



with Kevin Downing

# Getting Out Of Feeling Stuck In A Rut

**P**lenty of players get stuck in an artistic rut at some stage in their life. Yes, even the best of players suffer that frustrating and annoying feeling. Jimi Hendrix famously said, "Sometimes you'll want to give up the guitar. You'll hate the guitar. But if you stick with it, you're gonna be rewarded." Jimi was correct – if you can work through it you will benefit.

I describe a rut as being when you feel like you are stuck, burned out, have hit a brick wall, or maybe your practice sessions are just dull or completely unproductive. You may also feel like you just don't know how to turn it around. The good news is that it doesn't take much effort to get out of it, and here are 10 ways to bust the rut. You only need to find the one or two ideas that will work for you.

### 1. Go back to where you started

What was it that turned you on to playing guitar in the first place? What made the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end when you listened to your favourite music? Go back to that song, sound, artist, or genre, etc., turn the music up loud, and get back into it. I still make a habit of playing along with the recordings of my own favourite artists from when I first started playing guitar. It helps to keep me motivated and fresh.

### 2. Take a lesson

Many players think that teaching themselves is the way to go, but in truth most of the best players in the world have had formal lessons. Trying to teach yourself guitar is like reinventing the wheel, and really we haven't got enough time in our lives to do that.

The quickest way forward in learning anything is to get in the same room with a competent teacher/mentor who can teach you something that you want to learn about.

Most of the top players in the world I know are lifelong learners. I've studied music at university,

had private lessons in country, jazz, metal, classical, advanced sight-reading, theory, etc., as well as attended workshops on all types of instruments.

### 3. Try completely new material

If you are having lessons with a great teacher then you will already regularly have some new material to work on. If self-teaching it's difficult to know what material to learn next and this can often be where ruts begin.

One of my favourite ways of learning new material is listening to different instruments other than guitar. For example, you can learn new back up guitar parts by listening to and copying piano and organ players. For solo lines and licks, listening to horn players is a great way to go. Transcribe the parts or learn them by memory, both are good.

### 4. Get out and jam with friends

Music is social, not a solitary thing. The fun is in getting out and playing with your friends. If you are always only practising by yourself, then you're missing that. There is no better fun than playing with other instruments, those players will help push you along and motivate you get better at what you do. If not then maybe it's time to find some new people to play with.

### 5. Start/join a band

Being in a band motivates you to learn your parts correctly and generally get things sounding right. If starting a band it's best to build a repertoire that's easily within everyone's ability levels. Don't start with the more difficult tracks, they can come later once you have a decent song list ready for gigging. Remember the audience doesn't know if you are playing difficult or easy songs.

### 6. Go out and see/hear live music.

Live music has dynamics in the performance, connecting with audiences theatrically, verbally, musically, and body

language-wise, etc. There is a lot you can learn and get motivated by in seeing music performed live.

A few people have said to me that after watching their favourite artists they feel like giving up, but then remember your favourite artists were at your stage of development at one stage.

### 7. Listen to new music you have never heard before

This is a great way to get inspired and works for many players. Listening to new genres can really get you going down paths you never thought possible. If you are a fingerstyle player you could listen to some folk, classical, bluegrass, fingerstyle jazz, etc.

Play along with recordings of your favourite and not so favourite artists. Many of the top players I know still do this even though they have been playing for many years and tell me this is the number one thing that keeps them motivated.

Play along with Spotify or the radio even. I sometimes test myself to see if I can work out the song playing on radio before it is finished.

### 8. Change the routine

A top rugby coach has told me that doing the same routines every day can lead to being in a rut very quickly for sports players. It is the same for musicians. His advice was to change the routine – make sure you are practising different things each day.

### 9. Only practise what you will perform

It's all too easy to practise things you can already play well and are actually sick of, or exercises that sound like exercises and not music. This is a quick way to get into a rut.

The great LA session guitarist and Supertramp member Carl Verheyen has said repeatedly at workshops he does for our school that he only practises what he will perform, either now or later. He doesn't believe in exercises, etc.,

as such. Nor do I, yet a lot of music books are full of boring exercises.

If you are not a stage performer then get ready to practise things you can use at jam sessions, in your band, or playing at parties. There are many ways you can perform.

### 10. Take a break!

Short breaks can work wonders to get that motivation back for some people. When taking a short break it could be advantageous to not listen to much music at all. Longer breaks of months on end aren't recommended as your physical playing ability can suffer.

Top players often take a few weeks off practising after long tours or recording sessions. The longest I ever went without playing guitar was five weeks but was by necessity as we were travelling a lot overseas. These days I have a traveller guitar that goes with me everywhere on holiday!

### 11. Keep your gear in good working order

There is nothing more unmotivating than having a guitar that's dirty, hard to play or tune, an amplifier that is on the blink, dodgy cables or pedals that don't work. To keep motivation high and avoid ruts it's an idea to get all your equipment serviced on a regular basis. The most organised players have a schedule for maintenance and stick to it. If you are a working musician such a maintenance schedule is a must.

These are just a few of my ideas, it would be a great idea to write out any other ideas you can think of too.

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