



Steve Vai's
**10 HOUR GUITAR
WORKOUT**

SINCE ITS APPEARANCE in *Guitar World* in 1990, Vai's intensive guitar regimen has been the Holy Grail for serious players. Here, for the first time in 17 years, is the lesson that shaped a generation of guitarists.

Seventeen years ago, Steve Vai sat down with guitarist/transcriber Dave Whitehill and outlined his practice routine for the January 1990 issue of *Guitar World*. Never before had a guitarist given such an in-depth explanation of his musical exercise regimen. It became a must-have for guitarists; many of the players interviewed in *GW* have cited it as an influence on their development as guitarists. We thought it would be cool to give you the chance to experience the workout in its original form and to learn some of the things Vai has done to develop his formidable chops and remarkable music vocabulary.

To start, Vai presents the general philosophy behind his approach to the guitar. "I could sit here and tell you, 'Rule of thumb: try to always play clean,' or 'Rule of thumb: think melody.' But I wouldn't because I really don't think there are any rules of thumb. If you try to do something that somebody else says is a rule of thumb, you might be going against your better judgment. Most of the time, innovation happens when people break the rules.

"A rule of thumb I could offer is: never take what anybody tells you as gospel. Music is an art form; it's an expression of yourself, and you have to do it the way you do it. I'm not saying don't listen to what anybody else says, either, because it's very helpful to hear about what other people have learned. It's very helpful to build your technique around someone's lesson in a magazine. I may show you certain exercises I did that I thought were helpful, but you shouldn't get carried away with what I or anyone else does because you'll start sounding like me or the next guy and lose sight of your own musical identity.

"I could tell you, 'Play from the heart,' but what the hell does that mean? It's easy to say, but it's a hard thing to understand. When you say, 'Play from the heart,' you mean, 'Play from your own heart,' but what is in your own heart? To know your heart, you have to know yourself; and to know yourself, you have to be yourself; and to be yourself, you have to like yourself. This goes into all these realms of psychology, but this is what I think is important to a person's playing and the way he expresses himself."

THE 10-HOUR WORKOUT

On his way to becoming a guitar virtuoso, Vai would practice 10 hours per day and document everything he did. The first hour was devoted to technical exercises, the second to scales and

