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Distilling Big Band Guitar: The Essence of Freddie Green

by Michael Pettersen

For over fifty years, Freddie Green was keeper of the quarter note for Count Basie's band. Like Basie, Freddie simplified his style over the years, playing only what was necessary and essential. Both musicians were paragons of economy and good taste. By the time Basie re-formed his big band in the mid-50's, Freddie's style had been distilled to perfection. This article is based on my research on Freddie Green's playing with 1950's Basie band. Though I never had the honor of interviewing Freddie about his playing technique, as he failed to respond to multiple requests, recent CD and video releases have confirmed a hypothesis I have held for some time: that the essence of Freddie's 1950's style came from playing "chords" that contained only one clearly sounded note. Every article I found about Freddie claimed that he used standard three note chord voicings, played on the 6th, 4th, and 3rd strings. [See Example 1.] Freddie undoubtedly knew these voicings and used them when appropriate, but numerous careful listenings to 1950's Basie recordings led me to reject these three note chords as Freddie's primary voicings. As I played along with the records, there seemed to be too many notes! (However, every aspiring big band guitarist must have command of these three note chords. I recommend the superb book "Swing & Big Band Guitar", by Charlton Johnson, published by Hal Leonard, 1998, ISBN 0-7935-7381-5.)

Example 1



Why "One Note Chords"?

In a sixteen piece ensemble like the Basie band, there are more players than notes in the chord, so between the horns and the bass, each chord is clearly defined. Freddie's task was to provide a solid quarter note "heart beat" at every tempo, while avoiding conflict with the bass player's lines and Basie's comping. By deadening all the strings except the fourth but striking all six, Freddie created a unique style and sound that: 1) precisely defined the beat, 2) was recognizable as a guitar timbre, 3) cut through the thick texture of a big band even though unamplified, 4) allowed the creation of subtle moving inner voice lines similar to a cello or viola part, and 5) was comfortable to play at very fast tempos.

Details of Freddie's "One Note Chord" Technique:

The typical tessitura of Freddie's lines was a major sixth: from F (4th string - 3rd fret) to D (4th string - 12 fret). This range of notes kept him above the bass player's tessitura but below Basie's right hand tessitura. And as most acoustic archtop guitars have an exceptionally loud 4th string with a distinct timbre, this restricted note range could be easily heard by band members and the audience.

Freddie's left hand position was also unconventional. His very long fingers were positioned nearly parallel to the fingerboard, not arched in the typical guitarist's hand position. The 1st, 2nd, and 3rd strings were muted by the underside of the left index finger. The 5th string was muted by the tip of the left index finger. His left thumb wrapped around the neck and muted the 6th string.

Notes sounded on the fourth string could be fingered by any finger of the left hand. The finger sounding the note also was typically muting strings 1, 2, 3, and 5.

His left wrist was nearly straight because he held his guitar almost parallel to the floor. Not only did this position allow a comfortable left wrist position, it also helped the guitar project its sound upward and outward. Freddie's left hand position for "one note chords" would be very uncomfortable if the guitar were held in the typical position perpendicular to the floor.

His right hand technique was a combination of shoulder and elbow movements with a quick wrist flick to precisely position the quarter note pulse. Alternate pick strokes were delivered to different areas of the strings so that beats 1 and 3 had a different timbre than beats 2 and 4. As soon as the strings were struck, the left hand would release the fourth string slightly to choke off the fourth string note.

Other Key Elements of Freddie's Sound:

To get the Freddie Green sound, an unamplified archtop guitar of fine quality is a must. Freddie used no amplification, since an amplifier blurs the crisp attack of an archtop. He used a very heavy pick, likely 1.5 mm or thicker, and heavy bronze strings, the low E string having a diameter of .056 or greater.

Based on my personal observation at a Basie concert, I can say with certainty that Freddie's guitar had very, very high action to avoid string buzz against the frets. How high I cannot say exactly, but on my current big band guitar a stack of three U.S. 10¢ coins fits between the 12th fret and the 6th string. (Yes, all you Telecaster players, you read that correctly!)

Two Recorded Examples of Freddie's "One Note Chord" Technique:

Example 2

Taken from Basie's famous recording of "April in Paris", Freddie's part, transcribed here, is quite audible. After playing the "one note chord" technique along with the record, experiment with other chord voicings that include the indicated notes in this example. You should find that only the "one note chord" style matches Freddie's recorded part.


April In Paris

"One more time..."

Example 3

This 36 bar intro to "Cute" is the blues in F. Freddie's "one note chord" technique is very effective as he creates an interesting moving line that complements the bass part. After the intro, listen as he uses the same technique to play a harmony part when the "Cute" melody is stated by the band.

About the Author:

Michael Pettersen has a BA in Music from the University of Illinois. He has played guitar in big bands since 1970. Currently he is associated with several big bands in the Chicago area. (click here to send a message )

Read some notable quotes supporting the "One Note Chord"

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