

Balancing Volume of Single Notes & Chords

by Dennis Winge

The other night I was at a party where some people were playing music, and there were a lot of different instruments, from drums and percussion to flute, tuba, keyboard and guitar. I was not playing at the moment of the following incident, so I was able to objectively observe what happened. The guitarist was playing too loud and singing, and afterwards, the tuba player looked directly at him and said "Can we please turn all the electronic instruments down?" Everyone kind of left the room after that, including the guitarist, and no more music was played for a while.

The incident made me question: why is it that guitarists often play too loud? Is it because we can turn it up to 11 so our egos get carried away? Are we all on a big power trip? That could be a factor, but I personally think it's more than that. This article is NOT about how to manage your volume in a group setting. It's about what I think at least part of the real problem is, and it's a problem that a great many guitarists are not even aware of.

I. Where the Real Problem Lies

When we play solo, unaccompanied electric guitar, the single-note lines are not nearly as loud as the chords we strum, and it feels like the bottom drops out, so we turn up the overall volume to make up for it.

Let me clarify further. In the incident above, neither the keyboard nor the bass was playing, so the guitarist was trying to carry the tune, vocally and harmonically, all on his own. I actually understood what he was doing and where he was coming from: he wanted to give some form and structure to an otherwise disorganized and not-musically-coherent jam session. But of course I also understood how everyone else in the room was feeling because it was definitely too loud!

Also one other clarification is that the guitarist was not using pedals. When a distortion or overdrive pedal of some kind is used, guitarists can easily boost that signal a bit so that the chords/ strumming/ rhythm sound is lower than the single-note sound and so we can easily solve the problem of having "Napoleonic Complex" in our leads. The guitar string is small, and the sound of one note, without a boost or gain pedal, is actually quite small compared with a saxophone (or virtually any other wind instrument), piano, a drum, etc.

I've been playing for way too many decades than I'd care to admit, and I've been guilty of this habit of turning up the overall volume to make up for the smallness of the single notes. The chords sound so rich and thick, and yet when we solo, this is our 2-minutes of glory (or however long people will stay in the room lol). We can't have the bottom drop out during our moment in the sun!

For the following sections, please refer to this YouTube video demonstration:

<https://youtu.be/4TcXRYojJRc>

II. Why You Should Practice This

I have spent quite a bit of time working on these suggestions that follow, and let me tell you it is so much more fun to play now for many reasons:

1. When I play unaccompanied, on either acoustic or electric with no effects, my lines have just as much 'weight' and 'depth' as chords.
2. I enjoy a wider dynamic range. No more Napoleonic Complex.
3. I am more relaxed. This is huge.
4. I am better able to accompany others. Suppose it's just me and another guitarist both playing acoustics. I can easily play a rhythm part that's low enough in volume yet propulsive enough in the rhythm to let them shine.

III. How to Practice This

1. **Use Physical or Harmonic Techniques.** Is it possible that you can intersperse rhythm and lead on guitar and not feel like the bottom drops out when the chords vanish? The most relevant question for most students here is: "How do I make the rhythm part quieter but still provide momentum?" Here are some possibilities:
 - A. Simply strum with less force
 - B. Palm-mute the rhythm part
 - C. Play only a few strings – like the bottom 3, for example
 - D. Play only certain intervals – like the 3rd and 7th of a chord, for example, either with or without a route
2. **Check Yourself by Trading 4's on a Looper Pedal.** This is a fantastic electric-guitar exercise for evening out lead vs. rhythm volumes, or even making the lead volume slightly louder. The key here is to deliberately play quieter on the rhythm and louder on the lead. Here are the steps:
 - A. Pick a simple chord progression (4 bars is ideal)
 - B. Set a metronome
 - C. Play 4 bars of strumming the progression
 - D. For the next 4 bars, play lead with no accompaniment. Do not change any settings on your guitar or volume knob and do not use pedals.
 - E. Oscillate back and forth between rhythm and lead
 - F. Finish the loop
 - G. Do an overdub on top of the original loop where you do the opposite of what you originally did (i.e. play lead first, then rhythm)
 - H. Analyze the finished 2-track loop. Is the lead louder?

As I have said, this is a very rewarding way to play. And, now you don't have to schlep your looper pedal or have your band follow you around when you want to play! Drop me a line and let me know how you make out. 😊