

GUEST GURU

Avi Bortnick's Fantastic Funk

BY JUDE GOLD



ONE NIGHT, AFTER A WHITE-HOT SET OF high-energy funk with his band What It Is, Avi Bortnick was told, "You're the funkier white motherf---r I've ever heard." The statement would be a big compliment coming from just about anyone, but coming from Ronald Laster—a first-call guitarist for funk's Imperial Grand Master, James Brown—it was kudos of the highest order. Word soon spread that Bortnick was playing some of the *sickest* sixteenth-note funk riffs around, and when John Scofield was on the hunt for a rhythm guitarist, his search ended in bliss when, on a recommendation by Charlie Hunter, he found Bortnick.

Since then, Bortnick has been an integral part of Scofield's evolved sound, adding infectious rhythm guitar parts and laptop-generated sample sequences to the legendary guitarist's mesmerizing meld of jazz, funk, and electronica, all of which can be heard on two recent Scofield albums, *Überjam* and *Up All Night*. For an even bigger dose of Bortnick's stellar grooving, be sure to check out his new solo album, *Clean Slate* [avibortnick.com].

Perhaps the most hypnotic quality of Bort-

nick's playing is its sheer *evenness*. "I'm very conscious of time," says Bortnick. "One way to develop better time is to practice with a metronome pattern that hits *random* pulses in the groove—that is, it tags arbitrary pulses that are still part of the rhythmic framework, but aren't straight quarter-notes. That'll keep you on your toes."

Though people often compliment Bortnick on his "wicked right hand," he is quick to point out that when it comes to funk guitar, the *fretting* hand is just as important as the picking hand. "A lot of it has to do with muting things evenly," notes Bortnick, playing the highly staccato repeated *A* chord in **Ex. 1**. "This is a great exercise for improving your ability to mute with your fretting hand. What I'm doing is muting the strings after every single chord strum by simply lifting my fretting hand off the fretboard just enough to deaden the strings. You can also try this approach on moving chords [**Ex. 2**]. Then, try it on anything you want—not just chords, but single notes and double-stops."

Moving on to single-note funk, Bortnick uses **Ex. 3** to illustrate how to get a monstrous attack by striking several strings at once with the pick,



but only sounding one note at a time. "It allows you to hit the strings more freely, which results in a bigger sound," observes Bortnick. "By reaching over the neck a little with my fretting hand's thumb, and letting that hand's extra fingers—the ones that aren't fretting a note—rest gently on the unused strings, I can strum really hard without getting a mess of unwanted ringing, open strings.

"There's also the issue of picking-hand control," continues Bortnick, playing **Ex. 4**. "This

Ex. 1

♩ = 60-80

A

TAB

5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7	7

Ex. 2

♩ = 60-80

A E D E

TAB

5	5	5	5	4	4	4	4	2	2	2	2	4	4	4	4
5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	3	3	3	3	5	5	5	5
6	6	6	6	4	4	4	4	2	2	2	2	4	4	4	4
7	7	7	7	6	6	6	6	4	4	4	4	6	6	6	6

riff is a good test, because it demands that you hit a chord, *D7*, for a few pulses and then—just a sixteenth-note or two later—switch gears to picking single notes for the rest of the measure.”

Once you feel you've got a strong pocket going with a certain riff or groove, consider this: “There is more than one way to slice up 4/4 time,” says Bortnick. He demonstrates this assertion with **Ex. 5**, a rhythmically displaced double-stop riff from *Überjam's* title track made all the more intriguing by Scofield's quoting of the famous “Blue Moon” melody over the top. Every time Bortnick plays the example's main lick, which is exactly one bar long, he adds an eighth-note

rest. This is why the riff starts on the *and* of beat one in bar 2, on beat two in bar 3, and on the *and* of beat two in bar 4. “The riff sounds like it's in 9/8 until I fix it at the end of bar 4 by cutting off its last two double-stops, making the whole thing start over on the next downbeat. This kind of riff is fun—it's like having your odd-meter cake and still being able to eat your 4/4 funk, too.”

All the techniques presented in this lesson can be heard in a single song, “Diabolus Solo,” which you can find on Avi Bortnick's album Clean Slate or on his Web site, avibortnick.com.

AVI'S GO-TO GEAR

Guitar: 1992 Fender American Standard Stratocaster outfitted with Graph Tech String Saver polymer saddles.
 Strings: D'Addario or Electro-Harmonix .010-.046.
 Amps: Clean, loud Fenders and Mesa/Boogies.
 Pedals: Boss DD-5 Digital Delay, DOD FX-17 wah.
 Laptop: Apple iBook loaded with Ableton Live looping software.

Ex. 3

Aggressively

♩ = 108

A7

Ex. 4

Precisely

♩ = 108

D9

Ex. 5

Hypnotically

♩ = 126

Am7

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CHOPS



HOT GUITARIST ALERT!

Name: Liberty Ellman

Home Base: New York, New York

BY JUDE GOLD



"WHEN YOU START THINKING LIKE a composer, the *band* becomes your instrument," states Liberty Ellman, touching on the inspiration behind his second solo album, *Tactiles* [Pi].

"You look at the group you've assembled—from the kick drum on up through the cymbals to the saxophone all the way over to the bass—and you learn to play the group the way you play your guitar. Each of these elements has a strong timbral identity you can work with. You can even *switch* identities among instruments—for instance, why not have the sax play the bass line and the bass play the melody for a few measures?"

