

Final Paper Topic Proposal: Counterpoint of Freddie Green

In a discussion on the stylistic traits of swing-era guitar players, the topic often turns to the particular characteristics of a player's solo improvisatory techniques. For example, in the many books of transcriptions published on Charlie Christian, most if not all of the musical content focuses on his solo style; very little if any analysis or notation is devoted to his rhythm playing. In the case of Christian, this emphasis is partially due to his reputation as a pioneer in single-string solo jazz performance. Yet as one of only a few members of Benny Goodman's small groups, Christian certainly played his fair share of chordal accompaniment parts.

Numerous reasons possibly exist for the priority of solo improvisation over rhythm playing in the transcriptions and analyses of swing-era guitar players. For one, the "comping" of the guitarist is usually buried within the texture of the ensemble, especially in larger settings such as the big band. Moreover, the recording equipment of the day had a limited dynamic range and frequency response (as compared to modern technology) with which to capture the more subtle background sounds of the rhythm guitar. Also, solo lines are more clear, distinct, and melodic as compared to the constant sequence of note clusters in guitar chords. Thus the solo line presents itself as an easier target for transcription and analysis.

Even though transcription and analysis of swing-era rhythm guitar presents such apparent difficulties, the accompanimental role of the guitar player in an ensemble can be as if not more important than the guitar player's role as a soloist. Take for instance the role of Freddie Green in Count Basie's big band. Besides only a handful of examples, the entire work of Freddie Green during his circa 50-year association with the Basie big band centers on his rhythm playing. Affectionately dubbed "Mr. Rhythm," Freddie Green is hailed by many jazz historians and guitarists as the seminal rhythm guitar player in what was arguably the greatest rhythm section in the history of big-band jazz.

I would thus like to take a close look at the rhythm guitar playing of Freddie Green. Despite Green's stature as a father of rhythm guitar in big-band jazz, a fair amount of controversy surrounds the styles and techniques of his playing. Many transcriptionists posit three-note chord voicings for his rhythm playing, yet in an *Downbeat* magazine article from October 2000, Michael Pettersen argued that Green typically played only single notes instead of fuller sonorities. These "one-note chords," (to use Pettersen's seemingly oxymoronic term) allow the rhythm guitar to provide a rhythmic pulse for the ensemble without cluttering up the already thick harmonic texture.

Michael Pettersen and others have gone on to provide a fairly good selection of transcriptions of Freddie Green's playing via the internet. I am interested in not only taking a comprehensive approach to Freddie Green's rhythm playing through this stockpile of transcriptions, but also more closely investigating the validity of this "one-note chord" theory. Comparing and contrasting this "one-note chord" style versus more standard three- or four-note voicings also seems appropriate.

Furthermore, this "one-chord theory" brings up an interesting musical possibility to my mind. Specifically, as Freddie Green seems to emphasize a single note in his rhythm playing, the guitar suddenly appears to create a contrapuntal counterpart to the bass line. Both instruments, for example, often play a constant string of quarter notes. Of course, the rhythm guitar and bass player are doubtfully aware of the two-voice, first-species pseudo-counterpoint that arises from the combination of their lines, but I feel it is also worth looking into the more common patterns that occur between the instruments with regard to the harmonic changes.