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Become a Better Guitarist

If you're reading this, then you already have the desire and intention to become a skilled guitarist. My Guitar Lessons believe there are no coincidences in life. Hopefully this short report will help to eliminate confusion, build your confidence, and help you make progress.

What is Guitar Soloing?

The first step in any journey is to pick a destination. I have always been inspired by guitar players like Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, B.B. King, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Eddie Van Halen, and many others. What do these guitarists have in common?

- They sound amazing.
- They have a unique lead guitar style which reflects and expresses their personality.

But most importantly:

- They can play what they are feeling on any given day and improvise with incredible freedom.

This is well documented. Hendrix played wild solos and played differently every live show. In my opinion, his improvised live solos were more impressive than his studio albums. Clapton said that while he might have the beginning of a lead planned out, he never worked out any complete solos note for note in advance. And Eddie Van Halen said that he got his best solos recorded just by playing them live with the band.

These legendary players are so good at expressing themselves on the guitar, that they have been called "Guitar Gods". Someone even wrote "Clapton is God" with graffiti on a wall.

Being able to IMPROVISE what you feel is the essence of being a Guitar God. Why should you learn to improvise?

- Being able to play exactly what you feel in the moment is very rewarding.
- The better you can improvise, the greater your ability to also compose.
- Playing what you feel in the moment is the best way to express yourself and create emotive music.

What is "Guitar Control" ?

When I was just starting out playing, I read an article about Eric Clapton as an innovator. It said he had the perfect blend of technique and control. Reading that had a profound affect on me. Technique seemed like a straightforward, mechanical thing. However, control was another story. It seemed to be a hard-to-acquire quality that was rare among guitarists, and in practice, was difficult. By the time I heard a note in my head, and figure out where it was on the fretboard, the measure had long passed.

This seems to be the heart of the problem. Even great players like Steve Vai have said that really playing what you want is "so elusive".

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I spent the next couple decades trying to learn this rare art of improvising exactly what I wanted to hear.

The 3 Components

The three components of killer guitar control are:

1. Technique
2. Fretboard Knowledge
3. The Brain-to-Hand Connection.

Technique is the physical aspect of playing the guitar – your ability to hit the notes quickly, accurately, and in tempo. Fretboard knowledge is how well you see the patterns on the neck, and how they can be used musically. The Brain-to-Hand connection is your skill of hitting the notes that you hear in your head.

Technique

Technique is the basic physical ability to play notes on the guitar. Without at least a basic technique, it is essentially impossible to play any music at all on the guitar. If you've been playing guitar for any amount of time, you already possess a certain level of basic technique. You can get lots of free resources from our website at www.MyGuitarLessons.co.uk.

Ironically, technique (also called “chops”) is both underemphasized and overemphasized. Many modern “shredders” (players with a lot of chops) overemphasize technique in that they mostly work on, and develop the ability to play fast. For example, they can play fast through a scale pattern. But playing through a scale at a fast pace doesn't necessarily mean you'll be able to play a better solo.

What is the purpose and role of technique? If your goal is to play from the heart, then technique should be there to serve that purpose, and nothing more. In other words, technique's purpose is to allow you to play the notes that you hear in your head, without stumbling.

There is nothing wrong with those shredders who have built speed. But I feel that many of them overemphasize technique and do not go far enough to develop real feeling on the guitar. They can start to believe that great chops means great playing when it is only part of the equation. There is also the tendency to overplay – both in terms of playing fast too much, and also developing musical ideas that are technically impressive rather than emotionally deep.

On the other side of the spectrum, many guitarists never develop enough chops to play fast. Why not? They simply don't have a regimented, disciplined program to build technique. There are all kinds of rationalizations guitarists have for this. Some of them include:

- “Technique is not that important.”
- “Practicing technique just makes me sound like everyone else”
- “Practicing technique is boring”
- “My technique will automatically get better over time as I become a more knowledgeable musician.”
- “Building technique is just mindless repetition. That's easy so
- I'll worry about it later.”
- “I don't really want to play fast stuff anyway”

None of these are very good excuses not to practice technique. Sure, if you just want to sit around strumming simple chords and playing Neil Young songs or something, you don't need to learn to shred.

But if you want to become a great (or even just solid) lead guitarist, you should spend time practicing your technique in a disciplined manner. In addition to being able to run through the scales quickly, you need to work on your phrasing – this is another aspect of technique. Specifically, bends and vibrators. Blues prodigy Kenny Wayne Sheppard once said - “after you get your basic skills down, work on your vibrato.”

If you are going for speed, the fastest way is to start by alternate picking just a single note – see if you can work that up to speed – perhaps 200 bpm or beyond. Then start working on patterns on a single string with a few different notes. Next go to 2 strings, and then finally multiple strings. As your patterns get more complex, you may need to slightly reduce the tempo.

This is the proven method used by shredding legends like Paul Gilbert. 2-time Guitar Idol finalist Silvio Gazquez breaks down his approach to advanced lead guitar in his Virtuoso Guitar Secrets program.

