



## The Rock Guitar Solo: From expression to simulation

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**Review Essay**  
**The Rock Guitar Solo:**  
**From Expression to Simulation**

**Ben Goertzel**

Over the past twenty five years, the electric guitar solo has achieved a mythical status far beyond that of any other aspect of rock music. Consequently, the evolution of the guitar solo reveals a great deal about the history of rock. In particular, I will focus on the metamorphosis of the guitar solo from a powerful means of individual expression into a stylized, pro forma "frill." This development seems to be deeply connected with the transformation of rock music from a rebellious, experimental art into a rigidly stylized form of commercial pop music. And it fits very naturally into Baudrillard's analysis of the replacement of expression by simulation in popular culture.

Until the mid-60s a rock guitar solo rarely lasted more than ten seconds; it was little more than a simple tool for augmenting the chord pattern of a song. The transformation of the guitar solo into a powerful vehicle for subtle melodic and emotional expression occurred almost simultaneously with the evolution of "art rock." And as over the last ten or fifteen years "art rock" has gradually been abandoned, so has the power of the guitar solo declined. Today's rock guitar solos tend to be unoriginal and perfunctory; and the most innovative guitar soloing is taking place in jazz and heavy metal music, outside of the context of mainstream rock.

Naturally, an abbreviated history such as this cannot capture the whole "truth" about the evolution of the guitar solo. To explain even the more obvious nuances of the styles of the most famous rock guitarists would require several volumes, and the picture would still be terribly incomplete. My aim here is merely to paint in broad strokes one important aspect of the history of this beautiful and intriguing phenomenon: how, in this realm as in so many others, what was once a reality is being replaced by a system of signs.

*Early Rock*

Early rock guitar solos were short and simplistic, but they were raw and emotionally expressive nonetheless. Today Chuck Berry's solos tend to sound a bit cliché, but they certainly didn't when he originally played them. At that time, the very concept of a rock 'n' roll was revolutionary. Early rock rhythms were based on a very limited variety of three-chord patterns, and early rock guitar solos were based on a very limited variety of riffs, but this was entirely appropriate: the overall nature of the songs was so radically creative that to introduce further novelty in the chord patterns or solos would have merely been distracting.

Eventually, of course, rock 'n' roll in the style of the Chuck Berry and Little Richard did become a bit cliché. Something new was required. And a variety of novel musical forms emerged. Only one, however, is particularly relevant to the evolution of the guitar solo: what is now called "art rock."

If a landmark is required, art rock may be assumed to have begun with the release of the Beatles' "Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band" album. The song "A Day in the Life," with its creative use of dissonance and its poetic/political lyrics, made it clear that rock 'n' roll had the potential to be more than "disposable music." The Beatles were also the first to introduce a variety of instruments—violins, sitars, etc.—into rock 'n' roll. However, their innovations were soon superseded. Their compositions invariably centered around simple, catchy tunes. The next step was the emergence of electric blues and art rock as completely novel genres.

### *Art Rock*

The Doors were an anomaly. They started out playing blues, and evolved a unique style of rock based on Ray Manzarek's intricate carnivalesque organ work and Jim Morrison's surrealistic, theatrical vocals. Robby Krieger, the Doors' guitarist, was more important as a composer than as an instrumentalist. To some extent, they were successful precisely because their sound was so different from that of the typical late-60s/early-70s rock band. Virtually every other big-name rock band of that era was dominated by a powerful lead guitar.

The Yardbirds, a 1960s band, were a paradigm case. Three of the all-time greatest rock guitar heroes—Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page and Jeff Beck—were in the band at various times. Eric Clapton went on to create extremely innovative rock music, as a part of the group Cream, on various solo albums, and in collaboration with Duane Allman under the name Derek and the Dominos. Jeff Beck went on to make interesting jazz fusion as well as rock, in the Jeff Beck Group, on his own, and with Jan Hammer. And Jimmy Page went on to form Led Zeppelin, probably the most important force in the establishment of the guitar solo as a rock 'n' roll myth. All three of these guitarists used their solos as a powerful

vehicle for individual expression. Like Ritchie Blackmore of Deep Purple, Joe Walsh of the Eagles, Neil Young, and dozens of others, they were classic "guitar heroes." In concert, they often extended their songs to several times the length of the recorded version, and most of the additional duration was usually guitar solo. Their solos were almost always different, and they often presented not only harmonic subtlety and melodic complexity but the subtle interpenetration of various themes. In this they were somewhat reminiscent of the great jazz improvisers: Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, John Coltrane. . .

