8 Steps To Slaying The Speed Demon: Speed Picking Secrets For Jazz Guitar

by Stuart King and Greg O'Rourke
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About The Authors:

Stuart King



Stuart is a guitarist with over 20 years experience as a performer in many varied contexts, ranging from classical through to contemporary styles, musical theater, and jazz.

In 2005 Stuart graduated from the Canberra School of Music, Australian National University with a Bachelor of Music as a jazz performance major.

These days Stuart performs regularly around Canberra as a band leader, sideman, session guitarist and solo jazz and acoustic guitarist. Stuart has performed with the Canberra Symphony Orchestra on various occasions and has performed with many notable Australian jazz musicians including Mike Price, Ben Hauptmann, Carl Dewhurst, Lucinda Peters, and Luke Sweeting. Find out more about Stuart at www.stuartkingmusic.com

Greg O'Rourke



Award winning Australian guitarist Greg O'Rourke received his Bachelor Of Music Honours degree in 2006, and was a scholarship holder at the Australian National University School Of Music. Greg's main speciality is jazz guitar, which he teaches about on his website www.FretDojo.com.

Greg's versatile ability on the guitar is credit to several teachers he has studied with over the years, including Mike Price and Don Andrews, well known performers and teachers in the Australian jazz guitar scene, as well as more recently studying with internationally acclaimed jazz guitarist and teacher Matt Warnock. Greg also undertook extensive study with Tim Kain, one of Australia's leading classical guitar performers and teachers.

Greg has given prizewinning performances at the Australian National University Chamber Music Competition, and was awarded 1st prize in the Chamber Music division of the 2004 Australian International Guitar Competition. Greg currently enjoys a busy career, comprising of teaching online and offline, performing and collaborating with other Australian artists.

Introduction

Hi, Greg here! I'm pretty excited today.

There's a good reason for this:

I was lucky to pin down my good friend and virtuoso guitarist **Stuart King** to record a lesson on how jazz guitarists can build their speed picking.

Why did I pick this topic?

Because learning to play lines fast is a **critical skill** for any jazz guitarist.

Besides being a great all round musician and a top jazz guitarist (and a nice bloke to boot), Stuart is endowed with incredible chops.

He's simply the fastest guitarist I've played with to date.

At the time of writing, Stuart and I had have been busy working on Stuart's debut jazz guitar album *Qualia*.

During our mixing session, I was able to nab Stuart for a few hours in the video studio, and I'm so glad I did.

As you'll see in the lesson video (link below), it's resulted in a sensational how-to-guide on building speed – you're going to enjoy this one.

It turns out Stuart is one of those ‘hidden guitar yogis’, who has quietly worked out an incredible shortcut to boosting your speed and accuracy on the guitar.

Since recording the video, I’ve been practicing Stuart’s approaches daily.

After one week of following the step-by-step process in this lesson, I’ve noticed a **significant boost in my maximum speed,** and my speed picking accuracy has increased as well.

Without further ado, let’s get into it!

Click here to view the video lesson>>

Why Do I Want To Learn To Play So Fast Anyway?

There's no doubt about it:

Whether you are interested in shredding it up or not, any serious study of jazz guitar **requires** an ability to play fast tempos.

Why?

The majority of single line solos by the jazz guitar greats are stuffed full of double time runs that are often tricky to play.

So, if your chops aren't up to the job, you're missing out on being able to incorporate critically important jazz guitar vocabulary into your playing.

That's not all:

If you can play quickly, you'll be able to *think* more quickly when you improvise.

This means that you'll have a greater ability to be more creative when you solo,**regardless of the tempo,** as your *mind* will be working faster.

Now that I've convinced you why you need to get your speed picking up to scratch, here's what *not* to do…

The WRONG Approach

Like what Stuart mentioned in the video above, I myself have always had issues with building speed.

Here's the typical approach when it comes to guitar speed exercises:

Take a passage and practice it over and over, bumping up the metronome 1 to 5 bpm at a time, gradually increasing the speed until you reach your desired tempo.

But…**It doesn't work.**

Most of my colleagues and students I've talked to about this approach describe a **threshold** that, upon reaching it, is impossible to get past.

But there's another way.