Technique involves pushing your nervous system. Experts say you must push your nervous system to a “90% excitation level” in order for new neural pathways to form. This means you have to practice hard. However, you should never strain yourself or feel pain. There are software programs available to help you push your technique beyond what a normal metronome can do.

Finally, another secret is that endurance is a big part of technique. Anyone can play a few notes fast – but can you keep it up in order to play fast, clean runs and produce an entire solo? In addition to having the practical benefit of just being able to play fast for a longer period of time, working on your endurance will actually make you play faster. Think about it – if you can play something perfectly 10 times in a row at a medium tempo, you can certainly play it 2 or 3 times at a faster pace.

Guitar Scales

Whatever style you want to play, technique will come in handy. And perhaps the most universally handy tool is guitar scales. Not only will they improve your chops tremendously, but they are a great way to find the right notes to play. Think of guitar scales as a bridge between technique and fretboard knowledge. Within the realm of scales, it is counterproductive to try to learn too many. Forget those books that show you 100 different scales. For starters, work with the pentatonic scale. This is a 5 note scale and it's the easiest scale to get started with to make some sweet lead guitar sounds. Even when you become advanced, you will still rely heavily on this basic scale.

It is important to be able to play through each scale pattern. After that, learn sequences on each of the scales. Practice alternate picking.

Here are the 5 basic patterns of the pentatonic scale:

Pattern 1: This is the “home base” pattern with the root of the scale as the first note on the low E string. For example, in the key of A, you would start this pattern on the fifth fret. The

nice thing about any pattern on the guitar that doesn't use open strings, is that you can change keys by moving it up or down on the fretboard without changing the shape.

In case you've never seen these kinds of patterns before, the highest string (the high E string) is first, then B, G, D, A, and low E strings:

These patterns are well known to experienced guitarists. Nothing new here, but how well do you really know the patterns? Can you play all of them with no problem?

Next, you should practice diatonic scale. "Woah, hold on", you might be saying... What the heck is the diatonic scale? The well-known "major" scale is the diatonic scale. However, the "minor" scale is really the same scale but starting on a different note. For example, the G major scale contains the notes: G, A, B, C, D, E, and F#.

These are the same notes as in the E minor scale: E, F#, G, A, B, C, and D.

The Modes

Therefore all the patterns all over the neck for E minor are the same as for G major. The only difference is which note is treated as the root or tone center. By changing the tone center, or which note is emphasized the most and returned to, the quality of the musical flavor changes. This is what guitarists are talking about when you hear them talking about the various modes.

Understanding that it's all really ONE scale (the diatonic scale) makes things much more easy to grasp and to practice.

For your reference, here are the various "modes" of the diatonic scale:

SCALE DEGREE ONE: Ionian Mode (Also called Major Scale)

SCALE DEGREE TWO: Dorian Mode

SCALE DEGREE THREE: Phrygian Mode

SCALE DEGREE FOUR: Lydian Mode

SCALE DEGREE FIVE: Mixolydian Mode

SCALE DEGREE SIX: Aeolian Mode (Also called Minor Scale)

SCALE DEGREE SEVEN: Locrian Mode

You should know that each mode has its own musical flavor and uses. For example, the ionian mode is a warm, sunny, happy sound... the dorian mode is a slightly jazzy, bluesrock scale. The phrygian mode has a dark, exotic, middle-eastern feel to it.

The use of modes could be a topic and discussion all on its own. Whatever kind of sound you are hearing in your mind, or in your gut, or in your heart, you simply have to find the right notes. Whatever scale it happens to be, it doesn't really matter.

Also, to make things simpler, I recommend learning 5 basic diatonic patterns...

Essentially, the major, minor, dorian, phrygian, and mixolydian patterns. There is not really a need to learn a separate lydian or locrian patterns as these mostly overlap the others.

In addition to these patterns, you can learn the diatonic patterns with 3 notes on every string, which gives you an entirely new set of patterns. Eventually, you have to see how they all overlap and connect.

When should you use the "short" patterns and when should you use the 3 notes per string patterns? The short answer is that the more compact patterns are more useful to

play melodies and arpeggios, while the extended patterns lend themselves to playing fast shredding runs.

And by learning the diatonic scale everywhere on the neck, you will already be equipped to produce the various possibilities with your fingers. Unless you're already pretty advanced, don't worry about learning 29 different exotic scales. It is better to go deep and master the basics than to know a little bit about many different scales or modes.

As far as actual practice goes, I tend to focus on the major/minor scales. The modes such as dorian, phrygian, lydian, etc are all just inversions of the major scale. When you learn a complete scale all over the neck, such as G major, you are really learning all the modes of that scale as well.

As I mentioned earlier, you should also work to develop a powerful bending and vibrato technique so as to improve your phrasing. This is just as important as being able to play quickly.

Fretboard Knowledge

This includes the knowledge of the scale patterns, but also where the notes are on the fretboard, knowing their various combinations (such as scales, modes, chord voicings, etc), and beyond. It encompasses music theory, and how that theory applies to the particular layout of the guitar fretboard.

