
It might be best to start with what this DVD is not. Most important, this is not a useful DVD for either individual beginning players or for classroom instruction.

It is an idiosyncratic folk/blues instructional method using the “CAGED system” to play and ornament melodies. In this system, the player can use any one of the chord fingerings (used on the strings used in first position) that form the acronym “CAGED” on any fret to play melodies.

Understanding that chord forms can be repeated up the fretboard is an important concept for advancing guitar players. In the December 2007 issue of Guitar World, “The Alchemical Guitarist” column covered exactly this subject, but did it by following the order of fourths (EADGC), and discussing the fourth/fifths relationships in a way that references standard theory and gives an overview of how this process works.

On the DVD, Marcy Marxer approaches this aspect of guitar playing on a per-song/per-ornament basis. I found this confusing, first because I didn’t already know the melodies she used, and secondly because the overview that would have made the process more understandable for me wasn’t there.

Other problems with the DVD include imprecise or incompletely explained musical terms. Major and minor scale patterns aren’t adequately defined, and speaking about major seventh chords without defining them is unfair to the learner. Defining “chromatic” as “not skipping any frets” is not technically an error, but it would be better to explain it as moving scalewise by half step. A diagram of the cycle of fifths on the DVD is devised in the conventional way, moving clockwise by fifth, but in the accompanying booklet is shown moving counterclockwise by fifth. Better to have consistency.

Music theory can be a daunting subject, and explaining it in a DVD format is a real challenge. For some people, approaching theory on a “How can I use this in a song?” rather than a “How does this whole thing work?” basis may work well. In my opinion, however, Marxer’s method would work best with a live teacher to answer the questions it raises, rather than being presented in DVD format.

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An Overview of Electronic Instruments is a valuable record of the development of technology-based music performance. The DVD menus are clear and easy to navigate, and the product is usable in any standard DVD player. While this product does not directly address the most recent forms of technology, it is an important item that links the current state of music technology to the past.

Don Muro, a recognized expert in music performance technology, has been intimately involved in that area for several generations of its development. Muro’s personal connection to music performance technology lends an interesting perspective to the practical concerns of electronic musicians.

The first section of the DVD, “An Overview of Electronic Instruments,” was originally released in 1988, and has been remastered for the DVD format. In this section, Muro offers clear, concise descriptions of the functionality of the electronic instruments available in the late 1980s such as keyboard synthesizers, samplers, drum computers, and outboard effects devices. He also provides examples of how each instrument or device is used and the types of sounds it produces.

The second section, “Performing with Synthesizers: A Personal Perspective” is Muro’s account of his involvement in the development of electronic instruments. He tracks the progress of instruments according to their polyphonic capabilities, programmability, and portability. This section is a fascinating look into the needs of a master performer from his use of the Moog modular synthesizer through modern polyphonic instruments such as the Korg M1. Finally, an “Extras” section features archival footage of Muro’s electronic performances.

An Overview of Electronic Instruments does not address the most recent developments in technology, such as computer-based sequencers and synthesizers. It is therefore not recommended as a tool to demonstrate those technologies. However, as new technologies develop, it is important that students understand the complexity of electronic instruments and connect modern tools with their predecessors. An Overview of Electronic Instruments offers a glimpse into the world of music technology before computers were powerful enough to be the primary tool of electronic musicians, and may help the current generation of technology-immersed young people comprehend development of this field. This DVD is an excellent historical record of early electronic instruments and would be valuable for teachers and students interested in preserving that history.

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