# 11 Rhythm Changes: Rhythm Guitar from Jazz to Funk

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## Introduction

In a 1939 article published in *DownBeat* magazine pioneering jazz guitarist Charlie Christian offered what has been considered a manifesto for electric guitar playing. Although the acoustic guitar had become an integral part of jazz ensembles during the 1930s, it functioned almost exclusively as part of the rhythm section. With limited ability to project or sustain sound, particularly in comparison to the favored solo jazz instruments of the swing era, the trumpet, saxophone, and clarinet, the acoustic guitar had been relegated to a background role, playing steady rhythmic patterns of strummed chords to accompany solo instruments while they played virtuosic melodic lead lines. According to Christian, this left guitarists akin to merely "a robot plunking on a gadget to keep the rhythm going."[1] Throughout the article, Christian implores fellow players to adopt the electric guitar, asserting that amplification would give them a "new lease on life."[2] As Christian had done on his Gibson ES-150, the electric instrument allowed players to develop single-string melodic soloing techniques that could be heard over other instruments, therefore elevating their role to a featured part of the ensemble. While Christian's primary argument can be read simply as one of economics (electric guitar = musical versatility = increased paid playing opportunities), the subtext implies that assuming the role of the featured soloist conferred an agency, both musical and personal, upon the guitarist unattainable when functioning as a member of the rhythm section alone. Although a division of rhythm and lead guitar labor can be heard on recordings throughout early twentieth-century popular music, with the development of the electric instrument in the 1930s, the role of the lead guitarist begins to eclipse that of the rhythm guitarist.

As players in jazz, blues, and country all turned toward the incorporation of the electric guitar, the instrument became an increasingly featured part of the mainstream musical soundscape during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Players began to develop extended techniques and incorporate sonic effects available through the use of amplifiers while, at the same time, developing spectacular performance styles that incorporated the instrument as a fundamental part of their stage persona. By the late

1950s and early 1960s, within certain genres, lead guitarists began to "rival the band's singer for the spotlight,"[3] conferring upon them a privilege largely withheld from rhythm guitarists, who were merely assimilated as part of the band. As a natural by-product of this musical and cultural agency, within popular media and academic studies, attention has been given mainly to those who have been considered innovative and influential lead guitar players, with little study of the fundamentally important role and contributions of the rhythm guitarists in popular music. Therefore, the main aim of this chapter will be to shift this focus and examine the approaches to rhythm guitar playing taken by several key players on recordings from the 1940s to 1970s, across multiple subgenres of popular music. The outcome of these short case studies, and the widely varied approaches found within them, will support an argument that the rhythm guitar's role in popular music is more than merely the binary opposite of its privileged counterpart, the lead guitar. Rather than simply functioning as an accompaniment or background instrument, rhythm guitar works on a spectrum that encompasses multiple layers of the soundscape, and as such serves an integral yet often overlooked role.

Over the past twenty years, much of the academic work in the developing field of popular guitar research has focused on understanding the musical and cultural agency of the instrument and its players.[4] While these texts examine the approaches to playing taken by some influential practitioners, the analysis of playing approach within them is largely deployed as a means to gaining insight into the cultural meaning and impact of the instrument itself. While a small yet growing body of work focuses primarily on the analysis of idiolect—or individual playing style—of musicians acknowledged for their innovation and influence,[5] only one of these studies, *An Analysis of Freddie Green's Style and His Importance in the History of Jazz Guitar*, focuses exclusively on the practice of a rhythm guitar player.[6] In this study, Lewis Dickert Jr. identifies from the outset that Freddie Green, the guitarist for the Count Basie Orchestra, "focused solely on rhythm guitar playing"[7] and argues for his inclusion in the canon due to his influence on subsequent generations of rhythm guitarists in jazz. Ulrich Adelt's recent work[8] acknowledges the focus in current scholarship on the lead guitar, yet argues that the study of the rhythm guitar "allows for a more fluid understanding of sound and genre."[9] His articles focus primarily on identity formation surrounding the rhythm guitar, which Adelt describes as an instrument that inhabits a more ambiguous terrain than its lead counterpart. While work has been undertaken for decades in tutorial books and magazines such as *Guitar Player* and *Guitar World*, and in the last decade on social media channels, within this extensive knowledge base, the close analysis of playing style is often secondary to skill development.

