

Historical Development Jazz Guitar

Stylistic analysis of Julian Lage's solo guitar improvisations at Denison University

Julian Lage is a renowned North-American guitarist, composer, and producer. He was born on December 25, 1987, in Santa Rosa, California.

Lage has been around for a long time now, first known for being the protagonist of a documentary released in 1996 called "Jules at Eight" where he's portrayed in his early years as a child prodigy.

One can already notice him involved not only with music but also with the instrument itself. To help understand more about his musical background a [short fragment](#) from this documentary depicts him playing an excerpt from a classical Bach piece while holding the guitar backwards as Jimi Hendrix used to do. Later in the fragment he's also playing blues guitar phrasing and licks.

Fast forward a couple of years, we can see an artist that carries in his shoulders the whole tradition of guitar playing, and applies all of this knowledge in real-time solo guitar improvisation.

It's evident that his approach to solo playing seems to be organized not only by the harmonic ideas and form of the song itself but also by the techniques that he applies to the instrument, most of them related historically to North-American traditional music genres (jazz, bluegrass, country, folk, rock, blues) and also to European traditional genres (classical and gypsy).

Thanks to the wide variety of techniques he uses in his right hand, he's able to offer a palette of different sounds and landscapes that make his playing amazing and unique.

For this essay I will mainly use as a reference two videos of Julian playing solo guitar at Denison University, where he performs the classics "[Autumn Leaves](#)" and "[Alone Together](#)".

I believe both videos are a great example of Julian's mastery, where it feels like he was able to give a clear picture of all the amazing things that can be achieved in the instrument.

In the aforementioned he uses a Manzer guitar that is designed to play out without worry of feedback, and with enough sensitivity to have a live acoustic tone.

Also, [one more video](#) where he's playing "After You've Gone" with the guitarist Armand Hirsch (who ended up being Lage's producer for his last three records) will be used mostly to expose Lage's knowledge of Gypsy guitar. The video consists of a duo setting recorded in a completely informal situation.



Julian Lage with his Manzer guitar

The dynamics game

If you listen closely to Lage's playing, the first thing you notice is that his dynamic range is something he has taken care of.

Every note that he plays has a different intention depending on what he wants to transmit in that specific moment. In an [interview](#) he was asked how conscious he was about his sense of dynamics:

"I think it's as simple as that I'm a sucker for as wide a dynamic range as you can have on the guitar. I love Django Reinhardt, for example, who is the most unbelievably dynamic, fluid and dramatic player. I'm drawn to players that have a sense of drama, ones that know how to drip you and make you feel like the end of their solo coincides with the end of the world! I think you're either drawn to that style or you have other ways of achieving drama."

Even though Julian gives a clear example about Django being his reference in terms of dynamics when he plays, I believe that there's also a really heavy classical guitar influence drawn and implied in that way of playing. It may be because Django's music was also heavily influenced by classical music.

Both videos from the Denison University are flooded with clear examples of how Lage works with dynamics, but there's a specific moment during the Autumn Leaves video ([4:06 - 4:11](#)) where he shifts from *pianissimo* to a sudden and scary *fortissimo*. It's not only about the drama that he mentions but I reckon it's also sometimes about the sense of humor and spontaneity that he has.

There's also another example from Alone Together, where he plays a really long musical idea with dynamics that flow like waves in the sea ([1:11 - 2:16](#)).

This shows us how vital is for him the concept of playing dynamically because it allows him to trigger different ideas and musical textures and also to stretch the amount of time he's developing one idea.

The gypsy influence

Earlier in the essay we learnt that one of Julian's influences, as he states, is Django Reinhardt. Even though he mentions him while explaining his sense of dynamics, Lage has not only taken that aspect from him but also much more.

The first thing we notice in the video is that even though both of them are playing unplugged, Lage's sound and attitude are definitively louder. This is not because he chose to be a poser, or because the other guitar player is shy... this is because he's using the most adequate technique for this type of setting: the gypsy picking.

The main characteristic of this picking technique is the flat wrist position resulting in a nasal, brilliant and thick sound that can be achieved not only while playing normal speed lines but also really fast ones.



Julian in Norfolk, CT

In Julian's case, he's not adopting a strict flat-wrist position, but still he's able to perfectly evoke that gypsy sound.

From a physical perspective, it seems that he is mostly inclining his technique towards a bluegrass kind of picking (which we are going to talk about later). But that doesn't take away the fact that the sound and the lines are objectively reminiscent of the Django sonority. All the video is a demonstration of how he speaks the Gypsy language: the melody, the improvisation and the accompaniment are perfectly inside the genre without any alien sonorities invading.

In the Alone Together video ([2:00-2:17](#)) we can observe a clear example of that sonority in a completely improvised context that doesn't relate at all with gypsy music.