But of course, remarkable as they were, it was neither Clapton, Beck nor Page who fulfilled the ultimate potential of the guitar solo. In 1965, a young black guitarist named Jimi Hendrix appeared on the London rock scene, having been discovered in New York by Chas Chandler, formerly of the Animals. He was left-handed, but he played a right-handed guitar upside-down. He played with his teeth; he played behind his back; he played while writhing on the ground in orgiastic fury and while having mock intercourse with his guitar. And, with an astounding arsenal of physical tricks and stylistic innovations, he made the guitar spew out sounds like nothing anyone had ever heard before, from any instrument. He would bend the neck of the guitar, caress the strings, twist the strings, use the waw-waw pedal to create a unique psychedelic drone, slide from one note into another with amazing effortlessness, and somehow harness the most incredible levels of feedback toward the creation of bizarre sound effects. The most flamboyant of lead guitarists, he often described himself as a rhythm guitarist, and this was true in that he habitually played lead and rhythm *simultaneously*, thus keeping his solos in perfect counterpoint with the rhythm.

In short, Jimi Hendrix epitomized the phrase "guitar hero." He had an incomparable effect upon guitarists, not only in the specific tricks he invented but in the way he revealed that the electric guitar could be used for much more than comping chords and playing straightforward melodic solos. He sparked the birth of the age of the electric guitar as a sound-effects machine. And, at the same time, he solidified the image of the guitarist as a sex symbol, a showman, and a maverick creative force. When he played "Wild Thing" at the Monterey Pop Festival, he literally raped his guitar, pelvic-thrusting it up against the wall while he made it wail psychedelic melodies above a wall of feedback. And then he doused it with lighter fluid and set it on fire. With that, the *future of the rock guitar solo was irrevocably determined.*

It is worth pausing to consider the relation between sex and the electric guitar. Jimi slept with his guitar at night; he called it his Electric Lady (hence the title of his third album, "Electric Ladyland"). In concert, he once admitted that his "Manic Depression," was "a song about a cat wishing he could make love to his music, instead of the same old

everyday woman." This is an extreme case, but it is certainly not out of synch with the popular image of the electric guitar. Frank Zappa once said that he played the electric guitar because, although a saxophone can sound sleazy, only an electric guitar can sound truly obscene. To many guitarists and many rock fans as well, there is something sexual about the *sound* of an electric guitar. This contributes something essential to the "guitar hero" image of the lead rock guitarist.

A large proportion of rock lyrics center around sex and love. And, of course, the steady beat of rock music is inherently sexual in nature: from the beginning, this was a large part of rock's allure. Early rock was dominated by vocalists, who usually served as sex symbols, sometimes attaining a mythical status. (Many deeply religious Elvis fans, for instance, do not hesitate to speak of Elvis and Christ in the same breath.) Given this tendency, it seems only natural that when rock became more musical and less vocally-oriented, it did so through the creation of a new class of sex symbol, the guitar virtuoso. The lead guitarist, alone under the spotlight, caressing and attacking his guitar, spinning around, not even looking at the audience—just him and his guitar, his Electric Lady, just him spinning out his individual vision, his electric, sexual dreams. As has often been observed, the guitar hero fits into the culture of machismo with perfect ease.

