

X.X. Playing What You Hear

Up until now, we have really been doing things sort of ass-backwards from the way it really works when a good improviser plays. I've been asking you to sing what you've been practicing. What a good player does involves hearing it in his head first and playing it on the guitar in real time. The two are intertwined, but it's the latter that you should be striving for.

When you sing (or hum or whistle or whatever) the stuff you practice, you do learn it on a much deeper, more musical level. There is a world of difference between the act of consciously playing a note somewhere on the fretboard for some reason and the act of singing that same note. When you sing something, whether or not you possess a good singing voice, you are forced to really HEAR it. It is something inside of you, not some mechanical contrivance you manipulate outside of yourself. You don't need to have a good singing voice, but I have NEVER run across a musician who could play jazz who was not capable of singing a melody, and doing so, more or less, in-tune.

When you sing what you are practicing out loud, you train yourself to learn to HEAR what you are practicing, not merely to play it. Once this ability is developed it is not necessarily something that needs to be done, out loud that is, forever-and-ever. A good player always has an internal voice going on inside his head. You will be singing internally, even if you are not singing out loud.

When you sing out loud while you are practicing improvising, you will probably force yourself to play more melodically. Most of the fingering pyrotechnics that young guitar players are so drawn to yields music that is impossible to sing (or that you wouldn't want to sing, even if you could). As soon as you take the attitude that, for the most part, you will not play anything that you cannot sing, your playing will begin to take on that vocal quality that is the hallmark of a really good jazz player.

Singing while practicing new material (scales, arpeggios, melodies, etc), will help you to hear new things, things that you can't hear now. You should develop the ability to sing any scale or arpeggio, whether you have the guitar in your hands or not. Eg. After practicing a C7 \flat 5 arpeggio in Pos VII. for 20 minutes - if you can not sing a C7 \flat 5 arpeggio YOU ARE MISSING THE POINT ALMOST COMPLETELY!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Singing while improvising will train you to play less leaps and to use more step-wise motion, especially at the point of a chord change.

You will be more likely to play long notes as well as short notes. The voice is capable of sustaining a note and varying it dynamically, whereas a struck guitar string begins to die away immediately. Most guitar players try to fill up all that dead air way too much and play way too many notes.

You will probably play more repeated notes as opposed to a different note on each attack, because your ears are leading you around not your fingers.

You will probably play more in time, with succinct, recognizable, definable, transcribe-able rhythms.

You will probably begin to subconsciously develop both rhythmic and intervallic themes, as well as developments of those themes. Most of the good things in music happen at the subconscious level, after they have been well digested by the conscious mind. Singing while improvising will help put you in contact with this deeper level of your musicality.

It is a lot harder to sing a bad note than it is to play one, so you will probably start hitting more good notes.

There is a fraction of a second, just before you attack a note, where you will know if you can sing it (and therefore whether you are really hearing it). You should be able to train yourself to stop right there if you know beforehand that it will sound bad.

Learning to lay out when you don't hear anything is extremely important. Only a fool keeps playing when every single note sucks. Don't be afraid to let time go by while you find your bearings, and get ready to lay into that 1 note that you KNOW will sound great.

In summary, you will begin to play much more musically and less like a typical, wanking, novice, rock guitar player whose guitar is playing him when it is he who should be playing the guitar.

Note: In order to sing a line that extends above or below your vocal range you must develop the ability to vocally switch octaves. You should learn what your practical vocal range is. What is the highest note you can sing? What is the lowest? What notes can you sing in falsetto? When the music goes past your upper range switch into falsetto or sing the notes an octave lower. When the music goes below your range sing it an octave

higher.

But, as good as learning to hear what you are playing (via singing) is for you, it is nowhere near as important a skill as being able to play what you hear. There is a difference. A big difference. When you sing what you play, you are trying to hear something that you are first conceptualizing on the guitar. When you play what you hear, you are hearing it first. The guitar is merely the medium by which you “vocalize” that which you already hear.

