

# Wild Stringdom

by John Petrucci of Dream Theater

## Creative soloing, Part 1

How to think “outside the box.” I often get asked how I come up with my solo-ing ideas, and especially the thinking behind some of my intricate lines. The best way to answer that question is to take you step by step from the conception to the execution of one such line—the weird fast solo that begins at about 3:12 into “Beyond This Life” (Metropolis Pt. 2: Scenes from a Memory).

After the first bridge in “Beyond This Life” I play a very mellow interlude on an acoustic guitar based on a variation of the main riff. I did that because it felt like there should be a natural resting place—a brief respite from all the intense music we just played.

After stating this pensive moment, I felt that the next section should completely contrast that part. As such, I wanted the guitar to explode into something insane, and I knew that playing something fast would achieve that. I didn’t want to settle for just another repetitive speed lick, though.

In order to achieve that, I decided to use a series of notes that were harmonically ambiguous—that is, outside of the key. Within this pattern, I also decided to play unison notes back-to-back on adjacent strings. By doing this, I could phrase the line so that the listener wouldn’t spot any obvious sequence—no matter how much you listened to it, you couldn’t really hear a logical beginning or ending to the pattern.

I decided to begin the solo using a line based on the phrasing pattern found in FIGURE 1. As you can see, this pattern is made up of a repeating 12-note sequence. And since the phrase consists of three beats in 4/4 time, it begins on a different beat each time it’s repeated, creating a hemiola effect that disguises the downbeat of the measure. When practicing this part, tap your foot and be sure to use strict alternate picking (down-up), and really strive to play it cleanly and in time.

FIGURE 1

Figure 1 displays musical notation for a 12-note phrase and its repetitions. The notation is presented in three measures, each containing a treble clef staff and a guitar staff (labeled T, A, B). The first measure is labeled "12-note phrase" and includes a chord symbol "(G#m)". The second and third measures are labeled "repeat" and "repeat" respectively. The guitar staff shows fret numbers (6, 7, 4, 6, 7, 4, 6, 7, 4) for the first measure and continues the pattern in the subsequent measures. The treble clef staff shows the corresponding notes for each fret number.

Figure 1 [RealAudio](#) [MP3](#) 

Once I settled on this initial pattern, I chose to play it using weird notes. As you can see in the first measure of my solo in “Beyond This Life, I start with the flatted fifth of G# (D), followed by the natural fifth (D#). Note that in the same measure I also follow the ninth of G# (A#) with the flatted third (B). These intervals are both minor seconds (as they’re a half step apart) and create a bluesy-sounding “rub” when played consecutively, especially at a quick tempo.

As mentioned earlier, I also liberally inserted back-to-back unison B notes (played on the 16th fret of the G string followed by the 12th fret of the B string) throughout the first measure.

To my ears, the combination of the slightly “out” notes and the unison notes played at a very fast tempo create a distinct tonal cluster—one that isn’t in any particular key per se, but fits into just about any progression. Think of a tonal cluster as the spokes in a bicycle wheel. When it’s not moving, you can see every spoke (or note). But when it is moving, you don’t see any individual spoke—just a blur of movement. The technique needed to execute this passage is also a bit tricky, as there’s some left-hand stretching involved. You’ll need to use your pinkie in order to play this line fluidly. Again, use strict alternate picking throughout the whole solo. Good luck! d