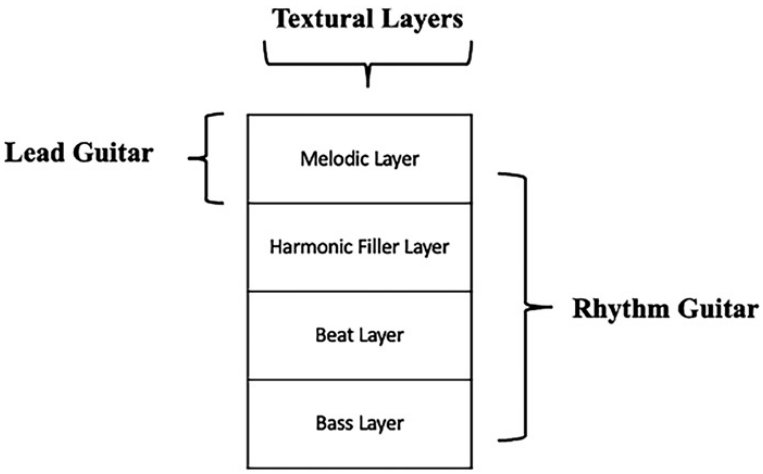


**Figure 11.1** The guitar's function within Moore's model of textural layers in popular music

While none of the above sources offer an explicit definition of rhythm guitar playing, all assert in various ways that the rhythm guitar's role in popular music is primarily one of accompaniment (accompanying the voice or other lead instrument), establishing and/or reinforcing both the harmonic progression and the basic metric profile of a song. Allan F. Moore's model of functional textural layers in popular music (Figure 11.1), comprising of a melodic, harmonic filler, bass, and explicit beat layer, is beneficial to contextualize the way in which the conception of the traditional division of labor is split between lead and rhythm guitars.[10]

Upon initial assessment, while the lead guitar is easy to locate within Moore's model, primarily heard front and center within the melodic layer during instrumental breaks or solos, the rhythm guitar can be best conceived as working across a functional spectrum that encompasses the harmonic and beat layers, in addition to the bass and secondary melodic layer. As noted by Moore,[11] while instruments can and will often switch functions within the texture of popular songs, the ensuing brief case studies in this chapter demonstrate that rhythm guitarists often move fluidly between, or function simultaneously within, multiple textural layers over the course of a song, thus best considered as working on a rhythm guitar spectrum.[12]

## Jazz and Charlie Christian

Returning to Charlie Christian, while an acknowledged pioneering lead guitarist in jazz, he can also be heard playing rhythm on many recordings across his catalog. After developing his approach as a young musician in

Oklahoma City during the early 1930s, Christian was hired by Benny Goodman in 1939, spending the next two years touring and recording with The Benny Goodman Orchestra and Sextet. In February 1940, Christian attended a Columbia Records session with the Goodman Sextet, recording two takes of the tune "Gone With 'What' Wind" (1940). Based on a 12-bar blues form in the key of C, Christian can be heard taking an accompanist's role during multiple choruses, affording insight into his approach as a rhythm guitarist.[13] On this recording, Christian takes what can be considered an archetypal approach, down-strumming chords on the beat in a strict quarter-note rhythm and reinforcing the 4/4 meter. He likely uses traditional I–IV–V closed chord voicings (chords that do not incorporate any open strings) in the fretting hand to reinforce the harmonic progression, playing staccato by fretting the chord and then immediately releasing after strumming to give the simple quarter-note rhythm a nuanced articulation (a relatively common idiomatic device used by rhythm players). When listening more closely, Christian can be heard activating his rhythm guitar part by incorporating moving lines within chord voicings rather than simply holding a static shape for multiple bars. For example, when accompanying the piano solo for two choruses (track time 0:27–0:51) prior to playing his own solo, Christian alternates between the third and second degree of the I chord during the first phrase of the section, and at the start of phrase two, articulates the fifth of the IV chord in the top voice, drawing attention to a simple yet noticeable counterline of E–D–C played on a high string throughout the first two phrases of the chorus. Similarly, Christian (Figure 11.2) adds an E♭ passing tone on a high string when moving from the I to the V7 chord in the third phrase.

While within the bounds of functioning as a rhythm player, reinforcing the harmonic progression and basic meter of the tune, Christian's rhythmic articulations and countermelodies push into a secondary melodic layer that adds interest and allows him to be identifiable within the soundscape while pushing the boundaries of what is traditionally considered a background, accompanying role.

## Electric Blues and T-Bone Walker

As a counterpart to Charlie Christian, T-Bone Walker is recognized as another key figure who helped establish the electric guitar in popular music during the 1940s. Considered a pioneer due to his development of the electric lead guitar style in blues, Walker can also be heard playing rhythm on multiple recordings. A brief assessment of his blues classic "Call It Stormy Monday (But Tuesday Is Just as Bad)" (1947) demonstrates a very

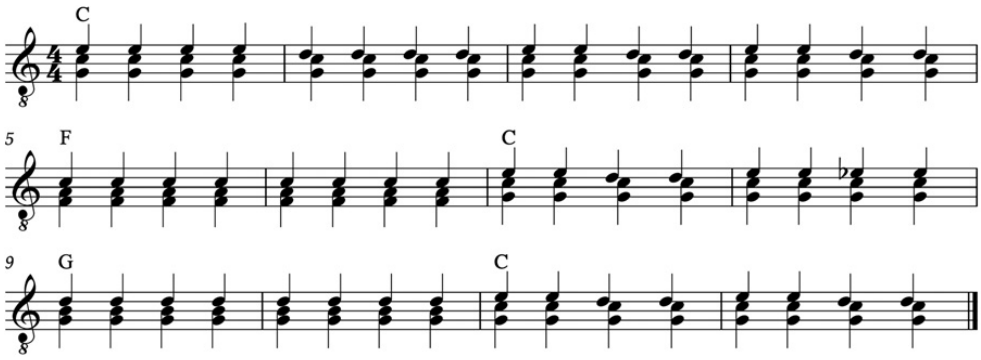


**Figure 11.2** Charlie Christian's rhythm guitar part, with a counter-melodic line in the top voice, on "Gone With 'What' Wind" (1940). Track time 0:27–0:41

