sup> G <sup>b</sup>	
	A	A <sup>#</sup> B <sup>b</sup>	B	C	C <sup>#</sup> D <sup>b</sup>	D	
	E	F	F <sup>#</sup> G <sup>b</sup>	G	G <sup>#</sup> A <sup>b</sup>	A	
	B	C	C <sup>#</sup> D <sup>b</sup>	D	D <sup>#</sup> E <sup>b</sup>	E	
	F <sup>#</sup> G <sup>b</sup>	G	G <sup>#</sup> A <sup>b</sup>	A	A <sup>#</sup> B <sup>b</sup>	B	

There are four possible finger alignments within a position:

- |             |   |
|-------------|---|
| 1 2 3 4     | no stretch; four obtainable frets                     |
| 1 1 2 3 4   | first finger stretch; five obtainable frets           |
| 1 2 3 4 4   | fourth finger stretch; five obtainable frets          |
| 1 1 2 3 4 4 | first and fourth finger stretch; six obtainable frets |



### Complete Fingering of the *Third* Position

				2	3	4	4	
				2	3	4	4	
			•	2	3	4	4	
				2	3	4	4	
				2	3	4	4	
				2	3	4	4	

A position is determined by the fret that the unstretched first finger is in: 1 1 2 3 4 4. For example, when playing in the *fifth* position, the second finger is in the sixth fret; the third finger in the seventh fret; the first finger in the fifth fret (not stretched) or in the fourth fret (when stretched); and the fourth finger is in the eighth fret (not stretched) or in the ninth fret (when stretched).

### Activities

- Establish the concept of playing in and maintaining a single position: choose a position and play every note chromatically available, both ascending and descending, naming the notes aloud as they are played.
- Learn fingerings for the C major scale in positions one through twelve. Improvise over seven modal vamps in all twelve positions (seven modes in twelve positions provides eighty-four possibilities); see page 25 for sample modal vamps. And/or learn fingerings for all twelve major scales in a

chosen position. Improvise over all eighty-four modes (seven modes in twelve keys also provides eighty-four possibilities) in a single position.

- Play a variety of arpeggios, ascending and descending, in a single position; then play a single arpeggio in a variety of positions.
- Improvise over a twelve-bar blues progression while maintaining a single position.
- Play through a tune keeping entirely in one position while improvising. Also, stay in one position and transpose the changes to all twelve keys, or change the position and keep the key the same.

### Guidelines

- Avoid stretching between the second and third fingers.
- Do not shift the second or third fingers up or down a fret—this amounts to changing positions.
- Avoid using the same finger to play consecutive scale degrees when there are alternate fingerings available.
- Become familiar with all alternate fingerings available within a position. For example, there will be alternate fingerings between the G and B strings due to the interval of a major third that occurs between those two strings, as opposed to the perfect-fourth between all other sets of strings.
- In each of the above activities there are two basic approaches. For example, when working with the major scale one approach involves maintaining the same major scale while changing the position (e.g., the C major scale in each position); the second approach involves maintaining the position and

changing the scale (i.e., all twelve major scales in one position). Experiment with both approaches.

- When working with scales, explore interval leaps, riffs, and other ideas.

Practicing only up and down a scale can lead to scale-like improvisations.

- Any and all positions contain: the chromatic scale, two whole-tone scales, three symmetrical diminished scales, twelve major scales, twelve natural minor scales, twelve melodic minor scales, twelve harmonic minor scales, twelve major pentatonic scales, twelve minor pentatonic scales, twelve blues scales, the seven modes of each major scale (ionian, dorian, phrygian, etc.), additional modes (e.g, super locrian), all triads and four part chords in all keys, and so on.

- It may be more comfortable to begin extensive position work in one of the higher positions (the seventh or above). The frets are smaller in these upper positions and are physically easier to reach (although the higher action can pose a new difficulty). As the fingering-hand becomes accustomed to the required stretching, gradually work down through the lower positions.

- Patterns for scales and arpeggios may develop and can be useful; however, continue to concentrate on note names and scale degrees.

