

with Kevin Downing

## The Best Guitar Solos Tell A Story. Do Yours?

**W**hether your guitar performances stretch to playing solos or not, this article should be good reading and learning for you as sooner or later you will have to play one.

The lists of what songs include the best guitar solos, as voted by music buyers, all have very similar ingredients – top players know that it's not simply an opportunity for the guitarist to show off. A solo must fit the song and contribute to it, so it becomes a large part of the song.

Too many guitar players think a solo is the chance to show off their amazing technique or new lick they have just learnt, with little or no consideration to its context. This lesson may be easily learnt, but like anything to do with guitar playing, it needs plenty of practice.

The five main ingredients of any great solo, no matter if composed or improvised, are; an introduction, rising action or tension, a climax, falling action or tension, and resolution back into the vocal. (Overall, a sixth key ingredient could be that all great solos are very singable.) Obviously there are always variations to any rule!

Here's how those parts often work out:

Introductions are quite often riff-based, short or long note type statements. Riffs will be slightly different on each repetition, and the intro will lead seamlessly into the next phase.

Rising action or tension will mean an increase in the frequency of notes, more aggressive playing style, and maybe introduce some different rhythms that lead to the climax.

The climax is the highest point of the solo. Normally it is the highest note(s) and hasn't been heard before in the solo. The most tension happens at this point.

Falling action or tension is like a release from the climax. Some solos have one and some don't, but this part winds down with longer notes, less aggressive playing, back to familiar

rhythms, etc., and leads into the resolution, where the soloist releases the song back to the vocalist. It normally ends on a chord tone of the vocal entry point.

Taking Eric Clapton's guitar solo on The Beatles' version of *While My Guitar Gently Weeps*, from 'The Beatles' album as an example, the solo begins at 1.55. Find it at your favourite listening source as we go through each segment to see what Clapton is doing here.

Introduction – this is the first four bars. Notice how well it fits the song. It starts with a few notes on entry then goes into a small riff with a crying vibrato to end each phrase. The crying vibrato fits the last vocal line of each verse.

Rising action – second four bars. The next four bars rise slowly, and it can easily be heard that it's leading us to someplace else.

More rising action – third four bars. Notice how Clapton moves into a higher register and involves more rhythmic and note choices.

The climax – this is the last four bars of the solo. Clapton brings the solo down a bit in pitch before beginning his long ascending run up to the climax, which also resolves back into the vocal line.

Interestingly there is no falling tension or action after the climax, it goes straight back into the vocal. Did you observe the sheer aggressive nature of the pick attack on the notes being played? Notice the vibrato is very aggressive too, not easy to do. Also, this solo is very memorable or singable (at least in your head).

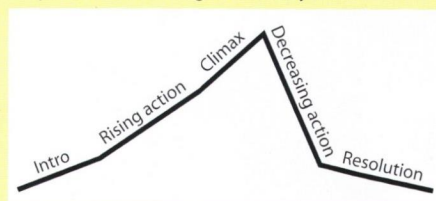
Of course this is not an ordinary solo for a pop recording as they are normally only eight bars. It is difficult to compress all the above into eight bars, which is why some might leave out the falling action or tension section.

On another popular note, have a listen to Steve Lukather's solo on *Roseanna* from the 'Toto IV' album. There are two solos on this

recording, but note how Lukather manages to get all the concepts above into that five-bar solo in the middle section. That is why he's an in-demand LA studio player.

Ending solos are a slightly different beast in that you are trying to either bring a song down to a conclusion, or lift it up to go out on a high as with this solo. Thus ending solos follow a slightly different pattern of events.

For those guitarists who like long solos in the blues/rock tradition listen to any Joe Bonamassa solo, he moves through the five sequences of soloing over many bars.



Also check The Eagles' *Hotel California*, or Steely Dan's *Kid Charlemagne*, arguably two of the best guitar solos ever recorded.

Some homework for you over the coming months. Listen to your favourite solos and see if they fit the descriptions above (there will be variations) and make notes you can learn from. See if you can copy what they are doing in your own way. I'm not talking about playing exactly what the artist is playing, but taking the concept and putting that into your playing. Just thinking about this will make you more aware of what you need to do to become a more improved player.

Warning – this type of practising is very addictive and should not be done to the detriment of your rhythm guitar practice!

Kevin Downing is a professional guitarist, teacher and author. His contact details, along with many other articles and freebies, are on his website at [www.guitar.co.nz](http://www.guitar.co.nz)

short section of one of your songs (15-30 seconds) and sync it with some immediately eye-catching video content, whether your own B-roll footage, live performance footage, or stock video from free-usage sites.

The caption should be a short description of your band's sound written for someone who has never heard of you plus your lead magnet. Then you use the demographic targeting function to get the ad shown to fans of an artist who creates similar music to you and who, therefore, would probably like your music too.

### Keep Them Around

Once you've caught these new fans, make sure you encourage them to stick around! Send regular updates to your email list. Create engaging content that tells them who you are, why you make music, and makes them want to learn more about you.

Ask questions and put polls in your stories, but most importantly – don't ignore them if they do actually comment or message you! Reply with a short acknowledgement or even just some emojis if you're dealing with a lot of comments. Nothing will put people off engaging in the future than being ignored when they do!

Make sure your website and socials are cohesive and feel professional. They don't have to be corporate or stuffy – but consistency is key and people feel more confident buying merch through stores and sites that seem legit. You might be the most trustworthy band around, but if your website looks like a janky geocities site from 1999 (or worse, you don't even have one) customers will become suspicious about whether you'll actually mail that \$30 t-shirt you're selling, and venue bookers will wonder if the fact that you can't get your online world in order means you'll also mess up your tour organisation and miss the gig they want to offer you.

Ultimately, if you figure out who you are, figure out who you're talking to, and create engaging content and conversation around your music, you'll be well on your way to those 1000 true fans.

Vanessa McGowan is a Fender and Aguilar endorsee originally from NZ, currently based in Nashville, TN. She plays bass and sings backing vocals for a wide range of touring artists including Sugarland, Jennifer Nettles, Brandy Clark, and Tattletale Saints, and is the founder of [promusicguide.com](http://promusicguide.com) – Simple strategies for powerful DIY music marketing. [www.vanessamcgowan.com](http://www.vanessamcgowan.com)