For example, take a simple A minor pentatonic scale, starting on the 5th fret low A string, playing two notes per string, and ending on the 8th fret high E string (C). This is the pentatonic scale that guitarists are probably most familiar with.

The scale itself is easy to learn and play.

But go a little deeper with analysis, and you discover a wealth of fretboard knowledge... Notice all the degrees of the scale, and the intervallic relationship to every other note. Notice the physical relationship on the fretboard. Notice the first octave is 2 frets and 2 strings away. Notice the V (5th) note (E) on the B string at the 5th fret.

Now go deeper, notice how the notes in A pentatonic (A C D E G) are a subset of the notes in C major, without the IV and the VII. Notice the A minor triad overlaps with the scale on the 5th fret on the top three strings. And this is all just the beginning. Now expand these kinds of observations to more positions, more scales, and to entire chord progressions. Notice the relationship between scales used to solo over a progression and the chord tones within the chords of that progression.

There are many, many, many ways to conceptualize the fretboard, and the more you know, the greater your fretboard knowledge and mastery will be. "Memorizing" the fretboard is often a misused concept. Let's say you memorize that the 8th fret on the B string is a G. That by itself is of some value, but it is more meaningful within the context of a scale or chord progression. For example, in an A blues progression, using the A minor pentatonic scale, the G is considered "the 7th". So if you're playing the G on the 8th fret B string, you should be able to see all the notes around it, such as the A on the 10th fret B string, which is the root.

Then, you should also be able to see that the G is part of the A7 chord, in multiple

voicings. And you should be able to see that the G is one half step above the F#, which is the third of the D chord, which is the IV chord in the progression. And you should be able to see the relationship between the A7 chord and the D7 chord, and the smooth voice leading from the G down to the F#.

I could go on and on, but hopefully this gives you an idea of what I mean by fretboard knowledge. The bottom line is, the more familiar you are with all these conceptualizations of the fretboard, the deeper your understanding will go. Now here is a critical concept - when you're playing a deeply passionate solo, there is no room for thought. There is no room for conceptualization. Therefore, you learn the various ways of thinking about the fretboard, you deepen your understanding and knowledge, but you don't let this get in the way of emotion and feeling. It can help you in many subtle ways. One way is "if you get lost" on the neck, you can fall back on what you know.

The Brain-to-Hand Connection

The third aspect of guitar control is perhaps the most powerful, and this is what I call the "brain-to-hand" connection. It is the most raw and abstract skill for improvising. It all starts with the energy of inspiration, which comes from within. What you feel in your heart and hear in your head is simply played directly, without thought, without any considerations. We can improvise freely with our vocal chords by singing pitches – but why is it so much harder to do it on the guitar?

It's because our vocal chords are a part of our physical body – so there is nothing in between to get in the way. With the guitar, we somehow have to know the right pitch and how to find it on the fretboard. This requires some serious ear training. The most direct way of recognizing pitches that you hear in your head is to develop the ability to know the pitches themselves. This skill is called "perfect pitch" or "absolute pitch". This takes 1) knowledge of how to train your ear in this manner and 2) either a partner or a computer program to drill you.

For example, take a simple 12 bar blues progression. It is fairly easy to distinguish when you are hearing the root of the progression. Then it becomes a matter of learning the other important pitches such as the fifth degree. It just takes practice. Besides ear training, there are a number of other things you can do to improve your brain-to-hand connection.

One exercise you can do is simply to practice getting good at nailing the first note of a phrase that you are imagining in your head. I call this the "first note" exercise. It's very powerful because once you hit the first note, often the rest of the phrase falls under your fingers. But, there's many other exercises you can do. There was a time when I was focusing specifically on developing the brain-to-hand connection. I was playing lead guitar in a band at the time, and ...get this... I refused to know or learn what key I was playing in. And I played some very inspiring and powerful leads. However, occasionally I would get lost.

Eventually, I learned how to play totally from the heart, yet still feel grounded by the knowledge of the fretboard. I was able to integrate the two, and also use my technique to serve the purpose of expression.

Other exercises you can do for the brain to hand connection:

- Seperate left and right hand practicing.
- Singing along with what you play
- focusing on various rhythmic groupings

Conclusion

Becoming a “Guitar God” and ruling the neck means learning to improvise successfully and fluently so you can play from the heart. This is accomplished by mastering physical technique, understanding the layout of the guitar and music in general (fretboardknowledge) , and developing what I call the “brain to hand connection”, which lets you find pitches you hear in your head on your guitar.

Practicing scales is the most straightforward way to develop both your technique and your fretboard knowledge – however there are other things you can do with your technique such as phrasing techniques like bending and vibrato, as well as note-based techniques such as chords, arpeggios, sequences, and other licks.

And there are other things you can do to boost your fretboard knowledge such as learning where the various degrees of the scale are, where all the notes are, and the relationships between notes, scales, and chords.

Developing the brain-to-hand connection has a lot to do with training your ear.

Developing the skill of perfect pitch is a direct route to hearing tones in your head, identifying them, and being able to find them on the fretboard. In addition, developing your sense of relative pitch is also important so that you can hear notes in relation to the chord progression.