

XVII. Finding Good Fingerings For Single Note Lines

There's really no two-ways about it. Determining a good fingering for a single-note line on the guitar involves being aware of several (I would say all ... but that's impossible much of the time) of the possible fingerings. It also depends on the phrasing you want to achieve.

You may recall that in my Chord-Tone Exercise #1 I suggested that you learn how to play triad arpeggios starting on every finger on every string. This is essentially the exact same process you must go through in order to find the right fingering for any particular line, or section of a line, that you have to play.

- Try starting it on every finger in every possible location on the fretboard and see where it takes you.
 - Attempt, at first, to stay in the same position that you started in, for as long as it is not totally impractical.
 - When it does become totally impractical, simply shift briefly to a nearby position that is more practical.
 - Use odd fingerings (I called them “illegal” before in my chapter about Position Playing) sparingly. If you must, you must, but only if it is the best sounding or best feeling solution to the present problem.
 - Try to remember which fingerings, in which locations of the fretboard, were more successful or felt more natural than the others, and see if you can link them all together for the different sections of the line.
 - When playing quick flurries of notes, like 1/8 note triplets, or the common figure of a 1/16 note triplet + an 1/8 note (swing), try to keep the notes of the figure on the same string, if possible. Usually, these figures involve simple melodic auxiliaries, so the notes are just a step or two away from each other. Obviously, wider intervals will not allow you to keep the notes of the figure on the same string.
 - Get used to analyzing the melody you are trying to play for chord-tones and non-chord-tones. When you recognize a familiar arpeggio, you will probably already know a familiar fingering for it too.
- Although it is a completely valid way to play, if you like that sort of thing, you don't have to pick every note. Use pull-offs and hammer-ons to create a more flowing vocal-like, or horn-like, phrasing. Not having to pick every note can really make things easier for your picking hand too, and can help keep you relaxed. In order to develop this type of phrasing, I've done quite a bit of work where I'll read through saxophone and/or trumpet. etc. solos that have phrase markings notated, and I'll try to imitate the indicated phrasing on the guitar.

For example:

If I encounter a phrase marked legato, consisting of 4 eighth notes:

If it is possible to play all 4 notes on the same string, I will only pick the first note and then hammer-on or pull-off to the other 3 notes. Sometimes a slide might be needed also.

If the intervals are too wide for all the notes to be on the same string, I will put them in groups of two notes, and pick the first of each of the two groups.

This can get quite interesting when the phrases start on up-beats rather than down beats, because all the picking, and therefore the accents, are on up-beats. By emphasizing swing upbeats, the music tends to swing a bit more.

If I encounter a phrase marked legato, consisting of 3 eighth notes:

If it is possible to play all 3 notes on the same string, I will only pick the first note and hammer-on or pull-off to the other 2 notes.

If the intervals are too wide for all the notes to be on the same string, I will put them in one group of two notes, plus a single note (or visa versa), and only pick twice.

can be played:

V VI

can be played:

X VIII X

X VIII X

VIII X

VIII

Groups of 5 notes can be seen as various combinations of the above (4 + 1, 3 + 2, 2 + 2 + 1, etc.). The same is true for any size group of notes within a legato phrase.

Note: The above techniques will, and should, result in some rather frequent position shifts.

Another thing I have done to develop this ability is to figure out fingerings, and to practice scales and arpeggios, with certain types of legato phrasing in mind.

For instance, I might:

1. Play scales where I pick 1 note and hammer-on (on the way up) and pull-off (on the way down) 3 more notes. I may have to slide to a new position for 1 of the 4 notes too. (I.e. Groups of 4 notes per string. And 4 notes per each pick attack.) This usually involves a position shift after each 4-note group.
2. Play scales where I pick 1 note and hammer-on (on the way up) and pull-off (on the way down) 2 more notes. (I.e. Groups of 3 notes per string, and per pick attack.) This usually involves a position shift after each 3-note group.
3. Play scales where I pick 1 note and hammer-on (on the way up) and pull-off (on the way down) 1 more notes. (I.e. Groups of 2 notes per pick attack.) This may or may not involve a position shift after some of the 2-note groups.