Initially, Stuart was unwilling to part with his hidden secrets about speed picking……but I got them out of him eventually.
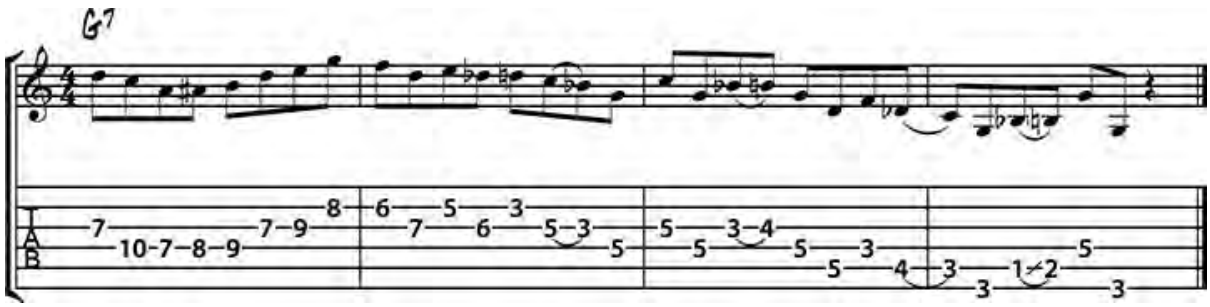
Read on for his method in all its glory!

(Hint: Fast forward the video to the time code (in green) to get to the spot in the lesson video that demonstrates the steps below.)

Step 1: Presenting The Sprinting Technique (4:04)
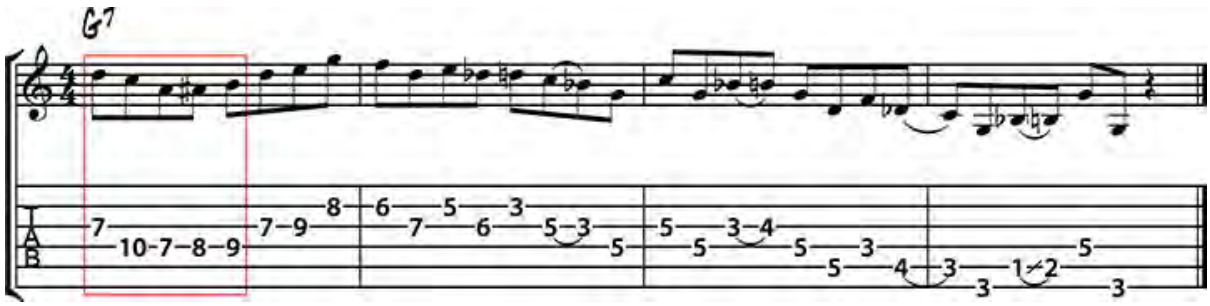
To get started, choose a lick that you want to practice building your speed picking with. Ideally, a longer line will be the most useful to study. Try to stick with **just one lick initially** – you'll see why later.

Here's the one that Stuart was using in the video above:



As Stuart describes in the video, a **'sprint'** is: *"…a short burst of fast notes, interspersed by slower notes either side."*

To start building your chops with the Sprinting Technique, take the first 5 notes out of this lick and isolate it:



Why 5 notes?

The reason:

You want the cell to **start and end on a downbeat.**

Practice this short cell of notes at a slow tempo a few times until you get the hang of it before moving to the next step.

Step 2: Choose Your 'Target Tempo' (5:55)

What you need to do now is choose a fast tempo that you'd ideally like to become comfortable at.

Stuart refers to this as your **'target tempo'.**

We aren't talking about bumping your tempo up only 10 bpm.

You want a tempo where you could keep up with Pat Martino at least:

Stuart chose **150bpm** as the target tempo in this video, because you won't often find double time licks played much faster than that in jazz.

If you can play 16th notes at 150bpm, you should be pretty comfortable with most tunes and transcriptions.

Ok, let's not mess around:

You're going to learn to play at this tempo *right now.*

"Whaaaat?!? But I could never play that fast!"
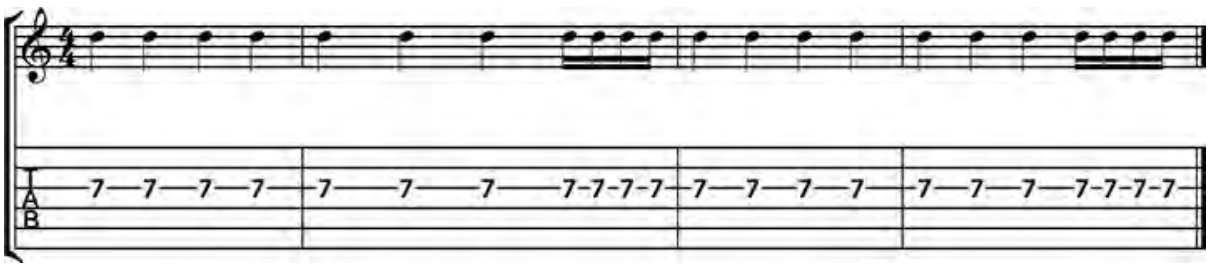
Never fear my friend.
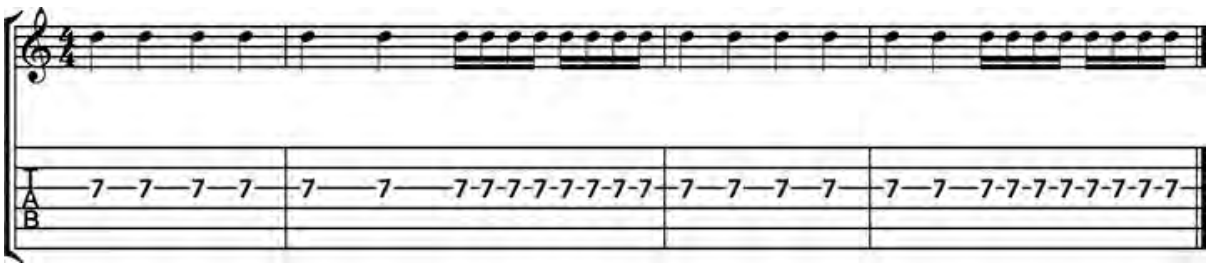
At the end of this lesson, you'll be carving it up like there's no tomorrow.
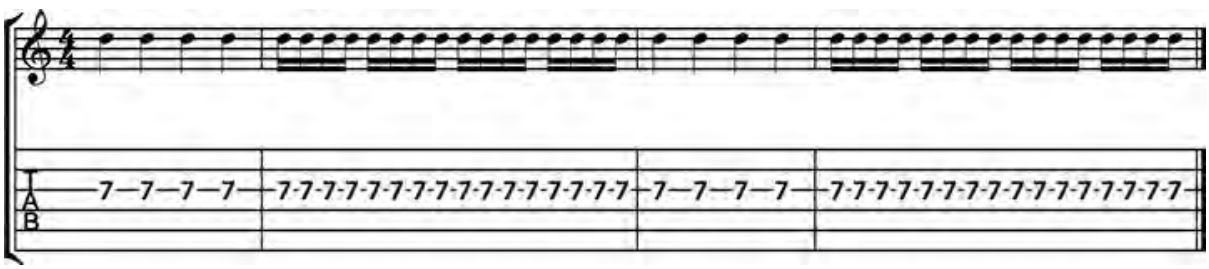
Let's take these guitar speed exercises step-by-step.

As Stuart demonstrates in the lesson video above, first practice 'sprinting' at your target tempo with **tremolo speed picking** on just the first note of the 5 note cell, along with a**metronome.**

Here are a few exercises to show you what I mean:







Speed building isn't so much about building muscles as it is about being able to **hear fast tempos.**

The above exercises are pretty straightforward, but make sure that you're nailing the notes on each downbeat **precisely** along with a metronome.

These are really **ear training exercises** to get you familiar with moving at a fast tempo.

Notice how on either side of the 16th note sprints in each exercise, you play **simple quarter notes** on each downbeat.

This helps you verify you actually did, in fact, nail the sprint with rhythmic accuracy.

It's easy to think that you've played a sprint rhythmically in time, but…

…you can make subtle errors that will, when it comes to playing a longer sprint, start to skew you away from the metronome.
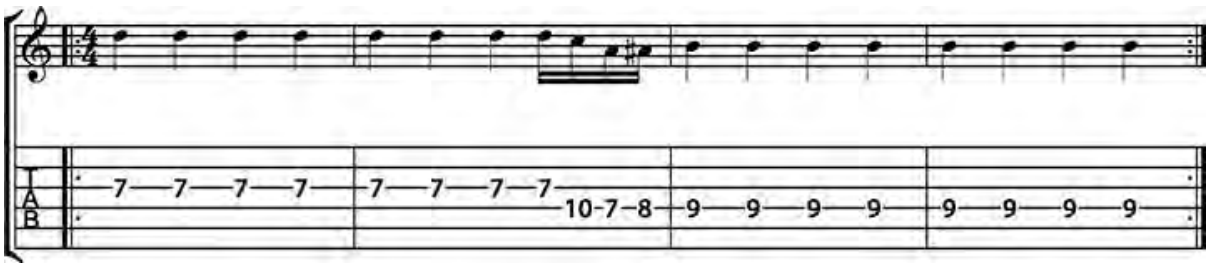
Playing quarter notes either side of the sprint helps you avoid this problem, forcing you to zero in on the beat.

