

The Diatonic Harp Reference: Improvising Using Rhythm


Improvising Using Rhythm

Here's a way to add a sense of structure and cohesiveness and "composition" to your improvised playing. The focus is on the *rhythmic pattern* of a phrase (or riff or lick or whatever structural component of a solo or song you want).

The idea is to repeat that rhythmic pattern over different notes in different places in the improvisation. The result is a sense of "variation on a theme" familiarity (where the theme is the rhythmic statement rather than (necessarily) a melodic one).

Rhythmic patterns can come from:

- The first (or any arbitrary) phrase (lick, riff, etc.) you play
 - In other words, play a phrase the way you normally would—but pay attention to and remember the rhythmic pattern of the phrase.
- Some familiar rhythmic pattern you already know
 - For example, try using the rhythmic pattern from "Mary Had A Little Lamb", only *don't* play "Mary


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Had A Little Lamb", play other notes.

- The meter of any sequence of words
 - As you read a series of words, the syllables form a rhythmic meter (e.g. iambic pentameter). You can reflect these spoken patterns as musical rhythms.
- Rhythmic patterns of the song in which you're playing
 - These add a sense of "fitting-in" with the song
- Rhythmic patterns of phrases from other soloists
 - These add a sense of cohesiveness among the musicians and to the different solos in the song.
- The basic bass or rhythm "groove" of the song
 - Once again, this maintains a sense of cohesiveness between the improvisation and the song.

When a rhythmic pattern has been established, it can later be improvised off of, again, rhythmically, over and over. For example, take a quarter note and turn it into a triplet shake, or swing eighths, or a tongue switch warble... endless variety, yet the rhythmic theme is still recognizable. And you certainly aren't restricted to a single rhythmic theme. Play one, play another, repeat the first, repeat the second, play a variation of the second, play a variation of the first, play the second, play the first. An endless supply of structural combinations exists.


The goal is to get a sense of completeness, cohesiveness (it all fits together), and integration with the whole.

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This attention to rhythmic patterns is also useful as a “rut-busting” exercise. If you find yourself getting bored with the same ol’ thing, try making up new rhythmic patterns and playing a familiar lick using the new pattern.

One variant of the “theme and variations” tip is...trick ‘em. Set something up by repeating a phrase or rhythmic pattern until the listener comes to *expect* something—a concluding note or phrase, a particular beat or groove, a certain effect, like vibrato (absent or present), etc.—then take it away and give them something else. This adds interest, and builds a sense of excitement at the unexpected—“what’s coming next that I don’t expect?” Of course this, like most things, can be over done. You have to create a balance between playing the expected and the unexpected so the music is neither too predictable nor too “off the wall”.

Too often musicians, especially less experienced ones, pay too much attention to the notes, and not enough to the rhythm. The notes you choose to play should always fit with the rhythmic content of the music.

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