- There is no direct relationship between how well we understand position playing and how well we improvise. However, when improvising, position playing is of great importance.

## HORIZONTAL PLAYING

In the majority of the method books researched for this essay, no mention was made of playing up and down one string. Playing on a single string can be a very logical way to play the guitar. Consider the following:

- One of the simplest ways to see notes on the guitar is in a straight line—a single string is a straight line.
- On a single string there is a direct relationship between interval distance and whole and half-steps.
- Playing on a single string helps to eliminate two common problems—the fear of movement and the fear of higher frets—because the entire length of the fretboard is utilized from the beginning.
- The horizontal approach is very practical for learning note locations because we are unable to rely on patterns as in position playing.
- Various types of phrasing and articulation can be played very consistently.
- Elements of fundamental theory (scale construction, intervals, chords, arpeggios, etc.) can be learned in clear and simple visual terms. The same is true for dynamics, articulations, and timbre.
- Many stringed instruments of Eastern countries (such as the sitar of India) are played in a much more linear fashion than our own. Many Eastern musical systems predate those of ours in the West. Playing horizontally may help us to learn something about, and from, these other cultures.

When we are familiar only with position playing it can be difficult to discern the entire fretboard. Playing on one string can entirely transform our

understanding of the guitar fretboard.

When playing on one string we can use one finger at a time (either the first, second, third, or fourth); two fingers at a time (first and second, first and third, first and fourth, second and third, second and fourth, or third and fourth); or three fingers at a time (first, second, and third; first, second, and fourth; first, third and fourth; or, the second, third, and fourth). All four fingers combined produce all previous possibilities.

There are three ways to play notes on a single string: groupings (of two, three, or four notes—five and six when applying the stretches described in position playing), shifts (using the same finger to play consecutive pitches), and by slurring (slides, pull-offs, hammer-ons, and small bends).

### Activities

- Map out all of the notes on each of the six strings, utilizing the entire length of the fretboard. Play and name the notes ascending, descending, and then randomly—the latter has proven quite effective.
- Record the following suggested modal vamps on to a blank tape (if each vamp is two to four minutes in length, all seven vamps will fit on one side of a thirty-minute cassette):

### C Ionian

| Cmaj7 | Dm7 | G7 | Cmaj7 :||

#### C Dorian

| Cm7 | Dm7 | Ebmaj7 | Dm | Cm7 :||

#### C Phrygian

| Cm Eb | Db | Cm Bbm | Cm :||

#### C Lydian

| Cmaj7 | Em7 | D | Cmaj7 :||

#### C Mixolydian

| C F | C | Dm Bb | C :||

#### C Aeolian

| Cm | Gm | Ab | Cm :||

#### C Locrian

| Cm7b5 | Ebm7 | Fm7 | Cm7b5 | Db | Cm7b5 :||

- Play the tape from beginning to end while improvising melodies over each modal vamp using only one string (seven modes and six strings provide forty-two possibilities). There are two approaches: first, play one string through all seven vamps and repeat the same procedure five times using the other strings, one at a time; second, play through a single vamp six times, once for each string and repeat the same procedure six times using each of the other modal vamps.

- Apply the single string approach to a twelve-bar blues progression and/or a jazz or rock tune.

### Guidelines

- Remain on one string. If boredom or repetition becomes an issue experiment with dynamics, articulations, and timbre. For the time being a single string is our entire instrument and our entire musical voice.
- Emphasize the characteristic notes of each mode, yet employ all seven notes and establish a clear sense of the root.
- On a single string we can use: vibrato, bends, hammer-ons, pull-offs, slides, harmonics, palm muting, and tone differences by attacking the string in different places. Explore each and practice expanding these concepts.

## PLAYING ON STRING SETS

The next application involves playing on two adjacent strings, or string sets. This approach provides the advantages of playing horizontally *and* the advantages of partial position playing. There are five sets of two adjacent strings: E and A, A and D, D and G, G and B, and B and E.

### Activity

- Improvise with each of the five string sets. Practice with the same rhythm tapes and tunes as before and work with some new material as well.

