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**Jazz**

## Mastering the Guitar Fingerboard Through Visualization

by Lynn Wiles

In our minds we've all pictured memorable times we've experienced in the past as well as exciting wants and desires for the future. For example, years after the fact- I can still recall the look on my mother's face when she found that I had eaten the entire shortbread cake she had spent the whole morning preparing for her bridge game partners who would convene that same evening. *What we are doing when we vividly recall an event is visualizing these moments and thoughts.* Yes, one can visualize anything one puts one's mind to, and the process can be a very useful learning tool!

By applying visualization techniques to our learning and understanding of the guitar, we can build a firm foundation toward mastering and mapping out notes on the guitar fretboard. For any serious player, I don't have to explain the importance of a complete understanding of the physical layout of the fingerboard. Many players, amateur and professional, use visualization techniques to improve their learning, interpreting, playing, and performance skills. Regardless of the style of music that interests you or the instrument that you play, you will find visualization techniques very helpful.

This past summer at the Interlochen Guitar Institute, I presented a two-day class on applying visualization techniques. One of the students who put the information immediately to work was amazed at how well he was able to memorize and play through a piece that had previously challenged him.

Visualization definitely works, but you must be methodical and disciplined in applying the technique.

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## Our Goals

- To be able to identify and play every note on every string up to the twelfth fret.
- To hear the sound of each note in relation to the other notes.
- To be able to relate the sounded note to its corresponding written notation.

### One thing that is important to understand before beginning is:

The 12 notes of the *chromatic scale*, which can begin on any note, move through each successive note until one arrives at the note one octave above the starting note of our scale.

Beginning on **C**, the chromatic scale would appear like this:

**C - C#/Db - D - D#/Eb - E - F - F#/Gb - G - G#/Ab - A - A#/Bb - B - C**

Notes separated by a slash sound the same and are played at the same fret on the tempered scale of the guitar. These notes are called **enharmonic equivalents**.

I learned visualization technique at the Guitar Institute of Technology and will present the approach in outline form. Let's start by visualizing with the end result of naming and locating every note on the guitar.

### The Approach: Getting Ready

- Set the guitar down. Do not hold it yet! If you're tempted to hold the guitar in playing position, put it in its case.
- With your eyes closed visualize (picture yourself) holding the guitar. Visualize both right and left hands, as you would hold the guitar in correct sitting position. "See" yourself from the player's viewpoint, not from that of the listener.
- If you use a pick, visualize holding the pick. If you're a fingerstyle player visualize using correct right-hand position.
- In your mind's eye, picture the neck of the guitar, the headstock and tuning machines, the strings, the nut, and the first few frets, including the brown of the fretboard, the white of the nut, etc.
- Next, as clearly as possible, focus your mind's eye on the sixth string where it passes over the nut and first fret,

*Are you getting the picture? Good!*

### Playing Visually (Keep the guitar in the case!)

- Physically feel yourself playing the open sixth string with your right hand. Again. If you use a pick, feel the pick hitting the string. Fingerstyle, likewise.
- As you "play" the open sixth string, mentally say to yourself the name of the note: E
- If you can hear the note in your head, it is also very important to try to hear how the note sounds.

### Do not rush through this process!

- Now feel yourself pressing your left-hand first finger down on the sixth string at the first fret.

- As you play the note (mentally), say the name of the note to yourself. (F)
- Again, try to hear the new note.
  - You can hear the F by referencing it to the E note a half step below.
  - If you read music notation, try to visualize how the note looks in written notation as you visually play it.
  - If your guitar has side dot position markers, visualize them also.

### **Playing (really!)**

- Now go ahead and pick up the guitar and very slowly and deliberately, actually play the E followed by the F note as you visualize yourself playing them.
- As you are playing you should be listening to what the notes sound like, and also be visualizing the written notation.
- Slowly, play these two notes several times.
- Do not interject any hot licks at this point! No noodling. You are programming the brain.
- Important. Each time you visualize or physically play, you should be listening to what the notes sound like, visualizing the written notation, the location of the fret on the fretboard, the side marker, the appearance of the finger, and any other visual keys that you might feel are important.

### **Now set the guitar down again.**

- Once again, visualize yourself holding the guitar. Remember, correct posture.
- Visualize playing the 2nd finger at the second fret, at the same time saying the note name (F# or Gb). Remember, F# is the enharmonic equivalent to Gb.
- Next, visualize playing the next higher note- 3rd fret, 3rd finger, G.
- As a visual review, practice playing in your head the finger, string and fret while visualizing the written note and how it sounds.
- Now visualize playing the next note higher- 4th fret, 4th finger, G# or Ab.
- Slowly, repeat this procedure several times.

### **Playing Again**

- Slowly, while holding the guitar properly, play E note open, F note 1st finger, F# or Gb note 2nd finger, G note 3rd finger, G# or Ab note 4th finger.
- Slowly, replay this sequence several times.

### **That's right! Set the guitar down again.**

- Visualize playing and mentally hearing and seeing the written notation of the next ascending note. (A note, 1st finger, fifth fret.)
- Repeat this for the next three notes. (A# or Bb)-B-C

### **OK! Pick up the guitar.**

- Slowly play, listen, visualize, etc. A- (A# or Bb)- B-C.  
Without any hot licks or noodling!

#### **Again, holding the guitar:**

- Visualize, listen, etc. the notes from E to C.
- Slowly play, visualize, etc. the notes from E to C.

Our task is to continue ascending up the neck and to identify each note until you reach the 12th fret. If you are so inclined you may continue up the sixth string

until you run out of frets!

**You will apply this approach to each of the strings of the guitar:**

6th string E 5th string A 4th string D 3rd G 2nd B 1st E

Depending on your playing level you may only be able to visualize and add one or two notes at a time before playing them, or you may be able to add several.

In the end, you should be able to visualize every note on the guitar. You can time yourself as you visualize playing and reciting every note starting at the open sixth string ascending to the 12th fret, then repeat on the fifth string from open to 12th fret and continuing to the fourth, third, second, and first string ending at the 12th fret, first string.

Another great exercise is to visualize arbitrary notes on every string. In other words, find every F on each string, then find every C on each string, then every Eb, etc.

As a musician there are many ways that you can use visualization to your advantage. In future articles I hope to cover other aspects of using visualization such as; improving your performance repertoire, overcoming performance anxiety, presenting a better performance, learning a tune and really knowing it, as well as other technical skills as applied to the guitar. I hope you've found this information useful, and I wish you well.

Lynn Wiles

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### About the Author

**Lynn Wiles** has been performing and teaching guitar for over 35 years, drawing from many styles and performing situations. He is a graduate of the Musicians Institute and a registered Suzuki Guitar instructor. Through his career Lynn has studied with many wellknown musicians in his field, and is the founder of a not-for-profit music academy. He leads an active performance schedule and is dedicated to his own 'for-profit' music studio in Ithaca, NY.

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