

CHUNK-CHUNK or HOW DID FREDDIE DO IT?

A short treatise concerning the art of big band rhythm guitar

By Greg Hyslop

Just how was Count Basie's guitarist Freddie Green able to be heard without an amplifier in a big band? Well, it involved some things that are rather impractical for most electric guitarists today. First of all, Freddie's huge bodied Stromberg arch top guitar had a solid spruce top instead of a laminated top which allowed it to resonate more like an acoustic guitar. Secondly, Freddie used bronze strings instead of the popular nickel/steel variety recommended for electric guitars. Thirdly, the action on Freddie's guitar was extremely high, allowing the guitar to sound louder and more percussive.

In addition to these three differences, Freddie held his guitar at an unusually flat angle in his lap which enabled his sound to project up and out more. His choice for chord voicings is commonly referred to as "orchestral voicings," which is a reference to big bands being called orchestras. Mostly, Freddie utilized three-note voicings on the lower four strings which included the thirds and sevenths/sixths above one other note, usually the root or the fifth. Many articles have recently been written describing Freddie's ability to grip three notes while allowing only one note on the fourth string to sound. While this may be what comes through in the recordings, I find this technique to be neither natural nor easy.

My reason for writing this essay is to give students the information they need to approach this style and to prevent them from injuring themselves. Some students may develop 'guitar tendonitis' or 'tennis elbow' in their strumming arm. A big part of the problem is due to the attempt to make an electric guitar sound like an acoustic guitar. I believe another part of the problem may be in the way students use their strumming arm and wrist.

One way to think of the wrist action is to imagine flicking a fly off the back of your hand. While both the forearm and wrist are involved, the more intense motion is in the wrist. It has been suggested by some jazz scholars that Freddie struck the strings closer to the fingerboard where the tension is less than near the bridge. It has also been written that he sometimes alternated the direction of his strumming from left to right to slightly change the tone between strong beats and weak beats. Both of these techniques should help to relieve some of the stress inherent in the repetitive motion of playing four to the bar rhythm guitar.

Indeed, Freddie Green was a master of his craft, but it is important to note that his guitar setup may have been the main reason he played almost no melodic solos. The best we modern electric guitarists can do is keep the amp at a low volume, confine our voicings to the lowest four strings and use the wrist more than the arm when chunk-chunking.