

The Art of Solo Guitar

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Unlike a piano, where one hand is free to play the accompaniment part while the other plays the melody, playing melody and accompaniment on guitar sometimes requires careful forethought, technique and practice. It doesn't have to be "difficult," however. Here are some suggestions to make the process easier.

PART ONE – The "Head"

The 'head' in music means the tune itself as opposed to the section that is improvised over the song's structure. If there is a singer, for example, he or she sings the melody and then there is typically an instrumental section before he or she comes back in to take the song out. In rock this instrumental section is typically a guitar or keyboard solo, and in jazz there could be a variety of soloists. In a jazz jam session, the 'in-head' and 'out-head' could be only a small percentage of the overall length of the song if there are multiple soloists. Regardless, the 'head' is called such whether the song's melody is sung or played instrumentally.

1. **Learn the melody** – This may sound obvious, but what I mean is to learn the melody in intervals. Learn the melody by 'numbers.' Jingle Bells, for example, starts with 333, 333, 35123. Each number refers to the scale degree in whatever key the piece is in. Jingle Bells is typically played in G whose 3rd note is *b*. Since this is the first note of the tune played 3 times, that is why we write 333. Understanding a melody this way allows you to take it to a different key that might be much easier to play on solo guitar (more on that in a bit). For more on this, read my article "Music by Numbers" at <https://guitarlessonsithaca.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Music-by-Numbers.pdf>.

2. **Learn the harmony** – Similarly, when you learn the chord changes, it should be in Roman Numerals. If the tune is Happy Birthday (don't laugh, it can be a nice gift to play that solo for someone you care about and it's not hard), the chords go (in the key of F, 3/4 time)

| F | C | C | F | F | Bb | F / C | F |

Then you should understand that as: | I | V | V | I | I | IV | I / V | I | because if you need to take it to a different key you can easily transpose this. See my article "How to Harmonize a Scale" at <https://guitarlessonsithaca.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/How-to-Harmonize-a-Scale.pdf> and/or consult the "Harmonized Scale Charts" at <https://guitarlessonsithaca.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Harmonized-Scale-Chart.pdf>

3. **Combine bass notes with melody only** – As a place to start, play the melody with the roots of the chords only just to see how it feels in that key, and familiarize yourself with the tune. If you have trouble with this step it's going to be even harder to do it in a different key. You might even make a composite interval graph that might look something like this for "America the Beautiful." (I have tried to vertically line up melody and chords as close as possible.)

Melody: 5 5, 33 5 5, 2 2 3 45 67 5
Chords: | I / / #ldim | II V | II V | I |

4. **Choose the key** – This can be subject to personal preferences, but many players do these things:

- a. look for keys that are '**guitar friendly**' such as E, A, D, and G. Notice that in these keys the player has access to open strings which can come in very handy.
- b. choose a key where the melody is **not too low**. The melody should be the highest note, or else the other notes can distract the listener away from the melody, so if the melody goes below the 3rd string, for example, you can't get many supporting notes underneath it (meaning if the melody is on the 4th string, the only choices you have for supporting notes are on the 5th or 6th string).
- c. choose a key where the melody is **not too high**. Let's say your melody covers one octave from one root to the next in the key of F. The melody would be played all the way from fret 1 to fret 13 on the top string. This not only requires a lot of moving around position-wise, but it take you way up the neck. If the key were B, by contrast, you would only have to move as far as the 7th fret, and you would not have to move around so much because you would employ the 2nd string as well for some of it.

5. **Choose chord voicings** – A 'voicing' is the way that the notes are arranged. For example, you can play the notes of a C chord (c, e, and g) in any order, anywhere on the neck, and they would all be voicings of the C chord.

- a. **keep it simple** at first. Once the key is chosen and you can play the melody with bass notes only, choosing the chords can be a relatively straightforward. You can embellish or alter the chords in the next step, but for now, keep it simple and simply play the melody and chords at the same time. Where do you have to change positions? Is everything relatively accessible? Are there chords that you can leave out (in other words, only play the melody and no chord in certain places) if certain places are too challenging?
- b. **embellish** or alter the chords. If you're arrangement does not thrill you, you can:
 1. provide **inner voice movement**. This refers to the notes between the melody and the bass note. For an easy example if you have an open A chord whose melody is e on the top string, then you can move the 2nd string (which normally plays c# at fret 2) to d

or *b* (at frets 3 or 0, respectively). Alternately, you could move the 3rd string (which normally plays *a* at fret 2) to *b* at fret 4 or *g#* at fret 1.

2. move the **bass line**. The bass voice is the next most important one after the melody in terms of what the ears notice so moving the bass line can give your arrangement a good deal of flow. If you're connecting a C and a G chord, for example, then you can play *b* and *a* on the way to G.

