

On Soloing

by Randell Young, D.Mus.

I once had the opportunity to do a few gigs in a quartet featuring the great keyboardist/composer Rob Mullins. Nate Phillips, who had worked with Rob in the Jazz Crusaders, and Jeff Suttles, who had just come off tour with Janet Jackson held down the bass and drums, respectively. The basic concept was to play instrumental arrangements of funky R&B tunes, sort of like a funk version of Paul Shaffers' "Worlds Most Dangerous Band" (the David Letterman Show band). The project was put together with a handful of head charts, one rehearsal and, boom, straight into live performance. And it worked very well, even the first night out.

I guess Rob and I were sort of surprised at the audience response, especially on that first night. In between tunes, we gave each other a "wow, this going over big time" look. Then, Rob, only half jokingly, says, "Well, don't get too full of yourself. With the groove that Nate and Jeff are laying down you could probably spit on your guitar and get an ovation!"

An exaggeration? Of course. But he did make a very important point.

As a soloist in a blues or R&B format, the best you can hope to do is rise to the level of the rhythm track. You might think you're wailing away. But, if you don't have a solid groove underneath, it really isn't going anywhere.

So, if you are looking for the secret to great soloing, perhaps the most important rule is to be very selective about who you play with. What should you look for in a bass player and drummer? Well, that's a whole other column isn't it. For now, let's just establish the basic rules and leave it at that.

Before you get up to solo in the first place, ask yourself these two questions. One, do I play in time or do I tend to take liberties with the tempo? And two, do I have a good sound?

If your time is not solid, you are going to sound sloppy. No matter how creative your ideas, if they are not executed in time, you are still going to sound more or less like an amateur. If you learned to play by picking up a guitar and trying to play everything you know as fast as you can, you may have developed some bad habits. If so, you are going to need to work you way out of them and quick. Start practicing with a metronome and keep it up until your internal clock gets in sync with real time.

Like most guitar players, you probably started adding distortion to your guitar both because you liked the sound of it and also because it seemed to make your axe easier to play. Yes, a little sustain does seem to smooth out the rough edges of the attacks but you don't want to be hiding bad meter behind lots of overdrive.

Unless you have heard yourself on several recordings and know for sure that you have a great sound, try working with less distortion. And when you are comfortable with that, a little less again. We generally need a lot less overdrive than we think. Don't feel like you have to fill up every space. Your guitar is not a saxophone. It's O.K. for the notes to ring for a while and then fade out.

If it is necessary to sustain a note out for longer than what your amp/pick-up configuration is giving you, add a little finger vibrato and move your pickups toward your speaker to induce a little feedback. A little experimentation with this technique will allow you to add that screaming element at relatively low sound pressure levels and with a good strong attack on the front of the note.

Maybe, you don't use any overdrive at all. That's O.K. Just realize that there are licks that work in both clean and dirty mode and there are licks that work only in one mode or the other. My solution is to use both. I have a customized Mesa Boogie with a clean lead channel and an overdriven lead channel. I use the same graphic EQ, reverb and delay for both sounds. This keeps a level of continuity. But there are times when I'll use a judicious amount of distortion and times when I won't.

Whatever sound you go for, make it your own. Forget about trying to sound "just like Stevie Ray Vaughn" or "just like Jimi Hendrix". Get a pleasant, well-defined tonal center that works well with your repertoire (of both licks and material) and stick with it. Keep the effects to a minimum. How is your audience going to relate your sound to you if "your sound" consists of an endless procession of gimmicks? And if you haven't got a sound, what have you got?

So, assuming that you have your meter and your sound together (and, hopefully, are playing with a tight rhythm section), here is our first rule: "Listen".

Why? Two reasons: First, to capture the vibe. Second, for inspiration. Usually, if you can find one, the other will channel in as well. Instead of comping up to your solo thinking about what wild licks you are going to throw off, just listen to what the rest of the band is doing. Whether you are following a vocal, a rhythm vamp or another solo, tune into the vibe and listen to the ideas that are coming from the other players. When, it comes

time to start your solo, maintain that vibe and begin just by playing what you feel (within, of course, the confines of keeping the rest of the rules in tact along the way).

Rule number two is: "Start Simple".

Good solos are like good stories. They need a beginning, a middle and an end. Sometimes, you may even add a dénouement. But the idea is to draw the listener in and take them somewhere. You have to start simple for two reasons. One, you need to catch the ear of the listener. Give them something easy to process at first. Second, you need to have somewhere to go. If you start making love with an orgasm, it may feel good for a few seconds but then what are you going to do?

