

### General soloing and practicing tips

Obviously, fluent improvisation needs a lot of practice. But if you know how and what to practice, you won't be wasting time doing it. Although a lot of tips and pointers have been given in the previous chapters, there are just a few general things to be reminded of, when you are practicing improvisation:

- try not to feel rushed, take your time to find the right notes. Space in music is great, use some space to think and relax . You don't have to fill each beat and each bar, in fact, preferably not! The most common mistake is to try to play too much. The backing tracks are long enough to give you time to think, and to try out an idea several times, so do that; if you play an idea that did not come out right, play it again. As mentioned before, the more you do this, the less you have to think about it, the more relaxed and natural your playing will become.
- Though easier said than done, try to use many aspects of variation available to you, don't get obsessed by notes alone, think about time, phrasing, dynamics, structure and form. You won't be able to all that at once in the beginning, but make sure you don't forget about them, and take some time to pay attention to all these aspects individually. When you get the right feel for each of these aspects, you can start combining them into interesting and personal solos.
- Don't feel like you're "glued" to the chord changes, don't be afraid to anticipate chords or extend an idea or phrase after previous chords, in order to build natural sounding phrases. Don't divide your solo into equal sections, fitting the chords exactly, but play across chord and chorus boundaries. *And don't start all phrases on the first beat.* For practice, try to start each phrase on a different beat. That will help a lot in creating a free-flowing, natural sounding solo, and not like a chord progression or scale exercise.
- If you have the means, record yourself and listen. Do you like what you hear, if not, what don't you like? Are you playing the wrong notes, are you playing the right notes with bad timing, or a weak tone? Does your playing sound convincing or like it accidentally came out that way? Of course a live teacher can help you a lot with this kind of listening, but if you listen critically, you can decide for yourself what your strong and weak points are and work on them. And again, don't listen to the notes alone, but listen to how you play them; quite often that's the 'forgotten' or overlooked part. A warning: listening to yourself can be quite confrontational at first: don't let it get you down; listen to your improvements, did it sound better than a day or a week ago? Then be proud, and know that you're on the right track.
- Don't practice the same thing too long. Not only is it boring, but it also doesn't work very well. Practice, then take some time to let it sink in, and practice again some time later. Like all forms of study, regular study, bits at a time, works a lot better than cramming it in all at once. Yes, some patience is necessary! If you are very keen on studying a lot, which is great, make sure to

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vary the exercises.

- Don't practice at high tempos too much. You don't have time to think creatively and critically when you are playing as fast as you can. Practicing fast playing is nice when you have mastered slow improvisation!
- Try something really unknown now and then; for instance, play a large interval in your solo, one you may not be very sure of. Then listen and try to continue on that note. In order to do that, you have to 'place' the last note in the chord in your mind, that is, you have to try and identify the relation of this last note to the chord it is played over. When you can do that, you know how to continue. In fact, when you are able to place a note that you hear in the chord it is played over, you can improvise without knowing the changes! If you practice this a lot, you can 'feel' your way through an unknown chord progression, actually finding out what it is while playing. It's a bit like a blind man feeling for reference points; when you have found a few, you know where to go!
- Try humming along with your soloing, it doesn't have to be very accurate. If you can do that, it means you know what you're doing, if you can't (at all), you're probably just relying on your knowledge to produce notes. It means the 'musical' connection between your fingers and your mind is not quite there yet. That's OK as a start, but you'll want to know internally what you're playing at some point, and eventually you want to be able to play what is in your mind. In fact, you will be able then to improvise in your mind, and imagine how you would play it. A big advantage of singing along is also that it will keep you from playing musical nonsense, and help you to play clearly and melodically; it helps to be really aware of what you are playing. If you're a somewhat decent singer it might even sound very cool! Check out George Benson!
- Playing with a looper (loop pedal) is a great way to practice improvisation. Download backing tracks to it or play your own chords. The looper is very patient, and it's a fun way to practice:  
<https://youtu.be/g96eih4FLgI?si=eqmY1JmfRr97XCu1>
- As a very general last remark: playing 'straight from your imagination' is probably the ideal, that very few people ever achieve. In practice, you can imagine some things and then play them, and sometimes you will have to feed your imagination by playing things that you already knew how to play. Try to be aware of this interaction, so that you can learn to use both, and feed off each other, knowledge and imagination.

## **Jazz Guitar Improvisation Workout**

### **An analogy between speech and music**

*Consider this analogy: suppose someone asks you to tell a story about what you did during your last vacation. When you start talking, you are improvising with words:*

- you have a theme, something you are talking about, it is not random talk.*
- you speak without preparing your words in advance, they just come out spontaneously*
- you create sentences/phrases on the spot, and sometimes you use your favorite expressions (licks) when they are appropriate in the story*
- you use knowledge, experience, and feeling all at the same time, mostly without thinking*
- you use the rules of language, but you're free to break the rules when you want, sometimes breaking the rules can be more expressive; anyway, the way you speak defines your particular style.*
- inevitably you will use phrases or expressions you picked up from other people; in fact reading and listening will enhance your vocabulary.*
- you may have to actually have to think about a word occasionally, fine, pause and think.*
- when you are asked the same question the next day, you would tell a similar story, but never in the exact same words, in fact you wouldn't be able to, unless it was written down.*

*All of this applies to a playing solo on a given theme: the main difference is that you learned to speak (improvise with words) at a much earlier age, and you've practiced continuously since then. So then you know what to do to become a natural improviser: do it, do it a lot, and then some more. Read, listen, make mistakes, learn from them and keep growing. There is no end.*