3. **alter the chord**. For extra spice or color, alter certain chords to something more exotic. These work especially well in places where you want to create tension or animate the emotion. For example, if you are in the key of C and your melody note is also *c*, what about A minor, Ab major, F maj, F minor, D7 or Dbmaj7 for example? As long as the melody note is the root, third fifth, or seventh of the substituted chord, it can work, as long as your voicing keeps that melody note on top.

6. **Choose a stylistic approach/technique** – A stylistic approach is one that should help convey the emotion you want the song to convey. If it's fast and fun, for example, then Travis Picking might be the way to go. If it's solemn and regal, you might arpeggiate the chords in 8th notes underneath the melody. Driving songs might be better strummed. In other instances, you can even keep the chords and melody separate if the melody has enough space where you can fill in with chords in between the phrases. Another possibility is that you simply harmonize the melody with only one other supporting note, producing a 'diad' (2 notes at the same time) so no chords are actually played (because a chord is 3 or more notes.)

7. **Keep melody prominent and take liberties with the rhythm** – The melody should be the loudest note, so don't obscure it with the supporting notes. Can you pick or pluck the melody slightly louder than the others? It's something to be aware of. The melody is the most important, but there are times when you don't have to play the rhythm of the melody exactly as originally written if it throws off the flow you have with whatever technique you are using to deliver the piece. Small adjustments are fine as long as the overall character of the melody stays intact.

PART TWO – The Solo

Of course if you're the only one playing, the whole song is played 'solo' but in this case the word 'solo' refers to the improvised section. How do you 'take a solo' on the guitar when there is no other accompaniment? Here are some tips.

1. **Trade lines and chords** – If you are totally unfamiliar with playing single-note improvised lines on the guitar without chordal accompaniment, a nice way to ease into it is to trade 2 bars with yourself. In other words, play chords for 2 bars and then solo for 2 bars while keeping your place in the tune. Or, reverse the order where the lines come first. Once you

are comfortable with that, try longer (as in 4 bars) or shorter (as in 1 bar or 2 beats) length of the trading.

2. **Chordal accents** – You can also add stability to an unaccompanied solo by making short chordal accents in between the lines. Just hit the chord once without letting it ring (i.e. staccato) or while letting it ring (legato). Of course, it helps to know lots of voicings all over the neck.
3. **Use Triads** - Typically consisting of the 1st, 3rd, and 5th notes of a chord, triads are compact and versatile shapes that can be seamlessly integrated between single-note lines. They offer numerous advantages for solo guitar playing:
 - a. **melodic and harmonic integration** - As demonstrated in the video <https://www.facebook.com/GuitarLessonsIthaca/videos/368254548767832>, triads allow you to carry a melody while providing harmony, without relying on cumbersome barre or open chords.
 - b. **ease of embellishment** - Triads are far easier to embellish than larger chord shapes. For example, the root (1) can move up to the 2nd or down to the 7th, the 3rd can move up to the 4th or down to the 2nd, and the 5th can move up to the 6th or down to the 4th. A demonstration of this can be found in the video <https://www.facebook.com/GuitarLessonsIthaca/videos/770673838390112>.
 - c. **improved Voice Leading** and Visualization - Using triads simplifies voice leading and helps you visualize common tones between chords. This understanding opens up new melodic possibilities and enhances your ability to create smooth, connected lines.
4. **Use diads** – Using diads (2-notes at a time) can really help close the gap between chords (3 or more notes at a time) and lines (1 note at a time).
 - a. **3rds**. One way to use them is to add another line above or below that is in the key or chord of the moment. An example of this is 3rds and 6ths. In C major, **3rds** look like this:

The image shows musical notation for triads in C major. The top staff is a treble clef in 4/4 time, starting with a first finger (1) on the G4 string. It contains a sequence of six triads: G4-B4-D5, A4-C5-E5, B4-D5-F5, C5-E5-G5, D5-F5-A5, and E5-G5-B5. Below the staff are three lines labeled T, A, and B, representing the Treble, Alto, and Bass clefs. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 0-13 above the lines: Treble clef (0-1, 3-5, 7-8, 10-12), Alto clef (1-3, 5-6, 8-10, 12-13), and Bass clef (1-3, 5-6, 8-10, 12-13).