### Guidelines

- Working in string sets offers an opportunity to make a detailed study of picking techniques—an important and often overlooked aspect of guitar improvisation.
- In each of the five string sets the strings are a perfect-fourth apart, except the G and B strings which are a major third apart. This may be complicating, but does provide unique possibilities that would otherwise be unavailable.
- Playing on two adjacent strings is where patterns can also develop.

Continue to focus on the note names as well as the function of the notes relative to a particular key.

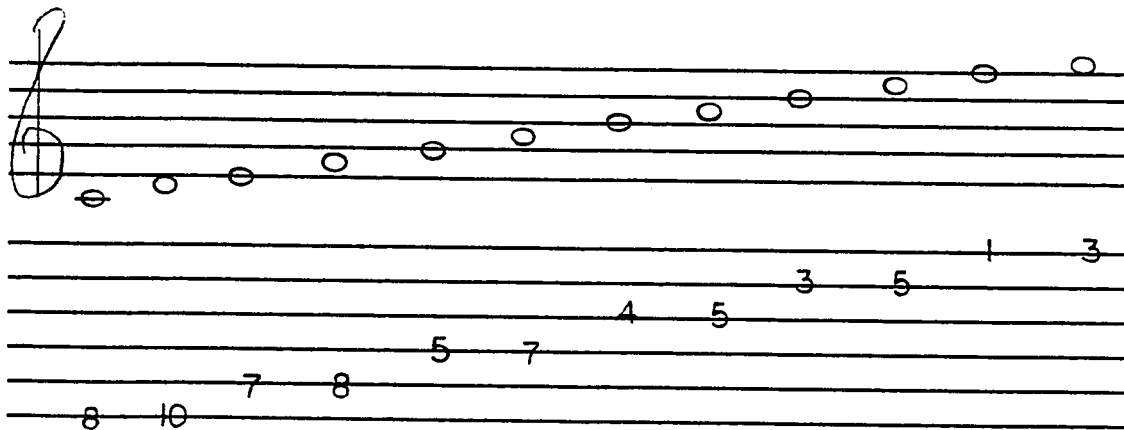


## COMBINATION PLAYING

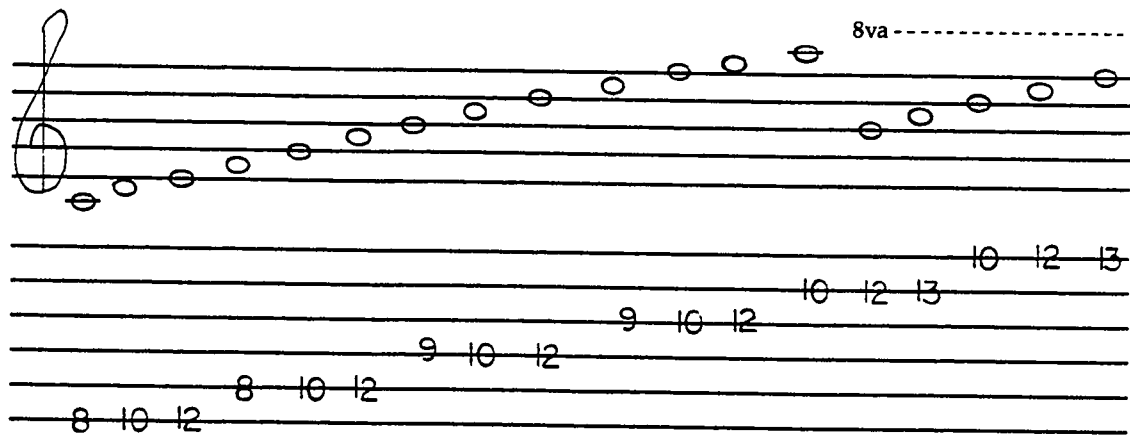
Combination playing is the technique that most jazz, blues, and rock guitarists employ when improvising. We do not play only on one string, not just in a single position, nor exclusively in string sets—we combine these approaches in order to proceed up, down, and across the neck. Position playing, playing horizontally, and playing in string sets are fitting ways to prepare for combination playing. By working with a combination of these applications, the improvising guitarist can gradually obtain a greater sense of freedom with respect to whatever area of the fretboard the music and our intuition invite us.

