Transcribing: Good or Evil?

by Tom Swan

It's no official definition, but *transcribing* to me simply means learning a piece so very well that I could almost play it backwards. The *scribing* part is kind of after the fact.

Some might think it wrong — even evil — to play songs this way from a printed score, each note the same every time through, the way things are done in the classical world. Isn't jazz supposed to be all about improvisation? Yes, but in the real world of performance and recording, even the best improvisers play memorized passages and licks at least part of the time. Furthermore, though perhaps paradoxically, you can learn a lot about improvisation by memorizing a favorite recorded piece in minute detail.

My inspiration for transcribing Wes Montgomery's performance of "In Your Own Sweet Way" by David Brubeck, and playing it in the companion video, grew out of a period of introspection, a time when I fell in love with this music, which also increased my already high regard for Wes Montgomery's guitar-playing genius.

I felt that I *had* to learn this song, and so I immersed myself in it. At the same time, I'd been experimenting with three music-engraving software tools: Lilypond, Frescobaldi, and Denemo, all of which I used to create the accompanying score's PDF and MIDI files (see Score Files for Download).

I mixed the score's MP3 playbacks in the studio by playing the generated MIDI files in a track voiced by a simple piano synth plugin. MIDI files contain no audio. To play them requires MIDI software, a MIDI synth, or similar. If you don't have MIDI playback, to play a score, open its MP3 audio file on just about any computer, phone or device.

I try to keep my scores relatively uncluttered, and so dotted rhythms and specialty markers are minimized. I prefer to *hear* rhythm and accent. It's just one player's opinion, but I don't need to see every single nuance and sneeze written out in a score.

Good reasons to transcribe music:

- Helps you to slow down and really examine phrases and licks
- Inspires improvisation by showing chord and scale relationships in use
- Helps teach the fretboard through identifying note names and accidentals
- Helps teach readin' and writin' music notation and tablature

Bad reasons to transcribe music:

- Can restrict playing to a paint-by-the-numbers type of memorization

- Can be time consuming. Maybe just transcribe that one cool lick?

- Increases computer-app time at the expense of practice time

> As you work to memorize a piece from a transcription, or to create one of your own, try to identify phrases and licks in the music. Each time you play the piece through, change one or two notes here and there in selected phrases until, after some time, you are improvising over the entire piece one phrase at a time. Use the same notes as memorized from the transcript (later add new ones) to make up your own improv lines. This really works, and it's a great way to get extra mileage from a memorized piece!

Every guitar player (probably every serious musician) should attempt to transcribe at least one piece in detail. Of course we all play many transcriptions while learning to play the guitar and jazz (and other styles). Nobody in their right mind, however, would suggest playing transcriptions all of the time. Transcriptions are great, but always spend time improvising too!

Score Files for Download

Follow the links below to the score PDF, MIDI, and MP3 files that accompany this article and video.

Lead Sheet and Chords

PDF: Download

Chordal Solo

PDF: Download | MIDI: Download | MP3: Download

Melodic Solo

PDF: Download | MIDI: Download | MP3: Download

Backing Track for Melodic Solo

MP3: Download

> The supplied MIDI and MP3 files are simple in nature and are intended for practice only. Listening to these basic playback files while browsing the scores will help fix the solos and chords in mind and, I believe, also help train your inner ear to "hear" music while reading any score when there's no playback available. After a few times listening to the playbacks, read the scores again in silence and try to hear the music in your head. When you've learned to play the song, try this experiment again and this time also *visualize* your fingers playing the notes and chords.

About My Videos

As in all of my studio videos, all tracks in this article's performance video are live and unedited. I film, record and mix everything myself in my home studio using off-the-shelf components and software. For effects, I use only EQ, reverb, and compression — pitch correction and timing quantizations are strictly verboten. Mixing for me is mostly about adjusting volume levels and maybe reducing background noise. Not everybody will agree, but I say a good performance at the start is the best way to ensure a good mix in the end. "Garbage In, Garbage Out" may be a computer programming saying, but it applies equally well in the recording studio.

My recording philosophy is bare-bones simple: if I hit a wrong note, either I leave it in or I start over from the top. I will sometimes lay on a doubled part for fullness, but in all cases, the audio you hear in my videos for all parts is the actual audio as performed during filming. No dubbing! No lip syncing!

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