FIGURE 1

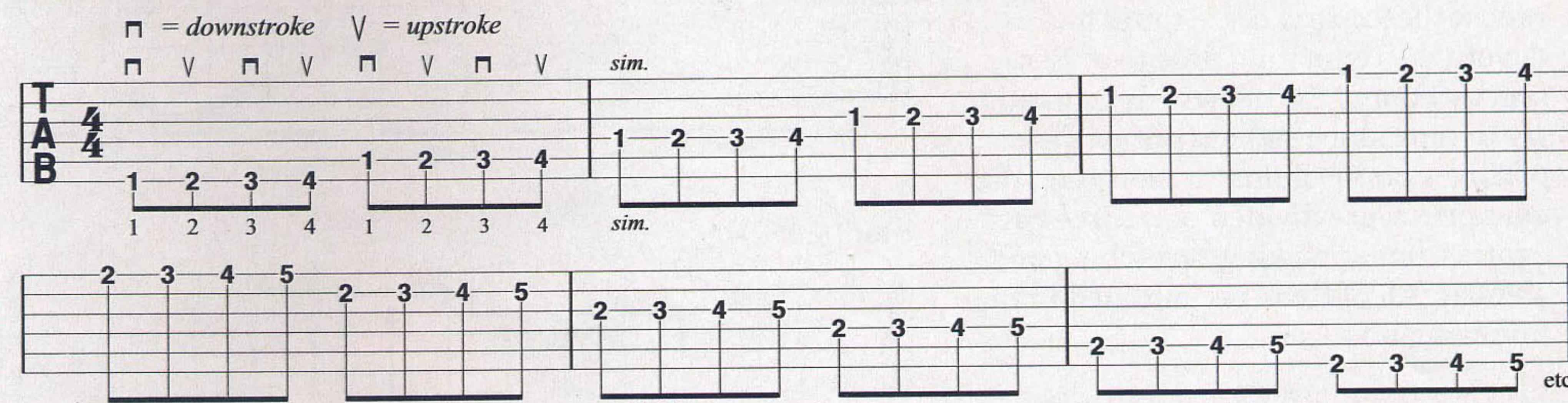


FIGURE 2

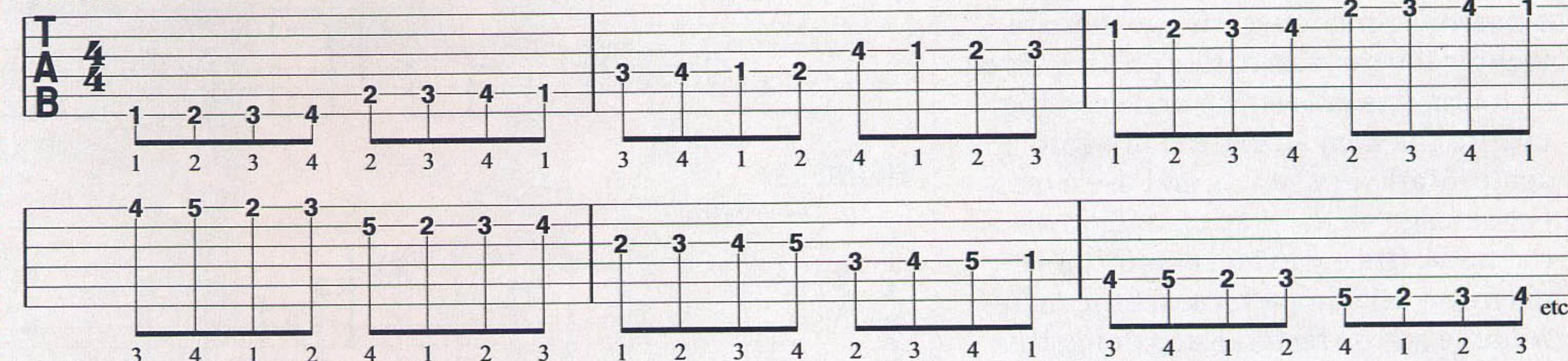


FIGURE 3

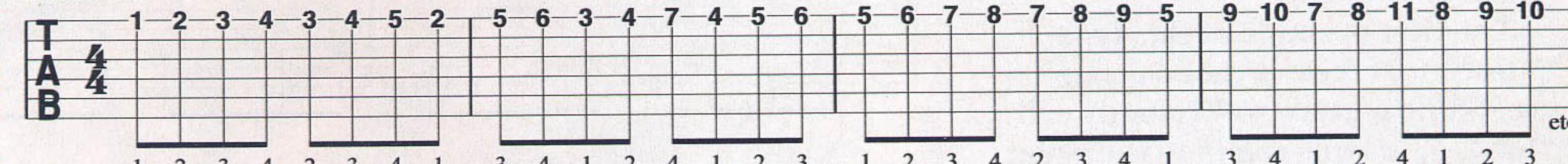


FIGURE 4

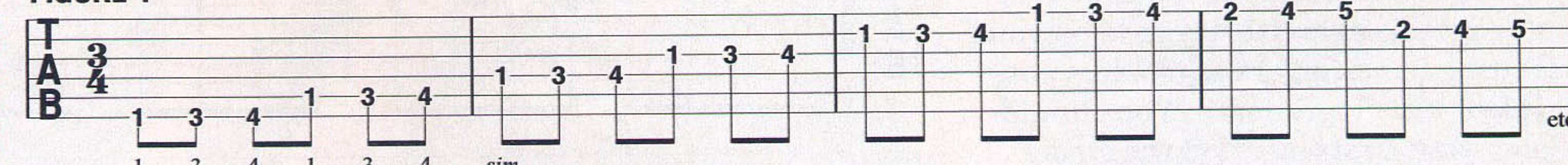


FIGURE 5

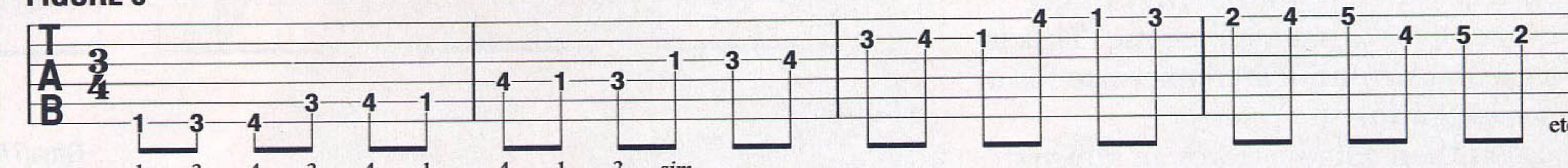


FIGURE 6

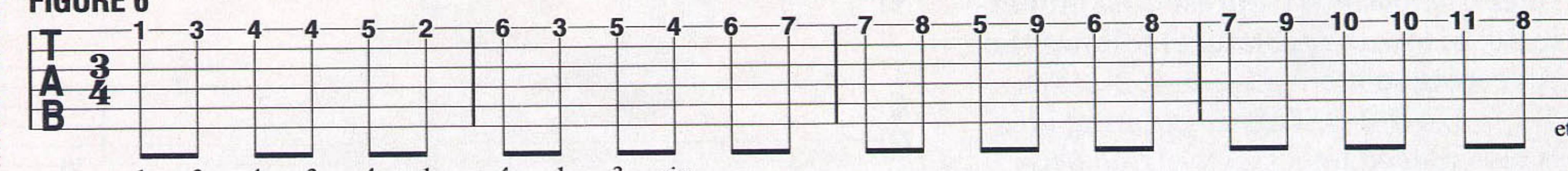


FIGURE 7

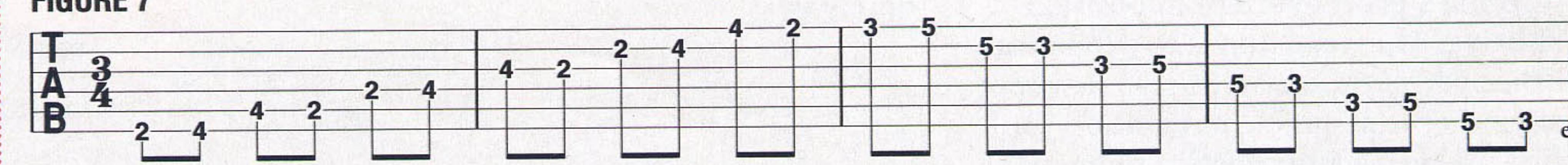


FIGURE 8

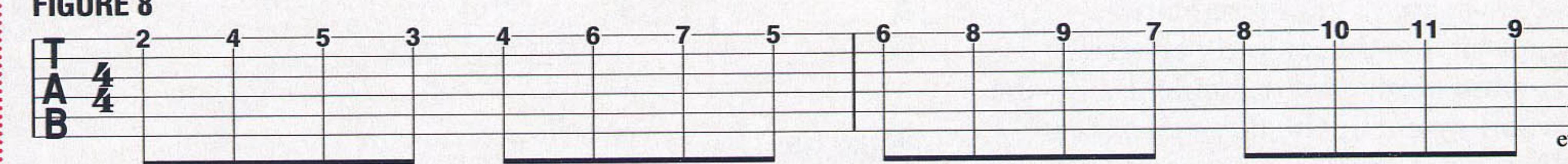
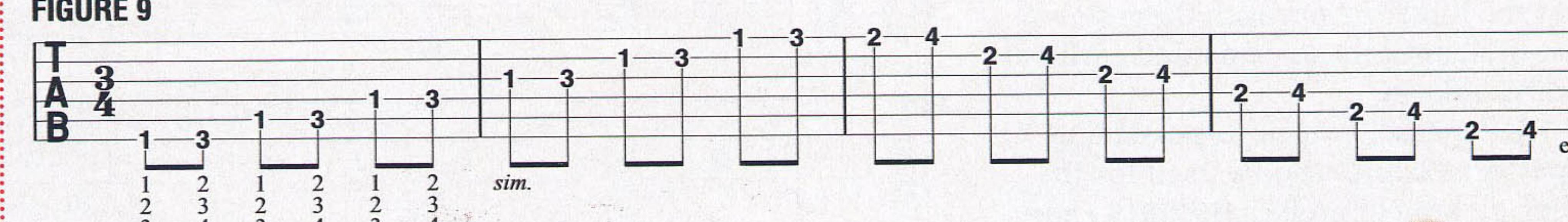


FIGURE 9



the third to some “chord thing.” He’d repeat these areas three times and devote the remaining time to a “Sensitivity Hour,” during which he would try to reproduce spoken phrases as passages on the guitar. In addition, the exercises were divided into three categories: linear picking, stretching and angular. All of them are outlined in the following text.

LINEAR PICKING EXERCISES

To develop a strong, fluent alternate (down-up) picking technique, Vai recommends practicing “things that are technically awkward, like picking three or four notes on a string and crossing over to the next string and doing it again. Start very slowly and use a metronome; go all the way up and down the neck. Once you feel comfortable playing a certain pattern, set the metronome a little faster. Keep doing this and eventually, after several months, you’re just wailing.”

The first example of this type of linear exercise is based on an ascending pattern we'll simply call "1-2-3-4," as this refers to the order in which the fret-hand fingers are placed on each string (**FIGURE 1**). When playing this exercise, try to keep your fretting hand fingers as close as possible to the fingerboard. You should keep your first finger on the string until the fourth finger makes contact, at which point the first finger moves over to the next string. This is a great, uncomplicated exercise for a novice guitarist.

Vai then demonstrates an alternating variation (**FIGURE 2**) in which the fingering pattern (represented numerically below the tablature) follows the repeating sequence 1-2-3-4, 2-3-4-1, 3-4-1-2, 4-1-2-3. This alternating idea is also played on a single string (**FIGURE 3**) and has the added benefit of offering a great exercise in position shifting. The next step is to exhaust all other permutations of the 1-2-3-4 or any other four-note combination you find awkward and practice them in a similar manner.