But sex is not the only theme of which the guitar solo is a natural expression. To some extent, art rock represented a digression from the typical themes of rock and roll—sex, partying, the travails of everyday life. The topics of contemporary rock songs are essentially the topics of early rock songs. But art rock displayed a definite tendency toward the mystical. The Beatles were perhaps the first popular manifestation of this trend, with their frequent references to Indian religion, with songs like "Tomorrow Never Knows." Jimi Hendrix's albums are about evenly divided between love songs and "cosmic songs," tales of transcendental experience. Often, as in the title song to his first album, "Are You Experienced?," mystical and sexual themes are interlinked in a complex web of imagery. The lyrics of Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven," often considered the most popular rock song of all time, are overtly religious and mystical in nature. Pink Floyd and Yes are examples of groups the majority of whose songs refer to some "cosmic" religious experience. These two bands were not so lead-guitar oriented as Cream or Led Zeppelin or Hendrix, but they both included outstanding guitarists and they both integrated tremendously inventive guitar solos into their music.

Often these mystical lyrics were extremely vague, relying on an ideosyncratic superposition of oblique metaphors, flowery language and rock clichés. For instance, "The Dark Side of the Moon," Pink Floyd's masterpiece of mysticism, ends with the following cryptic phrase:

All you create, and all you destroy...  
and everything under the sun is in tune,  
but the sun is eclipsed by the moon.

In the background one then hears someone mutter "There is no dark side of the moon really. It's all dark."

Sometimes, however, they were very concrete and visual, drawing from definite historical sources. Led Zeppelin drew a degree of inspiration from black magic, particularly the writings of Aleister Crowley. And Hendrix's second album, "Axis: Bold as Love," is named after a legendary Turkish demigod. The title song begins:

Anger, he smiles, towering in shiny metallic purple armor  
Queen Jealousy, Envy, waits behind him, her shiny green gown sneers at the grassy  
ground  
Blue are the life-giving waters, taken for granted  
They quietly understand  
Once-happy turquoise armies lay opposite, ready, but wonder why the fight is on  
But they're all bold as love...  
They're all bold as love...just ask the Axis...

But the exact words, good or bad, were never all that important. What was essential was the mystical *feel*, the *cosmic impression*. To an extent, these mystical art rock songs had a more specific purpose than ordinary rock: they served to help induce in the listener a state similar to that which inspired the composition of the songs. This is particularly true when the listener is taking the same drugs as the musicians involved. The lyrics and music then appear as a sort of cipher which can only be decrypted by one who has taken the proper drug. For instance, seeing sounds as colors is a common experience among those who have taken LSD—and this certainly gives new meaning to the song "Axis: Bold as Love." Among art rock fans, one often hears comments like "You can tell he was on acid when he wrote that." The songs were often long—often from seven to twenty minutes, a far cry from the standard three-minute songs of early or contemporary rock—and this contributed to their emotional impact: they were less momentary stimuli and more comprehensive "experience."

The electric guitar solo fit into this atmosphere beautifully. Hendrix had revealed that the guitar could be used to create a vast variety of "cosmic," "unearthly" sounds, limited only by the ingenuity and technical prowess of the guitarist. Any new musical technology tends to have a futuristic, surreal sound to it at first; here this effect was amplified by conscious attempts to get as weird as possible, and to make music which would combine with mystical lyrics to form an integral whole. Other instruments also played an important role: in Pink Floyd and

especially Yes, synthesizer solos came to equal guitar solos in melodic complexity and mystical power. But the electric guitar was always perceived as more *human*, more direct somehow. It packed an individualistic, sexual force to which nothing but the voice could compare.

In sum: the guitar solos of the “art rock” period were extremely adventurous and inventive, drawing inspiration from a variety of musical sources and venturing far beyond mere augmentation of the bass line and chord pattern. In this context, the guitar solo was the primary vehicle for subtle emotional expression, for elaboration on the themes of the lyrics, bass line and chord pattern. It was the primary means by which individual personality was introduced into a song. The small repertory of figures which characterized the guitar solos of early rock was replaced with an astounding variety of musical figures, bizarre sounds, and novel techniques. And this variety of tools was used creatively to transmit the details of spiritual, psychedelic experience to a receptive audience.

