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Position Playing Explored and Expanded

This pamphlet will attempt to give the jazz guitar student a clearer understanding and a more capable facility with the concept of “Position Playing” as first presented in William G. Leavitt's A Modern Method For Guitar series of books which were used as the basis of the guitar courses at Berklee College Of Music. I assume that you've already gone through at least the first 2 volumes of William Leavitt's books or that you've gone through the Position Playing materials in my own book. This is a prerequisite for being able to understand the materials presented in this pamphlet.

Position Playing is a concept that the player can use to calculate the vast majority of the possible fingerings for any single-note line he/she needs to read, play, or improvise on the guitar. The proposition is that a playable fingering for any single-note line exists at any and every fretboard position the fretting hand might be placed at, as long as the range of the line happens to fit within that position.

[FYI The range of any single position is the interval of a Perfect 18th (a P4th plus 2 octaves). See below.]

Open Position

In Open Position (aka Position I) the “rules” of Position Playing are quite simple:

- Any notes that need to be played in the 1st fret will be played with the 1st finger.
- Any notes in the 2nd fret use the 2nd finger.
- 3rd fret - 3rd finger.
- 4th fret, 4th finger.

Position I is the only position where we'll be using the open strings on a regular basis, thus the name “Open Position”.

So in Open Position, any note that is playable via an open string will almost always use that open string. E.g. In Open Position the note B (a min 2nd below concert middle C) is usually played via the open B string but may occasionally be played at the 3rd string 4th fret instead.

- The highest note available in Pos I is the A at the 5 fret on the 1 string.

This is played via what is known as “4th finger stretch”.

[This is the only finger stretch actually required in Position I. More on finger stretches in the following sections about the upper positions.]

So, by following these fingering “rules” a fingering is more-or-less automatically generated for any single note line that needs to be played, as long as the range of that line fits within the range of Pos. I [Low open E to high A at the 5th fret - 1st string].

So, there are 5 frets involved in Open Position when we include the high A.

In Position I:

Work out the fingerings yourself for all 12 major scales, melodic minor scales, harmonic minor scales, harmonic major scales (1 2 3 4 5 b6 7), whole-tone scales, octatonic diminished scales, hexatonic augmented scales, etc.

Then work out the fingerings for all of the arpeggios of all of the chords that exist within these scales.

[Check out the arpeggio exercises in the following sections of this pamphlet dealing with the upper positions for a possible template as to how to practice these arpeggios in Open Position.]

Read through the melodies of several tunes in your fake book(s) while staying strictly in Pos. I. Etc.

Positions II And Higher

Beginning with Position II, the “rules” change somewhat. The concept is still based on the one-finger-per-fret idea of Open Position but now we don't have access to the open strings and we will need to expand the number of frets involved from 5 to 6, using both 1st finger stretches and 4th finger stretches, so that we can play any notes that fall outside of the standard placement of the 4 fingers of the fretting hand.

Position II is called Position II because the 1st finger usually falls across the 2nd fret.

- Any notes we need to play in the 2nd fret are played with the 1st finger.

Sometimes the 1st finger will need to stretch down to the 1st fret to play a note too.

So the 1st finger really covers both the 2nd and the 1st frets.

- Any notes we need to play in the 3rd fret will be played with the 2nd finger.

This is the only fret that the 2nd finger will play in whenever we are in Pos. II.

[I.e. There are no “2nd finger stretches” used within this particular version of the Position Playing technique.]

- Any notes we need to play in the 4th fret will be played with the 3rd finger.

This is the only fret that the 3rd finger will play in whenever we are in Pos. II.

[I.e. There are no “3rd finger stretches” used within this particular version of the Position Playing technique.]

- Any notes we need to play in the 5th fret will be played with the 4th finger.

The 4th finger will also have to play notes in the 6th fret occasionally using 4th finger stretches.

So the 4th finger covers both the 5th and the 6th frets.

As soon as you use one of your fingers in a different fret from those detailed above, you will have shifted to some other position besides Position II. There may not be anything inherently “wrong” with this position shift, but if what you are trying to do is to study what is available in Position II it will be a “mistake”.