Onwards to Step 3…

Step 3: Sprint on the First 5 Note Cell At Your Target Tempo (8:12)

Now that you've gotten used to the target tempo of 150bpm on a single note, the next step is to take the 5 note cell we isolated and use the Sprinting Technique on *that*.

Remember to pump out those quarter notes before and after each sprint. This will help you check if you're getting the sprints rhythmically in time. Here's an example:
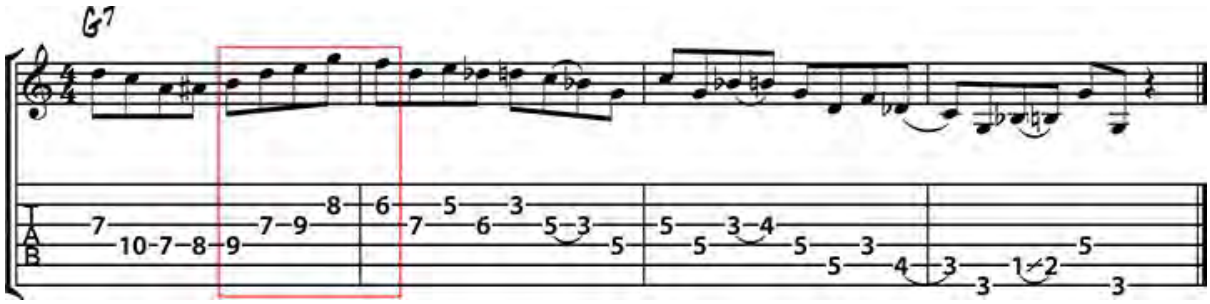


If you aren't sure you're playing the sprints exactly in time with the metronome, **record yourself** using an audio recorder or smartphone and check how accurate your rhythm is.

An important point to mention here: **Don't worry** if you're technique is a bit messy, i.e. missing strings or hitting wrong strings with your pick as you play the sprint. Ignore all that for now, **we'll clean it up later.**
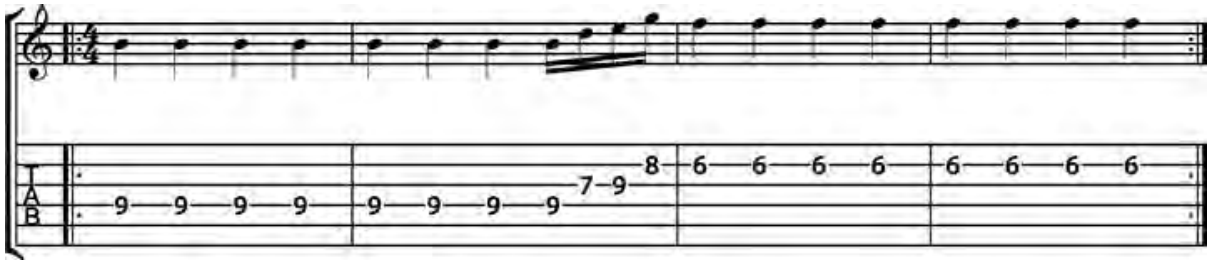
Just focus on developing your rhythmic awareness of the **target tempo,** regardless of any technical flaws.

Step 4: Isolate The Next 5 Note Cell – Rinse And Repeat (8:35)

Now that you've used the Sprinting Technique on the first cell, **isolate the next cell** of the lick and repeat the process:
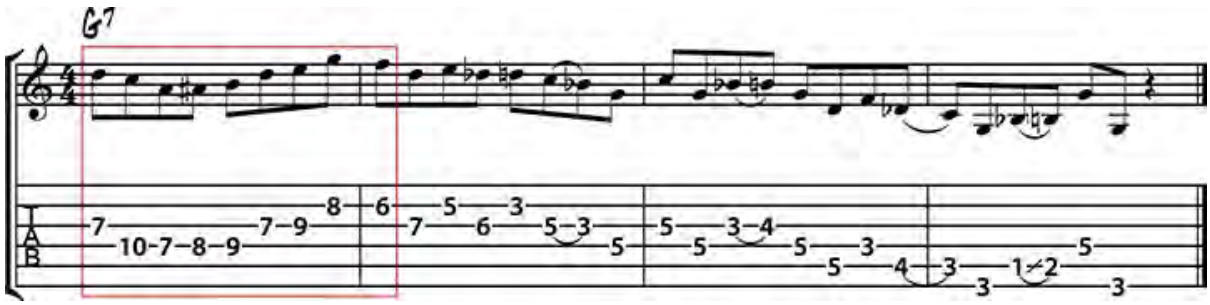