This shows us what a genius he is: although he is able to fully speak the Gypsy language, he chooses not to use it in a literal way and only presents small traces of it in his music.



Julian Bream, the amazing classical guitar player that Lage seems to really look up for

A classical point of view

Let's start with a quote from Julian extracted from an [interview](#) after they asked him about his album "World's Fair":

"(...) Segovia is my hero. He and Julian Bream are just the greatest. It's funny; when I was younger, I thought I wasn't smart enough to like him. I thought his playing was the ultimate in virtuosity. But then when I started listening to him, as I got older, I thought, "This is music I could just put on in my house and listen to all day." There was no elitism; it was just such rich music. There was also a legitimacy that Segovia brought to the guitar as a concert instrument. He made it so it was no longer this weakling trying to fit in with an orchestra, but also not this bombastic thing.

What he did was on par with someone sitting down at a Steinway piano. So that was the inspiration: I wanted to make a record that I would want to listen to in the background. I also wanted to keep it consistent with having three to four minute songs I could play for anybody and not have to say, "Oh, I wish you could hear this with a bass player."

Segovia's probably the all-time greatest example of that. I don't pretend to think I'm on his level, and I'm also coming at it from a very different angle, but I do think it's worth striving for. As for the Joe Pass and Martin Taylor School of solo guitar, those guys are insane! They're so good. I also have enough respect for them to realize I don't do what they do; and that since it already exists at such a high level, I should do something different."



Andrés Segovia, was a Spanish virtuoso classical guitarist. Many professional classical guitarists were either students of Segovia or students of Segovia's students

At first sight, the classical influence is extremely evident in the harmonic decisions, the counterpoint, basically everything that happens in his left hand. But to carry out such puzzles in the left hand you have to first of all have a right hand that can handle them.

The way he solved playing block chords and counterpointal melodies is basically similar to the classical approach: 4 fingers. The main difference is that he never let go of his plectrum. So he ends up playing a perfectly crafted and clear hybrid picking: consists in holding the plectrum with the thumb and index while using the rest of the fingers as strumming devices as well.

Some examples:

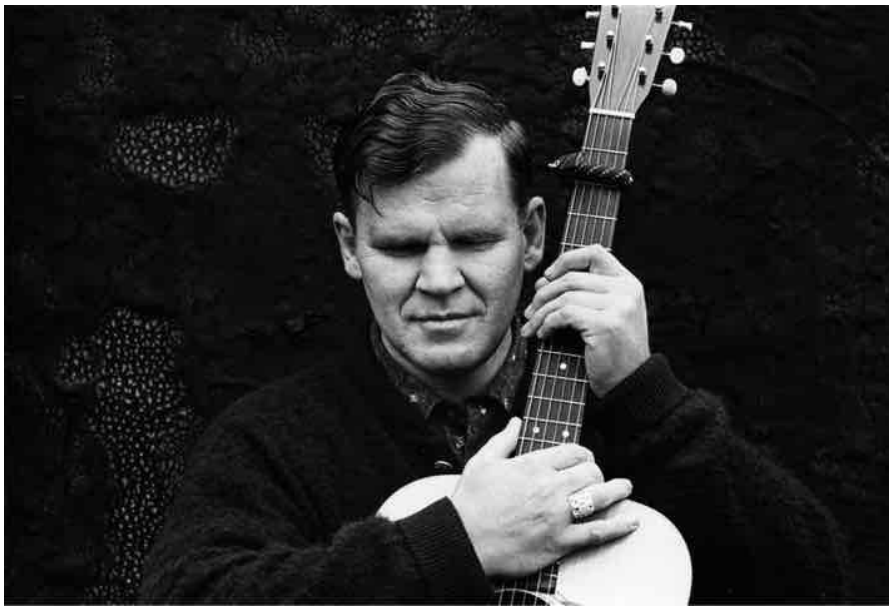
The Autumn Leaves rendition starts with a friendly and beautiful progression played all with hybrid picking. ([0:00 - 0:53](#))

In Alone Together there's a really unconventional way of using it. He strums steady quarter notes with the plectrum while with his pinky finger he plays a polyrhythm. ([3:23 - 3:28](#))

North-American tradition

The north-american traditional way of playing guitar is, in my opinion, the core of what Julian Lage is evoking when he plays solo guitar.

As I mentioned before, his picking technique motion seems to be working exactly as the one of a bluegrass player. The plectrum does a diagonal up-down motion but everytime the pick hits the string, it gets out of the way in order to be available immediately to strum the next string. At the same time he uses his right's hand pinky finger as an anchor.



