

SHREDDING METAL

CLEANING UP

If you play a lot of metal-style guitar, for the most part you will find yourself using a distorted or overdriven tone. Furthermore, when it comes to lead playing, it's also pretty common to use effects such as delay, reverb, compression, wah pedals, etc. Whilst high gain and effects are a standard convention of a classic 'metal' sound, for this column I'd just like to make the point that sometimes when you're practicing, it's a good idea to turn everything off and see how you sound with just a straight clean tone. I'm sure you've heard it before, but distortion and effects can hide a hell of a lot! By practicing with a clean tone, it will be easier to analyse just how 'clean' (as in, not sloppy) your guitar playing really is.

I've written out a few exercises and licks to give you some examples of what you might like to practice using a clean tone. Specifically, the techniques covered here are fingering/picking drills, alternate picking runs, sweep picking, legato playing, and metal rhythm playing. These are just some suggestions, but of course you can apply this concept to any lick, technique or song you may be working on.

EXERCISE 1

Practising standard left/right hand exercises like this without distortion will help you to focus on the accuracy of both hands as well as the tone quality of each note.

etc.

EXERCISE 2

This is a typical shred-style ascending run in A natural minor. When played with a dirty tone, it can be quite common for licks like this to end up sounding a bit sloppy. By working on it clean, you can really make sure that your alternate picking is correct and that you're hitting every note clearly.

Am

full

EXERCISE 3

When sweep picking, it seems that a common problem is that you hear the notes on the top and bottom strings, yet the strings in-between are muted and inaudible. Try using a clean tone for this Im-VII-VI arpeggio lick in (or any other sweep picking lick) and make sure that every note is clear and accurate.

Exercise 3 is a sweep picking exercise in 4/4 time, featuring three measures of music. The first measure is in Am, the second in C, and the third in G. Each measure contains a descending arpeggio lick with sweep picking. The notes are grouped by triplets. The fretboard diagrams below the staff show the fingerings for each note: Am (12, 15, 14, 13, 14, 15), C (10, 15, 14, 13, 12, 14, 15), and G (10, 14, 12, 12, 10, 15, 10, 12, 12, 14, 12).

EXERCISE 4

While distortion and effects actually make hammer-on/pull-off licks easier, it's a good idea to make sure you can also play legato lines – like this descending A minor run – without high gain. This will help to build the strength of your left hand.

Exercise 4 is a legato exercise in 4/4 time, featuring a descending A minor run. The notes are grouped by slurs. The fretboard diagrams below the staff show the fingerings for each note: 8 5 7 5, 8 5 6 5, 7 5 4 5 7 5 4, 7 5 3, 7 3 5 3, 7 3 5.

EXERCISE 5

Don't forget your metal rhythm playing too. This is a fairly standard riff in E minor using a few different picking styles. By practising it clean, you can ensure that there will be no small inaccuracies. This is particularly important when recording and if you have to double rhythm parts.

Exercise 5 is a metal riff in 4/4 time, featuring E minor. The notes are grouped by slurs and pickings. The fretboard diagrams below the staff show the fingerings for each note: 9 0 0 0 0 0 9, 8 0 0 0 0 0 8, 6 5 5 5 4 4 4 3 3 2 2, 3 1 0 0 0 0 3.

While I know the tendency for a lot of metal players is to 'turn it up to 11' (and certainly I do this myself), I think you'll find that by also practicing with a clean tone, it will help you to tighten up your overall lead and rhythm playing. That way, when you do crank up the distortion and effects, it will sound even better!