

Improvising on Guitar without Accompaniment

by Dennis Winge

In a previous article called “The Art of Solo Guitar,” I discussed how to arrange the song’s melody with the underlying chords in a solo guitar arrangement. But what about the improvisation 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 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). 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:



If the 3rd is below the target melody note then it is called a 6th, like this:



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

Gmaj7 G7 Gm7 Gm7b5 Gdim7

The image shows musical notation for five chords: Gmaj7, G7, Gm7, Gm7b5, and Gdim7. The top staff is in treble clef, 4/4 time, with fingerings 1-5. The bottom staff shows guitar fretboard diagrams for the same chords, with strings T, A, B and fret numbers 4, 3, 3, 3, 2.

4. **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.
5. **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: <http://australianguitaracademy.com.au/398-2/>
6. **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 overlapping, and playing with a softer touch.”

7. **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:

- a. 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.
- b. 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.



- c. balance long notes and short ones – 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://www.jazzguitar.com/lessons/Jazzing-Up-Your-Rock-Playing-2-Rhythm.html>.

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 composer, freelance and studio guitarist living in the Finger Lakes Region of New York State. If you are interested in taking [Guitar Lessons in Ithaca](#), NY, then be sure to contact Dennis!