

No Pain, More Gain

Get the best out of your playing while avoiding strain and injury

(NB- this article is compiled from a variety of sources, and the author is not a trained physiotherapist. Under no circumstances perform these – or indeed any other- exercises if they cause pain)

It might not always feel like it, but the pain reflex is a vital part of our physical and psychological makeup, protecting us from harm. The idea of “fighting through” the pain in order to achieve your goals has moved into the popular psyche from the sports world, but for musicians who need to be able to make small, delicate, fast and frequent movements, pain is a vital warning sign. The limits are much closer, and extreme caution needs to be exercised when “pushing the envelope”.

Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI for short) and specifically the sub group of RSI known as Carpal Tunnel Syndrome (CTS) is one of the biggest bugbears of musicians, and guitarists in particular are especially vulnerable to CTS. Carpal Tunnel Syndrome occurs when the median nerve, a major nerve which runs down the arm and forearm is compressed in the carpal tunnel area of the wrist, leading to pain and loss of mobility.

So, what can we do to ensure progress without damage? Well, in essence, it's fairly simple- the keyword is RELAX! The more you tense up, the more chance there is of you doing your finger, hand, wrist and arm muscles damage. Relax, ensure there's no stiffness and tension anywhere in your forearm. I often talk to my students about having a “drunk wrist” or “shaking water of your wrist” as a good picking hand warm up for both rhythm and lead playing. You are in greatest danger of contracting CTS when the forearm muscles are tensed up, occupying more space within the carpal tunnel itself and therefore compressing that vital median nerve within the tunnel. So, relaxez-vous, and you'll keep playing for longer.

And not just longer, but better. Let's look at this logically- in order to play fast and accurately, you need to be able to make small, accurate, controlled movements. Tense your arm and try and play a simple chromatic line along the E string accurately when your centre of movement is the shoulder.

Tricky, isn't it?

Now, relax all your arm and now make the wrist your centre of movement. Make a conscious effort to stay as loose and relaxed as possible, staying stock still and moving only what you need. Play the chromatic line again- should feel noticeably easier.

It really is worth scrutinising your technique to look for potential problem areas. Anywhere you're tensing up is a warning sign that something is wrong. There are a couple of potential culprits:

- 1) Picking too hard. I've lost count of the number of students I've seen almost trying to saw the string in two with their picks. A confident, clear attack is good, but trying to beat the guitar to death with a plectrum is inadvisable. Try lightening your touch, you'll sound and play better.
- 2) Squeezing too hard- applying too much pressure with your fretting hand. All this does is push the string downwards or upwards, bending the notes sharp and

- making chords sound out of tune. Frustrating, painful – but easily curable.
- 3) Posture- one of the most fundamental parts of playing the guitar well is getting a good grip on the neck. There are two extremes of grip- the so-called “correct” method, where the thumb sits straight up at the base of the neck, and the “baseball bat” grip beloved of blues players (check out Jimi Hendrix) with the thumb gripping over the top of the neck. Contrary to what some people might say, there is no perfect grip. There would be, if every guitar and every guitarist was the same shape and size, but experimentation, trial and error is the only way. Just be aware that the thumb is a major factor in comfortable playing.

Exercises:

Athletes warm up and stretch before they do whatever misguided strenuous physical exertions it is that they do- so why shouldn't we? The principals are the same- making quick, efficient accurate movements with a high degree of speed and control. Both these exercises should help to ensure a loose wrist and no compression of the median nerve.

- 1) Stretch your arm out in front of you with the fingers pointing upwards and the palm facing outwards (as if you're trying to stop traffic..). With your free hand, pull back gently but firmly on your fingertips and bend the hand back towards the body. **DO NOT OVERSTRAIN**. Now keep the arm extended whilst pointing the fingers down and do the same exercise. It works equally well on both hands.
- 2) (a development of exercise 1- ensure you perform all movements slowly and deeply) Once again, begin with the arm stretched out in front of you, fingers pointing upwards toward the ceiling. Now, fold your hand over until the fingers are flat against the palm. Then clench the fingers into a fist, hold them and then splay the fingers out, feeling each stretch. As with the previous exercise, repeat six times with each hand.

You can, and should, work some warm up/ stretching exercises into your practice regime. Even one minute before and after can work wonders in preventing the RSI demon from rearing its ugly head, which will keep you playing better, sounding better and keeping going for longer. Always a good thing...