

Chapter Sixteen

How To Get Started Playing Killer Solos And Riffs

Your Private Guitar Teacher



Tips and Problem Solvers

Most of my students have a bit of trouble learning to play riffs and solos at first. But a little determination and the discovery of how much fun it is to improvise gets things off to a great start.

There are no songs in this chapter. You'll learn how to play in a "free form" way using scales and riffs as your starting point. It's a big step to becoming a great guitar player.

The Tips and Problem Solvers are very important in this chapter. Make good use of them!

Chapter Sixteen

How To Get Started Playing Killer Solos And Riffs

One of the most fun and exciting things about playing guitar is creating and playing your own solos and riffs. First, here's the difference between the two:

A **solo** quite often changes each time with the player coming up with a solo "on the spot" based on what they would like to play, the chord structure of the song and the scales that work with the chord progression. Typically, a guitar solo takes the place of vocal line or acts as the bridge from one part of a song to the next.

A guitar **riff** is more of a signature for a particular song and is played the same way each time, almost always at the beginning of the song. In concert, an opening guitar riff often tells the crowd what song it is within the first few notes.

Here are some examples of signature riffs:

"Satisfaction" by the Rolling Stones
 "Enter Sandman" by Metallica
 "Thunderstruck" by AC/DC

Studying and playing killer solos and riffs

Even if you hear those great guitar solos flying by at break neck speed and think you'll never be able to play like that—rest assured it can be done! It's a matter of breaking them down note for note and playing them slowly until you can eventually get up to speed.

But speed is not the only goal. What you play must be musical and work for the song and style of music. And to a great degree, that is what this chapter is all about.



Tips and Problem Solvers

Almost all guitar riffs are played (repeated) over and over. You can repeat all the riffs in this chapter to form a steady foundation for a song. Typically, a guitar riff starts off the song, then bass and drums come in to set the tone. A vocal follows.

When it comes to great guitar riffs, simple is better. They're easier to remember and most guitar players can play them which adds to their popularity.

Speed is not important in this chapter. Focus on each note and play clean and clearly.

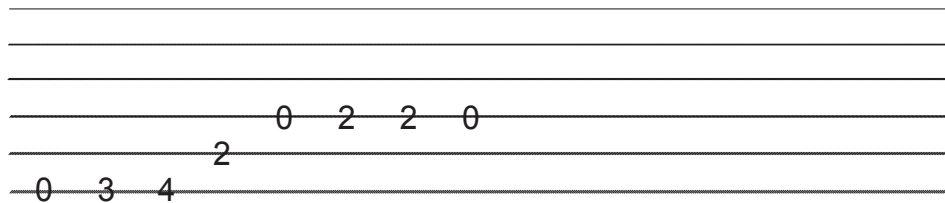


*Note: If you're new to the guitar or new to playing solos and riffs, it might be a good idea to jump back to **Chapter Nine, Scales and Why They Are So Important** to review how you can use scales to create guitar solos before tackling this chapter.*

First up, signature guitar riffs

If you're ready, take a look at this first guitar riff.

Riff 1



Before you take a listen to the **CD Cut 74** to see what it sounds like, here are a few points about this particular tab:

- You don't have to move your left hand position.
- You never play above the 3rd fret.
- There are no pull offs, hammer ons, slides or bends.
- You never play more than one note at a time.

Note: Get into the habit of looking at a piece of tab and knowing from the top what you'll need to do. This is very helpful in keeping things simple.

Remember: There are Tips and Problem Solvers in the margins of these and all the pages in the book. Take advantage of them!

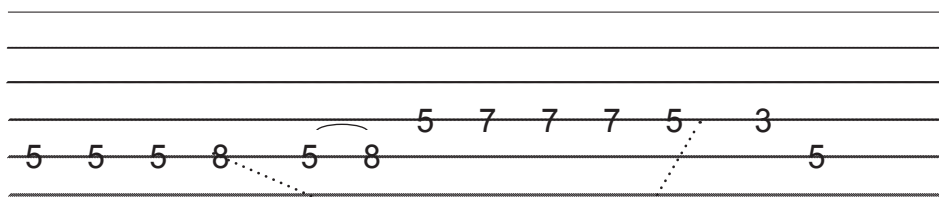
So take a shot at playing Riff 1 then listen to **CD Cut 74** to check your work. Work at it note by note, slowly, while making every note clear and clean until it comes together. Once you can do that, you can start building your speed.

