

# **Emotional Guitar Playing – How To Express Yourself Freely Through Your Guitar**

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## **Introduction:**

### **How To Express Any Emotion Through Your Guitar**

In this guide we will focus on three simple exercises that will enable you to express any emotion through your guitar. Expressing yourself through your music isn't something that's hard to obtain; you don't need years and years of training on the guitar to be able to express yourself.

Yes, it is true that the better your guitar techniques such as string vibrato and bending become, the easier it will be to express your emotions in your guitar playing. But don't let that hold you back from delving into the exercises in this guide in case you've only been playing guitar for a couple of months. I have personally trained students who were playing for only a couple of weeks and the results they've achieved with exercises like these have been astonishing.

So before we get to these exercises, when you go through this guide it's important to keep two things on the back of your mind:

- 1) These exercises are really simple, but they are effective. You might think to yourself that if something is easy that it's probably not that effective, but that's your ego tricking you. The world is full of guitar players who aren't going anywhere on the guitar because they simply refuse to look at the simple exercises that any beginner on guitar should do. Because they neglected these exercises in the past, their whole guitar playing now suffers because of this, but they don't want to go back and learn these exercises because they tell themselves "I'm playing for 'x'-amount of months/years now, I should be able to do this by now". That's the ego talking and it's holding them back to further growth on the guitar.
- 2) While I've stated that these exercises don't require years of training on your instrument before you can attempt them, it's important that you at least can improvise using a basic scale such as the minor pentatonic scale. Furthermore, these exercises aren't the only ones one should do, but they cover the basics of becoming sensitive to emotions in your guitar playing.

## I. Exercise 1 – Emotional Guitar Licks

In this first exercise we are going to choose a random lick (you can choose any lick you want) and try to evoke one single emotion by altering the way we treat the lick and by altering our thought process.

Choose a random lick and try to express the next emotions on this lick (try out each emotion a couple of times on the same lick, before going to the next emotion):

- Nervous
- Calm
- Heartache/broken hearted
- Bored
- In love
- Angry
- Ecstatic
- ...

Like I described above, there are two things that will make sure that the emotion comes across; altering our thought process and altering the way we treat the lick. Let's take a look at both of them:

### - **Altering Our Thought Process:**

Remember when you started out playing guitar and you'd need to think really hard where to put your finger and which string to hit in order to let the sound of a single note come out? This is a common thought process that is shared by beginner guitar students. The better you become as a guitarist the more advanced thought processes you will need to master. For instance, an intermediate to early advanced student will think about the notes in the scale and how they affect the emotional impact of what he wants to express.

Whatever level you are on in your own guitar playing, you need to master the thought process of each playing level (beginner – intermediate – advanced, etc.) before you can move into the new levels. When we talk about evoking emotions in our guitar playing, it's crucial to realize that this thought process of being aware of the emotions you want to express is important ON ALL LEVELS of your development. This means, that the sooner you will master this thought process of being sensitive to emotions in your guitar playing, the faster you will become a better guitar player.

In order for you to make this thought process work you'll need to contemplate each emotion before you play the lick you've randomly chosen. When we for instance take the emotion 'nervous', it's important to hold this emotion in your mind first in order to feel it before you can express it.

If you don't feel the emotion you want to express with your guitar first, neither will the listener feel it. If you want people to feel sad or cry when they listen to your music,

you should be crying yourself. If you want to give them goose bumps, you should give yourself goosebumps first.

So the process becomes this;

Mind → Body → Music

Or could be thought of like this;

Imagine (what the emotion feels like) → Feel (the emotion) → Express (the emotion)

This thought process is by far the most important, but can't work if we don't pay respect to the second important piece; altering the way we treat the lick.

- **Altering The Way We Treat The Lick:**

When we go through the steps described under 'altering our thought process' then the logical outcome is to alter the way we play the lick for each new emotion. We call this guitar phrasing. It's the way in which we give our guitar playing its unique voice. That's why guitarists such as B.B. King and Jeff Beck (just to name two of them) are so recognizable; the moment you hear them play their first note on the guitar you know its them playing!

We can approach the topic of guitar phrasing in many different ways, but if we want to approach it the way that almost any master blues musician has learned it we need to start with our mind-body-music statement. Just ask yourself this simple question when you go through each of the emotions:

If 'emotion x' would be what I want to express, how would I phrase this lick to express that feeling?

- Would I play the lick loud or softly?
- Which techniques would I use?
- Which rhythms would I use?
- ...

For instance, if the emotion you want to express is 'in love' wouldn't a delicate slide to a target note you embellish with a tender and subtle vibrato be a great way to start or end your lick? What about the emotion 'anger', would you play the lick in a very smooth fingerpicking manner or would you make sure you hit every ounce of dynamics out of the strings with your guitar pick?