If we apply Vai's pragmatic approach to three-note-per-string combinations—for example, 1-3-4—the result would be the three exercises shown in **FIGURES 4-6**. These exercises present a workout for the brain as well as the fingers. Approach them slowly at first, until the logic behind each pattern sinks in.

Of course, two-note-per-string patterns could also be used for linear picking exercises (**FIGURES 7 and 8**). If you have problems crossing strings with the same finger, you'll find the exercise shown in **FIGURE 7** to be particularly beneficial. Roll your fretting finger over the strings as you switch from one to the next to keep the notes from 'bleeding' or ringing.

FIGURE 10

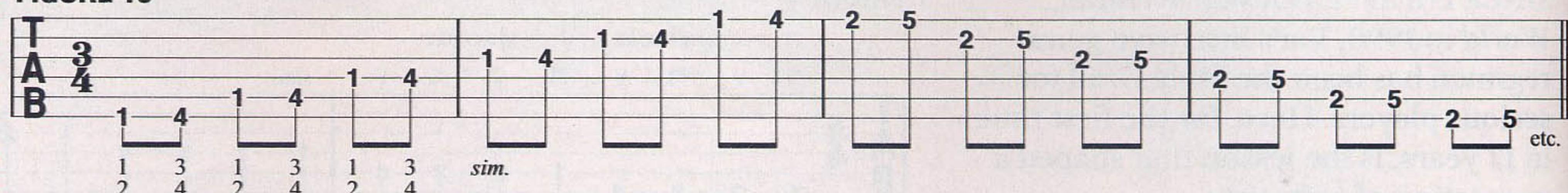


FIGURE 11

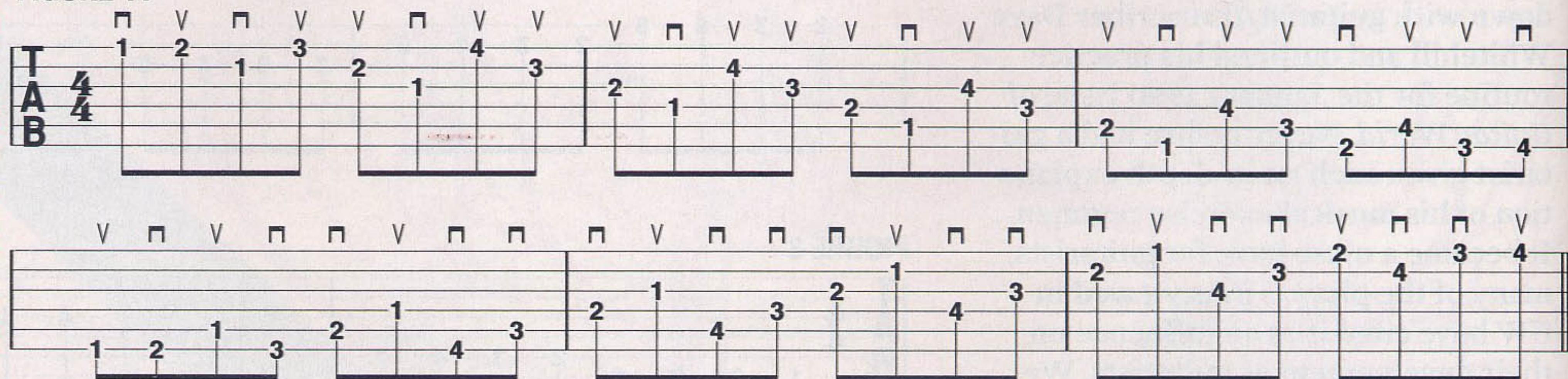


FIGURE 12

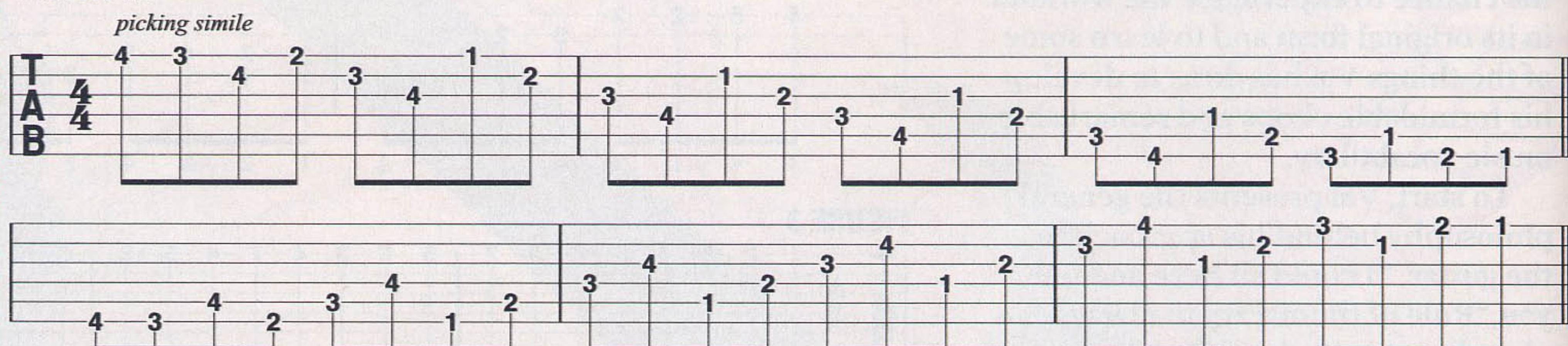


FIGURE 13

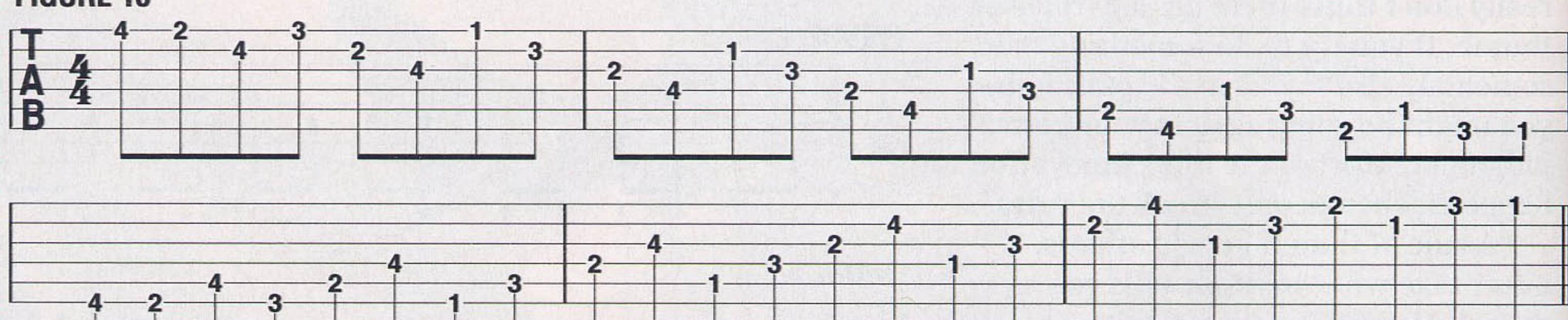


FIGURE 14

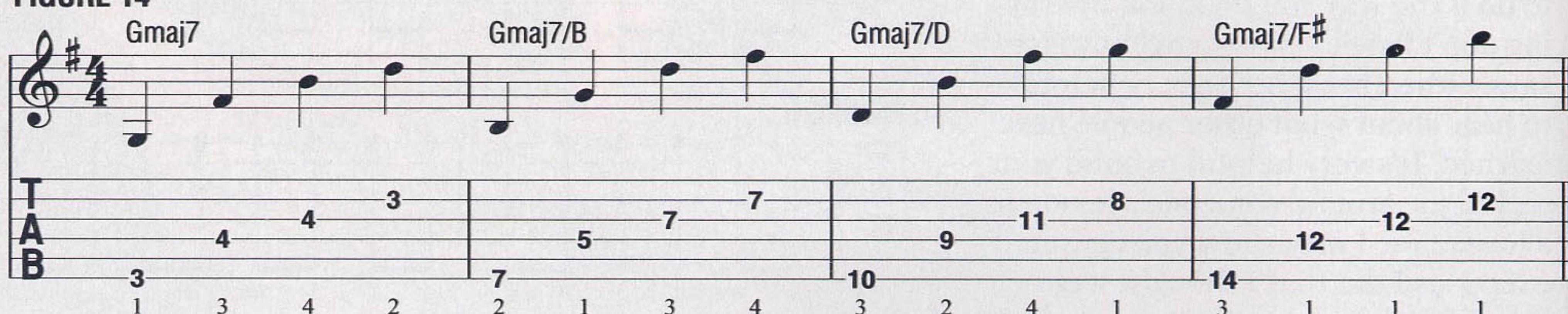


FIGURE 15



FIGURE 16



into each other. To do this, simply straighten your first knuckle as you shift the fingertip pressure over to the next string.