Note: As I mentioned, it's a great idea to learn how to "scan" a piece of tablature to give you some very important information such as:

- How many single notes and chords there are.
- On what strings the majority of the music is played (top three, bottom three, a combination, etc.)
- If there are some really challenging sections to prepare for.
- The chord progression used and how much it changes as the song goes on.
- Special techniques needed such as bends, slides, hammer ons, tapping, etc.
- Locating and learning chords you are not sure how to play.

Here's another riff. This time, you'll have to move your left hand position and there is a slide and a pull off to play.

Riff 2



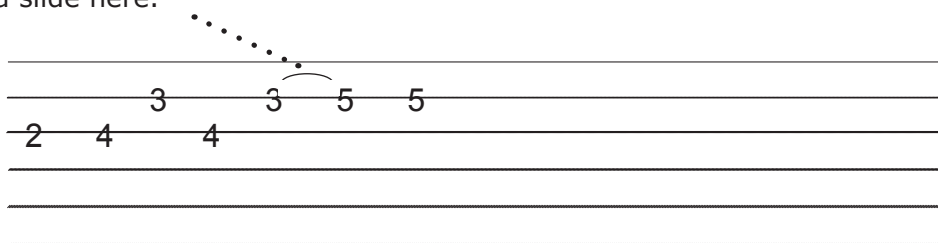
Make a slight pause in your playing here and here. There is a little extra space in the tablature which means to make the note before the space last a little longer. You'll hear Riff 2 on **CD Cut 75**. Be sure to listen closely.

*Note: If you're having trouble reading the tablature and recognizing what you are asked to play, jump off here and go back to **Chapter Five, Tablature And The Language Of Guitar Music**. Then return to this page.*

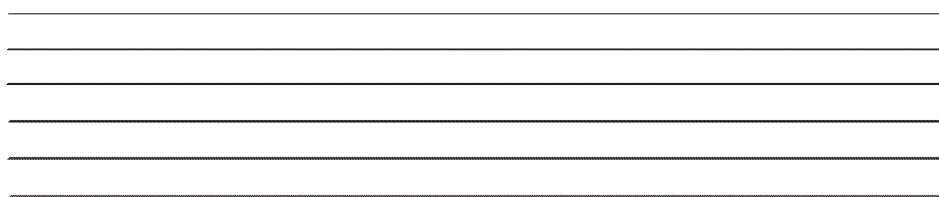
Just as there is a little bit of mystery in what makes music great and what catches the listener's ear—the same is true of a signature riff. Start with these guidelines:

- It needs to be original and not a noticeable copy of another riff.
- It needs to sound good even when played on different kinds of guitars.
- It needs to be not too difficult to play. If it is, it will not catch on.
- It needs to be able to be a part of a well recognized rhythmic pattern.
- It needs to be related to the rest of the song.
- It needs to be based (or somewhat related) on a recognizable standard scale.

Here is another: **Riff 3. CD Cut 76**. This works well for Em. Make sure you slide here.



If you're ready, try creating a riff on your own. Use the blank tab below or better, a separate sheet of blank tab paper. Keep it simple.



Tips and Problem Solvers

Coming up with a guitar riff of your own is not as hard as you may think. You've probably already played one by simply working on other songs or experimenting on your own. It's perfectly OK to steal ideas from another riff or player. It's part of the nature of music. But try not to copy something note for note.



Tips and Problem Solvers

Start Idea 1 by holding a D chord if it helps you play the two notes together. Notice that the note on the fifth string is played alone.

Idea 2 works with an Am chord and songs in the key of Am. Basic chords in the key of Am are: Am, Dm, F, G and E.

There are slight pauses here and here.

The simple power chords in Idea 4 should be played with a strong attack and a bit louder than you would normally play. And these need to be rock steady in rhythm.

Couldn't come up with anything? That's OK. Here are a few more ideas that you can expand on. They are designed to be repeated over and over.