## II. Exercise 2 – Emotional Guitar Solos

In this second exercise, use the same process as in exercise one, but now play a whole guitar solo or a combination of several licks while you shift your focus from one emotion to the next during your solo.

For example:

Calm → Nervous  
Heartache/broken hearted → In love  
Bored → Ecstatic  
...

Keep the two important pieces that we've covered under exercise one; 'altering our thought process' and 'altering the way we treat the lick' in the back of your mind to make sure that you express the emotion that you want to evoke.

## III. Exercise 3 – The Feedback Loop Between Hearing, Feeling and Playing

The absolute end goal for most improvisers is to be able to be actively aware of the continuous feedback loop between what you hear and your feelings. In this way the feelings you evoke in your guitar solo continuously evolve as you are playing, because every time you're playing something you'll automatically reflect on that feeling and will be able to steer the expressiveness of your next phrases towards a resolution of that feeling. This is pure improvisational freedom.

We've already talked about the process that is found present in evoking emotions when you play. In this process we started with thinking about the emotion and transferring this to feeling the emotion in order to finally express the emotion through our guitar.

In this third exercise we're going to add one layer to this process. This is the process of distilling information out of listening to the feedback that the music that we've just heard gives us and reacting upon this. So our earlier process becomes this:

Mind → Body → Music → Feedback

or

Imagine → Feel → Express → Hear

The earlier process 'mind → body → music' ('imagine → feel → express') now becomes 'mind → body → music → feedback' ('imagine → feel → express → hear'). In this feedback phase all you need to do is to listen to

what the music you just played is 'telling' you and reacting to this feeling.

How is your body reacting to the sound you just heard? What emotion is the sound of the previous lick you just played awakening in you?

In the first two exercises we've chosen our emotions beforehand out of the list I presented in exercise one. In this third exercise you can pick your own emotion out of the nearly endless list of possible emotions that you can experience. The best part is that you don't need to actively pick out an emotion and then start playing, you just need to start playing something and then reflect upon the feeling that the sound coming back to you is evoking in you.

Simply use this model to get started:

Play lick 1 → listen to which emotion this lick 1 makes you feel  
→ Play lick 2 and focus on expressing this emotion → listen to which  
emotion this lick 2 makes you feel → Play lick 3 and focus on expressing  
this emotion → ...

Most guitar players do this:

Play lick 1 → Play lick 2 → Play lick 3 → etc.

They never stop to listen and play lick after lick without considering what it is that they want to express. That's the main reason why so many guitar solos out there become really boring after a couple of licks. The guitarists who play them never stopped to consider what feelings they want to express (whether intentionally such as in a composed solo or reactionally such as in an improvised solo).

It's a wrong assumption to think that improvisation is just moving your fingers through scales or licks. Improvisation is reactionally in a way that the improviser reacts to the feelings that go through his body (by using the feedback loop between what he hears, feels and plays) to determine the expression of his next lick.

A great practical definition of improvisation would be this:

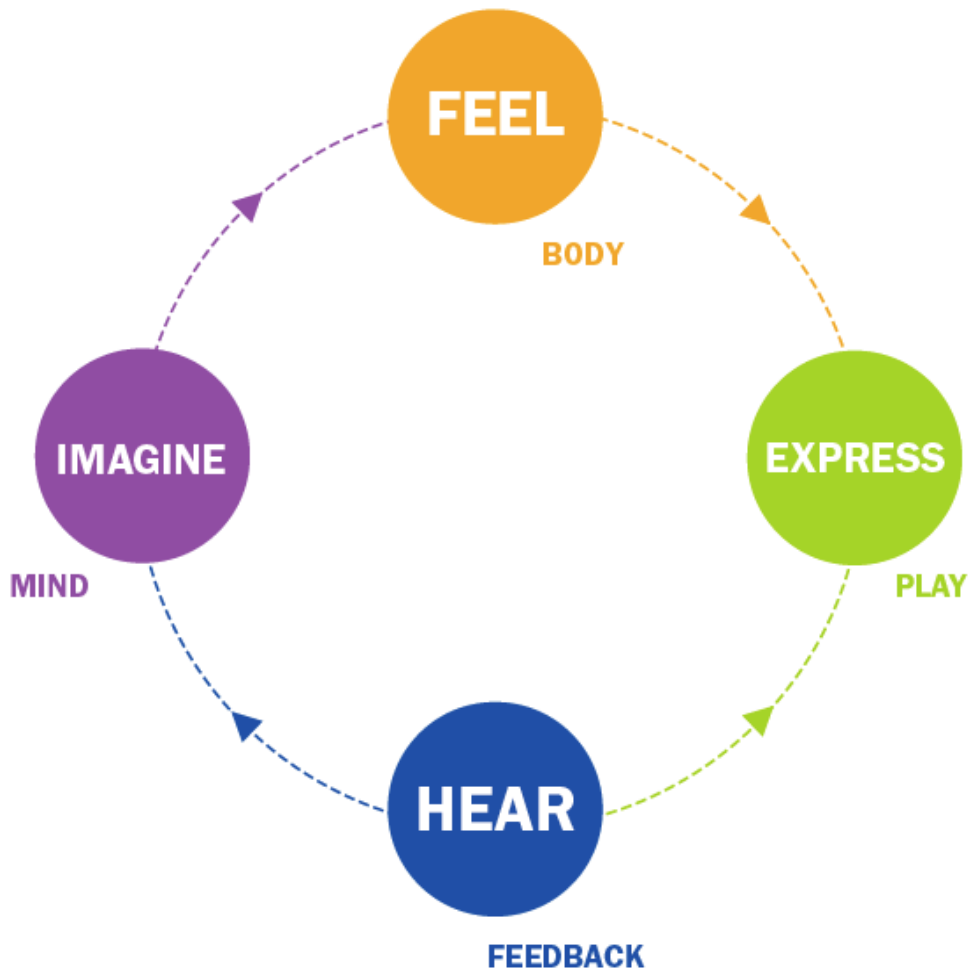
*Improvisation is the act of composing in real-time using the continuous feedback loop between what you hear and your feelings to determine the expressiveness of your choices and the resolution of what you feel through reflection upon your inner state of being that is changing continuously by the music.*