STRETCHING EXERCISES

The stretching exercises depicted in FIGURES 9 and 10 are played just like the two-note-per-string picking exercises, but here you want to gradually increase the span of your fretting hand. FIGURE 9 stretches each adjacent finger pair (1-2, 2-3, and 3-4). If you find it difficult to play any of these stretches in first position, begin higher up the neck and work your way down as your fingers become more limber and their range of motion increases. Despite the awkward stretches, strive for clean execution and allow each note its full duration. If there's a big gap of silence between each note, you're cheating.

FIGURE 10 works the 1-3 and 2-4 finger pairs. In addition to these two exercises, try spanning four or five frets with the first and fourth fingers. As before, if you encounter any difficulty, begin higher up the neck until your hand muscles and ligaments become more flexible. Unlike weight lifting, "No pain, no gain" does not apply here. Stop if you feel any discomfort.

"Hand position is critical in all these exercises," Vai emphasizes. "Don't hook your thumb over the top of the neck. This will greatly decrease your stretching ability. Keep it centered behind the neck and your fingers parallel to the frets before you attempt a stretch."

ANGULAR EXERCISES

"Angular exercises improve your string-crossing chops," Vai says. "The more adept you are at crossing strings with the pick, the better your picking technique." FIGURE 11 exemplifies what angular exercises are all about. The general idea is to take a finger pattern, in this case 4-3-2-1, and work it across the strings, assigning one finger per fret. Since there are only three groups of four adjacent strings (first through fourth, second through fifth and third through sixth), the entire pattern doesn't manifest itself until it is played on one of these three string groups.

You may find it helpful to visualize three "phantom strings" on either side of the neck, to give you a reference for fingering the first six and last six notes of the exercise. With this approach, the progression of notes seems very natural. For example, when playing the first note (F) with the first finger (1), think in terms of the complete 4-3-2-1 pattern with the other fingers (2-3-4) on the imaginary strings. Therefore, only the first finger is being used. As the pattern moves across the strings, all four fingers are eventually brought

FIGURE 17

FIGURE 18

FIGURE 19 G major scale, second position

FIGURE 20 G major scale in thirds

FIGURE 21 G major scale in fourths

FIGURE 22 G major scale in fifths

FIGURE 23 G Dorian mode in thirds, second position w/first-finger stretch

into play. Likewise, as you run out of strings in bar 3, all fingers, except the fourth, move off the neck onto the imaginary strings.

FIGURE 12 shows a 1-2-3-4 applied to an angular exercise. Use the imaginary strings approach to make it easier to figure out the corresponding exercises for other finger patterns. For example, an angular exercise based on a 1-3-2-4



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finger pattern would begin 4, 2-4, 3-2-4, 1-3-2-4, as illustrated in the first bar of FIGURE 13.

CHORD STUDIES

Vai's three one-hour chord-study sessions were as varied as the other areas of his workout. "For the first hour, I'd study charts. I'd take *The Real Book* [a bootleg anthology of jazz

and fusion standards used for decades by jazz musicians and students, particularly at the Berklee College of Music in Boston] and play stuff like [plays the melody to the Hammerstein/Kern standard “The Last Time I Saw Paris”]. He would spend the second hour experimenting with unusual chords and voicings, and “for the third hour, I would just jam on a rhythm like [plays a funky Em11 chord vamp]. Once I got a groove going with it, I’d record it and solo over it. I would also invert and arpeggiate different types of chords, like Gmaj7.”

[FIGURE 14]

“Invert” and “arpeggiate” require some explanation. “Inversion” is a technique in which a chord is voiced so that any of its notes other than the root is the lowest (bass) note. In FIGURE 14, a Gmaj7 chord (G B D F#) is voiced first with the root in the bass (bar 1), then the third, fifth and seventh. “Arpeggiation” means playing the notes of a chord in succession rather than simultaneously. Other common four-note chords, such as the sixth, dominant seventh, minor seventh and minor sixth, are given the same treatment in FIGURES 15–18. Try to identify any familiar chord shapes (or fragments of them) as you move through these inversions. For example, in FIGURE 16, it’s easy to visualize the G7 barre chord shape in bar 1 and an A-shaped barre chord in bar 4.

SCALE/MODE STUDIES

Vai’s scale workout involves playing the major scale in all 12 keys at 10 different tempos, and practicing scales in interval patterns. For example, after playing the G major scale in FIGURE 19—a standard scale shape that all novice guitarists should learn—he plays it in thirds (FIGURE 20), fourths (FIGURE 21) and fifths (FIGURE 22). Practicing scales in interval patterns like this is an excellent way to improve your coordination and come up with alternatives to playing straight ascending and descending linear patterns in your lead playing, which can quickly become boring.

Vai then runs through all the diatonic modes in thirds (FIGURES 23–28). The guitarist advises, “Play them slowly to make sure they’re perfect—clean, even and right in sync with the metronome—and concentrate on making sure your pick isn’t moving that much.”