Idea 1

Idea 2

Idea 3

Idea 4

One of the big advantages to developing your own signature riffs is it puts you on the fast track to learning everything else on the guitar. Through the riff process, you'll develop an ear for hearing patterns of notes and the distance (interval) between each note.



It's good to remember that for the most part, signature riffs are fairly simple and easy to play. You don't need a ton of notes or work toward showing off advanced techniques—focus on making it musical.

Coming up with a riff that is musical and memorable can be a real challenge. But many of my students are able to create something interesting on their own. You can too!

*Note: In **Chapter Two, The Right Guitar For You**, I talk about the importance of having a guitar that is easy to play. It's very important for playing killer solos and riffs. You will spend time playing up the neck as far as 15 to 19 frets. A guitar with high action will definitely be a hindrance.*

Next, it's time to create some killer solos!

How to get started playing killer solos

Every solo you play must fit with the song in a number of ways:

- It must work with the key and chord progression of the song.
- It must work with and be true to the rhythm and groove of the song.
- It must be interesting and fun to listen to.
- You must play within your abilities (or right on the edge of them).

It's being able to play within these guidelines yet play something unique, interesting and original that is one of the marks of a great guitar player.

Some songs have a somewhat complicated chord progression with unexpected chords. In fact, some songs even change keys. So in order to play a lead line that works great for a particular song, you must know the chord progression and how to make your solo work with that progression. More about that later.

Crossroad

- If you're more interested in playing chords, solo guitar or finger picking patterns than scales, move on to those chapters.
- If the tablature presented in this chapter is still confusing, move to **Chapter Five, Tablature And The Language Of Guitar Music**.
- If this chapter makes you wonder about what kind of guitar player you want to be, see **Chapter Thirteen, What Kind Of Guitar Player Do You Want To Be?**
- If you want to find out more about how to get started playing killer solos and riffs, continue in this chapter.

Tips and Problem Solvers

If you are having trouble with playing scales, make sure you press down each note (string) straight down. Your finger should be arched (so it doesn't touch another string) and you should use the tip of your finger (not the area where your fingerprint appears). After playing, you should see grooves (string impressions) on the tips of your finger. You will build calluses in this way to make playing more comfortable.



Tips and Problem Solvers

Remember that "Pentatonic" means five. In other words, there are five notes in a Pentatonic scale. Five *different* notes that is. The note C for example (marked in bold on the scale at the right), can be found in more than one place on the neck.

If you add slides to your playing, make sure you "plan ahead" a little bit. For example, if you are sliding up a few frets, use the left hand finger that allows you to easily play the notes after the slide. In the scale above, the slides are done with your ring finger.

To get started, here is a C Pentatonic scale, one of the scales used in **Chapter Nine, Scales And Why They Are So Important.**

Notice that I added a couple slides in this scale to help you work your way up the neck and stay in position to easily play the notes. Below the tab, you'll find the proper (left hand) fingers to play each note in the scale. Don't forget the two slides!

I R R I R I R R M

I = Index
 M = Middle
 R = Ring
 P = Pinky (not used above)

If you can't remember how to do a slide, go to **Chapter Ten, Developing The Skills Needed To Play Great Guitar.**

This time, I'm going to jump right in and demonstrate how the C Pentatonic scale can be used to create some solos. On **CD Cut 77**, you'll hear me playing the scale, then use it in different ways while playing to a **C, F, G and Am** chord progression.

If you've practiced the scale above and you're ready to give it a shot, you can turn off the right side of your speakers or headphones and create your own solos by playing along with the same chord progression (it starts right after the scale on **CD Cut 77**).

More thoughts on getting started playing solos and riffs

Keep in mind that this chapter is an introduction to playing solos and riffs. If you're not quite getting it or really don't want to learn scales and riffs at this point, you can come back to this chapter later.

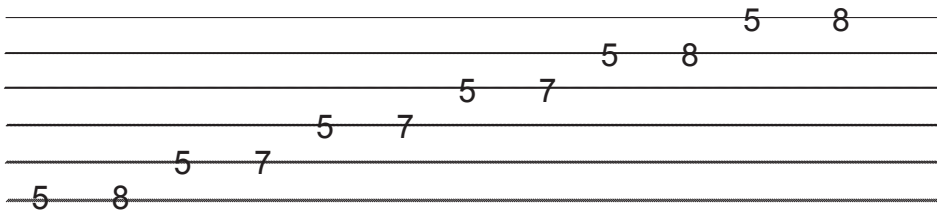
At the very minimum, learn the scales here (and in **Chapter Nine, Scales And Why They Are So Important**) in their simple form because they go a long way to helping you learn guitar (especially for playing melodies) and scales are a great exercise in playing single notes cleanly and accurately.