[Usually, if a note is playable without a finger stretch it will be played without using a finger stretch.

But sometimes playing a note that doesn't really need a stretch with a stretch will aid in the smoothness of the execution and/or the phrasing you are trying to achieve.]

In my opinion, the study of Position Playing is largely the study of how to incorporate finger stretches into your playing. There are other problems we'll encounter as well, but the lion's share of the work is involved with making good choices for finger stretches [e.g. When to use a 1st finger stretch vs a 4th finger stretch (and vice versa) or simply shifting position.]

You will also find that most really good guitar players, people who have a real strong sense of flow in their line playing, tend to shift position a lot, seemingly avoiding finger stretches as much as possible.

And there is good reason for that.

Finger stretches, as handy and useful as they are, tend to tire the hand somewhat.

If a line can be played without using finger stretches at all, it tends to be easier on the hands and may flow more smoothly than a comparable fingering that does involve finger stretches.

So, you really have to take the whole Position Playing concept with a grain of salt, so to speak.

My own opinion is that it is highly worth exploring and exploring fully, but there are lots of great players out there who haven't explored it like I will be doing here.

By adhering to the "rules" for Position II, as detailed above, you should be able to come up with a workable fingering for **any** single-note line you have to play as long as the range of that line sits between the low F on your low E string and the 6th fret Bb on your high E string.

Now, the above statement is really true only in a limited scope when playing certain types of relatively simple melodies.

I.e. Some lines you'll need to play will require you to shift position from time to time.

Also, in order to achieve any type of musical phrasing on guitar you'll **want to** shift position frequently to the places that allow you to get that phrasing.

This pamphlet attempts to expand the palette available within any single position by allowing the player to utilize a slightly wider area of the fretboard, with occasional position shifts up or down of one position, as briefly as possible, before returning the position being studied.

E.g. Some lines in Pos II will require brief shifts to Pos I and/or Pos III.

We will keep these shifts down to a bare minimum as much as possible.

I'll also attempt to catalogue all of the potential finger problems that arise when one tries to play a line within a single position with the hope being that the player will learn to think on his/her feet when they are in the throws of performance. I.e. These fingering solutions have to become second nature in both muscle memory and within the ear, otherwise you'll just be confused all the time.

The scalar and arpeggio exercises that follow will help to expose most, if not all, of the potential fingering snafus.

In all cases my goal is to arrive at a fingering that has the most potential for legato phrasing. When staccato phrasing is desired there are potentially other fingering solutions that one might want to utilize.

E.g. In Pos. II, if you've just played the E on the 2nd fret of the D string with your 1st finger and the next note you want to play is the G# directly above it, you could use the 1st finger again for the G# on the G string. But if you do that you'll have to cut off the duration of the E somewhat resulting in a less than full legato sound. However, if you use a 4th finger stretch on the D string to play the G# you will be able to give the preceding E its full potential duration. So, generally speaking, in this particular situation, the 4th finger stretch is the preferred solution.
Etc.

Within any single position, whenever a finger stretch is required, you will **always** have a choice of using a 1st finger stretch **or** a 4th finger stretch.

You need to learn to make this choice intelligently. My own general advice is to favour 1st finger stretches for the most part and to save 4th finger stretches for those occasions (like above) when a 4th finger stretch is truly called for.

In my notation, first finger stretches will be indicated by "1s".
Fourth finger stretches will be "4s".

Position Fingering Problem #1:

How to play notes in the same fret on adjacent **pairs** of strings

In my opinion, every player should try to develop the ability to partially barre any one of the 4 fingers of the fretting hand across at least 2 adjacent strings.

Barring involves the relaxation of the the 1st joint of the finger so that the first 2 segments of the finger can sit flat across the strings.

Most people can do this fairly easily with their 1st finger and every barre-chord grip you've ever played requires you to do this. Most people can barre across all 6 strings with their 1st finger which often involves relaxation of the 2nd joint of the finger as well as the 1st.