different approach to playing rhythm to that taken by Charlie Christian on "Gone With 'What' Wind" (1940). Recorded in 1947, "Stormy Monday" features Walker singing and playing guitar, accompanied by a rhythm section of bass, drums, and piano, in addition to a trumpet and saxophone. Rather than taking the archetypal approach to playing rhythm by simply strumming chords in line with the pulse of the song, Walker is much more nuanced, interjecting partial chords and single-note riffs in less predictable patterns in response to his sung vocal lines. During the first chorus (0:07–0:50), a 12-bar blues form in G, we hear Walker playing a single-note riff during the first phrase, in a typical blues call-and-response style, interjecting secondary melodic lines on the guitar, along with the saxophone, in response to his sung vocal line. Walker's voice undoubtedly carries the main melodic material here, but the single-note profile of the guitar at this point calls into question the layer in which it is functioning. While it could be considered a quasi-lead role here, pushing into a secondary melodic layer, Walker's choice of notes used for the riff (D and G) also reinforces the underlying tonic chord harmony at this point in the phrase, thus functioning implicitly within the harmonic filler layer. When we hear Walker finally playing his first explicit chord at the start of phrase two, rather than playing the IV chord in a steady beat pattern to reinforce the harmony and meter, he strums the chord in response to, rather than in support of, his sung vocal line, again blurring boundaries between functional layers. During the second chorus (0:50–1:32), Walker takes a somewhat more traditional approach to playing rhythm, mainly playing chords while the muted trumpet plays single-line responses to the vocals, but again, rather than simply establishing or reinforcing the meter, he interjects chords during breaks in the sung vocal line. Throughout the entire song, Walker takes a liberal, chromatic approach to establishing

harmonic areas, sliding into and out of partial voicings of extended I, IV, and V chords by a half-step. Rather than establishing or reinforcing the harmony, he creates a sense of harmonic ambiguity, in line with his whole approach to playing rhythm guitar on this track.

When comparing these brief case studies, we see two contrasting yet equally effective approaches to rhythm guitar playing, taken by two pioneering players within relatively similar musical parameters. While Christian demonstrates an archetypal approach, in line with his anticipated role of reinforcing the pulse in the rhythm section of a dance band, Walker eschews the archetype, a prerogative afforded as the featured performer on the track, taking a more fluid approach that works along the rhythm guitar spectrum.

## Jump Blues/Early Rock and Roll and Willie Kizart

Due to the innovations and incorporation of the instrument by players such as Christian and Walker, by the early 1950s, the amplified guitar was an increasingly common featured part of the popular music soundscape. One of the key recordings to feature the instrument during this period, as the musical streams of blues, gospel, and country began to coalesce into what would become rock and roll by mid-decade, is the song "Rocket 88" (1951), recorded by Jackie Brenston and His Delta Cats in 1951. While informed by the jump blues,[14] this record is often held as the first to represent the developing rock and roll sound and ethos, and additionally, one of the first to feature a distorted electric guitar sound.[15] In a frequently cited anecdote, guitarist for the group, Willie Kizart, dropped his amplifier on the way to the recording session, requiring him to perform with a damaged speaker cone. Contrasting with the dynamically assertive yet clean tones utilized by players such as Christian and Walker on tracks recorded in the 1940s, the electric guitar on "Rocket 88" is fuzzy and distorted due to the damaged speaker cone, a new sound for popular recordings of the time and one that would go on to represent the transgressive nature of rock and roll.

"Rocket 88," based on a 12-bar blues in E♭, features a vocalist, tenor, and baritone sax, pianist, and drummer, in addition to Kizart, who can be heard functioning as the rhythm guitarist on all but the final shout chorus, where he joins the group playing the lead line. On initial listening, Kizart's guitar part could be considered relatively simplistic. Until the final chorus, he plays a repetitive single-line "walking" or "boogie" bass riff rather than full chords, identified by Moore as a common technique used by rhythm guitar players to "sketch out a harmony."[16] Although the line is rhythmically active (Figure 11.3), it repetitively outlines the I, IV, and V chords of

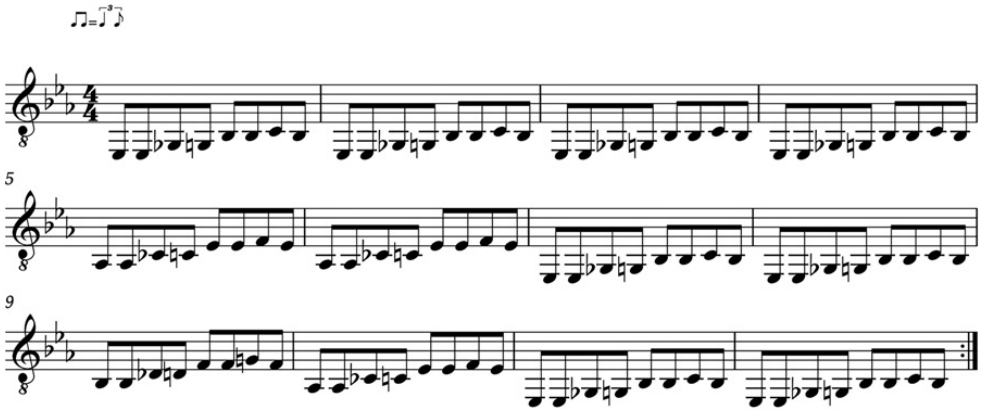

**Figure 11.3** Willie Kizart's rhythm guitar part on "Rocket 88" (1951)

the relevant bars, using a swung eighth-note pattern of blues pentatonic and major diatonic scale material.