The main principles of combination playing are straightforward. Using the C major scale as an illustration, combination playing permits us to play this scale using two, three, or four notes per string:

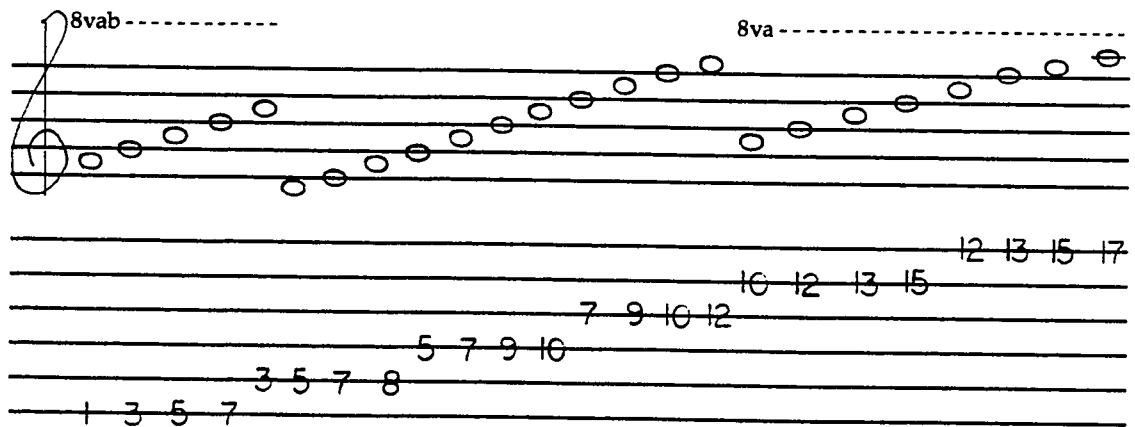
### Two Notes per String



### Three Notes per String



### Four Notes per String



From these examples it is apparent how rhythmical groupings can become an important consideration. For instance, playing two notes per string is ideal for eighth-notes, as are three notes per string for triplets, and four notes per string for sixteenth-notes.

## Activities

- Play each of the major scales using only two notes per string.
- Play each of the major scales using only three notes per string.
- Play each of the major scales using only four notes per string.
- Experiment with a variety of scales, modes, and arpeggios using the entire fretboard.
- Improvise over modal vamps, blues progressions, and tunes using the entire fretboard.

## Guidelines

- In many of the combination scale fingerings our fingering-hand moves down the neck as the scale ascends, and moves up the neck as the scale descends.
- Fingerings may look similar to position playing until we get to the B string; then a shift to a higher position must take place for the top two strings.
- Leap about the fretboard to search out melodies, riffs, and all interesting ideas.

## LISTENING

In jazz, blues, and rock improvisation, many things are important: knowledge of the guitar, knowledge of the materials, technique, time, rhythm, phrasing, consonance and dissonance, tension and release, theme and variation, change, rest, sound, silence, dynamics, articulations, feelings, ideas, movement, sensitivity, and an appropriate state of mind. However, one of the most significant elements is *listening*.

Truly hearing the music we play will offer a great deal of important information. Likewise, immersing ourselves in the sounds of others can broaden our thinking on many levels. Improvising within a group demands constant listening among the musicians in order to achieve a level of communication (and interaction) that is effective in a musical manner.

What to listen for? Listen to the spirit, emotion, and feel of the piece. Also, line shapes, scales, rhythms, harmony, phrasing, articulation, time, group interaction, tone, dynamics, technique, solo shape, arrangement, individual instruments, attitude, lyrics (if any), “outness” and “inness,” missed opportunities, “magical” moments, and so on.

There are many ways to listen. Because we are musicians does not necessarily mean that we invariably know how to listen. Learning to listen requires continual practice.

