

Allan Holdsworth, Guitar Astronaut

towering intervals and lunar harmonies mark these solo flights

Allan Holdsworth's music defies description, let alone transcription. In the case of his single-note soloing, it's virtually impossible to define signature licks or phrases because Allan is a true improviser. One of the giants of '80s progressive jazz/rock, Allan reinvents the game every time he solos. The only way to gain insight into the "Holdsworthian school of melodic line" is to dissect his recorded solos. While our examples are drastically different, we find recurring concepts such as legato phrasing, large interval skips (often on the same string), and motif development. In fact, Allan's celebrated legato phrasing is often so seamless that it's difficult to tell which notes are picked. While transcribing, I frequently

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had to choose between several fingering possibilities. I went with what seemed logical, but I encourage you to explore alternatives.

Here, then, is a sampling of Holdsworth solo excerpts to be savored, scrutinized, and, if possible, expanded upon. Remember, as scary as these lines may seem at first, they are digested best if consumed one bite at a time.

Minor motifs

Ex. 1 illustrates Allan's sense of motif development. Over a C-Dorian progression, he

first outlines *Cm-add2* using a simple rhythm motif, and then he displaces and syncopates the figure while ascending a *B \flat* major (*C* Dorian) scale on the fifth and third strings. Note how the *G* note on the fourth string is common to both motifs. The third phrase (beginning at the end of bar 2) uses the eighth-position C-pentatonic-minor scale, while the fourth (bars 4 and 5) extends this idea before abruptly leaping a minor seventh. A short Dorian scale fragment targets *G*, the 5 of *Cm*.

Motif development in *Cm* is also the focus of **Ex. 2**. An ascending *Csus4* arpeggio targets the 9 (*D*). After a one-beat rest, the same sixteenth-note rhythmic motif returns, but with *E \flat* as the point of arrival, producing a suspension/resolution effect. The final phrase is an extended *Cm7* arpeggio beginning with the first two notes of the original motif, but with both now played on the fifth string. This five-fret, perfect-fourth stretch, a Holdsworth trademark, also occurs on the third and first strings. Practice these stretch-

Ex. 1

Ex. 2

Ex. 3

Ex. 4

Ex. 5

es slowly at first. Once they become comfortable, pick up the tempo and use this concept to explore new avenues out of Cliché City.

Played over a rare (for Allan) I-IV-V progression, the short, sax-like phrase in **Ex. 3** approaches the tonic (C) via an arpeggiated *D_bmaj7*. Next comes a five-fret pull-off, an outlined *Gsus4* (or *Csus2*), and an octave-and-a-fifth pull-off from the 19th fret to the open *D*-string—another favorite Holdsworth device.

Ex. 4 is a beautiful example of hammered

ascending fourths organized into a symmetrical string-skipping sequence (fifth string to third, fourth string to second, third string to first). Try this one over *Cm7*, *F7*, or *E_bmaj7*

Ex. 5 opens with an *A_b*-major (or *D_b*-Lydian) scale fragment, followed by a *G*-scale figure over *Gmaj13*. Note how each two-note grouping—excluding the *G* grace note and ghosted *C*—changes strings and melodic direction. The eighth-position *E_b* major scale at the end of bar 2 anticipates the *A_b* Lydian phrases in the following measure. Allan

wraps it up with a *G*-pentatonic-major excursion in the ninth and tenth positions.

Orbital harmony

Holdsworth often travels outside the established tonality by shifting a phrase up or down a half-step. The first three notes of **Ex. 6** are derived from the thirteenth-position *F*-pentatonic-minor scale, while the next three shift briefly but effectively to twelfth-position *E*-pentatonic minor. After a return to *F* with melodic minor and blues scale

Ex. 6

Ex. 7

Ex. 8

material, a descending $B\flat 6$ (or $Gm7$) arpeggio precedes the final C .

Ex. 7 twists and turns around $Cm7$ like a world-class cyclist on a high-speed obstacle course. Holdsworth incorporates C and $D\flat$ pentatonic-minor ideas, chromaticism, single-string melodic leaps, and C -minor scale runs, all played legato and accelerating into the final targeted D note. Try playing this line over $F7$ or $E\flat maj7\#11$.

Ex. 8 develops a very cool perfect-fourth motif. The ascending fourth is played five frets higher on the same string, and then in unison on the next highest string, shifting against a primarily Cm background. The motif ultimately makes its way to the first and second strings, where it becomes a chromatically descending sequence. A tenth-position C -Dorian excursion liberally sprinkled with

chromatic passing tones precedes the unusually bluesy eighth-position wrap-up.

A mutated $IIm-V-I-IV$ progression is the harmonic background to our final finger-twister (**Ex. 9**). $B\flat/G\flat$ ($Gmaj7\#5$) substitutes for IIm , $G\flat/A\flat$ ($B\flat 13\flat 9/A\flat?$) subs for V , $E\flat maj7\#11$ is the altered I chord, and $Dsus4/B\flat$ ($B\flat maj7/6$) replaces IV . Allan starts in the seventeenth position, but by the end of the first beat he begins a series of descending half-step position shifts to accommodate the increasing chromaticism of the line. Reaching the eleventh position at the end of beat 3, he reverses direction, ascending to the fifteenth position for the $G/A\flat$. Here Allan employs a fragment of a symmetrical G -diminished scale (half-step, whole-step). The phrase culminates in an unexpected slide to the 21st fret and some

melodic tremolo-bar scooping (another Holdsworth hallmark). Working his way into the eighth position via an $E\flat$ -major scale, Allan superimposes a stretchy $Fsus4$ arpeggio before continuing to develop a descending motif derived from $E\flat$ major. Bar 4 features a stripped-down pentatonic approach to an ascending octave skip, a half-step descent, and a pull-off to the open E -string.

To hear Holdsworth's interstellar lines for yourself, keep your eyes peeled for these albums: *Velvet Darkness* (CTI), *Believe It* (Columbia), *Feels Good to Me* (Polydor), *Tempest* (Warner Bros.), *Enigmatic Ocean* (Atlantic), and *The Wardencllyffe Tower* (Restless). ■

Jesse Gress is the music editor for *Guitar Player*.

Ex. 9