

# GUITAR SCHOOL

## Building BLOCKS FOR SOLO Guitar MASTERY

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# FLYING SOLO

TECHNIQUES FOR DEVELOPING  
A LUSH SOLO GUITAR  
VOCABULARY *BY MIMI FOX*



Virtuoso guitarist Mimi Fox has earned international renown as a live-wire performer and poised improviser.

Playing solo guitar is a challenging but extremely rewarding pursuit. It's also an important aspect of becoming a masterful jazz guitarist, because all of the skills that are required for solo guitar are essential to developing a complete understanding of the harmonic, rhythmic and melodic possibilities of this majestic instrument.

I found studying classical guitar for several years to be a great foundation for all of my subsequent solo jazz guitar development. In my practicing today, I still spend time playing through Bach, Villa Lobos, Vivaldi, Mozart, etc. This music is highly enjoyable to play, and it's a great way to develop your ear and your technique, as well as strengthening your sight-reading.

I have made four solo guitar recordings using a variety of guitars (hollowbody electric, acoustic steel string, 12-string acoustic, baritone acoustic). Using different instruments for recording and performance is a great way to create different aural textures and moods for the listener/audience. It's also a great way to discover new aspects of your own musicality.

I find switching from my hollowbody jazz guitar to an acoustic steel-string guitar requires a different touch (*finesse*) and also enhances my creative palette. More hand/finger strength and flexibility is required when playing a steel-string acoustic guitar, and this, too, influences what and how I play. The time spent exploring all of the different challenges that various guitars require is well worth the effort. The reward

will be the further development of your artistic voice with enhanced creativity and technical mastery.

For this article, I will use a B $\flat$  blues of mine called "Blues For Two," as well as a few classics to demonstrate a myriad of devices that I use to create richness, excitement and breadth in my solo jazz guitar performances.

For further studies I recommend my TrueFire educational course, *Flying Solo: The Essential Improvisation Map for the Solo Jazz Guitarist*.

### ARPEGGIATE YOUR WAY TO MASTERY

One of the best ways to begin to generate a compelling solo guitar voice is to outline the changes to a piece with arpeggios. The arpeggios clearly outline the notes in the chord and help create strong melody lines that can stand on their own without additional accompaniment. (For an in-depth study of arpeggios please see my book, *Guitar Arpeggio Studies On Jazz Standards*, Mel Bay Publications.)

I recommend using continual eighth notes and landing on the third of the new chord when possible. See Example 1 on page 76. In this first example, you'll notice that the last note of the first measure is an A $\flat$ , which leads perfectly to the G (third) of the following chord, E $\flat$ 7. The last note of the second measure is an E $\flat$ , which again leads back to the D (third) of the B $\flat$ 7 in measure 3.

In the fourth measure, you'll notice that I start on the fifth of the Fm7 chord instead of

the third. This works because the C (fifth) is a new note that is introduced and is not found in either the E $\flat$ 7 chord that precedes it, or the B $\flat$ 7 chord that follows it. While the third makes for the strongest resolution, other notes can work when necessary. Generally speaking, half-step resolutions work best (e.g., D $\flat$  to D, A $\flat$  to G) but they are not the only way to navigate the arpeggios. Using your ear is always recommended.

### IT'S ALL ABOUT THE BASS

Once you have begun to play through a B $\flat$  blues using arpeggios, the next logical step is to walk bass lines while simultaneously playing chords. This technique creates the impression of more than one instrument playing at the same time and is a necessity not only for solo jazz guitar playing, but also for backing up a vocalist or another instrumentalist. See Example 2 for a basic approach to walking bass lines over a 12-bar blues. This technique can be played fingerstyle, or with a hybrid technique that I use which involves using a pick and my middle finger to pluck the chords. In measure 2, you'll notice that the bass line I am playing with the E $\flat$ 7 chord is simply a descending E $\flat$ 7 arpeggio (E $\flat$ , D $\flat$ , B $\flat$ , G). You'll also notice that the chords are played on the upbeats.

The walking bass lines used in this example are merely a starting point. Eventually, you will want to practice playing bass lines without chords, similar to what an actual bassist might play. This way, you will be able to integrate more sophisticated bass lines with the basic ones in this example. There is a big difference between what you can do when you are solely walking bass lines as opposed to walking bass lines and plucking chords at the same time.

Once you can play walking bass lines (with chords) through an entire 12-bar blues in B $\flat$ , move this exercise to different keys. Then, try walking bass lines (with chords) through the changes to standard tunes in the jazz repertoire. The more you do this, the easier it will become and soon you will be adding more chromatic passing tones, varying the rhythms in new ways and creating fresh musical ideas along the way.