While Kizart is implying the harmony, working in the harmonic filler layer, he also supports the swung eighth-note groove and drive of the song, locking in with the drummer, who, due to the fidelity of the recording, resides in the background of the mix. Maintaining the eighth-note pulse, the guitar can also be heard functioning as an integral part of the beat layer. Further, in the absence of a bassist on the recording, the guitar is also establishing the bass layer of the song. While a piano appears on this track, on which the left hand may reinforce the bass layer, the presence of the lower register of this instrument is again negligible due to the fidelity of the track, leaving the guitar to assume the role. Conceived in this way, the guitar on this song can be heard as functioning within multiple textural layers of the soundscape, thus working on a rhythm guitar spectrum.

## Rock and Roll and Chuck Berry

Following the musical, technical, and technological innovations of the 1940s and early 1950s (including developments around solid-bodied instrument construction by Gibson and Fender), with the arrival of rock and roll to the mainstream by the mid 1950s, the electric guitar became firmly supplanted as the lead instrument in popular music due to both its musical and cultural agency. As a player considered by many the "definitive guitarist of the early rock and roll era,"[17] Chuck Berry undoubtedly helped embed the electric guitar into the mainstream musical and cultural consciousness during the 1950s. While again much attention has focused

on Berry's work as a lead guitarist, he can be heard functioning in both a rhythm and lead capacity on many of his records.

Berry achieved his first mainstream hit in 1955 with "Maybellene" (1955), a 12-bar blues-based song in B♭, featuring Berry on guitar and vocals, accompanied by piano, bass, drums, and maracas. The song begins with Berry playing a short riff, ends with a lead guitar solo, and features a 24-bar solo mid-song. In these sections, the guitar is definitively heard as functioning in the melodic layer both by virtue of no other lead instruments or vocals on the track at those points and due to being pushed to the front of the recording mix. During the sung verses and choruses, Berry assumes the role of rhythm guitar, buried deeper in the mix and using a characteristic bass-strum accompaniment style commonly heard on early country and blues guitar recordings. In these sections, Berry plays the root note alternating with the fifth of the chord on the bass strings on beats one and three, and strikes the rest of the chord on beats two and four, using staccato strums to reinforce a strong backbeat feel. Again, here we can identify a rhythm guitarist functioning in multiple textural layers of the soundscape, reinforcing the backbeat feel in the beat layer while at the same time working to reinforce both the harmonic and bass layers.

Berry's hit "Johnny B. Goode" (1958), perhaps the quintessential guitar song of the rock and roll era, again features Berry singing and playing guitar, with an approach to playing rhythm quite different from that taken on "Maybellene." Based on a 12-bar blues form in B♭, Berry's rhythm guitar functions in the harmonic filler layer throughout the song, somewhat buried within the context of the accompanying piano, bass, and drums yet reinforcing the harmony of each bar using a characteristic blues shuffle technique, oscillating the 5-6 chord tones above a static root note. Here, the rhythm guitar functions within the harmonic filler layer and the beat layer to establish a consistent eighth-note driving pulse throughout the song in a way that can be described as a "rhythmically active [harmonic] filler."[18] During the solo sections of the song, Berry's lead guitar is overdubbed on top of his rhythm guitar part, with the lead guitar pushed to the front of the mix, affording a moment in the context of this study to observe the traditional rhythm and lead guitar division of labor. Within these two short examinations of the songs "Maybellene" and "Johnny B. Goode," we see two different approaches to playing taken by the same player. While best known for establishing the guitar as a lead instrument within his songs, here Chuck Berry expertly navigates the rhythm guitar spectrum.

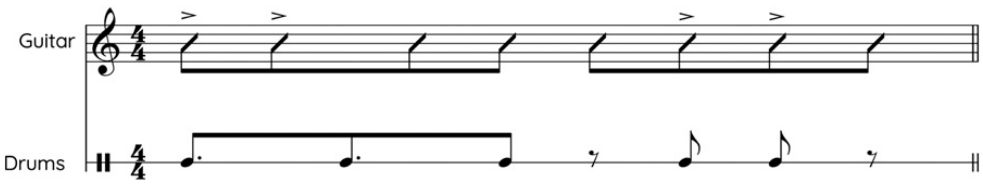


**Figure 11.4** Guitar and drum pattern of "Bo Diddley" (1955)

## Rock and Roll and Bo Diddley

The examination of another key figure in the establishment of the electric guitar in mainstream popular music during the 1950s, Bo Diddley, demonstrates a very different approach to playing rhythm guitar to that of his rock and roll counterpart, Chuck Berry. While many of his contemporaries in the 1950s were pushing the guitar further into the musically and culturally privileged territory of a lead instrument, Diddley became perhaps best known for his use of a characteristic rhythm, the "Diddley Beat."[19] The eponymous song "Bo Diddley," recorded in 1955, features Diddley on vocals and guitar accompanied by a tom-tom drum and maracas. While the guitar is primarily showcased as a rhythmically active harmonic instrument, the entire song is built around the "Diddley Beat" and the interaction between guitar and percussion.