With so many guitarists remaining so intensely focused on their own fretboards, Ellman's broad, ensemble thinking is refreshing. His intriguing perspective is in no small part inspired by the many master jazz musicians and composers with whom he has worked, including sax phenom Chris Potter, bass icon Dave Holland, composer/saxophonist Henry Threadgill, and M-Base kingpins Steve Coleman and Greg Osby. But none of this should imply that Ellman has not *also* devoted countless hours to the study of guitar. As you'll soon find out from his stellar comping approaches, he's spent more than his fair share of time

staring at the guitar neck.

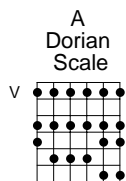
"If you like finding new chord voicings, then it's helpful to be able to see *maps* on your guitar," says Ellman, demonstrating one such "map" in **Ex. 1**. "This contains nearly every *A* Dorian scale tone between the 5th and 10th frets. Visualizing modes in this manner makes it easy to put together combinations of notes you might not otherwise have tried—like this chord [**Ex.2**]. If your pinky can stretch across five frets, you'll find this is a nice alternative to *Am7*. The next step is using that map to come up with new chord progressions. Try this II-V-I in *G* major: Except for one note, the progression stays within our *A* Dorian map [**Ex. 3**]. Notice that I've left out the roots of each chord, assuming the bass player will play them."

Despite his love for adventurous, tendon-stretching grips like the ones you just learned, Ellman contends that a big problem for many guitarists is "piano envy." "We often try to put as many notes as possible into a chord, but one of our biggest strengths is being able to play really simply and have it sound extremely cool," says Ellman, launching into the pleasing progression in **Ex. 4**. "If I'm at a jam session and someone calls 'All the Things You Are,' this is probably the first thing I'll play. These chords are just *shell voicings*—that is, they

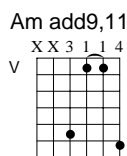


"I'm a total proponent of people inventing their own voicings." —Liberty Ellman

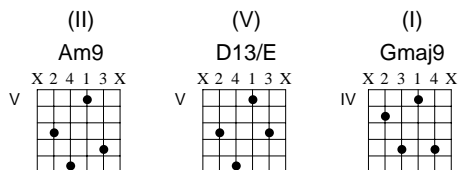
Ex. 1



Ex. 2



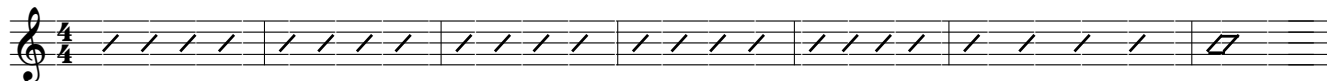
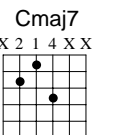
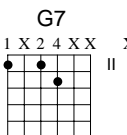
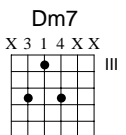
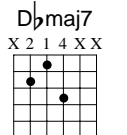
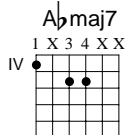
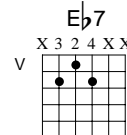
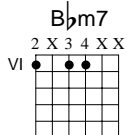
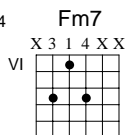
Ex. 3



Ex. 4

Gently

♩ = 144



LIBERTY'S RIG

Guitar: 1966 Gibson ES-330.

Amp: Fender Vibrolux.

Strings: D'Addario flatwound .013-.056.

each have only a root, a 3, and a 7—but the progression sounds wonderful because each new chord shares at least one note with the previous chord, which creates smooth voice-leading. And if there's a bass player, I'd probably leave out the low note in each grip—the root—and just play little two-note chords. Lat-

er in the tune, if it felt right, I might stretch out and play something like this (Ex. 5), a more advanced version of the progression that adds a bit of dissonance and color." ■

To learn more about Liberty Ellman, click to libertyellman.com.

Ex. 5

Vibrantly

♩ = 144

READER'S CHALLENGE • ARIA HYSTERIA

CHANCES ARE THAT JIM RIVERA OF ALBUQUERQUE, New Mexico, *could* play the shred-metal-approved triplet lick shown here even faster than he does. But, while there's certainly nothing wrong with feeding one's need for speed by firing off a zillion notes per second, sometimes it's also worth slowing things down and really getting *inside* the notes being played, as Rivera does with this submission. Granted, he still plays this baroque-sounding cadenza at a tempo that will trip up most beginning guitarists, but his riff is slowed down just enough so that the dark, ominous *E* minor harmonies come through with a poignant, operatic sense of melancholy; almost generating a feeling of impending tragedy.

THIS MONTH'S PRIZE: A Line 6 Pod!

Rivera prefers to sweep-pick the notes, using an upstroke for the descending triplets and a downstroke for the ascending ones—but you can also execute the moves with an alternating picking attack, especially at reasonable tempos. "This exercise sounds great with lots of *grease*," adds Rivera. He's talking about effects—thick distortion, a concert hall-sized reverb, and maybe an echo timed to repeat on the quarter note. Add these elements to your sound and, like many an opera, this lick is nothing short of *epic*. ■

Want to help the world play better guitar? Submit your candidate for Reader's Challenge (preferably notated *and* on cassette or CD), along with a brief explanation of why it's cool and how to play it, to *Guitar Player Reader's Challenge*, 2800 Campus Dr., San Mateo, CA 94403. Include your name, address, e-mail, and phone number. Materials won't be returned, but we *will* listen to all submissions. You'll hear from us if your lick is chosen.