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Fingerstyle Improvisation

Australian guitarist Adam Miller talks about improvising over a bass line while keeping a solid groove.

By Teja Gerken



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APPROACHING HIS GUITAR AS IF each of its six strings were a separate instrument, fingerstyle guitarist Adam Miller is a groove machine, creating a sound that invites comparisons to Tuck Andress and Charlie Hunter. Like nearly every Australian guitarist of his generation, Miller began playing guitar after hearing Tommy Emmanuel. "For whatever reason, my mom bought me a Tommy Emmanuel cassette, and that was it. From that point on, I just wanted to play like Tommy," Miller says. "From the time I was ten to when I was 16, I basically only listened to and played his songs." Miller's immersion in Emmanuel's music paid off when he was asked to tour as Emmanuel's opening act

in Australia in 2000, when he was 19 years old.

Miller may have started out as an Emmanuel clone, but as he began fusing his varied influences (including Charlie Hunter, John Mayer, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers), his playing took on a more personal quality. Although his chops are impressive, Miller's playing is about creating complete arrangements of groove-based originals that wouldn't be out of place in a funk band (Miller also performs many of his solo guitar tunes with his band in Australia). His ability to play solid bass lines while freely improvising solos puts him in a small club of players who have mastered this kind of finger independence. Miller has released five albums over the past decade, including his most recent, *Delayed*; he performs in both Australia and the US, and teaches at the local university near his home in Newcastle, Australia.

I caught up with Miller last summer to talk about how he creates grooving bass lines and improvises while playing solo.

How did you get into the multiple-voice approach to playing fingerstyle guitar? You've said your biggest influence is Tommy Emmanuel, but I hear more of a Tuck Andress or Charlie Hunter approach.

It came from wanting to do the stuff I do when I play electric guitar. Two of my biggest influences after Tommy Emmanuel were the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Rage Against the Machine; I loved their stuff! It took me years to come up with something that sounded similar with just an acoustic guitar. It just came out of necessity. The other thing was that being on the road with Tommy early on, I had to find something that didn't sound like him. It forced me into a very different direction.

A lot of players who play groove-based music on solo acoustic guitar use alternate tunings and extended techniques such as tapping, but you don't.

I've always played fairly simply. The tapping approach never sounded right to me. Most of my music is heavily centered around the bass line; I need the bass to be strong and very specific. I like things being big and warm. I tried incorporating some percussive elements for a while, but I just don't pull it off.

When you're writing or arranging a tune, do you tend to start with the bass line? Can you give us an example?

On a tune like "Noah's Little Nod," [from *Delayed*] I was noodling around with this [Example 1], which is just A, C[#], D, and E. I then added the chords around it [Example 2]. I was on vacation, and my little nephew Noah was around, and he was grooving to what I was doing, so that's where the name came from. The melody [Example 3] came later. The melody is often the result of me trying to find new progressions to play and then improvising over them at the same time. A lot of my focus has been on being able to improvise and solo.

How freely can you improvise when playing solo guitar?

Pretty freely. All your independence has to be worked out on the right hand, but the left hand is always an issue. It's easy to say, "OK, my thumb is going here, and my fingers are going there" on the right hand, but for the left hand, there is no model; it just has to get the notes when it can. You have to plan your solo in a lot of ways; you have to be specific where you're heading with it. For me, [when I'm soloing] the melody always comes first, and if I can't reach the bass line, I'll sacrifice the bass line and continue the actual solo.

On a tune like "Noah's Little Nod," I'd look for a few places to play the bass line. I've got this basic one here [Example 4], I can have the open A [Example 5], and I can replace the E with the open string E [Example 6], and then I can go [up the neck, Example 7] so that I can play it in different positions depending on where the solo goes [Example 8].

On your picking hand, do you sometimes move your index finger to the bass strings to play bass notes?

Yes, and the thumb may play melody notes. Most of my tunes are separated into almost a drum-style groove. The bass line is roughly what a bass drum would play [Example 9]; my fingers and the melody would be like a hi-hat [Example 10], played with alternating index and middle fingers; and then the snare drum, and this is the biggest thing, to get it

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onto the two and four, it's sort of a downstroke with my nails [Example 11].

How do you go about soloing on a blues-based tune, like "Wedding Speech" (from *Delayed?*)?

That one is pretty much in E. The groove is [Example 12]. The bass line I improvise over is basically an E and a C[♯], with the occasional D, and I always prepare myself so I can get to that bass line in a couple of different positions.

The main thing to work on [improvising on] this would be to just play short [bass] notes to help get your independence up while playing a solo at the same time. The next thing would be to incorporate the C[♯], so you get two beats on E and two beats on C[♯]. What that will do straight away is make you think about your position: you've got a C[♯] here [fourth string, fourth fret] and here [sixth string, ninth fret], so you're going to be meandering between those two. I'm also holding the bass notes for just one beat, and it's the muting and shortening of those notes that gives the groove; it's what conveys that dance to it. I'm muting with either my palm or the thumb of my left hand [Example 13].

AC



WHAT HE PLAYS

ACOUSTIC GUITAR: Jeff Traugott 00 with a German spruce top, Indian rosewood back and sides, cutaway, and multiscale fingerboard with a 25-inch scale on the treble side and 27-inch scale on the bass side. "The fanned frets are all about tone," says Miller. "Having the bass strings longer, but tuned the same, gives more of the tonality of a bass."

AMPLIFICATION: D-Tar Multi-Source undersaddle pickup and internal mic. Miller's guitar also has a separate DPA 4061 internal microphone that is powered by the D-Tar preamp's second channel. Miller typically blends the D-Tar undersaddle pickup and the DPA using a D-Tar Solstice preamp and only uses the mic part of the Multi-Source when he needs to run a simple mono signal without using the Solstice T-Rex tube reverb.

STRINGS: D'Addario EXP light gauge (.012-.053).

CLIP OF THE MONTH

This video of an improvised solo in Miller's tune "Noah's Little Nod" illustrates his ability to play continuous single-note lines while keeping a steady bass going by moving to fretting positions he works out in advance, as discussed in Examples 4-8.