At 2:29 minutes long, the song eschews any real sense of harmonic progression, remaining on a static tonic chord in the key of G through much of the song. While felt in 4/4, the drummer plays a clave rhythm on the tom throughout, and Diddley's primary rhythm pattern (Figure 11.4) is first heard as an eighth-note subdivision of the pulse, with accents located around the first and fourth beat of the bar.

While this primary rhythm pattern is foregrounded through accenting beats in the strumming hand, the gaps in the pattern are filled to varying degrees in each bar by both somatic (physical approach) and sonic means through the use of a tremolo effect. Known as a "tinkerer" due to his experiments with unusual guitar shapes (such as a square-bodied guitar and one shaped like the fin of a Cadillac car), Diddley harnessed technological developments in order to sonically enhance his somatic approach. In his biography, Diddley describes how he spent several years working with amplifiers in order to develop a louder, cleaner sound via increased wattage. After experimenting with drive and volume, he turned to the idea of "breakin' up"[20] his sound by developing a tremolo system from the spring of an old clock. This effect allowed the instrument to sound as if it was "disappearin' an' coming back,"[21] resulting in a highly textured yet

persistent presence of the guitar in the harmonic filler layer of the song "Bo Diddley," which also integrally relates to and reinforces the beat layer.

There are several places on the recording where the guitarist assumes what could be considered a traditional lead guitar role, spotlighted as the "main voice" on the track when the vocals drop out. However, during these sections, Diddley forgoes the tradition of playing a melodic lead line, using chordal material instead. Acknowledging the primacy of rhythm within his own idiolect, Diddley describes his approach as "*all* rhythm."[22] On the song "Bo Diddley," instead of offering a traditional melodic lead during the guitar break, Diddley plays upper-position chords on the top strings, sliding in and out of them to craft a solo that blurs the boundaries between melody and harmony, and in turn lead and rhythm guitar. Diddley himself acknowledges challenging the traditional binary division of rhythm and lead guitar labor, stating, "if you listen to the stuff I'm playing, you won't find any gaps in there: I play first and second guitar at the same time."[23] In this way, the approach taken on Diddley's eponymous song is a prime example of a practitioner working along what could be considered a rhythm-lead continuum rather than bound by the traditional binary division of rhythm-lead labor.

While approaching the labor of rhythm playing in very different ways, players such as Diddley and Berry undeniably "solidified the electric guitar's place at the center of the music"[24] in rock and roll by the late 1950s. By the middle of the following decade, the instrument had moved to "a position of relative supremacy within the world of rock."[25] Key players who had become lauded as heroes and gods in part due to their ability to "stress the value of individual notes"[26] demonstrated virtuosity in the lead guitarist role that only further eclipsed labor in the rhythm guitar arena. With what could be considered an increasing pressure to play more intricate lead lines within genres such as rock, hard rock, and heavy metal, an examination of approaches by players involved in genres rooted in valuing the collective, rather than the virtuosity of an individual, during the 1960s and 1970s is beneficial within the context of this study.

## Soul and Curtis Mayfield

As a genre located within the lineage of African American musical styles that migrated into the commercial mainstream in the 1960s, soul is considered by many scholars to be both a collection of stylistic musical elements and a cultural signifier, developing during the midst of the Civil Rights movement in the United States. One of the most pivotal records to encompass both the musical and cultural elements of soul is the 1965 hit

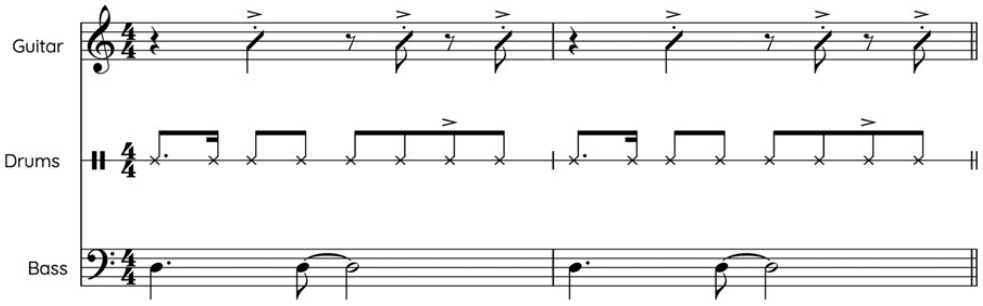


**Figure 11.5** Rhythm section groove of "People Get Ready" (1965)

"People Get Ready" by The Impressions. On this record, we hear Curtis Mayfield functioning in the role of rhythm and lead guitarist as an integral and integrated part of a collective. In his role as rhythm player on this track, Mayfield's approach is one of simplicity, yet in some ways offers a masterclass in working within the rhythm guitar spectrum. The track features Mayfield on lead vocals and guitar, working within an ensemble consisting of backing vocals, strings, French horn, xylophone, bass, and a small drum kit. During the introduction and the verses of the song, Mayfield, who had developed his playing style using a nonstandard open tuning,[27] can be heard functioning in the harmonic filler layer, playing upper-position three-string chord voicings of the song's simple looped diatonic progression. However, his chosen rhythmic profile centers the guitar as a fundamental element of the beat layer (Figure 11.5), playing a syncopated pattern around the 4/4 pulse within each bar, offering a groove that enhances and harmonizes the brushed kit and bass guitar within the rhythm section.

