

Put Down the Pick

BY PETE MCCANN

One of the most effective ways for guitarists to expand their tonal and rhythmic flexibility when comping is to put down the plectrum and use the right hand the same way a classical guitarist would.

For over two decades I have been working on comping without a pick and it's one of my favorite techniques in a jazz setting. Comping chords with a pick generally gives a "sharp" edge to the sound of the guitar, which, in some music styles, is certainly not a bad thing. Funk, Latin and jazz-rock fusion all sound great with tightly comped chords or single notes played with a pick. But in general, swing, waltz, and especially the bossa nova all sound more rounded when the guitarist comps with the fingers. The sonic difference between the rough edge of a pick and the fleshy part of the fingertip on guitar strings is huge. Imagine an upright bass player walking a bass line with a pick and it's easy to see what I mean.

Many of the great jazz guitarists have played brilliant solos and chordal accompaniments sans pick. A short list would include Joe Pass, George Benson, John Abercrombie, Gene Bertocini, Ben Monder, Kevin Eubanks, and of course, Wes Montgomery. Wes, by the way, is a guitarist who never used a pick, and I believe that this is the reason many consider his sound on the guitar to be the benchmark for a classic jazz tone.



How to Do it

Here's how to get started down the path to playing without a pick. Let's begin with a simple chord like D7sus 4.

- In example 1, the thumb (p) will usually play the lowest note of your chord, followed by the index (i), middle (m) and the ring (a). Take a look at these patterns and play along. Feel free to experiment with dynamics by the amount of pressure you apply to the strings. The D7sus 4 can become several new chords by changing the root to a different note. For example, if the 'D' is replaced with an 'F' as the root, now the chord becomes F major 9. If B flat is used as the root, now the chord becomes B flat 6/9 with a sharp 11.
- Example 2 splits the thumb and fingers. Now you are creating a bass note and chord accompaniment pattern. The chord is written as C triad over D, but it can also be written as D11. The comping pattern in example 2 can be used with either a swing feel or straight 8th feel.
- Example 3 separates the index finger and thumb in an Alberti accompaniment style. Breaking up the notes of a chord can be helpful on ballads and when the guitar comps with piano or vibes. When guitar and piano comp together, they usually play chords with all of the notes sounding at once. This creates an unnecessary density and adds excessively to the overall volume of the rhythm section. Whenever I'm teaching a rhythm section clinic, the first thing I do is make sure that the comping instruments become aware that they are not alone! There is nothing worse than two chordal instruments comping at the same time in a battle for

dynamic superiority. Sometimes newer guitarists will make the mistake of including the root in the voicing of a chord. Since the bass player is already laying down the root, the guitar player should therefore voice chords on the top 4 strings.

- Example 4 makes use of the chords you will find in a D mixolydian scale. On tunes that have long one-chord vamps, I find it helpful to play chord scales to help break up the monotony of just repeating the same chord over and over. Try moving any chord up or down to the next set of notes in the mode. A good place to start would be the chords found in the C major scale: C major 7, D minor 7, E minor 7, F major 7#11, G 7, A minor 7 and B half-diminished.

The Freddie Green Approach

Although I generally prefer the sound of the fingers for comping swing-style jazz, the Freddie Green approach (that is, four picked strums to a bar) is the one exception. Mr. Green played low-end voicings with just a few notes on an arch-top guitar with little or no amplification.

While adjudicating jazz ensembles or combos, I often notice guitarists using the Freddie Green comping style when it's not needed. The guitar student will usually be playing a solid-body electric with an amp, comping away quite loudly. Needless to say, this can bog down a rhythm section and create interference with the register of the bass. What will help remedy this problem is to find a recording of the Count Basie Orchestra and listen to what Freddie was really doing – adding to the groove and not getting in the way of it. Turn down the volume and dig into the strings to get a more percussive effect.

example 1

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D⁹sus⁴

T A B

example 2

C/D

5

T A B

example 3

D¹³sus⁴

9

T A B

example 4

C^Δ13 **D¹³** **E⁻⁷b13** **F^Δ7b13** **C^Δ13** **D¹³** **E⁻⁷b13** **F^Δ7b13**

13

T A B

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In Closing

Playing without the pick will help open new doors to the concept of getting varied sounds from the instrument and expand the rhythmical possibilities when comping in any ensemble.

Pete McCann is an adjunct jazz guitar instructor at the New School, and City College in New York City. He also teaches at the New York University Summer Guitar Intensive and the Maine Jazz Camp. He has appeared on over 45 CDs and has performed with jazz greats Kenny Wheeler, Dave Liebman, Lee Konitz and Peter Erskine, among others.
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Pete McCann Discography

As a leader:

- *Most Folks*, (Omnitone Records)
- *You Remind Me of Someone*, (Palmetto Records)
- *Parable*, (Palmetto Records)

As a co-leader:

- *Palmetto All-stars, the Other Side of Ellington*, (Palmetto Records)



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