

Basic Soloing – 101

While the mechanics of basic soloing are not that hard, it's a craft that no one ever masters. Every great musician will tell you that there's always another option that you haven't tried yet. These pages are to help you start experimenting with the entry-level options.

The BIG LIE is we tell people we're ad-libbing, that is making it up as we go along. WRONG! Good soloists practice a lot and create a long list of ideas that can be pulled from when you play. As you work down this page, don't try to do everything at once. Take it in stages. As you become more and more comfortable, you'll find it easier to combine the following techniques.

What notes should I use?

- 1) It's been said that there are no "Wrong Notes" when soloing and while that is true in a sense; it leaves the beginning soloist with too many options. Too many options can just tie you in a knot and cause complete brain lock. It's best to start with a chord progression that is Diatonic, that is chords of the same key, and solo with the Major Pentatonic Scale. **This is a 5-note scale using every note of the major scale except the 4th and 7th degrees.** In C major, you'd play: C, D, E, G, A.
- 2) If your changes are Diatonic and in Minor, then the Minor Pentatonic Scale would be easiest. **The notes would be like using the minor scale except skipping the 2nd and 6th degrees.** In A minor, you'd play: A, C, D, E, G. If you look on line, you'll find lots of pages that say "You can also do.....," They're all true, but the fewer options you have to start with, the easier it will be to play.
- 3) Now, how to use these pitches. When you started to read in Elementary school, you read short sentences with a lot of repetition. Think of your solo in the same way. Pick 3 or 4 letter names in the scale in a range that you find comfortable to play. Try these in different tonal patterns, rearrange them. The tonal patterns (ups, downs, skips) can be taken from some part of the given melody if the song has one.
- 4) When you find a sequence you like, play it again and then a third time, but this time add another note to it. A basic rule of soloing is to play an idea 3 times, but put a slight variation at the end.
- 5) Once you're comfortable with playing just one pentatonic scale all the way through your solo, the next step is to try to align your solo with the chord of the moment. A couple of the options are:
A) Change your pentatonic scale to that of the chord. That would mean C for the C major chord, Dm for the D minor chord. B) Use the chord tones of the moment as important destinations in your improvised melody. Of course, you need to know the chords of the song to do this effectively. You can figure them out by ear, sometimes, but that takes practice.

What rhythms should I use?

- 1) Your rhythmic options can be just as open or limited. It all comes down to the steps you need to take. If you're soloing to a particular tune rather than just open changes, find the most common rhythm in the given melody. Break it down into 4 or 5 note groups. Now, take the notes from your pentatonic scale and play them in that rhythm. Play the same idea multiple times. Stay with the same rhythm, but alter the notes until you find a sequence that you like.
- 2) One of the fundamentals of Jazz soloing is to de-emphasize the strong pulses in the music: beats 1 and 3. Try putting longer tones in between the counts or on counts 2 and 4. That will give you a more syncopated rhythm. Soloing for Pop and Rock tunes are generally the opposite idea.
- 3) Remember it's not the number of notes you play that is important. Rests can be just as, if not more, effective as a whole bunch of notes.

Just to recap:

- *** Look for tonal and rhythmic patterns in the given melody as a source of ideas.
- *** Work with 3, 4, or 5 note patterns from the Diatonic pentatonic scale.
- *** Include some rests in your solo.
- *** When you find a good idea, re-use it.
- *** When you think you're ready, expand beyond the Diatonic pentatonic scale into chord tones and chord scales.

You can find a lot of backing tracks on line. Some are to particular songs; some are just chord progressions to practices soloing. I've posted a link on the CWPA website. Go to: *CWPerformingArts.info* and look on the right side of the *Guitar* page. You can also use the link to *HubGuitar.com* and *MusicTheory.net*.

As you have questions, please feel free to ask me for help. The basic mechanics of soloing are not that hard to understand. The challenge comes in taking it slowly enough to allow your hands to keep up with your brain. Don't be too judgmental with your work. There are very few people that like everything they play. This page is just a small introduction to the world of soloing. It is a never-ending journey. There are always more things you can try. It takes time and remember, you can't learn to swim without getting wet. Grab your instrument and see where it can take you.

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