As part of the harmonic filler layer, Mayfield's upper-position chords are played with a staccato attack (likely using an up-strum in the right hand, a common approach for rhythm players wanting an enhanced percussive effect), and the tone of his instrument pushed into the treble range, via his pickup settings and/or EQ. While his work in the harmonic filler layer anchors the track, he is also functioning as a time-keeping device in the beat layer, perhaps more so than the kit in this case, which uses no kick drum. Further, the guitar is foregrounded as a central part of the soundscape within the context of the varied tonal spectrum brought by the unusual instrumentation of the song. When assessed holistically in this way, we can easily conceptualize Mayfield as working across a rhythm guitar spectrum.

During short breaks between the sung verses, the guitar is featured in a lead capacity, where all but the guitar and xylophone drop out (at this point, the xylophone assumes a quasi-bass function, taking up the

rhythmic pattern utilized by the bass during the verses). Like the approach taken by Bo Diddley, Mayfield's solo on this song is rooted in harmony and played around chord structures in the left hand that support an ornamented quotation of the song's main melodic hook. Here, Mayfield is heard as filling the role of rhythm and lead guitarist simultaneously, again challenging the boundaries of the traditional binary concept of rhythm and lead guitar labor. Perhaps most importantly, the guitar playing on this track demonstrates an exquisite sense of musicianship, serving and enhancing the song throughout. While Mayfield's approach could be pocketed into the binary roles of rhythm and lead, it can more profitably be conceived as fluidly navigating a rhythm-lead guitar continuum.

## Soul/Funk and Jimmy Nolen

Another key recording from the mid 1960s that features the guitar as part of a collective is James Brown's 1965 hit "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag," a song that calls into question the stylistic boundaries between rhythm and blues, soul, and the emergent genre of funk. The recording features guitarist Jimmy Nolen, who has been described as the "founder of funk guitar,"[28] a style that embeds the instrument within the rhythm section and includes the characteristic use of extended chords, strumming-hand percussive devices, and the wah-wah pedal.

Based on a 12-bar blues form in E, "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag" features Brown on vocals with an ensemble of bass, drums, guitar, and horn section. While the horns mainly work in call and response with the vocal line, the guitar sits within the rhythm section during the main part of the sung verses, functioning within the harmonic filler layer and playing simple four-note chord voicings on the guitar's top strings on beats two and four of each bar. Although the progression is based on a simple blues form, Nolen extends his diatonic chords, using I9, IV7, and V7 chord voicings. In line with the stylistic approach of many soul and funk rhythm guitar players, who often work within highly conventional progressions but use chord voicings and substitutions drawn from jazz and blues, Nolen creates more harmonic complexity in his part than the simple progression as such would indicate. Additionally, he plays staccato chords in a highly percussive way, in what is sometimes referred to as a "choked" style. Here, in addition to releasing the chords in the fretting hand immediately after down-strumming them with a heavy attack, the strumming hand intensifies the staccato nature of the articulation by muting the strings directly after being played. While Nolen's is a relatively simple guitar part, particularly in contrast to the melodicism of the bass and horn riffs, his pivotal

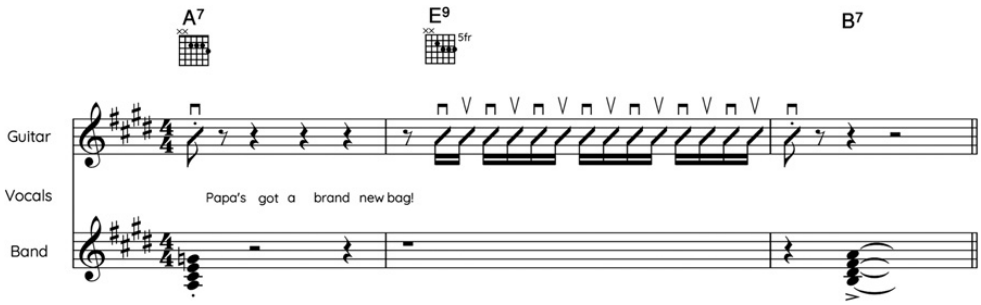


**Figure 11.6** Turnaround, bars 10–12, "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag" (1965)

reinforcement of the backbeat, combined with the prominence of the treble tonal quality of the guitar within the mix, creates a sense that all other instrumental parts seem to hang on Nolen's.