O.K. You're four bars or so into your first pass. You started with a nice simple little melody that incorporated some of the structures of the preceding Hammond organ solo. Everybody in the room heard it and it made sense to them. Basically, you have them tuned into the guitar. Now, what do you do? Rule number three: "Develop with style (yours)".

Well, we all knew that was coming. But, how do I do that?

Here are a couple of different primary strategies for developing your solo. One way is motif-to-motif. A motif is sort of a basic musical idea, a short melody or rhythmic device. The motif-to-motif strategy involves the statement of one idea followed by another version of the idea that either resolves or extends the first idea. Establishing a phrase and then moving on using different notes but maintaining the same phrasing is probably the most basic example. The reason this strategy works is that it gives your audience something to pick up on followed by something related to it. Remember, the more listeners you take with you, the more successful you are going to be. So make it easy on them. Give them something logical to follow.

Another strategy is to begin with a simple version of the melody, add a few embellishments and work your way towards increasing complexity. Rob Mullins is the master of a rather peculiar version of this strategy. Rob takes the melody and adds his embellishments going increasing outside until he winds up with a flurry of essentially random tones. He does this so gradually that, at the climax, you are sure he is playing some exotic scale. But, he's not. He is, in these moments, using the piano as an atonal percussion instrument, but he has taken you there so skillfully that you want to believe he has just invented some whole new set of harmonic rules.

Remember that complexity doesn't have to mean outside. That's just one parameter. You can also add complexity with more notes, longer phrases or

different rhythms... or all of the above. And, of course, you can combine the motif-to-motif approach with the melody embellishment approach.

Hopefully, you will find a combination of these techniques that works well with your repertoire of licks. If, and when, you do, trust it and go with it. That is how you start to develop your own style. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that your stuff isn't good enough. You don't have to play as fast as Al Dimeola or as outside as Alan Holdsworth to be a great guitarist. Django Reinhardt only had two fingers on his left hand yet he was one of the most influential guitarists of all time. Your own uniqueness is the your most potent weapon. If you can incorporate the way that you naturally hear things together with a subconscious adherence to these rules, and play with good meter and good tone (and a great rhythm section), it will work.

And now for rule number four: "If they liked it once, they'll love it twice".

As you build to your climax, have this old Vaudevillian adage implanted somewhere in your subconscious. It is the reason that repetition works so well. Give it to them. Repetition creates tension. You want to hear it again but you also want to hear it resolve. When you hit on an intense little theme, repeat it and resolve it only at some logical dropping off point such as the end of a four-bar phrase. If they liked it once, they will love it twice, or even three or four times.

Rule number five (again from the classic rules of show business): "Always leave them wanting more".

This is the rule that brings balance to rule number four. You can wear your audience out. This is especially true when the audience is required to process a lot of musical information in a small amount of time. Yes, sensory overload can be very effective but works best in small doses.

As to the overall length of your solo, remember the Charlie Parker rule (our rule number six): "Anything more than four passes and you are just practicing".

Yes, he really said that and you ain't gonna play any better than Bird so don't fight it. Forget about having everybody solo until they run out of ideas. If you absolutely have to do that, save it for rehearsal. Don't subject your audience to it. Approach your live gigs as performances not practices. Try to pack as much excitement as possible into your show. Before you take the stage, know who is going to solo when and for how long. It's O.K. to have a few open-ended vamp sections leading into a set-length chorus or bridge for resolution. Just don't try to put on a clinic with every solo. Your audience will appreciate your eloquence.

Actually, I like to keep it down to two passes. I got used to this structure when playing with Melvin "Deacon" Jones, who has recorded three great solo CDs and served as the musical director for Curtis Mayfield, Freddie King and (for 18 years) John Lee Hooker. With a two-pass formula, you can have two different instruments solo back-to-back (such as organ followed by guitar), bring the vocals back in and still get out of the tune in compliance with rule number five, i.e., before the room is ready for another song.

Although rules four and five (and, to an extent, even six) may appear to the novice as in conflict, they really are not. You can use repetition in a simple phrase or a blinding flurry of notes and everything in between. You can wait until your blinding flurry to introduce repetition or you can begin with a simpler version and end with the blinding flurry. Just program all three principles into your belief system and let your creative forces take over from there.