- b. **6ths**. If the 3rd is below the target melody note then it is called a **6th**, like this:

- c. **3rd & 7th of the chord.** Another use of diads is when you imply chords by playing the 3rd and 7th of the chord as in the following examples:

5. **Know your arpeggios** – An arpeggio is the notes of a chord played separately. For example, a D7 arpeggio is the notes *d, f#, a, c* played one at a time. Arpeggios bring structure to an improvised solo because they are the most stable notes you can play over any chord. Knowing where the chord tones are can allow you to start on, end on, or otherwise emphasize the structurally stable notes in a solo. We are not going to outline specific arpeggios here, but you should learn both triad arpeggios and 4-note arpeggios all over the neck.
6. **Make volume of chords quieter** – It may sound obvious to try and manage the volume of your chords so that the lines don't sound pale and thin by comparison, but it is not easy to do. I talk more about this in my article (which also has a video) called "Balancing Volume of Single Notes and Chords," available here: <https://guitarlessonsithaca.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Balancing-Volume-Between-Lead-and-Rhythm-Playing.pdf>
7. **Interplay with silence** – The guitar, by comparison to other instruments like piano, saxophone, and many others, does not have a wide dynamic range. This means the softest note is not as different from the loudest note as it would be on another instrument (acoustically, not electrically speaking, i.e. volume changes through amplification or effects of any kind don't count here.) In general, the lower the dynamic range of instrument, the more you have to play around with silence.

Here are some quotes about this from my article "Making Friends with the Silence on Guitar" at available at: https://www.ultimate-guitar.com/lessons/soloing/making_friends_with_silence_on_the_guitar.html. The first 3 are by Mildred Portney-Chase from her book "Just Being at the Piano."

"With the limited range of dynamics available to the clavichord and harpsichord, silence is the necessary contrast that helps create the illusion of fuller volume."

"Silence [is] the mother of sound. Just as a painter may portray a subject against a quiet canvas that in its quietness still speaks to him, so it is with a musician."

"Silence is as important, expressively, as sound. The mood felt during a silence will stand revealed. Keeping the tension of expression throughout [a] rest, especially a long rest, is an art in itself."

"There are many benefits to becoming attuned to the role that silence plays in your music. You have all heard the quote about music being about "the space between the notes," but do we really pay attention to the space more than the notes? This article will focus on 3 big benefits of focusing on silence: creating the illusion of a bigger dynamic range, avoiding overplaying, and playing with a softer touch."

8. **Rhythm is king** – When you play in a rhythmically compelling way you set up forward motion. It is achieved by strategically placing notes and rests in a way that sets up momentum with respect to the time-feel of the tune. Since there is no other sound instrument when playing solo, playing rhythmically means you are playing against the silence. Technically, this could then be considered an extension of the previous section, but rhythmic phrasing is so important that it deserves its own section.

Phrasing with forward momentum can be achieved by:

- using **anticipation and delay** – Anticipation could mean, for example, that your note is on the 'and of 4' and ties over the bar line. Delay could mean that your line doesn't begin (or end) until beat 2 instead of beat 1. Picking different points in a bar to start from or resolve to is a big topic that deserves its own article/ presentation.
- using **syncopation** – Syncopation loosely refers to anything that emphasizes the weak beats. Consider the following A minor pentatonic phrase whose attacks are on the "and of 1, the and of 2, 3, the and of 3, and the and of 4." Four out of five of the notes are on the off-beats. Listen to the forward motion it creates.



- add **rhythmic variety** – This may sound obvious but many musicians have a few favorite rhythmic subdivisions they like and seldom use ones outside their comfort zone. Can you vary your phrases to include whole notes (1 note per bar), half-notes (2 per bar), half-note triplets (3 per bar), quarter notes (4 per bar), quarter-note triplets (6 per bar), eighth notes (8 per bar), eighth-note triplets (12 per bar), sixteenth notes (16 per bar), etc? For more on this, see my article/ video "Jazzing Up Your Rock Playing Part

2: Rhythm” at <https://guitarlessonsithaca.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Jazzing-Up-your-Rock-Playing-part-2-Rhythm.pdf>.

In the liner notes of my solo guitar album “Fly on the Wall” I say, “The guitar is such a versatile instrument and a perpetual joy.” Perhaps no other instrument enjoys such a wide versatility, from classical guitar to shred heavy metal. And in addition to the stylistic versatility, the guitar can serve many different functions such as accompanying a vocalist, being part of a rhythm section with bass, drums and keyboards, taking the role of lead guitar, and many more.

Playing solo, however, is a very rewarding because in part because it requires no rehearsal-scheduling with other musicians. Learning to play solo, as we have seen, teaches you harmony, rhythm, and melody with nothing but pure practicality. Solo guitar is complete unto itself musically, and is a very satisfying and worthwhile pursuit.

About the author: Dennis Winge is a freelance/ studio guitarist and educator living in Ithaca, NY. For more information about lessons or performances, visit www.GuitarLessonsIthaca.com or www.DennisWinge.com, respectively.