During the turnaround sections of each verse (bars 10–12 in Figure 11.6), Nolen breaks his established backbeat pattern, playing a staccato IV7 on the downbeat of bar 10 in unison with the other instruments, then dropping out to allow space for Brown to make an *a capella* statement of the song's vocal hook through the remainder of bar 10 and into the downbeat of bar 11:

Immediately following Brown's vocal proclamation, Nolen reenters on beat 1+ of bar 11, playing a legato sixteenth-note strum pattern of the I9 chord through bar 11 and into the downbeat of bar 12, where he strikes a final staccato I9 chord, followed by a unison assertion of the V7 chord on beat two of the final bar by the rest of the band. While this bar 11 moment can be simply read as an extension of Nolen's rhythm guitar duties within the harmonic filler and beat layer, due to the absence of any other solo instrumental breaks during the song and the *a capella* nature of the guitar statement, Nolen is heard here as the lead guitarist. However, his use of a simple chordal device while taking the musical spotlight again blurs the boundaries between rhythm and lead guitar roles, invoking the possibility of a rhythm-lead guitar continuum.

As discussed throughout this chapter, from the 1940s onward, guitar virtuosity within the mainstream became increasingly synonymous with lead guitar practices. By the 1970s, the mainstream was dominated by rock and hard rock genres, in which the "relative value of guitar-based virtuosity would continue to be one of the defining issues."[29] However, as genres that challenged the excesses of rock and the heroization of individual players in favor of the work of the collective began to join the mainstream (such as funk and disco), practitioners with idiolects that challenged established notions of guitar virtuosity, particularly lead guitar virtuosity, began to emerge within them.

## Disco and Nile Rodgers

A brief examination of Nile Rodger's playing on "Good Times," the 1979 disco hit by Chic, exemplifies this challenge to the hegemony of lead guitar virtuosity by demonstrating a musicianship and technical ability that is of the highest levels while functioning, at least on first assessment, primarily within the rhythm guitar spectrum: accompanying the lead vocals, establishing the harmonic progression of the song, and reinforcing the meter. The song features a simple chord progression based on a loop of the I and IV chords in the key of E minor, with liberal chord extensions indebted to the harmonic language of jazz and funk (Em7–Em7sus4–Em11–A13). With the use of such extensions, in conjunction with Rodger's approach of moving chord tones, countermelodies abound within the simple progression, creating a secondary melodic layer within his harmonies, such as a G-A-G-F♯ line constantly articulated on the second string. Rodgers also employs liberal use of left- and right-hand percussive and muting devices, in addition to purposeful stratification of chords, separating out bass notes played on the downbeat of the bar, followed by targeting chord tones played on inside strings in the strumming hand. These secondary melodic, bass, and harmonic filler functions are all driven by a perpetual strumming-hand sixteenth-note pattern that reinforces the groove of the song in the beat layer. Here, Rodgers is undoubtedly functioning across all textural layers of the song, thus across the rhythm guitar spectrum, in addition to blurring the boundaries between rhythm and lead guitar functions, while demonstrating high levels of technical skill.

## Conclusion

The case studies contained within this chapter have shown several approaches to the integral yet often undervalued role of rhythm guitar playing in popular music. While the players on each of the recordings fulfill their primary role, accompanying a melodic line while establishing and/or reinforcing the harmonic progression and basic metric profile of a song, the ways in which they approach the role are highly varied. Using an analytical framework informed by Moore's model of functional textural layers allows for a close assessment of the way in which each guitarist functions within the "musical fabric"[30] of a song. The outcome of these short studies demonstrates that rather than working within textural layers to simply establish or reinforce rhythm and harmony, rhythm players often work across a spectrum that encompasses the harmonic, beat, bass, and secondary melodic layers.

From the initial identification of an archetypal rhythm guitar approach taken by Charlie Christian on "Gone With 'What' Wind," simply strumming chords on the main beats of each bar to support a melodic line, closer analysis reveals harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic nuances that exemplify an approach to playing across a rhythm guitar spectrum. Even when simply strumming chords, many players take a stylized approach, integrating syncopated rhythmic patterns that establish, reinforce, or harmonize the beat layer. Players often incorporate various idiomatic devices such as upper-register chords, upper-string, or partial chord voicings, which have frequently combined with percussive devices driven by the left and right hand, such as playing staccato or muting chords for added rhythmic nuance. Alternating bass, walking bass, or boogie bass patterns have allowed players to function explicitly or implicitly within the harmonic layer but also to establish or reinforce the bass layer. Tonal effects made possible by the use of the electric guitar enhance the above approaches, allowing players to inhabit and navigate the rhythm guitar spectrum more vividly and idiomatically.

The use of call-and-response riffs, moving chord tones, and extended chord voice-leading often creates countermelodies that push the function of the rhythm guitar into the secondary melodic layer. The frequent incorporation of melodicism, traditionally associated with the role of lead guitarist, but utilized when functioning primarily as rhythm guitarist, blurs the boundaries between the traditional divisions of rhythm and lead guitar labor, bringing into consideration a rhythm-lead guitar continuum. Further, when assuming the traditional lead guitar role of the featured instrument on a track, several players studied in this chapter utilize chordal materials in their solos, further blurring these functional lines and reinforcing the concept of a continuum of rhythm-lead guitar labor.

In the hands of the players discussed in this chapter, particularly those functioning within genres that prioritize the collective rather than the individual, the approach to playing rhythm guitar has been technically skillful and always musically insightful, challenging the notion of virtuosity within popular guitar playing as intrinsically linked to lead guitar practices.