When I first started playing, after I had learned the chords to some Beatles tunes, I began to lift bass lines chord progressions and eventually some lead lines, by ear. I had a crude technique but it worked. I would listen to sections of the recording over and over again until I could sing the part that I was trying to work out. Once I could sing it, it was just a matter of finding out where on the guitar those notes happened to be found. If I had a hard time with a particular note, I would simply go up and down a single string while singing the note that I was looking for, *1 fret at-a-time*, until I found that note. Once I knew what the notes were, I could then try to work out a decent fingering and maybe even a fingering that sounded just like the record.

To me, doing this seemed obvious. I am always stymied when I encounter a student who has been studying the guitar seriously for many years who has never learned how to lift a part off of a record. In my mind, and in my experience, this is the single most important ability an improvising musician can have. Without it, nothing else you might study is really of much use.

Now, I learned to sing when I was quite young. My father was a very good singer, and he loved to sing. My elementary school had a great teacher named John Bradshaw who used the Orff music training program. I sang in choirs, played glockenspiel as well as other percussion instruments and a little piano. My Dad played a baritone ukulele, and he taught me my first few chords when I was around 10. I have no idea what to tell you folks who have had dissimilar, or musically deficient, childhoods. If all of this stuff is WAY beyond you, you should seek out a professional ear training coach. [It wouldn't hurt to go to an ear training coach anyway, no matter what your musical level.]

The following series of exercises are designed to get you to listen closely to what you are presently capable of hearing, and to get you to be able to play that-which-you-can-hear on the guitar. Hopefully, with practice, you will develop the ability to hear more things and to hear better and more interesting things, and to do it all in real time while you're improvising.

We'll start with a blues in C major, but any tune could do. Pick simple tunes for now, with no more than 2 chords per bar, and, on-average, only 1 chord per bar.

1. With your metronome on at a slow tempo - play the chord in the 1st bar of the tune and also play the first chord of the 1st beat of the 2nd bar, and then stop. Strum each chord only once and listen very closely to it. Do this a few times. Let the sound of the chords sink in.
 2. With the 1st chord sounding sing a note that sounds good to you on that chord (DON'T PLAY IT SING IT!!!). We'll use that note as the starting note of the melody we are about to compose.
 3. Repeat Step 1 but this time sing a melody that starts on that note and sounds good all the way through bar 1, and into the downbeat of bar 2.
DON'T PLAY IT SING IT!!!! Try to find a simple melody with very distinct pitches that you can repeat. You'll need to sing this melody quite a few times before we decide that it is your 'keeper'. Try this 3 or 4 times in a row until you have clearly sung a melody that you like. If the first melody you come up with is not so hot, then just keep trying until you get one that you do like. It does not have to be brilliant and flashy. It just has to work and sound musical. Make sure the notes you are singing sound good while the chords are sounding.
- [If you have trouble finding any other notes beyond the 1st one that sound good to you, then try singing some chord-scales up and/or down (by step), beginning on your 1st note. Eventually you will find 2 or 3 notes that you like the sound of. Use them to make up your melody.]
4. Find the notes of your 1-bar melody on the guitar. Use the crude technique I talked about earlier if you must. (Sing the note and go up or down 1 string, *1 fret at-a-time*, until you find the note you are looking for.)
 5. Record yourself playing the chords from these 2 bars, as above. Play your line while the tape plays back. Make sure you are playing EXACTLY what you sang, and with the same rhythms! Nothing more, nothing less. Keep singing it, if you must.

6. You'll need some way of either memorizing this melody, or of storing it. If you have a good memory for melody you'll be fine. If not, you can either tape record what you have so far (on a separate tape, I guess), or if your reading/writing skills are up to snuff you could write it down in musical notation. Keeping it all in your head is best though.

7. Play the chords again for the 1st two bars and sing your line, but continue all the way into the 1st beat of bar 3. The first time you do this, just listen to the sound of the chord in bar 2. You should already know what your 1st note for bar 2 will be, because it's the last note of the little melody you already composed.

