

**Don't Shoot the Guitar Player**  
**(The really funny thing about jazz guitarists jokes)**  
**by Jeffrey Miller – All rights reserved**

- *A gentleman is someone who knows how to play the banjo and doesn't.*
- *Question: What do you say to a bagpiper wearing a jacket and tie? Answer: "Will the defendant please rise?"*
- *Question: What do you call a thousand accordions at the bottom of the ocean? Answer: A good start*

Musician jokes usually target bagpipers, accordionists, and banjoists, at the borderline of music and cacophony. But among players in jazz ensembles, the guitarist has become the target of choice. Trombonists, apparently, come in second as popular objects of ridicule, but guitarists are ahead by twelve bars, at least – which, sure enough, is a jazz guitarist joke right there, indicting us for our supposed inclination to “come in early.”

I learned all this at the knee and other low joints of my Uncle Gene Smookler, who at 77 still plays in jazz bands and has been my musical mentor from the time I could bang a spoon on a high-chair. A reedman and flutist specializing in baritone sax, as well as a music teacher, he has played at the big hotels in Las Vegas and with the road bands of Buddy Rich and Woody Herman, and he features at bari on Herman's “Brand New.” Over the years, from on and off the road, he has sent me jokes, such as:

*Q: How do you make a guitarist play more quietly?*

*A: Put sheet music in front of him.*

*Q: How do you make him stop?*

*A: Put notes on it.*

*Q: What do you call two guitarists playing in unison?*

*A: Counterpoint.*

*Q: Did you hear about the guitarist who was in tune?*

*A: Neither have I.*

Personally, as a guitarist with more than five decades of experience, I've always thought the problem with conventional jazz guitarists isn't their playing, but their edgeless sound – their default preference for the warmed-up, buffed-down, rounded-off burr you get with archtop instruments, and usually Humbucker-type pick-ups and flat-wound strings. True enough, a rock-rigged Stratocaster can make complex chords jangle, but that's another essay. What I've responded to my uncle about the guitarist gags is, "Hey, man" (he likes to talk like it's still the 1960s; it makes us both feel young and, uh, with it), "you guys read one note at a time. We have to read as many as six, with four or five possible voicings for each chord, not counting all the possible inversions." And of course this doesn't count the many possible alternate tunings you could play those chords in.

You might think pianists have it tougher: they're obliged to read two different staves and clefs simultaneously, and theoretically can be called upon to read ten notes at once. But recall that each of the notes written for them specifies a single spot on their instrument. And when the score gives guitarists nothing but a chord symbol – as in vamping sections – should they play a six-note "barre" version? Four-fingered? Three? Near the headstock, for a lower timbre? An octave or two higher?

If these home truths provoke even a flicker of shame or sympathy in Uncle Gene, he hides it well, never mind that I bring up this sight-reading argument so as not to embarrass him more seriously with the real fundamentals.

Such as: Hey man, for horn players, 85 to 90 percent of the repertoire has to be in B-flat and E-flat. In what keys are their instruments tuned? B-flat and E-flat. What key is “Spanish tuning” – the standard guitar tuning? Let’s see, you’ve got two Es, a B, and an A, which so far is E suspended fourth, plus a D, so that now we’re at E seventh suspended, and a G – *et viola!* (as a saxophonist might put it): E minor seventh suspended. *E minor seventh suspended!* Even Don Ellis and Ornette Coleman did not write tunes in E minor seventh suspended, assuming that could be a key. Yet if a jazz guitarist so much as carries a capo (a clip that fits across the strings as a sort of instant transposer) in his case, he ain’t getting the gig, ... man. Ditto, if he uses a tweaked tuning – which, granted, jazz guitarists don’t generally do, probably because they are shamed out of even considering the idea: capos and alternate tunings are cheating, never mind that almost everyone else in the band is reading and playing one note at a time on a factory-tuned instrument. (*Question: Why do guitarists leave their capos on their dashboards? Answer: So they can park in the handicap spaces.*) Part of the cachet of jazz is that it’s hard – never mind that it’s mechanically much harder for some perfectly competent band-members than others.

Oh, and on that factory tuning point: not for us. (*Did you hear about the guitarist who played in tune?...*) We’re on our own, with six strings to keep in pitch under constant stress and attack. While key pads might leak and reeds crack, if we break a string we’re terminally out of tune – out of *the* tune, *kaput*.

When Uncle Gene was honing his jazz chops – in the late 1950s and early sixties – jazz guitarists were no joke. Those were the heydays of Herb Ellis, Tal Farlow, Joe Pass, Jim Hall, Wes Montgomery. *Downbeat*, which was specifically a jazz aficionado’s magazine back then, regularly featured them, as well as ads for electric guitars and accessories. I know because I regularly intercepted Uncle Gene’s copy out of Grandma’s mailbox, so that I could send away

for free catalogues from Framus with their exotic nine-string guitar, and for free picks from Ernie Ball, in three different widths, with YOUR NAME HERE stamped on them in red, green, and blue. All for the price of Grandma's stamp, so that I wouldn't have to use the little plastic clips that held her bread-bags closed. I think I'd collected nine (free) YOUR NAME HERE pick samples when Ernie Ball decided enough was too much.

So what happened with guitarists in the jazz community? Envy in the rest of the band, perhaps, misplaced as it might be? Once rock guitar moved from The Ventures and The Kingsmen to The Beatles to Clapton, Hendrix, and Townsend, the guitarist became a god, too often for how he looked playing rather than for how he played. He was a sex object, a fashion icon, a coolness template who couldn't read a chart. Having sweated bullets parsing out how many voicings he could find for an E-flat-minor ninth-augmented-fifth, the jazz guitarist gets perhaps an eight- or twelve-bar solo a night, maybe two of them if he's unusually lucky, and charts otherwise full of strum-strumma-strum beat-keeping accompaniment. (*Question: How can you tell that a guitarist is at your door? Answer: He knocks out of time, then comes in too early.*) Sexy is saxy, and maybe a trumpeter or a drummer.

As for jokes, apparently orchestral musicians like to laugh at viola players. Among guitarists generally, folk strummers seem to fare better than their jazz counterparts. After all, you can spot the folk guitarist even when he's not playing, because he's the guy with the \$50 car and the \$2000 instrument.