#### *Post Art Rock*

What's happening now? Electric blues virtuosos like Jimmy Page, Jeff Beck and Eric Clapton are still playing spectacularly, but they are well past their prime. Their recent compositions, though by no means lacking in quality, do not compare well with their compositions of ten or twenty years ago. A lack of originality and fervor is glaringly apparent. There are a number of younger electric blues virtuosos, most notably Stevie Ray Vaughan and Joe Satriani; but there is no one soloing nearly as effectively as did Page, Beck, Clapton, or Hendrix. Blues-based rock seems to have lost its originality, its vitality. In fact, Hendrix may have sensed this—toward the end of his career, he was more interested in jazz than in rock. Pink Floyd, Yes, and other mystically-oriented rock groups are still around. But their fans almost universally agree that their new music is nowhere near as creative, as mind-bending, as their old. By and large they are making short songs in the standard rock 'n' roll format; they have left their symphonic tendencies behind. Since these bands were not driven by guitar soloists, their guitar solos have followed the rest of their music and become much less experimental and much less ambitious.

All this does not imply that electric guitar soloing is a dying art. There are a few rock bands—U2, for instance—which still incorporate the occasional imaginative guitar solo. And the past fifteen years have seen the emergence of three tremendously innovative electric guitar soloists. It just so happens that none of them are working within the mainstream of rock. Rock no longer has any use for the experimentally or symphonically inclined guitar soloist.

Yngwie Malmsteen has set off a minor revolution with his introduction of high-speed classical harmonies into heavy-metal guitar. But his most critically successful album, "Rising Force," was almost entirely instrumental. Even he admits that most of the songs on his most recent albums, "Odyssey" and "Eclipse," were made by improving fantastic guitar solos around rather dull lyrics and overall song structures. Several songs on "Odyssey"—e.g. "Heaven Tonight"—were clearly written with rock radio in mind. But in fact, rock radio almost never plays Yngwie Malmsteen. He has never had a hit. He is a household word among guitarists, but the overall rock 'n' roll culture has consigned him to the fringes.

Allan Holdsworth is even further out from the rock 'n' roll mainstream. His first album, entirely instrumental, immediately attracted the attention of guitarists; and neither it nor subsequent albums have attracted a much larger audience. Whereas Malmsteen's style is based largely on Bach and Paganini, and owes a great deal to classical violin, Holdsworth's creative idiosyncrasies derive primarily from jazz saxophone. His sustained notes and flowing melodic runs sound very much like John Coltrane. He himself has often stated that he may be playing the wrong instrument, in that the sounds he wants to get out would flow more naturally from the saxophone than from the guitar. Several years ago, in pursuit of more control over the length of his notes, Holdsworth switched from the electric guitar to the Synthaxe.

Holdsworth has made occasional efforts (on "Metal Fatigue," for instance) to write conventional rock songs, with repetitive lyrics and guitar solos only in the proper places. But this has not brought him mass success among rock fans. Rock radio plays him even less than Yngwie Malmsteen.

And the other great guitar solo innovator of the last decade, Stanley Jordan, is even further removed from the world of rock and roll. He is strictly jazz fusion. However, his breakthrough technique of "hammering" out complex melodies with two hands on the fretboard has had a significant effect on rock guitar solos. For years, various jazz guitarists had occasionally permitted their right hands to venture up onto the fretboard. Hendrix used the trick very occasionally; and Eddie Van Halen made it one of his trademarks. But Stanley Jordan was the first to take the idea to its natural conclusion, the first to use the two-hands-on-the-fretboard technique to generate a degree of melodic complexity traditionally restricted to the piano.

Now every hot-shot rock guitarist knows how to inject his solos with a few measures of Stanley Jordan style two-hands-on-the-fretboard magic. But it is important to remember that this was not a rock 'n' roll innovation. It was created by a theoretically-inclined jazz musician studying at Princeton University. Rock guitarists may inject some of



Jordan's innovation into their solos, but with few exceptions they have not integrated it into their music; it is just another means of showing off, another pyrotechnic device. Similarly, many rock guitarists have been influenced by Malmsteen enough to introduce classical melodies into their solos. But very few have sought to duplicate the way Malmsteen maintains a synergy between the rhythmic power of rock 'n' roll and the harmonic intricacy of classical music.