Vai says his woodshedding experience while studying at Berklee “was very mechanical. I used to try and balance the technical with the emotional in my playing and found that, once I got my motor skills sharpened, it became a lot easier for me to express myself, as long as I didn’t get carried away with my chops. It’s very easy to say to yourself, ‘Wow, I’ve got chops now,’ as a result of all these mechani-

FIGURE 24 G Phrygian mode in thirds, third position



FIGURE 25 G Lydian mode in thirds, second position



FIGURE 26 G Mixolydian mode in thirds, second position



FIGURE 27 G Aeolian mode in thirds, third position w/fourth-finger stretch

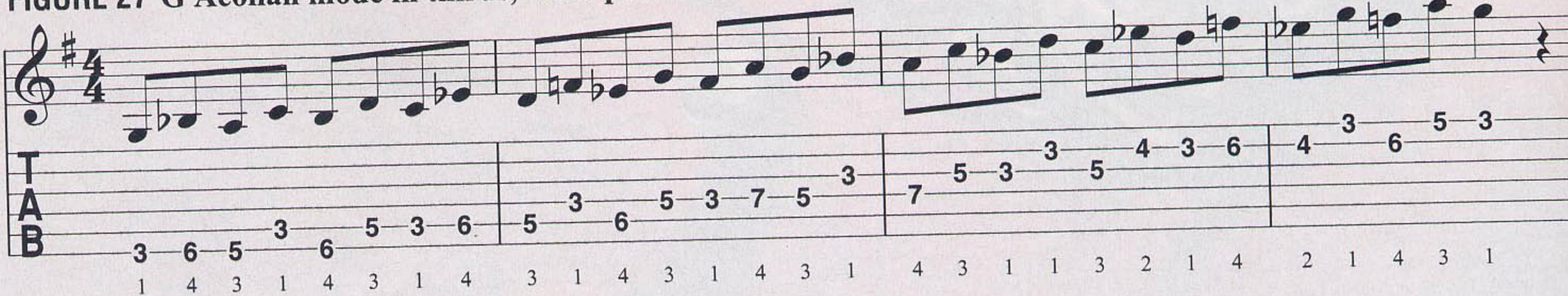


FIGURE 28 G Locrian mode, third position



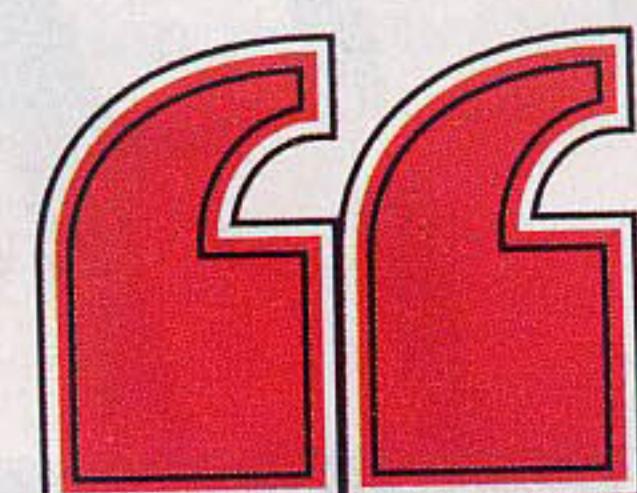
FIGURE 29 E major scale, extended pattern



cal-type exercises, but then you’ll lose sight of why you have the chops in the first place.”

In terms of ear training, it’s very helpful and educational when practicing modes to have a bass note “drone” sounding the root note (G in these examples). This way you can really hear and internalize the mood each mode creates. Without the root note of the mode in your ear, the brain will just pick up on the relative major scale from which the mode is derived. For example, when playing G Phrygian (FIGURE 24), it’s easy to gravitate toward hearing it as being an Eb major scale starting on G.

The Lydian mode (FIGURE 25) is one of Vai’s favorite scales. The raised, or “sharped,” fourth in this pattern gives



MOST OF THE TIME, INNOVATION HAPPENS WHEN PEOPLE BREAK THE RULES.

the Lydian mode its distinctive, exotically beautiful quality. Play this pattern with a friend strumming a G chord, and you should notice a definite Vai sound.

Asked whether he used the other possible positions for the major scale, Vai responds, “No, I just used to play in that one position; the others were useless to me. The only reason I used those scales was to get the sound of them in my head and get my fingers going. I didn’t want to learn scales in a million different positions because I was afraid my playing would become too position-oriented. I used to do this really cool exercise in every key: starting with E major, I would go from the lowest to the highest note [plays FIGURE 29] and then come back down.”

