

# Improvisation 101

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Improvisation -  
noun

1.

the art or act of [improvising](#), or of composing, uttering, executing, or arranging anything without previous preparation:

*Musical improvisation involves imagination and creativity.*  
([dictionary.com](#))

To improvise effectively the musician needs to “SPEAK” with their instrument. This involves a great deal of previous preparation in gaining musical knowledge, or musical experience, but more than likely a combination of both.

Speaking with your instrument is akin to speaking in general. When you answer the phone and it is someone you know well you recognize their voice immediately. You recognize the way they speak. Likewise, when you hear a musician who you are very familiar with you can likely recognize them as well, even if you’ve never heard the song before.

Remember that person who talks incessantly and is never quiet? Don’t do this with your instrument. Rests can be the most important notes in your music. Let your phrasing breathe.

Remember that person who is loud all the time? Don’t be that person. Use dynamics in your playing. Keep it interesting. Keep it pleasant to listen to.

So..... when we speak, we use words, inflections, and body language. How to we translate that to the guitar?

Speak with your instrument:

Invoke a mood with scale/mode and chord voicing choices.

Punctuate your sentences with the following:

- 1) Chord tones – chord tones make great notes to end your statement with. Equate them with periods, exclamation marks, colons and semi-colons. Land on Chord Tones.

- 2) Scale tones – these are the ‘words’ that sound “good”. They create varying tensions. They can ‘say’ nice things. Use them in between scale tones. Journey with scale tones.
- 3) Non-scale tones – these are the tone that create tension. Just like life, there are discussions that involve lots of tension, and discussions that don’t. Use your imagination and creativity to guide you. Don’t be afraid of tension.

Half steps are often the strongest path to the next note, especially to a chord tone, or any other tone you are resolving to. As an example, sequentially play degrees 1-7 of the major scale and stop. Is there a tension there? Sure is. Play degree 8. Tension resolved. Tension and release – that is what music, and life, are all about. Music is all about tension and release.

### Using scales

Think of your scales using degrees rather than the actual pitches. The actual pitches are unique to each key. Degrees are universal, regardless of key.

Spend time getting to understand how each degree sounds against the root. Degrees 1,3 & 5 will have little, if any, tension at all because they are chord tones. On the other end of the spectrum a flat 2<sup>nd</sup> creates a great deal of tension as it rubs closely against the root.

As you study other peoples improvisations look for the notes that you really like and understand their relationship to the chords underneath. It’s not just about the melody on top, but how that melody interacts with the fundamental chords below it.

### Arpeggios

There are an infinite number of ways to arpeggiate chords. You can arpeggiate in order, or out of order, ascending, descending, or other patterns. Veteran jazz players do this all the time. Typically the chords they play over contain complex harmonies using 5 or more notes which translates into 5 or more chord tones to land on, and many more notes to arpeggiate in whatever order your creativity steers you towards.

To use arpeggios effectively, you need to have a good understanding of chord construction.

### Breathe

You ever meet someone that doesn't stop talking? Is that enjoyable? Likely not. Apply this principle to your improvisation. Speak with your instrument and then give the listener time to digest what you said. You can build tension with a blistering onslaught of notes and then bring the listener back with space and something slow and silky. Build tension with "outside notes" and then bring the listener back with space followed by an interesting arpeggio. The approaches are infinite but allowing the music to breathe is common to most approaches. Allowing the music to breathe is paramount.

Affectations – in no particular order of importance:

- 1) Slide Guitar – to my ears this is the closest we can get the guitar to emulate the human voice. Slide guitar allows us guitar players to slide from note to note just as we do with the human voice. Add a good vibrato and the results can be stunning.
- 2) Sliding from note to note without a slide – A beautiful way to connect notes. Another affectation that resembles the human voice.
- 3) Bending notes – also close to emulating the human voice, especially when combined with good vibrato. Often times, we bend notes to the next note in the scale or mode that we are using – another reason it is beneficial to understand scales and modes.
- 4) Hammer-ons and Pull-offs – These techniques also offer a great way to connect notes. Again, it is beneficial to know what degrees of the scale you are using to decide what to hammer-on or pull-off
- 5) Raking – raking the strings creates a rhythmic tension that can be very effective.
- 6) Open Strings – when the opportunity presents itself, open strings can be an awesome alternative to their fretted counterparts.
- 7) Harmonics - when the opportunity presents itself, harmonics can also be an awesome alternative to their fretted counterparts.
- 8) Pick Angle, Finger picking, Hybrid picking – There are so many ways to physically 'affect' the notes you choose to speak with. Experiment with different ways of attacking the strings. Use different edges of the pick, hold it at different angles. Play close to the bridge for trebly/staccato tones vs. playing closer to the nut for mellow/ringing tones.