Which leads us to rule number seven: "Don't think".

Don't think?! How am I supposed to follow all these rules and not think? Either I'm using the rules or I'm not. Right? Right! Use the rules... but don't think about them.

Or, more to the point, don't think about them while you are soloing. Think about them now. Think about them when you practice. Think about them when you are listening to other solos, both live and recorded. Use this period to internalize the rules. Decide for yourself that they are, in fact, the rules... that they do, in fact, work. That, with these rules, you can trust your stuff and it will work.

This will allow these concepts to penetrate into your subconscious such that you won't have to think about them when you do go to solo. They will just be there. Just like your open G chord is there when you want it. Then, use them... but don't think about them. Stay focused on feeling the vibe and listening to the other players. Trust your stuff and let it happen.

More On Soloing

In response to my article "On Soloing", I received a number of emails from players who loved the concepts and were trying hard to incorporate them into their performance but still felt like they were stuck in a rut of playing the same tired riffs over and over. "I feel like I'm playing in circles. What additional advice can you give me to help me break out of this pattern?" many of them asked.

So it occurred to me that my original piece was oriented to more a advanced player and that it probably wasn't worth spit to a lot of you who are more in

need of a practical, step-by-step method rather than some theoretical overview. If you're one of these people, hopefully, I can make amends here and get you to a place where the first article will be of use to you as well. So, here we go.

A central concept that is generally lost on most guitar players is that soloing is actually composing.

Most guitar players have oriented themselves to think of a solo as an opportunity to demonstrate how fast they can play and/or drop in some licks that they think are impressive.

When you hear a great melody sung by a vocalist, are you impressed by how "fast" they sing? Of course not. How about when you hear a great sax solo, are you impressed by how fast the sax is played? Again, no way.

So why is it that guitar players think that by playing a lot of notes they are going to win some prize? And we make jokes about drummers being crazy. Let me take a stab at an explanation for this speed obsession thing.

When one is learning how to play the guitar, one passes through a stage where it is difficult to play things at quicker tempos. So one feels challenged by playing eighths or 16ths and when performed successfully, one feels a certain sense of satisfaction.

It is this sense of satisfaction gained during the learning stage that leads guitarists to think that by choosing notes of shorter duration (and thus playing a lot more notes) that the solo must be good. But this is an illusion and until one gets over this illusion, it is simply not possible to play a decent solo.

Another problem with a bias to play "fast" is that it seems to lead guitarists to play out of time with the track. If they are playing 16th notes but they are not at the top of their speed range and they can't play 16th note triplets or 32nd notes at that tempo, then they play their 16ths faster than the track, which, of course, sounds ridiculous. Worse yet, before you know it, their rushing becomes habitual and then absolutely everything they play is fighting the rhythm track.

You may have read somewhere that it is a good idea to sing along with your solos in order to slow you down and give you a better appreciation for the melodic value of what you are playing. This technique has some value and works wonders for some people but it also has its limitations.

For one, nobody has a vocal range sufficient to accommodate the range of the guitar. Also, once one has fallen into a pattern of repeating the same

riffs over and over, singing along with those same riffs isn't going to make much difference.

Again, the central concept is that solos are compositions. In order to solo well, one needs to develop an ability to compose melodies. So how do you do that? Well, here is what I suggest.

Start by playing the melody of the song.

Now a guitar creates sound differently than a voice, so allow that to affect the melody and color it. For example, use hammer-ons, pull-offs, slides and bends to give the melody a slightly different interpretation. Play the same notes as the vocalist is singing but let the guitar be a guitar. You will find that there are many songs where this is all you need to do and you will have a fine solo.

Finding those songs within your existing repertoire will not only improve your show, it will also help you to begin to approach all of your solos differently.

Playing riffs that you have copied from other guitar players is probably the second worst approach, the first being just running through scales as quickly as possible. It is not only that one needs to develop their own unique voice (and copying licks is not taking you in that direction). You also need to think in terms of composition and melody rather than technique and regurgitation.

If you go back through your repertoire of material and rework your solos by interpreting the vocal melody on the guitar, you are going to imprint into your subconscious mind a number of melodies. You are going to start to work in terms of simple musical phrases rather than meaningless barrages of notes. You are going to learn some things about how variation in note values, rhythms and spaces can create tension and interest. And, hopefully, you are going to begin to move away from a riff-oriented approach and become more composition-minded.