### PEDAL TO THE METTLE

Pedal notes are another essential harmonic device for the solo jazz guitarist. As with walking bass lines, pedal notes create the illusion of two instruments playing at the same time. They also create a nice texture. When the pedal note is an open string, the note can sustain over a number of measures, enhancing the harmony and creating a sense of fullness. Please check out my arrangement of "Caravan" from my 2006 album *Perpetually Hip* (Favored Nations Cool). In this arrangement, I use a lot of pedal notes to render the melody. A great example of what I think of as an inverted pedal note is the Villa Lobos *Prelude #1 In E Minor*. In this piece, Villa Lobos keeps an



E minor chord on top as the pedal point (and constant harmony) and the bass notes below are shifting. In Example 3, I use the open G string as my pedal note and move the chords on top starting with a C minor. This can be used in measures 9–10 in the B $\flat$  blues. The chords on top are all from the key of B $\flat$  major, with the exception of one passing chord (B major) for color and slight tension. You might notice that these are not full chords, but rather just the third and fifth of each chord. Because the key area is pre-established, these two-note voicings work just fine.

Using two-note voicings (double stops) is also an effective technique for creating fullness within the confines of a solo guitar arrangement. In my arrangement of “Caravan” (see Example 4), I harmonize the descending chromatic phrase of the melody with major/minor seconds, which is a creative way to strengthen the line without cluttering it (by attempting to play chords with each note). Sometimes, I harmonize this line with the  $\flat 5$  as well (see Example 5). Even one additional note adds a lot of texture and color, and helps to reinforce the melody and enlarge the sonic experience. In the third measure of Example 5, on beat 4, I change the bottom note from B to C for resolution. Because the top note (F) is held throughout, the feeling of fullness remains.

## HARMONICS TO THE RESCUE

I love exploring all the different ways harmonics (naturally occurring and artificial) can be used to flesh out a song. Harmonics can be individual notes or entire chords. In Example 6, I am using the naturally occurring harmonics on the seventh fret to demonstrate some of the ways these notes can be used. In this example, I am using them as the turnaround chord (and tritone sub) in measures 11–12 of my piece “Blues For Two” from my 2010 album *Live At The Palladium* (Favored Nations). The F7#9 chord is followed by the seventh-fret harmonics that create a B7#9 chord. The notes are a fretted E $\flat$  bass note followed by the harmonic notes A, D, F#, B. This chord is analogous to an F13,9#11 chord. The harmonics sustain over several measures, which adds a nice textural quality and fleshes out the sound. You can use these very same harmonic notes in myriad ways. For example, A, D, F# and B could also be used as a B minor chord, D6 chord, Em11 chord, Cmaj13#11 chord, etc. The possibilities are many and fun to discover.

## PARALLEL/SYMMETRICAL MOVEMENT

The last idea I want to draw your attention to is what I call “parallel harmony.” Simply put, this involves taking one chord type and moving it into different keys (usually with a pedal tone in the bass for support). This creates some very hip dissonance. My arrangement of “America” from my 2019 album, *This Bird Still Flies* (Origin), makes use of both these concepts (moving triads and pedal notes). In Example 7 (which corresponds to measures 18–19 on the recording), I am playing a major triad that moves from B to C to D, all with a B pedal throughout. The D chord is played using harmonics (the exact same harmonics used in Example 60. Instead of serving as an F13,9#13 chord, it is simply a D triad. The moving triads and pedal note create a very full and lush sound.

## SUMMATION

Decades ago, I approached Joe Pass when he was in San Francisco for a show. After a fair amount of arm-twisting, he agreed to give me a lesson the next day at his hotel. Joe spent many hours with me, which was an honor, and I’d like to share with you two of the most important things he said to me. First, he encouraged me to listen to string quartets. He explained that the two low bass notes on the guitar could be thought of as the cello, the two middle strings a viola and the top strings a violin. This proved very helpful to me, and I strongly encourage my conservatory students to do this as well. Another thing Joe said to me was that he was worried that I was practicing too much (yes, there is such a thing). For many musicians—because of our love of music—we can push ourselves too hard. So, I encourage all of you to take time to smell the pro-

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verbal roses in order to avoid burnout. When you return to your studies, you'll feel refreshed and benefit more from your practice time. Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't mention one of the most essential building blocks for solo guitar mastery: Listen to all of the great jazz and classical guitarists. They are too numerous to mention here, but well worth seeking out. **DB**

Internationally renowned guitarist, composer and recording artist Mimi Fox was cited in six consecutive DownBeat Critics Polls and has been recognized as one of the most eloquent guitarists on today's scene. She has performed/recorded with fellow guitarists Charlie Byrd, Stanley Jordan and Charlie Hunter; saxophonists Houston Person and Don Lanphere; vocalists Tierney Sutton, Kevin Mahogany and Janis Siegel; and B-3 organ masters Joey DeFrancesco and Barbara Dennerlein. Fox is an associate professor of jazz studies at the California Jazz Conservatory. In a nod to her artistry, Heritage Guitars released the Mimi Fox Artist Signature model in conjunction with its 30th anniversary in 2015. Visit Fox online at [mimifoxguitar.com](http://mimifoxguitar.com).

**Example 1**



**Example 2**



**Example 3**



**Example 4**



**Example 5**



**Example 6**



**Example 7**



MUSIC ENGRAVING BY KEITH BAUMANN