Many of my students who don't use scales very often still enjoy playing and improvising scales with me during their lesson. I play them a simple chord progression and help guide them along with ideas on what to play.



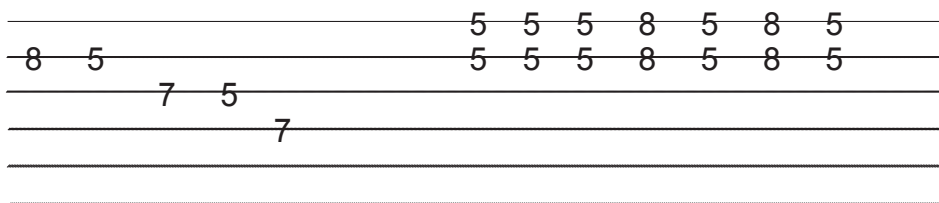
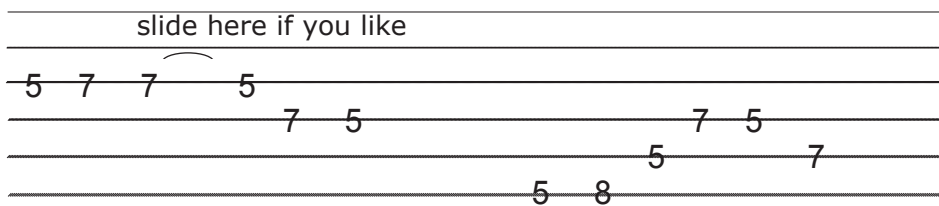
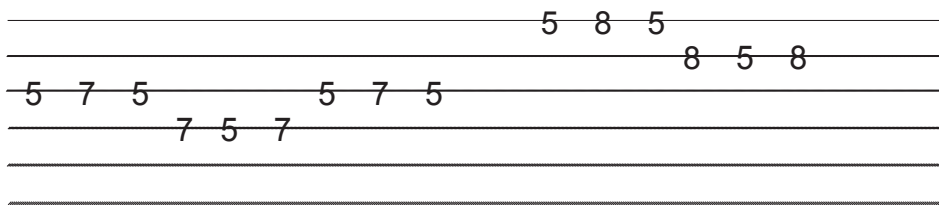
They enjoy coming up with something on their own, especially if it is very musical, and just as important, cool sounding. And working with scales help them improve their dexterity and timing and gives them a chance to work with slides, bends, hammer ons and pull offs.

The Am Pentatonic scale. Here is another scale from *Chapter Nine*:



Use your left hand index finger to play the notes on the 5th fret, your ring finger to play the notes on the 7th fret and your pinky to play the notes on the 8th fret.

This time, you are on your own. **CD Cut 78** has a chord progression that you can play along with as you play the scale above. To make it more interesting, be sure to change the order and length of the notes at times. Here are some ideas. It's OK to use most of them at first, then start to create new ideas on your own. Here are some ideas:



Tips and Problem Solvers

If you can't think of ways to play the scale in different ways, use the suggestions below. You can jump around from one to another or string them together in a certain order.

Eventually, the goal is to create your own solos based on the scale you are playing. Don't forget to try hammer ons, pull offs, slides and bends.



Tips and Problem Solvers

Remember that when playing guitar (solos, scales and riffs in particular) simple is best. Great guitar players concern themselves with great tone and technique not how fast or complicated their playing is. A great guitar player "shows off" by being a great musician.

NOTE: The page margins are different on the left-hand pages so you can easily read the music and follow the lessons when this book is placed on a music stand.



A little help from a friend

Find another guitar player to play with or find (or create) backing tracks to help you develop your abilities and your ear for what works great and what does not.

Be patient if you don't sound great at first. When learning to play solos, patience, practice and experimentation are key. It takes time. But it's a whole lot of fun once you get going!