Barring across at least 2 adjacent strings is often required of the 2nd finger as well.

I can do 4 strings pretty easily, but all 6 is problematic.

Ditto for the 3rd finger.

Most people never develop the ability to barre at all with their pinky though until someone like me tells them that they should learn to do it.

I know a couple of chord grips that use a barre across 4 or more strings with the pinky, but as far as utilizing 4th finger barring while playing single-note lines is concerned I have trouble with

anything wider than 3 consecutive strings. But barring the 4th finger across 2 adjacent strings really shouldn't be a problem for anyone, in my opinion.

So, when you have to play 2 notes in the same fret with the same finger what I advocate doing is to barre that finger across both strings.

When your line involves a lower string moving to the next highest string the idea is to play the 1st note without barring and then barre the 2nd note while rolling the finger pad just enough so that the lower note is muted.

When the line involves playing the upper note first, the idea is to pre-barre across both string when playing the 1st note and then releasing the barre as the 2nd note is picked so that the 1st note no longer sounds. When pre-barring care must be taken so that only the intended note is sounded and there should only be one note at a time.

In the exercises that follow I've used the text "b" next to the finger number to indicate a note that is played via barring, "pb" to indicate a note that involves pre-barring the next note, and "r" to indicate a note that is achieved by releasing the barre of the previous note that required pre-barring.

[Note: To the best of my knowledge, William Leavitt himself did not advocate using this system of mine of barring and pre-barring across adjacent strings. His only suggestion in his books as to how to handle this was to "roll the fingertip from one note to the next". And I advise you to practice doing it his way as well as mine. But my own explorations of his way have led me to believe that it is near impossible to achieve legato phrasing between these pairs of notes unless you barre as I've described. Still, there will times when not barring will be a better solution than barring and you'll just have to live with the slightly shorter-than-ultimately-desirable duration of the notes involved.]

Position Fingering Problem #2:

How to play notes in the same fret on **groups** of 3 adjacent strings

Here it starts getting a little thornier.

Controlling a barre across 3 adjacent strings is much harder to do, depending on the order of the notes, than a simple barre across 2 adjacent strings.

Here are the possible ways that the notes might be ordered within a group of notes in the same fret across 3 adjacent strings.

Each sequence will require a different fingering solution depending on which fret/finger within the position is involved.

And each solution might have other options available depending on which actual strings are involved (because of the tuning of the B string):

a. Lowest note followed by middle note followed by highest note.

The simplest thing to do, conceptually speaking, is to just barre across all 3 strings and release the pressure between attacks so that the notes ring out one-at-a-time rather than as a chord.

But my experience is that this is hard to control with any accuracy, especially as the tempo increases.

Barring between the first 2 notes isn't a problem, but getting to the upper 3rd note without having the 2 previous notes ringing out is impossible to control all with one finger, in my experience. So, what I advocate doing is to play each note here without barring.

The middle note will require a position shift up or down of one position, by using the next highest (or lowest) finger for the middle note.

Return to the correct finger for that position for the upper note.

E.g. In Pos. V, if you need to play the low D (5th string 1st fing) followed by the G above it and then the C above that: use the 1st finger for the D, the 2nd finger for the G (this puts you in Pos IV for this one note) and then go back to Pos V for the C using the 1st finger.

E.g. In Pos. V, if you need to play the low D# (5th string 2nd fing) followed by the G# above it and then the C# above that: use the 2nd finger for the D#, the 3rd finger for the G# (this puts you in Pos IV for this one note) and then go back to Pos V for the C# using the 2nd finger.

Alternatively, you could use the 1st finger for the G# which would put you briefly in Pos VI.

E.g. In Pos. V, if you need to play the low E (5th string 3rd fing) followed by the A above it and then the D above that: use the 3rd finger for the E, the 2nd or 4th finger for the A (this puts you in Pos IV or VI for this one note) and then go back to Pos V for the D using the 3rd finger.