- 9) Dynamics – avoid speaking in a monotone voice. Apply dynamics to all improvising. You can create tension or resolve it with dynamics.
- 10) Tone – your tone is a huge part of your voice. Most of it is in your hands. Experiment with it. When using electric guitars with amplifiers, experiment with placement of the amplifier. Consider bouncing the output off of a wall rather than directly at your audience. Be very careful with treble frequencies. They can hurt people. Experiment with different pedals that you like.
- 11) Harmonies – sprinkle your playing with double-stops, triads, and full chords as the opportunities present themselves. An occasional chord helps folks know where you are and where you are going. Voice leading is a wonderful way to build an improvisation. Play an entire chorus or two using harmony. A great way to ‘build’ to an ending.

## 12) Octaves/Intervals

Repeating a motif, or phrase, can be very powerful. You can use octaves to repeat motif outright. It is very easy for your listener to recognize this. Likewise, you can use intervals to repeat a motif. i.e. if you have a motif using degrees 1,3 & 5, then repeat it using degrees 2,4 &6, 3,5 & 7 and possibly resolve with degrees 4,6 & 8. The possibilities are infinite.

## 13) Serve the Song

Above all else, this is your job. Always think about what the song is trying to say and do what you can to help convey the message.

## Use your ears

It is always more important to listen than to talk. Music is no different. Listen closely to what you are playing over. What key are you in? What chords are being used? What is the mood being provoked? What is the groove? Use these questions to decide what best to say.

One of my favorite tricks at jams is to start my solo with preceding soloists ending statement, especially if it is a strong one. Often times it is not something I would think of, so it sparks the imagination into having a different discussion than it may have otherwise.

## Use your eyes

When improvising, keep your eyes open as well. Musical cues can be even stronger when accompanied by physical cues. Keep an eye out on band mates to help know what is going on. Watch the audience if you have one – be sure engage the audience as best you can – share what you have to say. No one enjoys a musician who has his/her back turned to them during the performance, or who only looks at the band mates and never engages the audience. It is very hard to make any kind of connection that way.

## Body Language

Use body language to communicate the dynamics you want. i.e. stoop down low when you want the volume to come down. Use the guitar neck to lead the band in accenting certain beats. Tap the top of your head to lead the band back to the beginning, tap your nose to take them to the bridge, use your fingers to indicate a ii chord or a IV chord.

## Start Simple and build from there

Take your listener on a journey. Start simple so you have room to expand, room to take your listener places. Take your listener for a ride. Speak clearly. Don't rush your listener. You might use the same series of motifs over three choruses with each one a little more complex and exciting than the previous chorus. Lock in with the drums to speak with emphasis. Make sure your listeners, and your bandmates, know when you are ending sections by speaking definitely. Use chord tones for a strong period to your last sentence, be it of a solo, or a section.

## Exercise Techniques

One of my favorite exercises is to improvise over a chord progression without the chord progression underneath. Improvise using motifs that clearly communicate the chord changes to the listener (use chord tones). The third degree is especially useful here as you can use it to communicate major vs. minor.

Practice with a metronome – not only does it help you maintain a good sense of rhythm, it reinforces the skill of listening while you are playing.

Practice arpeggios so you know where they are in as many positions as possible. One of the beautiful aspects of improvising is you never know exactly where on the neck you will wind up at any given time. Familiarity with the CAGED system of chord and scale shapes can be a helpful tool here.

Get familiar with the scales and modes, especially the ones that speak to you. If you are drawn to Carlos Santana, familiarize yourself with the Dorian mode. If you are drawn to heavy metal familiarize yourself with the Phrygian and Locrian modes.

Learn to harmonize scales using thirds. Practice this. This will help you spice up your playing using two or three part harmonies. For instance if you harmonize the major scale triads you get the following pattern – Major, minor, minor, major, major, minor, diminished.

Practice experimenting in drop D. This gives you a 5 (power) chord in the bass (D-A-D). Use these strings as pedal tones. Build melodies over this and listen to the different scales and modes as you do. Change from major to minor. Get familiar with how the different degrees of the scale sound over the pedal tones. Get familiar with how different affectations sound over the pedal tones.

Record yourself and listen back. See what works and what doesn't. Practice what works and shed the ideas that don't.

In closing, all of these ideas work not only with improvising, but with song writing as well. Improvising is 'on the spot' where as songwriting is more of a planned thing, but the same principles apply.

So.... I hope you can take all of these ideas and sit back, breathe, relax, and enjoy.