After you have learned all of the melodies in your repertoire, go back and see where you can deviate from that melody in just a section or two. In other words, let's say that you are playing over a 12-bar progression. Maybe there is a measure or two during which you can play something with the same rhythm as the original melody but using different notes. Or maybe there is a measure or two where you can play the same notes but apply a slightly different rhythm. Or maybe there is a place where you have a different phrase altogether but it lands on the same resolving tone.

So now you have two categories of solos in your repertoire. One - solos where you are going to give a guitar interpretation of the vocal melody

(using the unique elements of the guitar such as hammer-ons, pull-offs, slides and bends) but still sticking with the vocal melody. And two, solos where you have kept most of the vocal melody intact but in a few places you have altered a phrase or two.

You will find that there are certain songs in your repertoire where one of these two approaches is perfect and you will never want to play anything else. Great!

From now on, play these songs in live performance just like this with no additional improvisation. They are perfect as they are so leave them alone. Don't think of them as "throw-aways". Play them with as much emotional intensity as you can muster even though you know exactly what is coming.

Next move on to those songs for which this approach does not seem to be a perfect fit. On these songs begin by learning the melody and adding certain embellishments or modifications. Then move on by using the same beginning and ending notes for the phrase but making up something different in between. This will help you to learn and internalize the concept of resolving on the right note and will give both you and your audience some basic outline of where you are going.

As you compose your phrases, try to interject as much variety as possible consistent with maintaining both the musicality and integrity of the idiom, i.e., don't play licks that don't fit either the mood or the style of the piece.

Here are some types of variation to try.

Use a range of note and rest values, e.g., whole notes, half notes, quarter notes, eighths, dotted-half's, dotted-quarters and triplet-half's, quarters and eighths. Whole rests, half rests, quarter rests, eighth rests, use them all. Use staccato and legato devices. Until it becomes natural, make a mental note to work in as many value variations as possible. It is amazing how many amateur solos consist of only one note value (using eighths or 16ths or eighth-note triplets) - and no rests - throughout the entire solo.

Play, at various times during your solo, on both the middle, lower and upper registers of the guitar. Don't just riff on that one part of the guitar where you feel most comfortable. The same note played on a different string will give you a completely different tone and texture. Be aware of this element and use it to select the best place to phrase both your chords and passages and to create additional variety and interest in your solo. And use the different registers of the guitar to add variation to your solo and to give you different ideas.

Even if you have not mastered every possible scale and mode, you can still add significant variation using just a few basic concepts. For example, you can begin with your major pentatonic scale (root, 2nd, 3rd, 5th and 6th) and then expand to a major scale by working in the 4th and 7th. Or you can begin with your minor pentatonic scale (root, minor 3rd, 4th, 5th and flat 7th) and then expand into a basic blues scale by adding a flat 5th or an altered blues scale by adding both the flat 5th and a natural 7th. Or you could add a 2nd and a lowered 6th to your minor pentatonic scale and thus transition into a natural minor scale.

Depending on the piece, use both your major scale (root, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th) and your blues scale (root, b3rd, 4th, b5th, 5th and b7th) during your solo. And play these in different positions on the neck. When you go to the IV or V chord in your progression, change scales and then come back to your original scale when you come back over the one. This works going from major to blues or blues to major, either way, as long as you are in a major key.

In your blues mode, do not limit yourself to just the minor pentatonic notes (root, b3rd, 4th, 5th and b7th). Let the pentatonic notes do the heavy lifting but color your phrases with a few well-chosen b5s (traditional blues scale) and natural 7ths (altered blues scale) nonetheless.

When selecting notes for string bends, be aware of the "blue notes", i.e., the b3rd (traditional) as well as the b5th and b7th. These are great notes to bend up to from a half step below because the quarter-tone in between will still sound good (and quite bluesy).

Also keep in mind that soloing using just the notes of one scale over your entire chord progression is only one approach. You might call this a generalized harmony or "horizontal" approach. The "vertical" approach would be to select your notes (or your scale or mode) from the chord you are playing over.

Keyboard players seem to have a pretty easy time with this concept but guitar players often struggle. Having all your sharps and flats all singled out on the black keys does make certain things easier to visualize on the keyboard but it's really not all that difficult to apply this concept to the guitar.

A good way to start would be to add a section, somewhere in your solo, where you would play a triad on your E, B and G strings using your open D or E (or Dm or Em) finger positions and moving them around to create the appropriate chord.