E.g. In Pos. V, if you need to play the low F (5th string 4th fing) followed by the Bb above it and then the Eb above that: you could use the 4th finger for the D, the 3rd finger for the Bb (this puts you in Pos IV for this one note) and then go back to Pos V for the Eb using the 4th finger.

But, for this particular sequence of notes another option exists - because of the tuning of the B string.

I.e. We can play the high Eb as a 1st finger stretch on the B string.

So in this case the preferred fingering will be F(2) Bb(2b) Eb(1s) because it involve no position shift.

E.g. If the first note in the sequence involves a finger stretch (e.g. Pos V, C# on the A string) then the middle note (F# in this example) can often be played with a 4th finger stretch with the upper note (B in this example) using a 1st finger stretch or a 4th finger stretch.

There are other ways that this might play out, depending on the specifics of the line involved, and I'll try to cover them all in the following exercises.

b. Lowest note followed by highest note followed by middle note.

If it wasn't for the middle note there would be no problem just barring across all 3 strings to finger the lowest and highest notes. But following the high note with the middle note after barring from the low note is problematic.

So, I advocate using a neighbouring finger for upper note and then returning to the correct finger for that position for the middle note before moving on to what ever the next note happens to be. Another option might be play the low note with a neighbouring finger and then returning to the correct finger for the upper note and then barring that finger for the middle note.

E.g. Pos V - low D, C above that, followed by G below that might be fingered: 1 2 1 or 2 1 1b.

E.g. Low D#, C# above, down to G# might be fingered: 2 1 2, 2 3 2, 3 2 2b or 1 2 2b.

E.g. Low E, up to D, down to A might be fingered: 3 4 3, 3 2 3, 2 3 3b or 4 3 3b.

E.g. Low F, up to Eb, down to Bb is best fingered: 4 1s 4 because the Eb is available on the B string too.

E.g. Low C#, up to B, down to F# might be fingered: 1s 4s 1s, 1s 4s 4s or even 4s 1s 4s or 4s 1s 1s.

c. Highest note followed by middle note followed by lowest note.

Use a neighbouring finger for the middle note.

Or use a neighbouring finger for the upper note returning to the correct finger for the middle note and then barring that finger for the low note.

d. Highest note followed by lowest note followed by middle note.

There is no problem here with pre-barring across the two outer notes then releasing the barre for the 2nd note and then barring again for the middle note.

E.g. Pos V – Concert middle C, down to low D, up to G would be: 1pb 1r 1b

Etc.

e. Middle note followed by lowest note followed by upper note.

There is no problem here with pre-barring across the first two notes, unbarring for the 2nd note and then barring again for the upper note.

E.g. In Pos V - G D C would be: 1pb 1r 1b

Etc.

f. Middle note followed by upper note followed by low note.

Use a neighbouring finger for the upper note returning to the correct finger for the low note.

Or, start on the neighbouring finger then use the correct finger for the last two notes, with the last note being barred.

E.g. In Pos V – G C D would be: 1 2 1 or 2 1 1b.

Position Fingering Problem #3:

How to play notes in the same fret on **groups** of 4 or more adjacent strings

In almost all cases this will involve some usage of a neighbouring finger and a corresponding position shift up or down by one position.

Sometimes I can play a pair of notes that are in the same fret but are 4 strings apart (e.g. From the high E string down to the D string or visa versa with my 1st finger utilizing barring and/or pre-barring. But doing so with any other finger is not really practical most of the time.

On to the exercises.....

About the exercises:

I've written out the fingerings in Position 5 for the following patterns within the C major scale.

1. Diatonic triads proceeding by scale-wise steps in root position, 1st inversion and 2nd inversion.

There are 4 possible basic ways to do this:

- arpeggiate each triad up from the lowest note
- arpeggiate each triad down from the highest note
- arpeggiate the first triad up from the low note and the next triad down from the high note, etc.
- arpeggiate the first triad down from the high note and the next triad up from the low note, etc.

Within a single position the first two patterns will always be the hardest to finger.

The last two types of patterns will always be easier.

This is because in the first two patterns there is a leap involved between the last note of the first triad and the first note of the next triad.