## Activities

- Sing all intervals (ascending and descending), the four triad types (major, minor, augmented, and diminished), major scales, and the three minor scales (natural, harmonic, and melodic) in all keys.
- Sing and play an improvised melodic line or motif as it is played i.e, sing what you are playing simultaneously.
- Transcribe guitar solos, rhythm changes, solo classical guitar pieces, show tunes, pop songs, solo piano pieces, horn parts, bass lines, and so on.
- Record random notes with a short pause between each note onto a blank cassette. Play back the tape and duplicate by ear each note during the pauses.
- Strum a chord for four slow beats, change to an unrelated chord for four more slow beats, then another, etc. While playing back the tape, use your ear to help you improvise a simple melody (possibly on one string, or in one position) over each chord.
- Starting at the beginning of a sixty-minute blank cassette, make a recording of yourself improvising a short piece that is no longer than two minutes. Do not listen to the piece. On the following day, listen to the piece, then record a second piece after the first one. Do not listen to the new piece. On the third day, listen to the second piece and record a third one. Continue this procedure until both sides of the tape are complete with short, improvised pieces (there will be approximately thirty two-minute selections). Never listen to what was recorded until the following day so that each piece will sound untried. When the tape is complete listen to all of the pieces in

succession. This process can help us to learn a great deal about how we play. We may notice some aspects of our playing that we had not noticed before. For example, we may discover that we insist on certain scales, tonalities, or rhythms to the exclusion of others.

### Guidelines

- Closing our eyes while we are playing or listening can enable us hear more precisely.
- Open strings have a different timbre than closed strings. Internalize the unique sound of each open string and each closed note. The same can be done with open and closed chords.
- There are two primary ways of listening: passively (listening while doing another activity, such as driving or working) and actively (listening while performing, transcribing, or listening with headphones for the purpose of listening). Become aware of the differences of each and listen passively and actively at the appropriate time.

## PART II CLOSING THOUGHTS

- Fretboard intimacy is a disciplined study. The practice of these applications can be most successful when we are inclined to be disciplined.
- No single technique for developing jazz, blues, and rock improvisation on the guitar is consistently effective. We can begin with the technique that is immediately most effective and gradually work with the others.
- Practice is preparation for “real” music. Always include “real” music in practice.
- Quite often, less is more. We can consider notes as clever ways of moving from one silence to another. No musical element is simpler to play on the guitar than silence. Take time to *listen* to silence.
- If we like or dislike a sound we have made, it is useful to take the time to determine why.
- If a “wrong” note is played, all that is necessary to correct it is to move up or down one fret.
- It can be beneficial to think less about note choice and more about tone, color, shape, dynamics, emotion, connectedness to the music, and so on.
- It is not how many scales a guitarist knows, or chords, or tunes, or technical ability, that is of importance. What is crucial is our *manipulation* of this knowledge.
- Accepting the complexity of the fretboard enables us to cultivate patience and understand why we may not learn as quickly as we would like to. Fully comprehending the guitar fretboard involves a great deal of time.

## SUMMARY

When improvising on the guitar in either a jazz, blues, or rock context, it is extremely beneficial for guitarists to fully comprehend their instrument. Obtaining a high degree of “fretboard intimacy” involves position playing, horizontal playing, playing in string sets, and a combination of these and other techniques. Equally important is understanding the intuitive aspects of our minds—detachment, awareness, visualization, and others—that enable us to more improvise more freely and naturally.

It has become essential for me to maintain a balance between the intuitive and technical aspects of musical improvisation. Research and personal experience suggest that as we become more familiar with concepts presented in this thesis, improvising guitarists can advance to a higher level of musicality in their playing and improvisational abilities.

This work represents my initial sense and expansion of the intuitive elements of guitar improvisation in conjunction with the expansion of the technical skills I have found necessary to improvise on the guitar. Although many concepts have been presented in this work, my effort cannot be regarded as a *finite* assessment. The facets of musical improvisation are extremely vast. For this reason further study would be valuable for the reader. As research shows, methods currently available regarding guitar improvisation lack the intuitive aspects of improvisation. This thesis has been a first-stage effort to fill this void.



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