Here's how you would practice a sprint with this cell:



Step 5: Start to Glue The Cells Together (9:08)
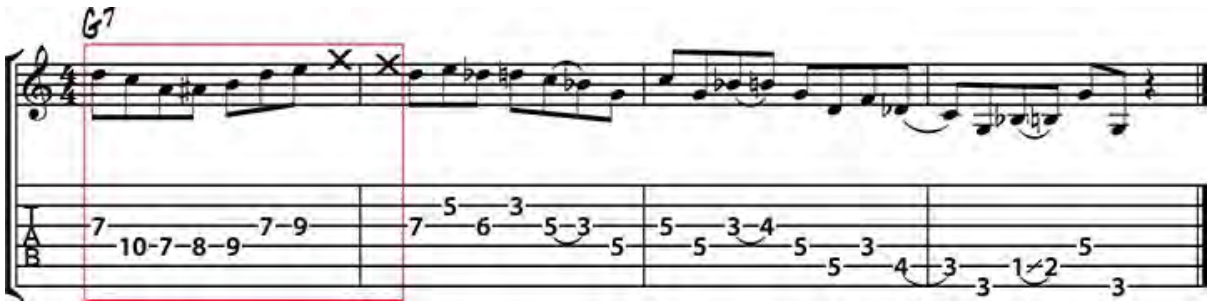
Now we have two ‘chunks’ out of the lick that you can play pretty quickly. I want you to now glue them together, to make a **longer sprint:**



This is where things can get tricky. It can be a struggle to be able to play a longer sprint like this at a fast tempo like 150 bpm.

But if you can’t play them together – *don’t* slow down the metronome!

Instead, take a couple of notes temporarily off the end of the sprint and try again:



Once you can play this shorter version of the sprint, add the notes back on that you removed and it should start to work for you.

In this way, work through the lick, one 5 note cell at a time.

Then, gradually combine them until you have cobbled together the entire lick at the target tempo.

Here's the thing:

You're likely going to find that the lick still won't sound that good and you are dropping notes, playing messy and generally struggling.

Don't stress – the point of this exercise so far is not to have clean speed picking…*yet.*

We'll sort that out later.

For now, you're just trying to train your ears to hear that fast target tempo of 150 bpm.

Read on, because Stuart has a great trick here when you get to this point, and things start to get mind-bendingly interesting…

Step 6: Drop the Tempo to 80% Of Your Target Tempo (10:54)

At this point, notice how Stuart on the lesson video took the tempo down from 150bpm to 140bpm.

He was able to play the lick pretty cleanly at that slower tempo. In his own words, it was like he was:

"…only playing at 80% of my ability."

Now here's the thing:

What if you can make your *target tempo* (in this case 150bpm), 80% of your ability?

You can.

You just need to train your ears to hear a tempo much faster than 150bpm, which is what you're going to do next.

Step 7: Ramp Up The Tempo Beyond Your Wildest Dreams (12:46)

"190 bpm? Are you mad??"

Trust me, it's **going to work.**

Attempt to either play the full lick or some 5 note sprints at 190 bpm or at a similar, incredibly unrealistic, fast tempo. Go to 150% of your ability at least.

As you can see in the video, Stuart failed miserably at 190bpm, but that's not the point.

What you're really doing here is **tricking your mind** into thinking that 150 bpm is actually a pretty reasonable tempo.

Spend some time with this. Put your ego aside and be prepared to bomb out at this insane speed. Ignore your lack of accuracy or not being able to play the whole lick.

Just keep focusing on those metronome clicks and see if you can generally approximate that stupidly fast tempo.

On to the final step…

Step 8: Now Go Back To Your Target Tempo (14:06)

Once you've suffered for a while at 190bpm, it's time to chill out.