2. Diatonic 7th chords proceeding by scale-wise steps in all 4 inversion.

Up-Up

Down-Down

Up-Down

Down-Up

The two patterns with alternating directions will be easiest.

By the end of this series of exercises we should have exposed ourselves to all or nearly all of the potential problems you are likely to encounter when using the Position Playing approach.

I know it's an awful lot of work and that it's mostly boring.

It's also quite hard on your fretting hand, with all the extreme finger stretches involved.

So take it easy and give yourself regular breaks.

Many of the resulting fingerings will seem completely impractical and you may already have the tools to come up with more practical fingerings for the same sequences of notes, and that's a good thing. If you know a better, easier, more flowing way to play any of these lines or if you can figure one out, then by all means feel free to use it. But it might be good for you to practice these strict position fingerings as well. Having more technique is **always** better than having less technique.

Position Playing isn't really about identifying the best ways to play a line.

It's about knowing as many of the possible ways of playing a line so that you can decide for yourself what the best way is **for you** to play that line for your own particular musical needs at that time.

And all of these fingering are possible to play, even if they seem pedantic or unwieldy in some way.

The vast majority of the fingerings that seem impractical will seem a lot less impractical after you can play them.

So, here we go...

C Major
Diatonic Triads - Root Position
Up - Dwn

Pos V

Repeat

C Major
Diatonic Triads - Root Position
Dwn - Up

Pos V

Repeat

C Major
 Diatonic Triads - Root Position
 Up - Up

C Major
 Diatonic Triads - Root Position
 Dwn - Dwn

C Major
 Diatonic Triads - 1st Inversion
 Up - Dwn

C Major
Diatonic Triads - 1st Inversion Dwn-Up

(On Repeat)
(IV V)
Pos V

C Major
Diatonic Triads - 1st Inversion
Up - Up

Pos V

C Major
Diatonic Triads - 1st Inversion
Dwn-Dwn

Pos V
(On Repeat) (IV V)

C Major
Diatonic Triads - 2nd Inversion
Up - Dwn

Pos V

C Major
Diatonic Triads - 2nd Inversion
Dwn-Up

Pos V

C Major
Diatonic Triads - 2nd Inversion
Up - Up

Pos V

C Major
Diatonic Triads - 2nd Inversion
Dwn-Dwn

Pos V

(1 2 1)
(On Repeat)

4 1 4s 2 3pb 3r 4s 1pb 1r 3 1s 4 1 3pb 3r 4s 1pb 1r 3 4pb 4r 1 3pb 3r

(alt: 1 2 1)
IV V

4 1pb 1 1b 3pb 3r 3b 4pb 4r 1s IV 2 V 1 1b 3pb 3r 3b 1s 4

(alt: 4 3 4s 1pb 1r) Repeat

C Major
Diatonic 7ths - Root Position
Up - Dwn

Pos V

4s 1 4s 3 1pb 1r 1s 3 1pb 1r

4s 3 1pb 1r 1s 3 1pb 1r

(4s)

4s 3 1pb 1r 4s 3 1pb 1r

4s 3 1pb 1r

(4s)

Repeat

C Major
Diatonic 7ths - Root Position
Dwn - Up

Pos V

4s 3 4s 1 1b

4s 1 1b 1s 1 1b

(4s)

1 1b 1s 3 1 1b

(4s)

4s 1 1 1b 4s 1

4s 1 3

Repeat

C Major
 Diatonic 7ths - Root Position
 Up - Up

4s 4s 3 1 4s

Pos V

1 4s 3 1 1b 1s 3 1pb 1r 1b 3pb

3r 1 1b 1s 3 1 1b

(4s)

4s 3 1 1b 4s 3

4s 3

Repeat

C Major
 Diatonic 7ths - Root Position
 Dwn - Dwn

Pos V

C Major
 Diatonic 7ths - 1st Inversion
 Up - Dwn

Pos V

C Major
 Diatonic 7ths - 1st Inversion
 Dwn-Up

Pos V

C Major
 Diatonic 7ths - 1st Inversion
 Up - Up

Pos V

C Major
 Diatonic 7ths - 1st Inversion
 Dwn-Dwn

Pos V (1b)
 (on repeat)

