

Never Run out of Ideas during a Solo Again

I. Introduction

“I filled my head with rhythm.” Dizzy Gillespie. Want to never run out of ideas during a solo again? Feel the rhythm first. Dizzy says, he fills his head with rhythm, which means that the initial impulse from the improvised line is rhythmic, but it might be more accurate to say he feels the rhythm, rather than thinks it. There are only 12 notes, but there are thousands of rhythms. I only say it’s impossible to think of all the possibilities of rhythm, the way you can think of all the melodic possibilities.

It’s amazing to me that in 30 years of taking guitar lessons, I never had a lesson in rhythmic feel. One time I had a lesson on playing whole notes with a metronome to become more precise in my time, but I have never had a lesson in learning how to groove, or learning how to conceive of melodic lines rhythmically. And, of course, when I say conceive, I mean feel.

There is so much concern in guitar lessons with what scales go with which chords, how to voice those chords, how to analyze tunes in terms of key, of mode, etc., that we forget the most essential element in music, which is rhythm. Rhythm is the most essential of all the basic elements in music because unlike the other elements, music cannot exist without it. Here are some ways to explore ‘thinking’ rhythm first:

II. Syncopation

Let’s take a simple 12 bar blues progression in the key of A. Once you have the basic pentatonic scale down, you can use primarily 8th notes (count: 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &) and 8th note rests, and play around with them. You can use 8th note rests as a way to syncopate your lines. (Ex: play 1 & - & - & 4 & only) Syncopation simply means lines that accent the weaker beats in a bar. “The more upbeats you have in your music, the more it swings.” Dizzy Gillespie.

If the blues has a swing feel, or shuffle, the 8th notes are triplet-based, but the overall concept remains the same.

In other styles such as hard rock, for example, you can use the same technique with 16th notes (count: 1e&a, 2e&a, 3e&a, 4e&a). If you use 16th notes as the basic unit and play around with the 16th note rests, you can feel syncopation in the exact same way as with the 8th notes. (Ex: play 1e-a 2e-a 3-&a 4-&a only).

III. Motifs

A motif is a little germ of an idea that can be repeated, varied, stretched, compressed, etc. The most famous examples of masterpieces that have developed from very simple motifs are Beethoven’s 5th, a four-note motif, and Mozart’s Autumn Night Music, which is a nine-note motif. Try playing a simple rhythmic idea over 2 bars, and then repeat it

exactly. Then, you can try repeating most of the motif but varying the ending. This is very common in blues, and they call it “question and answer phrasing”.

IV. Longer Phrases

You can also experiment with longer phrases, such as a 4 bar phrase. Even though a 2 bar phrase is more common, practicing a 4 bar phrase can really stretch your concept of rhythm. You can even try an 8 bar phrase if you have the appetite for it. Just remember to keep them simple, or you will forget what you played, and you won't be able to repeat it exactly. It's a very fun exercise that requires a certain amount of discipline, but is very rewarding.

V. Conclusion

There are so many variations on ways to practice rhythm. Just remember whenever you are out of ideas during a solo, stop thinking, and start feeling. Don't be afraid to scale it way back and be willing to play the most simple rhythms. When you do, you and the audience will feel refreshed, especially after you may have been overplaying prior to that moment. Don't worry about boring them, because now that you are in the groove, i.e. feeling the music and playing rhythmically, your solo will develop naturally from there.

Countless times with my more advanced jazz students have I said, okay, now we are going to just play chord tones with two bar rhythmic phrases. Sometimes they play some of the most compelling solos just by having those limitations superimposed. They are not limitations at all, they are back to basics, and most of the time, it simply gets them out of their heads and into their bodies.

Quantum physicists tell us we are made of vibrating strings. The whole universe is one big, pulsating song. Your body is an extension of this cosmic dance. Play with your inner booty-shaker turned on, and you'll never grope for ideas again.