To Loop or Not to Loop
by Dennis Winge

I love my looper pedal. If you don't own one, you're missing out on a ton of fun. However, could it be that relying heavily on a looper pedal (or computer software) to play chord progressions is not serviceable for your musicianship?

Think about it: on most gigs (or even jam sessions with more than 2 people) you typically spend most of your time 'comping' (short for "accompanying") for vocalists or other instrumentalists. Yet many guitarists spend an inordinately short amount of time comping in their practice routines.

When I was a kid, we had to walk uphill, both ways, in the snow, in July, etc. just to play guitar. Seriously though, the fact that there were no looper pedals or computer software like iRealPro or Band-in-a-Box at that time meant that if you wanted to solo over a backing for an extended period of time, you had to create it.

There are lots of advantages to playing the same chords over & over for an extended period of time:

a. You can explore lots of different rhythmic variations

b. You can explore lots of harmonic embellishments to the chords

c. You will memorize the chord changes. (Works great on jazz standards or any song whose chord progression you'd like to memorize).

d. You can explore variations in dynamics

e. You can explore ways of articulating the chord (strumming, arpeggiating, fingerstyle, palm muting, etc.)

To [give you a concrete example I recorded 5 minutes of myself](#) playing an easy chord progression, | Am | F | C | G | in 4/4 at 120 bpm. I did it in one take and there are a few mistakes, but so be it. I didn't plan what I was going to do in advance.

Boy did those 5 minutes go by quickly! I totally could have gone on for another 5-minutes and who know what else I might have come up with. I really should do that more often because it opens up so many creative avenues that don't get utilized as often as they could.

Some of the things I notice I was doing as I listen back are:

1. melodic motifs (0:07 to 0:40) – I made up simply melodies from within the chords to serve as a backdrop to the soloist

2. anticipation – at (0:41) I hit the F chord on beat "4" of the previous bar, thus anticipating it by 1 beat; at (0:50 to 1:15) I hit some chords on the "and of 4"

3. double stops – from (1:20 to 1:35) I hit only two notes per chord. Technically a chord is 3 or more notes, so these are more accurately called "double stops."

4. chords extensions – from (1:35 to) I used lots of 7th and 9th chords.

5. rhythmic motives – from (1:51 to 2:25) I repeated similar rhythmic themes over the progression

7. articulation – from (2:40 to 2:57) I arpeggiated the chords

6. pedal point – from (4:00 to 4:15) I put the open A-string under several chords

7. rhythmic variety - from (4:15 to 4:48) I made the rhythm funkier

8. inner voice movement – from (4:48 to 5:03) I was moving around some of the 'inner voices' of the chord. I think in the next cycle after that I tried the same thing with bigger chords and it didn't work as well because the bigger the chord the less flexible it is.

Even your chord vocabulary or rhythmic versatility isn't as vast as you would like, this kind of practice opens you up to ideas. You might even write down, immediately after your comping, the things you have discovered but can't yet do as well as you would like in a notebook so you can work them out later.

Also try it out. Solo over my chord progression (and ones you record), and see how it feels. Then play the progression with only one-pass through and 'loop' it. Now see how that feels. Isn't it much more fun from the point of view of the soloist to interact with a more interesting yet tasteful rhythm section (even if it's only one guitar in this case)?

So, for now, we'll keep the looper pedal, shall we? We just won't use it as a crutch as often. :)

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