C Major
 Diatonic 7ths - 2nd Inversion
 Up - Dwn

Pos V

C Major
 Diatonic 7ths - 2nd Inversion
 Dwn-Up

Pos V

C Major
 Diatonic 7ths - 2nd Inversion
 Up - Up

Pos V

C Major
 Diatonic 7ths - 2nd Inversion
 Dwn-Dwn

Pos V

1pb 1r 4s 1 4s 1 1pb 1r 1pb 1r 4s 1 3 1s 3

(4s) (4s)

4s 1 1 1b 3

3b 4 2 3 4s 1 1 1b 3 3b 1s 3

3 4 1 IV 2 4 V 1 (4s) Repeat

C Major
 Diatonic 7ths - 3rd Inversion
 Up-Dwn

Pos V

4s 1 4s 3 1pb 1r

1s 3 1pb 1r 1s 1 1pb 1r 1s 3 1s 3 1pb 1r 4s 3

(4s) (4s)

(4s) (4s)

4s 3

Repeat

C Major
 Diatonic 7ths - 3rd Inversion
 Dwn-Up

Pos V

4s 1 4s 1 1 1b

1s 3 1s 1 1b

(4s) (4s)

1s 1 1b 1s 3 1 1b 4s 1

(4s) (4s)

4s 1

Repeat

C Major
 Diatonic 7ths - 3rd Inversion
 Up-Up

Pos V

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Repeat

C Major
Diatonic 7ths - 3rd Inversion
Dwn-Dwn

Take all of these exercises through all 12 keys in Position V.
Do the same exercises in every position in every key.

If you want to explore this further, then here are some other things you can do....

Work out fingerings for the same types of patterns using diatonic quartal trichords proceeding via scale-wise steps in all 3 inversions/rotations.

E.g.

C F B, D G C, E A D, F B E, G C F, A D G, B E A: C F B

Rotation 1: F B C, G C D, A D E, etc.

Rotation 2: B C F, C D G, D E A, etc.

Up-Up

Dwn-Dwn

Up-Dwn

Dwn-Up

Work out the fingerings for the diatonic quartal tetrads proceeding via scale-wise steps in all 4 inversions.

E.g.

C F B E, D G C F, E A D G, F B E A, G C F B, A D G C, B E A D: C F B E

Rotation 1: E B C F, F C D G, G D E A, etc.

Rotation 2: F C E B, G D F C, A E G D, etc.

Rotation 3: B E F C, C F G D, D G A E, etc.

Notice that the quartal tetrads are all spread voicings that span more than a single octave.

They can also be seen as being “drop 2” voicings.

If we move the highest note of the quartal tetrad down an octave we’ll have the close-voiced version of the same chord.

E.g. C F B E reduces to C E F B.

So, you might want to try running the same types of exercises by arpeggiating these close-voiced quartal tetrads and their inversions.

E.g.

C E F B, D F G C, E G A D, F A B E, etc.

Etc. Etc.

The 1st rotation of C E F B is E F B C.

2nd rotation is F B C E.

Etc.

Take all the exercises through the other possible scales:

Melodic minor

Harmonic Minor

Harmonic Major

Octotonic Diminished [Idim, bIIIdim, bIIIdim, etc. Or Imaj, #IVm(2nd inv), bIIImaj, VIIm(2nd inv)] etc., etc.

Whole Tone [I+, II+, etc.]

Augmented [I+, bIII+, III+, V+, etc.]

Also try spread voicing arpeggios of the triads and quartal trichords.

E.g. C E G becomes C G E.

Etc.

C F B becomes C B F.

Etc.

Good luck!

Don’t hurt yourself!

Take it easy.

There’s enough work here for several lifetimes.

You’ll never master all of it.

But your technique *will* rise to the occasion and the things you learn here will spill over into your playing in ways you can’t imagine yet.