8. Repeat Step 7 but this time keep singing through all of bar 2 as well as the 1st beat of bar 3. **DON'T PLAY IT ... SING IT!!!!** Try this several times, until you have clearly sung a melody that you like, 3 or 4 times in a row.

9. Find the notes of the new melodic fragment on your guitar.

10. Tape record yourself playing the chords from these 3 bars as above. Play your complete 3 bar melody, while the tape plays back. Make sure you are playing **EXACTLY** what you sang, including the rhythms! Nothing more, nothing less. Keep singing it, if you must.

11. Repeat Step 7 for the next bar.

12. Continue as above until you have composed a full chorus.

If you are anything like the vast majority of my students, you will probably find that you have composed a melody comprised mostly of chord-tones, with the odd tension and/or passing tone here and there. There will usually be a clear repetitive rhythmic and intervallic theme that is gradually developed as the tune goes on. The range of the melody will probably be no more than a P12th. There will be few melodic leaps at the points of the chord changes. Chords will be joined smoothly, by step-wise motion or common tones. These are all the hallmarks of a good, strong, melody.

And you will have done this all subconsciously!

The subconscious mind is a lot quicker to put all of the various elements of a musical performance together than the conscious mind is. So, take the time to listen to what you hear!

Making music is a holistic process, but it involves many little details each of which often needs to be studied separately using a reductionist approach. At some point, however, you have to try to put it all back together again.

Do the above exercise diligently, and persistently, and eventually the time involved can be so drastically reduced that you can actually play what you hear in real time on the guitar, while you are hearing it. The above technique **IS** what improvising is. Improvising is nothing more or less than what I have described above. Everything else, i.e. all the scales, all the arpeggios, all the theory, all the other bullshit, is just supposed to help you do a better, more interesting, job of the above.

Random Chord Exercise (a different type of playing 'by ear')

This is an exercise of enormous importance. It trains you to learn to discern what notes you like to hear on certain chords, and, more importantly, it trains you be able to react and **FIX** the notes you play that you don't like. I.e. It trains you to listen and to react.

1. Use a tape recorder and tape yourself playing some random chords.

At a medium tempo, each chord should last at least 4 bars.

The less logical the progression from one chord to the next, the better. I.e. Do not try to stay in one key, or to play familiar well known chord sequences. The less related each chord is to the next, the better.

Make this a long recording, 5 minutes or more.

Mix in some triads, triads with added tensions, 7th chords, 7th chords with added tensions, altered dom7 chords, etc.

Use a metronome if you like, to keep the timing steady.

2. Put the tape away for a few days, so that you forget what you recorded.

3. Get the tape out, and try to improvise some melodies over the random chord sequences.

Don't worry about what scale fits the chord, or what chord you are on.

Simply, play a note and LISTEN to it. You'll either like the way it sounds, or you won't. But you have take some time to listen to it in order to decide whether, or not, you like the way it sounds.

If it doesn't fit the chord YOU WILL ALMOST * ALWAYS* BE A 1/2 STEP ABOVE, OR BELOW, A NOTE THAT DOES FIT. So if you play a bad note, just FIX IT before you move on.

Spend some time trying to play the worst notes possible, and fix them by moving down (or up) 1 fret.

Use your ears and your intuition to try and FEEL which way (up or down) the note WANTS to go. [Yes these notes have a mind of their own!]

At first it is wise to confine yourself to one string, but with experience and some confidence you'll be able to venture out across the fretboard, and just play.

Implicit in all of this is that in order to be able to improvise a melody over chord changes YOU DON'T REALLY HAVE TO KNOW WHAT THE CHANGES ARE. All you have to do is use your ears, and learn how to react to what you hear around you.

Knowing how to react to what you hear on the fly is real important because, even when you do know what the changes and chord-scales are supposed to be, there is no guaranty that the other folks in the band will be playing exactly the voicing you expect them to, or even the chord that you *think* should be there. You have to play on the chord that is *really* there. So you have to listen and react *ALWAYS. As soon as you stop listening and reacting, you've lost it.

That's it for now.

Best of luck in all your musical endeavors.