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Launch a Guitar Armada!; Basic Layering Techniques for Massive Textures

BYLINE: Michael Molenda

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HIGHLIGHT: For some blissfully uncomplicated guitarists, getting a sound is as simple as plugging a guitar directly into an amp, cranking the volume and tone controls, and wreaking havoc on those six strings. I love those guys, and, sometimes, I am that guy. But I'm also a proud member of a vast community of guitar players who employ signal processing and studio magic to conjure all sorts of fabulously bizarre and beautiful sonic textures. After all, it's fun - as well as very inspirational - to think of a guitar as a paintbrush that can dip into myriad colors and spew wonder across a spectral canvas.

It's also commercially smart, as many of today's young and successful guitar-oriented bands utilize density to great effect. Big guitar sounds are all over the charts (well, at least in those instances where guitars are on the charts these days), and the act of crafting textural vistas doesn't have to be limited to players inspired by Evanescence, Avenged Sevenfold, or Snow Patrol. Even if you're a blues or jazz cat, or a funkmeister, or a folkie, savvy applications of guitar layers can add drama and intensity to your recorded works.

Of course, "savvy" is the operative word, and that word may resonate quite differently depending upon the music you play. For example, a metal dude might construct a towering inferno of multi-layered rhythm guitars to drive home a chorus, whereas the same treatment might be a tad scary for an introspective acoustic song about how much your first puppy meant to you. So, although there are no rules commanding truly creative music, taste is still a good quality to bring to your audio-production values.

Ironically, the other main danger zone of layering pertains to the very goals that layering achieves: producing impact, dimension, and density. You see, by overdubbing guitar parts, you can actually diminish impact if you carelessly muddy the layers with parts that are too thick, too processed, or too woofy. Here, then, are three basic layering ideas to help you increase punch without adding paunch.

Chordal Tsunami

Layering chords to make a chorus sound as ferocious as a starving lion armed with an Uzi is an easy task - as long as you juggle the sonic elements. For a rock track, I'll typically layer four parts for each stereo channel (eight parts total): distorted humbucker tone, overdriven single-coil tone, direct (clean) single-coil tone, "wild card" (humbucker or single-coil through modeling processor, tiny amp, or other bizarre tone generator). However, each side will be

populated by different guitars. For example, if my left-channel humbucker tone is a Les Paul, then my right-channel humbucker tone might be a hollowbody. Likewise, if the left-channel single-coil is a Strat, then the right-channel single-coil could be a P-90-equipped guitar. The secret to this recipe is mixing all kinds of disparate flavors together - and those dashes of goodness are not limited to different guitars. You should also mix different miking techniques, different amps, and different modeling processors or plug-ins.

Finally, EQ the monstrosity to ensure that the low frequencies aren't "weighing down" the barrage (cutting a few dB at around 80Hz or 100Hz usually does the trick). Don't be afraid to try drastic EQ tweaks, either, as a tone that sounds truly disgusting by itself might just add the right zing to the layered sound.

Acoustic Armies

An acoustic guitar's ringing harmonics can really tank the clarity and punch of layered textures. Mixing bassy, midrange-y, and sparkling chord inversions is a big help, and some producers even add a "Nashville-tuned" guitar (where the low-E, A, D, and G strings are swapped for a 12-string guitar's high-octave strings and tuned an octave above standard, while the high B and E strings remain unchanged) to the blend. EQ is usually imperative, as you must tame any floppy bass frequencies or low-mid mud. Care must also be taken with miking, because too much room sound may obscure each guitar's attack even further. As with electric layers, I often mix miked acoustics with piezo acoustic-electric guitars and Line 6 Variax Acoustic models.

Smile Lines

A fun trick that works with either acoustics or electrics is using an EBow to play sustained, single-note lines that follow the song's chord progression. Well, you don't even need an EBow, as you can simply pick or trill the notes, but it's a gas to hear those yowling, bow-like sounds the device simulates. The single notes help clarify layered chord progressions - depending upon how high you use them in the mix. My favorite ploy is to make the lines barely audible, so that listeners can perceive the melodic movement without having the roar of the chordal bombast audibly diminished. Quickie reading comprehension test: Should you double or triple the single-note lines? (Please tell me you answered "yes"!)

Layer up!

These are just three ways to add guitar textures to your productions. I also recommend inviting fuzz boxes, delay units, reverb, tremolo, phasing and flanging, and other signal-processing toys to the party. Gather all your options, and like a fine chef blending flavors and spices, stir that stuff around and cook up a marvelous feast of guitar tone!

Michael Molenda is a seminal San Francisco punk, multimedia artist, and producer who has recorded tracks for everyone from NASA to Paramount Pictures to various major and minor labels to hundreds of bands you've never heard. He currently co-owns Tiki Town Studios with producer Scott Mathews, and is signed to MI5 Recordings.

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