

Classic Clapton

MASTER



CLASSES

Eric's Essential Licks

Of all the '60s guitar heroes, Eric Clapton has had the most consistent and enduring career. What better way to celebrate solo guitar than to explore a few of his classic licks?

To experience some early Yardbirds energy, try Ex. 1. Play it with a sharp, biting tone (a Tele cranked through a tube combo does the trick rather nicely). This lick—including the busy stuff—requires only two fingers. Clapton was never a fretboard gymnast. To this day, economy of motion, eloquent string bending, and fluid tone remain the hallmarks of his game. Notice the string skipping in the

By Andy Ellis



pickup notes (*G-D \flat*). It's a trademark Clapton maneuver, one you can use to kick off a variety of licks.

Ex. 1

(17)
♩ = 148 G7

3 B R

T
A
B

Ex. 2 is a typical Bluesbreakers-era turnaround. Unlike some modern-day guitar heroes who seem obsessed with movable scale forms, Clapton has never been afraid to incorporate open strings in his lead lines. Careful muting is required to prevent the open *D* (bar 1, beat four) from ringing into bar 2. Suggestion: Use the bottom side of your picking thumb. Note how the high *E* is first fretted and then played open. Shoot for a round, flutey tone. If you haven't heard *Blues Breakers with Eric Clapton*, run—don't walk—to your nearest record store and give your chill bumps a workout. Clapton used a Les Paul and a 45-watt "1962" model 2x12 Marshall combo to cast his magic spell. Much of the resulting rich distortion can be attributed to the amp's overdriven Celestion speakers, which were primitive by today's standards.

Ex. 2

♩ = 143 (17) E7 (17) E7 (v7) B7

T
A
B

Clapton's impassioned blues lines found a more progressive home on *Fresh Cream*; Ex. 3 is from this period. The opening phrase demonstrates the use of duplicate notes—the same pitch played consecutively in different positions. This technique allows you to maintain musical continuity while shifting from one fretboard region to another. Dig the final *slow* bend. Keep this *G \flat* to *G \sharp* transition in tempo, and make it smooth. Add vibrato once you complete the bend. Play the lick with an aggressive tone, using your treble pickup.

Ex. 3

(17) E7 *Sra* -----

♩ = 90

T
A
B

Ex. 4 dates from Clapton's psychedelic *Disraeli Gears* phase and illustrates his string-bending prowess. Hold the first note two full beats; add bold, quivering vibrato to the whole-step bend as soon as you reach pitch. The sliding figure in bar 2 (beats one and four) takes on dif-

ferent harmonic meanings when played first against *A7* and then *E7*. In the latter context, the *G♯* implies an *E7#9* chord. Shades of Jimi, yes? To recreate E.C.'s tripped-out tone, put your amp in overdrive and roll your pickup's tone pot fully counterclockwise, removing the highs. Experiment with neck and bridge pickup settings.

Ex. 4

(17)
A7

♩ = 110

(V7)
E7

etc.

Ex. 5 (also from the *Gears* era) contains another two-beat bend, this time executed on the second string. Again, hold the bend for its full rhythmic value and don't let the note go flat while you're shaking it. Give the *C♯* in bar 2 a microbend as you lead into the *A*. Play with a singing "woman tone."

In *Derek and the Dominos*, Clapton moved away from his fat violin timbres to embrace a more Buddy Guy-influenced, stinging Strat sound.

Ex. 6 is a turnaround from this period. The interval jumps in the triplet figures add melodic interest to the blues scale. You can apply this pattern—up a step, down a third (or fourth), up a step, down a third—to much longer phrases, too.

Ex. 5

(17)
A7

♩ = 110

B

Ex. 6

(V7)
E7

Lazy shuffle

♩ = 92

(17)
A7

etc.

**‘Make them
all wait for
the first
note of the
solo, and
then hit
exactly the
right note.’**

— Eric Clapton

Many feel that slow blues is Clapton's forte. In Ex. 7—which dates from early Cream—he uses both whole- and half-step bends to make his point. Watch the last bend: Move up to *E*₇ and then add vibrato—keep it pulsing for three beats. Use a sweet, singing tone.

Ex. 7

Slow blues
♩ = 60

15(17)15 13 16(18)16 13 15 15(16)15 13 15 13

14 14

9 8 10 8 10 8 8 10 8 10 8 (9)

Variations of Ex. 8 occur throughout Clapton's recorded work. Bar 2 demonstrates a variation of the duplicate note trick: Hit your target pitch; then, on the adjacent lower string, bend up to it from a whole-step below. Play this lick through a phase shifter or rotating-speaker effect to emulate the Blind Faith 335-through-Leslie sound.

To make Ex. 9 come alive, play it with an understated swing. Remember that Clapton always stretches time, pushing or dragging notes to create tension. It's impractical to notate such subtle rhythmic teasing, but here's a general rule for interpreting his licks: Hold bent notes a wee bit longer than written and make up for lost time in descending runs. Play this lick with the kind of raw Strat-and-screaming-tweed-Fender-Champ tone that Clapton favored in *The Layla Sessions* outtakes. ■

Ex. 8

12 15(17) 15 12 15 12 12 15 12 15(17)

13 12 15

Guitar Player associate editor Andy Ellis gave up a promising Nashville session career just so he could spread the word about rock and roll, blues, jazz, and other essential guitar subjects. He seldom regrets the decision.

Ex. 9

10 (11)10 8 10 10 (11)8 8 8 8 10 10

(V7)
G7

etc.