Doc Watson (March 3, 1923 – May 29, 2012) was an American guitarist, songwriter, and singer of bluegrass, folk, country, blues, and gospel music. He was one of the most important cross-pickers

This type of picking is called “crosspicking” or “flatpicking” and as in a [video](#) that the guitar player and educator Troy Grady explains, it seems like it's the perfect technique to achieve an instant and clear response between the right hand and the left hand. He also states that every guitar player should have this technique available in his pocket.

In the beginning of bluegrass music, as it happened also with jazz, the guitar was used to provide rhythm and harmony to the fiddle players, which used to play in a breakneck tempo that was of course very difficult for guitar players to handle when it came to playing single note phrases.

The first one to introduce crosspicking it's said to be George Shuffler from the Stanley Brothers, but without a doubt one of the greatest influences for bluegrass players is Doc Watson (1923-2012).

The crosspicking technique is really present in North-American music, and even a “flatpicking” contest is held every year in Winfield, Kansas.

In the Alone Together video we can see Julian crosspicking with amazing precision for almost a minute ([1:12 - 2:00](#))

In the same video ([4:57 - 5:15](#)) he plays some intense chord picking that resembles also to folk music.


And he also plays some country right hand ([6:22 - 6:33](#)).

Guitar Etude #1

Julian Lage
Guitar Etude Video Blog (2010)

Music by Julian Lage

$\text{♩} = 140$
[A1]
This etude focuses on irregular string-skipping picking for the right hand, and on fingering transitory chord positions for the left hand, all set in a very fast tempo.
— Let none of the arpeggiated chords ring, unless notated otherwise, yet without staccating each note (tenuto).
— Play with a pick.



Julian himself wrote a piece called "[Etude 1](#)" that is intended to play with a not-so-strict Crosspicking technique, since he sometimes makes variations in the down-up picking motion. The main goal of the piece is working the big skips between strings and maintaining a nice sound and articulation.

In the [same interview](#) I mentioned before about his record "World's Fair", Julian said:

"The same is true with the rhythmic propulsion on the record. I purposely stayed away from playing anything with a swing feel, because I didn't think solo guitar was the format for me to play swing. Instead, I incorporated things like Travis-picking styles and doo-wop styles. That feel is also a big part of what gives the music a location. So it wasn't a conscious thing, but I was around people who did that very naturally and maybe I took it for granted. "



Merle Travis: singer and songwriter of major proportions and guitar stylist of monumental influence. Also proved himself adept as an actor, author and even cartoonist. He was respected and prominent enough to have the instrumental style, 'Travis picking,' named after him.

This is clear evidence of the nearness and fondness he has with North-American folk music. In a [Facebook video](#) he uploaded, he also recommends learning travis-picking to his students/viewers.

Some closing remarks

By choosing to play solo guitar Julian puts himself in a large tradition of jazz guitar players that did the same: Django Reinhardt, George Van Eps, Dick McDonough, to name but a few. All of them strongly influenced by the classical guitar solo playing approach. What makes the difference between Lage's performance and the other guitarists named previously is that he seems to be taking decisions in real-time and not playing a pre-arranged version of the songs.

In a video of Julian giving a [masterclass](#) he states that he goes through 10 different improvised arrangements for every song that he's going to play alone, which basically means that he has in his mind around 30 different versions of the A section of Autumn Leaves or Alone Together. After that, it's just a matter of organizing and varying the material in different ways.

This is the reason why in his playing we can find so much freshness and unpredictability.

It's like he has an orchestra at his disposal that can perform any particular musical idea that goes through his mind in full detail: counterpoint, dynamics, textures....

The fact that he's able to improvise real-time arranging with such fluidity is extraordinary and we may not be able to still understand how unique and complex this approach is.

Julian Lage is going to remain forever an icon not only of jazz guitar but also solo guitar, and I reckon it's just a matter of time until we start seeing how his approach influences other guitar players and musicians in general. In his playing we can find everything that this music asks for: freedom of ideas, clarity and a unique voice.

References

Fragment of Documentary “Jules at Eight”

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Denison University solo fragments “Alone Together” and “Autumn Leaves”

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<https://www.guitarworld.com/features/acoustic-nation-julian-lage-discusses-new-solo-guitar-album-worlds-fair>

Julian Lage’s Etude #1

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<https://dsapresents.org/guitar/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Guitar-String-Skipping-Etude.pdf>

From Doc Watson to Carl Miner: the power of bluegrass crosspicking (Troy Grady)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMGwH5As72g&t=689s&ab_channel=TroyGrady

Julian Lage and Armand Hirsch Jam over “After You’ve Gone”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0OFoNgMPCA0&ab_channel=JavierSpicer

Julian Lage technique masterclass fragment (Facebook)

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=706200930088318>

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Andrés Segovia bio information

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