In closing, the findings within this chapter demonstrate the role of the rhythm guitarist to be integral within the soundscape of popular music, perhaps even more so in certain contexts than that of the lead guitar, despite often being seen as culturally and musically less significant. Continued close analysis of players working on the rhythm guitar spectrum will both add to the developing field of popular guitar research and aid in redressing the balance of a perceived lead guitar privilege, allowing us to understand more holistically the role and function of this ubiquitous and ever-evolving instrument.

## Notes

1. Charlie Christian, "Guitar Men, Wake up and Pluck!," *Downbeat* Magazine 6/14 (1939): 9.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Deena Weinstein, "Rock's Guitar Gods – Avatars of the Sixties," *Archiv Für Musikwissenschaft* 70/2 (2013): 144.
4. These texts include Steve Waksman, *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience* (Harvard University Press, 2001); Andy Bennett and Kevin Dawe, *Guitar Cultures* (Berg, 2001); Victor Anand Coelho (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Guitar* (Cambridge University Press, 2003); André Millard (ed.), *The Electric Guitar: A History of an American Icon* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Kevin Dawe, *The New Guitarscape in Critical Theory, Cultural Practice and Musical Performance* (Ashgate, 2010).
5. These studies include Frank Saladino, "An Examination of Eddie Lang's Technique and Textural Treatment in Three Selected Solo Guitar Performances," unpublished DMA thesis, Five Towns College (2012); Benjamin Givan, "Django Reinhardt's Style and Improvisational Process," unpublished PhD thesis, Yale University (2003); Jerry Richardson, "The Blues Guitar Style of B. B. King," unpublished PhD thesis, Memphis State University (1987); Kate Lewis, "Mothers and Sisters: Instrument and Idiom in the Music of Maybelle Carter, Memphis Minnie and Sister Rosetta Tharpe," unpublished PhD thesis, University of Surrey (2018).
6. Lewis Hay Dickert Jr., "An Analysis of Freddie Green's Style and His Importance in the History of Jazz Guitar," unpublished PhD thesis, University of Memphis (1994).
7. *Ibid.*, p. vi.
8. Ulrich Adelt, "Electrifying the Beat: Rhythm Guitar Performances of Keith Richards, Joan Jett, and Nile Rodgers," *Rock Music Studies* 7/2 (2020): 132–146; Adelt, "Let There Be Guitar: Rhythm Techniques in the Music of Malcolm Young, Maybelle Carter, and Bob Marley," *Rock Music Studies* 10/1 (2023): 1–15.
9. Adelt, "Electrifying the Beat," p. 132.
10. Allan F. Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (Ashgate, 2012), pp. 19–21.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
12. I argue elsewhere (Lewis, "Mothers and Sisters") that one of the multiple reasons for the continued popularity and ubiquity of the guitar, or as Waksman states, its assumption "to a position of relatively supremacy in the instrumental hierarchy of popular music" (Waksman, *Instruments of Desire*, p. 116), is due to the instrument's ability to navigate each of these functional textural layers, sometimes simultaneously, while in the hands of skilled player.
13. A playlist of the tracks discussed in this chapter can be found here: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6n6aUeIuQOg9RnCIYxCKhj?si=b4d7dcd4a0a645d8.
14. Jump blues is a style rooted in the blues tradition and characterized by a "twelve-bar boogie-woogie bass foundation overlaid with shuffle rhythms," typically played by a small combo; see Mellonee Burnim and Portia Maultsby, *African American Music: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2015), p. 242.
15. For a discussion of the development of guitar distortion in popular music, see Robert Palmer, "The Church of the Sonic Guitar," in *Present Tense: Rock & Roll and Culture*, edited by Anthony DeCurtis (Duke University Press, 1992), pp. 13–37, and Jan-Peter Herbst, "'My Setup is Pushing about 500 Watts – It's all Distortion': Emergence, Development, Aesthetics, and Intentions of the Rock Guitar Sound," *Vox Popular* 3/1 (2020).
16. Moore, *Song Means*, p. 25.
17. Steve Waksman, "The Turn to Noise: Rock Guitar from the 1950s to the 1970s," in Coelho, *Cambridge Companion to the Guitar*, pp. 111–112.
18. Moore, *Song Means*, p. 22.
19. Various sources relate the "Bo Diddley Beat" to the traditional African American "hambone" or "shave and a haircut" rhythm. For more information, see George R. White, *Bo Diddley: Living Legend* (Castle Communications, 1995).
20. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 25. Emphasis in original.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
24. Waksman, "The Turn to Noise," p. 113.

25. *Ibid*., p. 114.
26. *Ibid*., p. 115.
27. As a self-taught guitarist, Mayfield learned to tune his guitar using the black notes of the piano, resulting in playing in an F♯ major open tuning. From low to high, the string pitches are F♯, A♯, C♯, F♯, A♯, F♯. See Curtis Mayfield, *The Curtis Mayfield Guitar Songbook* (Alfred Publishing, 2007).
28. Michael Molenda (ed.), *50 Unsung Heroes of the Guitar* (Hal Leonard, 2011), p. 143.
29. Steve Waksman, "Contesting Virtuosity: Rock Guitar since 1976," in Coelho, *Cambridge Companion to the Guitar*, p. 122.
30. Moore, *Song Means*, p. 20.

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