- Antony Reynaert

*This is pure improvisational freedom. When practiced daily it will give you a sense of 'living in the moment through music' like nothing else.*

## Conclusion

To conclude the teachings in this guide, below you'll find an image of the continuous feedback loop as described above:



As you see this feedback loop becomes a cycle.

## The Next Step

If you've really done the exercises in this guide, then chances are that you've felt a glimpse of mastery and freedom while improvising. You've just tasted the sweet nectar of improvisational freedom. This glimpse is like a light shining through your whole being; when you have first felt how great it feels to just express your emotions freely through your guitar you want to go back to state of being that you've experienced in this very brief moment.

After reading this guide there are three possible outcomes;

### **1) You didn't do the exercises**

I know how you feel, this guide is just one of the countless other things you've read on the internet but just didn't act on. Instead of diving in and doing the exercises presented here, you feel like this guide is just one thing you will keep for later or you will try out someday. Maybe you didn't even read all of the words in this guide, but skimmed through it. If this is you, it's very easy for me to determine your feelings about your progress on the guitar; you are simply stuck in a rut and aren't making progress as you would want to.

To be honest, it isn't really your fault, it's just that there never have been somebody who took you by the hand and told you WHAT to do and WHY. I'm here to tell you that you can expect BIG results from improvisational exercises like these, but the only way to improve your guitar playing is to take action NOW! The worst thing you could do right now is to close this guide and download a bunch of other things or order another guitar magazine and learn a bunch of licks; it is simply a death trap for your guitar playing progress. This next quote wraps up all my advice to this group of so-called guitar 'students':

*Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.*

-- Albert Einstein

Don't get me wrong, I've been in the same situation as you have when I started out playing guitar. I didn't know which exercises to do and how to improve my guitar playing at all. Luckily I have found great teachers who told me what I just told you: TAKE ACTION NOW!

### **2) You did do the exercises but didn't feel any glimpse of improvisational freedom or mastery**

You need to realize that this 'glimpse of improvisational freedom' will present itself at first as a very fleeting feeling. Before you know it, it will be gone again. So it might be that you didn't recognize it at first. But this feeling is the first sign you will get that you are able to become a master on your instrument no matter what level you are playing on right now. Every master musician that you love to listen to once stood on the crossroads that you are standing on right now. Name any musician you like to listen to and I guarantee you that there was a time in his/her life that he/she felt just like you; they felt like their instrument and them were a separate entity. But at a given time in their life they felt that glimpse where they in a moment could be free to express their music as they felt it and that gave them the motivation to go further on their quest to mastery.

This 'glimpse' is as a doorway. It's the doorway between you and the music. Once you felt that door going open for the first time it will close again very fast, for a number of reasons, with the two biggest reasons being:



- Your guitar technique is preventing you to open that door permanently
- Your understanding of how music works is insufficient and prevents you from playing what you hear in your mind

If you for instance don't have great technique on the guitar or you don't know how to use scales in order to outline the chords you are soloing over, it will be impossible for you to reach a sense of 'freedom' in whatever it is you do on the instrument. So if this is the case in your guitar playing, we should address and discuss these things first.

### **3) You did do the exercises and you've felt how it feels to reach improvisational freedom or mastery**

Welcome to pure emotional improvisation and improvisational freedom! For a very brief moment you touched on one of the best feelings in the world; the ability to express yourself freely through music.

These exercises are the basics; emotional guitar playing 101 so to speak, which will make you sensitive to the emotions in your guitar playing. There is a whole world of deepening out the relationship between you and your guitar that we can engage in, in order to loose the restrictive boundaries between these two entities.

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