In a way, then, rock 'n' roll and the guitar solo have parted ways. For a while rock had artistic pretensions, many of which centered around mystical experience, and the guitar solo fit into this pattern well. It was an excellent vehicle for the improvisational expression of subtle emotional states, and its sexual, individualistic aspect coincided with the pre-existing culture of rock. Now, however, artistic pretensions tend to be frowned upon by the rock establishment (i.e., by record companies and critics). Long, symphonic songs and cosmic lyrics are emphatically out; short, simple, catchy tunes with simple, concrete lyrics are once again in. In this context there is no need for intricate, expressive guitar solos, and no room for them either.

And the "alternative rock" scene, the community of bands played frequently on college radio, has even less need of the guitar solo than the mainstream rock establishment. In this respect the alternative has religiously followed the mainstream. Heavy metal is the sole remaining home of the old-style rock guitar solo, and even in this subculture there are neither any real guitar geniuses like Beck, Clapton and Page, nor any bands making innovative experimental use of the guitar solo as did Pink Floyd and Yes.

Yet the guitar solo remains. Nearly every rock song has one. And the contemporary guitar soloist uses as many tricks as he can find. The art rock bands mentioned above are all shamelessly plagiarized, their most interesting riffs repeated time and time again—a practice that is almost pornographic in the way it singles out certain aspects of the whole atmosphere of art rock and presents them, again and again, in very slightly varying ways. The contemporary rock guitar solo is emphatically *not* an individualistic expression of emotion. Neither is it, like the guitar solos of rock's early days, a simple yet integral part of a stunningly original whole. It is, rather, a *simulation* of original, individualistic, emotional expression. It takes sounds and figures which were invented in the most direct emotional, sexual, mystical and symphonic contexts, and it tears them from their contexts and presents them in a trick-laden, stylized potpourri. It *stands for* deep and intricate expression, it *reminds of* deep and intricate expression, but in fact it usually expresses little more than the need to put together a flashy guitar solo from the tools at hand.

And to a large degree, this reflects what rock has become. It began as a rebellious, original break from traditional musical forms; and it evolved to spawn works intended and appreciated as "serious art." Now it is far less rebellious, and far less of a vehicle for serious expression: it is primarily a rigid, stylized form of commercial pop. To a large extent, rock has ceded the innovative edge to rap and black dance music. What is ironic is that there is still such a big market for "classic rock," for art rock. Every major American city has a radio station playing Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, Hendrix, the Doors, Eric Clapton, and so on. And many of the people who listen to it are too young to have been fans of art rock in its fertile period. Is this merely "nostalgia," or is it proof that millions of people actually do appreciate the wedding of powerful emotional expression with musical intricacy which was epitomized by the classic rock guitar solo?

### *Simulation*

Above I claimed that the modern rock guitar solo is a simulation of expression. What exactly does this mean? According to Jean Baudrillard (*Simulations*):

To dissimulate is to feign not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one hasn't. One implies a presence, the other an absence. But the matter is more complicated, since to simulate is not simply to feign: "Someone who feigns an illness can simply who simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms" (Littre). Thus, feigning or dissimulating leaves the reality principle intact: the difference is always clear, it is only masked; whereas simulation threatens the difference between "true" and "false," between "real" and "imaginary." Since the simulator produces "true" symptoms, is he or she ill or not? The simulator cannot be treated objectively either as ill, or as not ill.

Truly effective simulation is a logical conundrum. For instance, consider the problem of *perfect* counterfeit money, counterfeit money so good that no one can tell the counterfeit bill with a given serial number for the real bill with the same number. Is it "real money" or not? If no one can tell the difference, then it *is* real money, in that it can serve as real money for any purpose. Operationally speaking, each counterfeit bill is exactly as real as the real bill with same serial number. There is no scientific way to tell if the bill is real or not. The concept of reality is transcended.