Wind the metronome back down to an easygoing 150bpm.
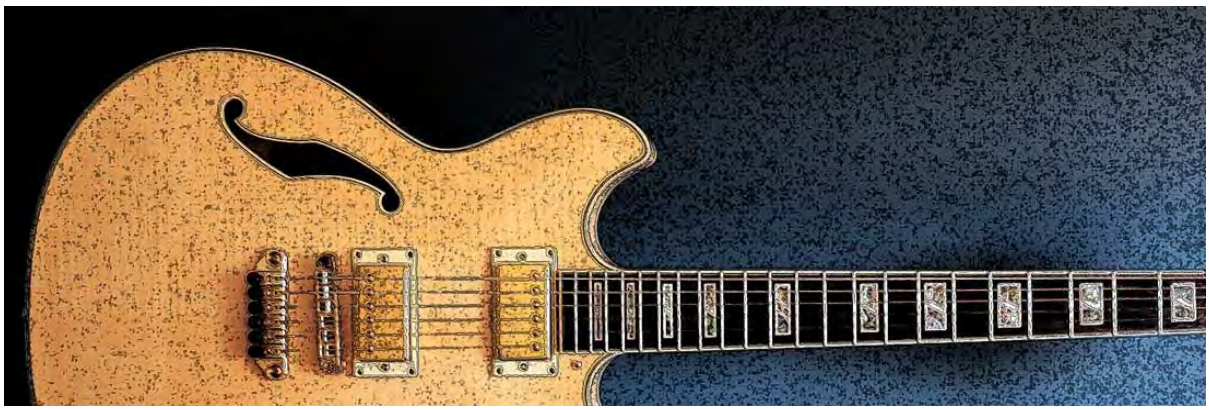
Ah…luxury!

See how much more comfortable 150bpm feels then the crazy tempo we attempted in the last step.

You might surprise yourself at this point how easy it will feel to play at a tempo which was, just minutes before, a real struggle.

I couldn't believe it when I tried Stuart's approach this week, as prior to this 140bpm was pretty much my 100% tempo…on a good day.

To have 150bpm feel relatively comfortable was unbelievable.



Ok, So How The Heck Did That Work?

The point of these guitar speed exercises was not to develop finger dexterity, fast twitch muscles, picking techniques or anything like that.

They were simple exercises in training the mind to perceive an incredibly fast tempo (in this case 190bpm), *even if you can't play it cleanly yet.*

By doing this, you are speeding up your mental awareness, which seems to be the crux of the whole speed development issue on guitar.

Interestingly, when you then go back to your 'slower' target tempo (e.g going back down from 190bpm to 150bpm), **it feels much slower than it actually is.**

You've tricked your mind into thinking that the target tempo is only 80% of your ability.

Rhythm awareness and rhythmic accuracy, *not* technical accuracy, is the key to unlocking the ability to play fast on the guitar. Regardless of your lack of accuracy with your speed picking, through following this approach you now have that 'raw' speed under your fingers to work with.

Be patient: the technical accuracy will come over time, as your fingers get used to playing at these faster tempos.

A Groundbreaking Approach

What I found most interesting about trying out Stuart's approach is **how quickly it worked** to build speed.

This indicates to me that the ability to play fast isn't really to do with building muscles in your fingers. If you've been playing guitar for a while, this should have already been developed long ago. Speed building is more of a **mental training issue.**

Here's another fascinating outcome:

Through practicing this approach, it hasn't just been the lick I've been using that has had a speed boost.

Everything else has felt much easier to play as a result of these guitar speed exercises.

It seems as though learning how to play just one lick fast gives you the ability to play *other licks fast too.*

Plus, I've found **my picking accuracy has increased** at slower tempos and my hands are more relaxed.

It appears that Stuart may have indeed slain the speed demon, a ferocious beast that has tormented guitarists for generations.

Further Resources

- If you need a metronome, I use TempoPerfect, a free software metronome. Pretty basic but does the job.
- On Stuart's recommendation check out guitarist Troy Grady's website at troygrady.com. Although geared more towards rock players, Troy has excellent tips for improving your speed picking accuracy, regardless of what style of guitar you play. Troy has an excellent online course you might like to check out called Pickslanting Primer, which is a detailed guide to guitar picking technique that I highly recommend. Click this link for more info…

Thank You!

A special thanks to Stuart King for taking the time out of his busy schedule to record this great video lesson for you.

Give this technique a try for a few weeks, and let us know what you think! Did you find this approach worked for you? Leave a comment below to share your thoughts.

If you enjoyed this speed picking lesson, **please share it with your friends;** it would mean the world to us.

May the force be with you,

Greg O'Rourke & Stuart King

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