You’ll have to figure out your own

fingering for this elongated scale pattern. It comes down to whatever works for you. Experiment with finger slides and quick, stealthy position shifts. Bearing in mind that the idea is to minimize hand movement wherever possible, moving your first finger frantically from note to note doesn't make much sense...unless you're going for a sitar-like vibe. Vai says, "The premise is that you have to do it by ear and play it differently each time without making a mistake, otherwise you have to start over. Your fingers will kind of develop 'eyes,' and you'll get a feel for playing the scale you're hearing in your head instead of being absorbed by the mechanics of it all."

LEAVING THE WOODSHED FOR OTHER REALMS

"Anyway, that's about nine hours of practice, and that was just on the first day. On the second day, I'd do less but move onto other things. I'd devote three hours to the mechanics, then work on vibrato, or take hammer-ons, pull-offs and 'flutters' [*trills*] and work on those for an hour." That may sound rather ambitious, but Vai also makes time for working on the feel of his playing. "I would always reserve the last hour of my routine for just soloing and jamming. You know, just feeling it, forgetting everything and just doing it.

"Later, I used to do this thing called the 'Sensitivity Hour,' where I'd try to play with as much extreme sensitivity as I could. I would record a chord progression, like this [plays **FIGURE 30a**] then think of a phrase in my head—like a word or a sentence—and try to play it melodically on the guitar."

To illustrate his point further, Vai asks Whitehill to say a word or a sentence; Whitehill reflects on the solo Vai had just played in **FIGURE 30a**, and replies, “Hey, Steve, that was really nice!” Vai then mimics this sentence in the first two bars of **FIGURE 30b**, following up with variations in each of the subsequent phrases. Each note corresponds to a syllable, and the rhythms follow the natural speech pattern. Vai explains: “You can start speaking your mind to yourself. Some people do this, and this is the way they pray—they pray to themselves when they play the instrument. It’s very expressive and a lot better than thinking, Okay, I’m in the key of E minor and this [*plays the second chord of the progression, Gmaj13*] is probably a Gmaj6 or a major seventh with the 13th and ninth, and I can play these notes [*plays the notes D, A and E in descending fourths on the first, second and third strings in the ninth position*].”

"It's much easier to just say something to yourself. What happens then

FIGURE 30a

FIGURE 30b

Gtr. 2 repeats Riff A twice

Gtr. 1

Em(add9)

Gtr. 2 repeats Riff A twice

Gtr. 1

Em(add9)

Gtr. 2 repeats Riff A twice

Gtr. 1

Gmaj13

Em(add9)

Gmaj13

is that you start saying things that are extremely personal, that probably only you can understand, but the personality behind each phrase will reach your audience. It'll make your solo mean something very special and it'll add a certain feel to the way you play it. This technique can be very useful for pulling yourself out of a creative rut. Of course, your frame of mind will be dictated by the rhythm. It's tricky and requires discipline, but it's worth trying because it's so expressive."

Examples of “talking guitar” in Vai’s discography include songs such as “Yankee Rose” with David Lee Roth and “The Dangerous Kitchen” with Frank Zappa. “It all started with Zappa’s ‘The Jazz Discharge Party Hat,’ ” Vai reveals. “Frank had this half-talking/half-singing thing he used to do. It made me realize that everything you do and say has a pitch that can be translated into music. If you take our conversation right now and put a metronome to it and stop the tape on every syllable you will find...that there are notes...to everything you say. Take those phrases and write them down in notation while trying to capture the right inflections. It’s extremely time consuming, because it’s really tough to get every little nuance of talking onto manuscript paper. But you can even go so far as to orchestrate it.”

GG

“WHEN YOU CONCENTRATE ON ONE THING FOR LONG ENOUGH, YOU CAN REALLY GET INTO IT AND DEVELOP IT INTO DIFFERENT AREAS.”

TRANSCRIBING

"I used to transcribe orchestra scores for Frank, which was really hard to do because, acoustically, your ear can decipher only three or four different sounds at one time. You have to be able to focus and concentrate on one instrument among many. You can do this by adjusting the EQ, listening to the recording in mono, using phase cancellation to hear certain things, listening to just one side in mono, or flipping the channels over [*reversing the speaker wiring or headphone placement*] because you hear things differently in each ear.

"Listening to things at half-speed helps tremendously. It's really weird; sometimes you hear things at half-speed that you never would've thought were on the recording. Using a different tape deck will change the sound, too. You might find one deck is better for pulling the bottom out and the other is good for hearing the top end."

In closing, Vai says, "Transcribing is a form of meditation. When I was doing it, I was so enthralled with it and the idea of working for Zappa that I would spend literally 12 hours a day doing nothing but transcribing. Sometimes, when you're listening to a piece of tape, it sends you off into another world. When you concentrate on one thing for long enough, you can really get into it and develop into different areas." 