Of course, imperfect simulation presents no logical difficulties: if someone paints dots on their neck and claims to have measles, the claim can be refuted by washing the dots off. But in the case of perfect simulation, Baudrillard is correct to observe that "whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulation." In

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the case of money, we must understand money as representing “value.” True, the perfect counterfeit bills can be understood as “false” representations of value. But if so, all the other bills are equally false—objectively, scientifically speaking. What Baudrillard is pointing out, I would express with the following syllogism:

Major premise: A perfect simulation is a false representation

Minor premise: A perfect simulation is objectively indistinguishable from a true representation

Conclusion: A true representation is, as far as objective tests go, the same as a false representation

Finally, he gives the following list of “successive phases of the image:

1. It is the reflection of a basic reality
2. It masks and perverts a basic reality
3. It masks the *absence* of a basic reality
4. It bears no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulation

How does all this apply to the case of the rock guitar solo? Stage 1 was early rock and art rock: the guitar solo expressed the basic realities of sexuality, mystical experience, and subtle emotion. The specific tricks and idiosyncrasies of guitar solos were evolved to reflect particular aspects of these realities. Of course, this still exists, to some extent. But modern rock is dominated by Stages 2 and 3.

If the guitar solo is taken to represent the state of mind of the guitarist, then it would seem we are currently in Stage 2. The signs of experimentation, rebellion and emotion are presented, but these things are not there: the actual mental/emotional state of the guitarists is misrepresented. It is not uncommon for a modern rock star to give a blistering guitar solo, showing off his chops and jumping around like Jimi Hendrix, bending over his guitars like Jimmy Page—and then go home to his mansion and tend his horses, and live like a nineteenth century aristocrat. The image of the wild rock 'n' roll partier is there, but it is often a deliberate misrepresentation of the life of a fairly ordinary upper-class middle-aged man.

And if the guitar solo is taken to represent the deeply felt emotions of the guitarist, it seems that Stage 3 is predominant. It is not that the mental/emotional state of the performer is absent, but rather that the deep emotions which the guitar solo is habitually taken to reflect are simply not there. More concretely, specific technical tools invented to express specific emotional states are used even though there is essentially *no* particular emotion underlying them: They are used as “things in themselves,” so to speak. Intense crashing feedback does not always represent chaos, tumult, confusion. Note-bending does not necessarily

represent melancholy or sensuality or anything else—it is just a “bluesy feel.”

In Stage 2, a reality is correctly assumed to exist. In Stage 3, a reality is incorrectly assumed to exist. In stage 4, there is no longer any presumption: the simulation no longer masks the absence of a basic reality. No one cares any longer about the basic reality. This may seem like an excessively metaphysical concept, but I suggest that it is exactly the future of rock 'n' roll. Right now there is a popular band—Milli Vanilli—which goes on tour and lip-synchs its music on stage. Not only don't they play their instruments on stage, they don't even *sing*—it's all prerecorded. And this is no big secret. Every Milli Vanilli fan may not know this, but it's been discussed in all the music magazines. Their songs, of course, include occasional brief, perfunctory guitar solos performed by anonymous musicians, probably for an hourly wage. Is there really any pretense of an underlying emotional reality here? Every Milli Vanilli fan, except for perhaps a few naive pre-adolescents, must certainly know that “their” guitar solos reflect no one's emotions. It's not like when conservative middle-aged men dress up as young rebels and crank out pro forma guitar solos. There the absence of a basic underlying emotional reality is hidden—the need for subterfuge is recognized. In Milli Vanilli, the absence of a basic underlying reality is not masked in the least bit: the simulation is accepted as a thing-in-itself. Milli Vanilli fans don't question the nature of the guitar solos; they hardly even notice them. A thousand times more emphasis is placed on the band members' clothes and hair. This is genuine Stage 4.<sup>1</sup>

Baudrillard's stages need not occur one after the other; all four can be present simultaneously. And this precisely is the situation with the modern rock guitar solo. Baudrillard's model makes it seem very likely that the higher stages will come to dominate more and more: as time goes by, there will be more and more Milli Vanillis and fewer and fewer Yngwie Malmsteens, Allan Holdsworths, or U2s. Whether or not this occurs will be a test of the usefulness of Baudrillard's abstract, inventive ideas for the understanding of particular phenomena.

## Note

<sup>1</sup>This essay was written before the recent Milli Vanilli/Grammy awards scandal broke out.