

## **Go Trade with Yourself**

If you want to learn to improvise on guitar alone with no backing track or other instruments present, you must learn to trade chords and single-note lines back and forth. The chords ground you, and the single note lines bring out the emotion.

It was completely by accident that I realized that many students were uncomfortable trading chords and improvised melodic lines while unaccompanied. Maybe it's because of my age that I took being able to do it for granted. After all, there was no electricity or indoor plumbing when I was a kid. Yes, I am kidding; but there weren't looper pedals, backing tracks or accompaniment software when I was a young aspiring guitarist.

Now that my students are doing it, I can see how tremendously valuable it is to practice this way: a few bars of chords, a few bars of single-note lines. There are a great many areas of musicianship that that 'trading with yourself' strengthens, and we are going to look at them one by one.

Just to clarify on exactly what I mean, I demonstrated 3 different grooves for about a minute each in the following video. The first was | G | D7 | which I integrated with a G Ionian (or Major) Scale. The second was | E | Bm | for which I used E Mixolydian; and the last one was | Am | Dm | which called for Am Aeolian.

VIDEO LINK: <https://youtu.be/XpoxlqSaCJY>

The advantages of getting good at 'trading' are:

### **Form Awareness**

It forces you to keep track of where you are in the progression while you are soloing. At first, unlike the random lengths I did in the video, I recommend you do a specific number of bars of chords, and then the same amount of bars with lines.

For example, you could do twice through any two-chord progression for a total of 4 bars, then twice through playing lines. If that's too much to keep track of too fast, then play chords on the progression 4 times, then solo 4 times. If the progression is 8 bars, you

could do first half chords and second half lines. It all depends on how long the progression is and your own comfort level.

You might also try using a metronome where the “1” beat is a different sound than the other 3 when you’re in 4/4 time, or playing along with accompaniment software that will prompt you what bar you’re on such as iRealPro or Band in a Box.

## **Phrasing**

Having a pre-determined length of solo time such as 2 or 4 bars really helps you construct a whole phrase or set of phrases in a balanced rhythmic way. Try ending the phrase just a little early (like on beat 3 or 4) so you can hit the next chord on the “1” beat. Alternatively, try to make your solo land on the “1” beat and just continue the rest of the bar with the appropriate chord that would start on a later beat.

## **Technique**

If you have any experience performing live at all, you may well know that sometimes the most difficult parts of any song are the transitions, especially to and from a guitar solo. The technique involved in switching between rhythm and lead playing can be challenging in many respects, and obviously practicing ‘trading’ massive addresses this in a short period of time.

## **Volume**

Of course, if you have a distortion pedal that kicks in or changes in amount of gain or volume when you go from rhythm playing to lead, you don’t necessarily have to control the volume of your chord playing to balance of that of the single notes. However, when playing acoustic or without effects, it can be great practice to balance the two, and trading addresses this head-on.

## **Chord Voicings**

If you only have two or three chord voicings for any given chord, you'll always have to rush back to one of those positions when it comes time to end your line and return to the chord. If the chord is G and you know it open position, third position, and tenth position (the latter two being standard barre chord shapes), then if you happen to be around the 7<sup>th</sup> fret shredding your solo, you're going to have to move quickly to get back to one of those. But what if you knew at least a dozen ways to play G? Just to give you an idea, there are 12 G triads on consecutive strings on the guitar, and non-consecutive string voicings add even more possibilities. 'Trading' will give you the desire to learn many more voicings than you previously knew.

## **Music Theory**

When no other chords are present, landing on chord tones on or near the first beat of each chord will really help to outline what chord you're on. Knowing what the chord tones are for each chord, i.e. how to 'spell chords' is something that 'trading' can make you want to learn. For example, can you spell a Bm chord as b, d, f# or an Ab7 as ab, c, eb, gb instantly?

The other aspect of 'trading' that involves music theory is what kind of chord progression to invent or adopt into your solo playing. Notice that in the video I went with the 3 most common modes in Western music: Ionian, Aeolian & Mixolydian. Do you know how to create progressions in those modes in any key?

## **Fretboard Theory**

Even if you can't "spell chords" like I described above, if you know the arpeggio shapes for each chord on guitar, you technically don't need the note names. So 'trading' can help you implement the use of arpeggios and integrate them within your melodic lines so that the chord can be 'heard' without playing more than 1 note at a time.

## **Ear Training**

Speaking of hearing, it helps your ear when you don't need chords behind you; you simply imagine them. You hear them in your head and outline them in your playing.

## **Bridges the Gap Between Chords and Lines**

We mentioned triads earlier, which are smaller version of typical guitar chords. They consist of only the first, third, and fifth notes of the chord without any of those being played more than once. For example, a typical G barre chord at the 3<sup>rd</sup> fret would be numbered in intervals, from 6<sup>th</sup> string to 1<sup>st</sup>, as 1-5-1-3-5-1. A triad for G major could be just the top 3 strings of that (3-5-1) or strings 4, 3, and 2 only (1-3-5).

Of course, playing 'diads' (two notes at once) is also effective in helping both you and the listener hear the underlying chords. You could hit just a root and third or root and third or third and fifth, for example. The third could be below the root, and technically that would be called a 6<sup>th</sup>. The fifth could be below the root and technically that would be called a fourth, etc.

The practice of 'trading' may help lead you to exploring things like diads to help bridge the gap between chords and lines.

So we see that 'trading' is a very useful practice. Not only will it strengthen your musicianship in the many ways outlined above, but it also has great practical advantages. The next time you bring an acoustic guitar to a picnic or the beach, you won't need to hope your phone can get service so that you can stream backing track videos. You won't need no stinkin' chords. :)