

SHREDDDED METAL

SINGING WHILE YOU SOLO

No matter what style of guitar you play, one of your main goals should be to solo with as much expression and feeling as possible. Rather than just fretting a bunch of scale patterns or recycled licks and hoping that it ends up sounding good, what you really want to do is to know in your mind what you're going to play before engaging your fingers. In this way, your phrases and melodies will have more meaning. Learning to sing the notes as you play them is a great way to develop this technique. In doing so, your voice acts as a conduit for getting the music from your brain and to your fingers. Steve Vai is a big proponent of this (it was he who turned me on to the idea).

EXERCISE 1

To explore this concept of singing as you solo we'll use the minor pentatonic scale (1-b3-4-5-b7) since it's the most common scale used in rock guitar and everyone should know the basic pattern starting on the sixth string root note. Pick a key that you feel comfortable in (it doesn't really matter which, although I'd suggest something mid-range such as A minor). Run through the scale up and down, however, instead of just letting your fingers go into auto-pilot, really take the time to listen to each note as you play it. Also listen out for the intervals between each note – in minor pentatonic these will be either a minor 3rd (three frets apart) or a major second (two frets apart). Without opening your mouth yet, try to aurally visualise the notes in your head as you play them. In addition, after playing one note, try to 'hear' the consequent note of the scale in your mind before you play it (this will help to develop your 'inner-ear').

EXERCISE 2

Next, pick a syllable that you will use to sing the notes of the minor pentatonic scale. It isn't too important what this is, but some suggestions are 'da', 'do', or 'la'. Play the root note on the sixth string, listen to it for a second, and then try to sing the same note using whichever syllable you have chosen. Aim to get it as on pitch and in tune as possible. Repeat this process for every note of the scale. The next step (and the most difficult if you've never tried this before) is to play through the scale with your fingers whilst simultaneously pitching the notes with your voice. Try not to cheat by playing the note slightly before you sing it. As you ascend/descend you may find that the notes start to fall outside your vocal range. If that's the case, simply shift your voice up or down an octave accordingly.

EXERCISE 3

Once you are fairly comfortable singing and playing the scale at the same time, take a simple pentatonic lick or sequence pattern (e.g. ascending/descending in 'threes' or 'fours') and try to sing along as you play that. This will help you get used to using different note groupings and will allow you to become more fluid with using voice and guitar simultaneously. It's important to note that the point here is not to be a fantastic (or even very good) singer. The primary goal is to better facilitate getting the music from your head to your fingers, with your voice working as a medium.

EXERCISE 4

Finally, we want to apply this concept to improvisation. This will be difficult, but it can be practised by breaking it down into three steps:

1. Improvise a short minor pentatonic phrase/lick; it doesn't have to be too complex or long (one or two bars is fine). Immediately after, see if you can sing the phrase that you just played. If you have trouble, repeat the process until you get it right.
2. Improvise a short phrase/melody with your voice, then see if you can play what you just sung on the guitar. While singing your improvised phrase, play the tonic chord of the key you're in (e.g. A minor) to help with the pitch.
3. Try to improvise a phrase while simultaneously singing the notes that you are playing. This may take some practice, but if you do it right, your brain, voice and fingers will all be working as one – the musical idea in your head is translated to your voice and in turn is translated to your fingers, all within a split-second.

When you're improvising in this manner, make sure to use different rhythmic values, and don't forget to incorporate embellishments such as bends and slides (approximating them with your voice). Once you've got the hang of it, you can then make your phrases longer and more intricate, and you could also try it with accompaniment.

EXERCISE 5

When you're comfortable soloing/singing using minor pentatonic, employ the previous exercises with other common scales such as the blues scale, natural minor, harmonic minor, major pentatonic, and the major scale. You could then apply the concept to more difficult areas such as the major modes, the chromatic scale, chromatic passing tones, and arpeggios. The more you practice this, you should find that it will bridge the gap between your mind and fingers – to the point where you may eliminate using your voice altogether and rely only on your 'inner ear'. Alternatively, you may wish to incorporate this technique into performances by scat-singing or using lyrics.

Ultimately, the whole point of this concept is to try to give your lead playing a bit more meaning and emotion instead of simply rehashing licks you've learnt or running through scales. Singing the notes you play is a great way of getting ideas out of your head and onto the guitar, and in this way, it can help you to become a more well-rounded and emotive soloist.