

Listen, then Play – Secrets of Rhythm Guitar

by Dennis Winge

The great jazz trumpeter Miles Davis had a reputation for his pithy but profound sayings. One of these was "Listen, then play." This was said during Miles' first playing with percussionist Airto Moreira, who was at that moment just doing what he always does, i.e. playing great percussion, but without absorbing the entirety of the musical texture and choosing where to fit in.

In teaching guitar as well as going to local jam sessions, I constantly run into musicians who are obviously not listening to the music as a whole. When you learn to listen to the entire group before you choose when/ how/ how loud or soft/ etc, your choices will benefit you because it will open up a huge array of choices, many of which you would never have thought of if simply left to your own devices (in which case you would probably just revert to doing the same old things) and of course it also benefits your fellow musicians immensely.

Think about it: how long is the average guitar solo in a song? Depending on the type of music it can be anywhere from say 30 seconds to maybe 2 to 3 minutes. That means most of your time playing in an ensemble will be playing some sort of rhythm guitar for a vocalist, other soloists, etc. Therefore, paying attention to the whole is what you should be doing most of the time. (Even when you are soloing, if your accompanists are great, listening to the whole can greatly help you develop your solo, but that is a story for another day.) So, just begin by listening to the whole of the music before you play. That in and of itself will help your musicianship grow by leaps and bounds.

From there, ask yourself continuously, either as an intellectual question or as an allowing for intuitive guidance, "How can I best contribute to the development of the music?" Obviously, it all depends on what the instrumentation is and what genre of music is being played.

Let's say by way of example there is in your band a bassist, drummer, 2 guitarists, and a vocalist. If the vocalist is singing and the other guitarist is playing big block chords, you can choose to simply double the part to thicken the sound, but there are many other more subtle and effective choices. What about using a higher (or lower) position to play the chords? What about inversions? What about playing extensions of the chords or other chords that act as extensions (ex: first guitarist plays a "C" chord and you play an Em or Am triad somewhere up the neck.) How about just playing 3^{rds} and 7^{ths} of the chords?

If the other guitarist is soloing as in the example above, are you actively listening to what he/she is playing and propelling the music accordingly? This doesn't necessarily mean you are at the soloists' whim for things like dynamics. Although he is temporarily the leader, you may also tastefully contribute rhythmic and harmonic ideas at will as well. In the best bands, everyone is improvising to some degree.

Going even further, perhaps even more important than what you play is how you play it. Guitarists often forget that they are part of the rhythm section of the band. Ask any saxophonist, trumpeter, violinist, etc. and they will say guitar, piano, bass and drums are all rhythm section instruments. Even if the band is only a 3-piece, duo or solo guitar, there are still many rhythmic responsibilities that must be carried, either while singing or as punctuation to or in harmonizing a melody. So ask yourself "am I locking in with the rhythm section? Is the rhythm I am playing best supporting, enhancing and shaping the groove and mood of the song? Is it clashing with any other part or is it contributing to the whole in a meaningful way?"

Lastly, the “listen, then play” motto might even suggest that you lay out (don’t play) from time to time. Have you ever seen your favorite guitarist do this? Many great guitarists do this frequently. But typically it never occurs to most beginners or intermediate players, and sometimes even more advanced players. But again, the laying out would be in service to the whole, not just because you think you could or should. It could be for dramatic effect, to let another soloist have more space, or simply because the texture is already thick enough that you don’t need to play at that moment.

Experiment, have fun and see what works and doesn’t work. There are no hard-and-fast rules to this. Just by asking the questions and being aware of the big picture will improve your rhythm guitar playing by leaps and bounds!