You can use your right hand to play various patterns or arpeggios or select individual notes from the triads that you are playing with your left hand (assuming you are right-handed). After a few bars of this concept you can go right back into your basic scale. Just a little bit of this will add a huge amount of variety and interest to your solo.

So now you have three types of solos in your repertoire. One where you play a guitar interpretation of the melody, one where you add embellishments or modifications to the melody and a third where you begin and end on the first and last notes of the melody but apply your own phrases in between.

A fourth type of solo could also be created by incorporating a combination of these three approaches into one solo. For instance, if you have a 16-bar solo, you can begin with the melody of the verse for the first eight (approach #1) and then go into an altered melody for the next eight (approach #3). And, of course, playing a completely new and different melody will give you a fifth type of solo with the added benefit that, after you have mastered the first four approaches, your note selection and melody composition in this mode is sure to have improved.

Once you have mapped out your night's solos in this fashion you will be able to see which strategy works best for each tune. Then, on those tunes where you still feel compelled to go further away from the original melody, make up your own beginning and ending notes and compose completely new phrases.

If you have not shorted yourself by skipping over the first three solo concepts, you are bound to come up with much better ideas now that you have reoriented yourself to think in terms of melody and not technique and to apply the more esoteric concepts that you read about in "On Soloing".

Don't give up your first two solo concepts. There are songs where it is simply perfect to play just the melody or an embellished melody. And there are many songs where you want to begin and end at the same point as the melody. When you do get to that third, fourth and fifth approach, your ideas will not only sound fresh to the audience (since they haven't been listening to the same riffs all night) they will actually be more creative because your imagination will be working along more musical lines.

One final idea: When you play with other guitar players or with other guitar players listening, you will have a tendency to fall back into the bad habit of riffing as fast as you can.

If just their presence doesn't cause you to do this, as soon as you hear someone else play a bunch of notes, you are going to want to play at least that many. But don't. Instead have the self-confidence to let the other guy

win the "who's faster" contest. If you don't have the self-confidence to do it, then, trust me and do exactly as I tell you just this one time.

If you are following another guitar solo, always play fewer notes. In fact, the fewer you play, the better. Concentrate on playing a great melody.

While the other guy is focused on winning the "who's faster" contest, you will be focused on winning the "who's more musical" contest. And unless he figures out what is happening and gives up his fixation with speed, he will have no chance to win the latter.

If the guy in front of you has just rattled off a mindless succession of same note value scales and you follow that with just the melody of the tune, you will get a better response from the audience every time.

On the next tune, "your opponent" will play even more notes (and probably rush the tempo if he wasn't already). Just come back and play the melody or a slight embellishment of the melody. Again, you will get the better audience response and the other guy will get even more frustrated and play even more pointless noodling.

After you have used this technique to establish yourself as the more musical soloist, you may as well go back and win the who's faster war as well - but not by playing more notes (or by actually playing faster). If you're both playing eighth note triplets at a 120 BPM tempo (and you're both playing in time), obviously, you're both playing at the same speed. But if you save your little flurry of notes for the last bar or two of your solo (and work up to it by playing a nice little simple melody) the contrast will make it seem to the audience that you are playing much faster than you actually are.

I am not a proponent of the concept of music as a competition or of trying to outshine or upstage anyone you are playing with either live or in the studio. I just don't see music that way.

In fact, I'm not really all that comfortable giving you the tools to frustrate your other guitar player friends at your local jam session but I do so in the hopes that you (and maybe even your victims) will gain something from the experience.

Until you get to a certain level, when you are around other guitar players, either at a jam session or on a gig or even maybe in your own band, you are going to be tempted to get into the "who can play faster" thing.

Since we have no music police in the free world, I'm trying to give you a technique to help you change your solo mindset, break some bad habits,

teach yourself the power of eloquence and perhaps even rid the world of a few million superfluous guitar notes.

If you try the strategy of playing fewer notes, composing melodies rather than throwing off riffs and saving anything quick for the last bar or so, you are not only going to sound better, your audience (by way of their response) is going to give you (and everyone else on stage) a great lesson in the value of these techniques.

As a result, you will develop more confidence in them, apply them with greater consistency and, practically overnight, become a much more seasoned player.

Best of luck to you!

And if all else fails, you can always take up the drums.

Randell Young - November 07, 2003