The Guitar Solos of Ritchie Blackmore: A Divergence From the Blues Roots

Steve Barnard (2018)

This essay seeks to explore the significance of the Deep Purple guitarist Ritchie Blackmore in the development of a specific heavy metal style of guitar solo during his work with Deep Purple through the years 1970 to 1975. Does this initiate a departure from the blues based models that permeated the standard approach to rock guitar solos in previous decades? If this is the case, what are the musical influences that inform this approach and how do they work in dialogue with each other? Most significantly, how does this differentiate him from his contemporaries? such as Black Sabbath’s Tony Iommi, who is heavily credited with shaping the musical language of heavy metal in the 1970s (Cope, 2010, 43-70). The evidence will seek to demonstrate through Blackmore’s unique style, that guitar solos in heavy metal are marked by a greater sense of definition, musical variety and virtuosity than in hard rock and that his style represents a breaking with blues traditions that would subsequently lead to the eventual filtering out of blues models in modern metal.

To better explore this argument, it is necessary to first examine pre-existing concepts of the characteristics of guitar solos in hard rock and heavy metal and how they differ. Allan Moore, in Rock: The Primary Text, observes that it is ‘worthwhile to distinguish between heavy metal (and its off-shoots) and what thirty years ago was called hard rock’ (2001, 147). Blackmore’s solos must also be analysed from a variety of angles that may in turn, lead to a greater understanding of the traits of heavy metal solos in general in its subsequent practitioners of the style. The key areas to examine for this will be Blackmore’s formative influences, his techniques and musical vocabulary.

Origins of Divergence

Though heavy metal did not come to fruition as a clearly defined musical and aesthetic practice until the early 1980s under the NWOBHM (new wave of British heavy metal) movement (Bayer, 2009, 20), its formative roots as a style of its own originally spring from the British blues movement in the late 1960’s, and are popularly attributed mainly to three bands; Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple and Black Sabbath (Mcdonald, 2000, pp.356). There was no definitive tag known as heavy metal at this time but much of the later language of the style has, in one form or another, evolved from these three bands. Gerd Beyer, in Heavy Metal Music in Britain writes that ‘Genres begin before they are named’ (2009, 20), meaning that there is not a stark moment of materialisation wherein a genre just appears from nowhere, there is a set of historical, social and technological conditions that contribute to the creation process of new genres. Thus when we discuss Ritchie Blackmore, it is less so as a heavy metal soloist per say, as more as a pioneer of the style that would later become known as heavy metal for the reasons that this essay will put forth.

In Black Sabbath and the Rise of Heavy Metal music, Andrew Cope makes a compelling case for the Black Sabbath guitarist Tony Iommi in being heavy metals
most influential songwriter and guitarist. He does this throughout the course of the book by making intermittent comparisons with Led Zeppelin’s Jimmy Page and concludes that Iommi’s Style represents a more radical transgression of the blues origins of rock music that would become heavy metal and its various sub-genres, whilst Page and Zeppelin represent a more conservative and incremental approach that would influence the evolution of more traditional hard rock styles (2010, 70). Cope’s conclusions are very convincing in terms of episodic/sectional song structure, timbre influenced by the tuning down of guitar strings and riff construction based upon Aeolian and implied Phrygian modes. However, the aspect of guitar solos is almost entirely absent from Copes analysis. There is also the aspect that many of Black Sabbath’s songs, like ‘Into The Void’ (1972) and ‘War Pigs’ (1970) function at a relatively slow or mid-tempo bpm and could be seen to lack a sense of energy or aggression that is an inherent quality in many subsequent forms of metal (power metal, thrash metal, death metal). This is often reflected in the nature of Iommi’s guitar solos, melancholy in their expressions and heavy on reverb, the solo that opens the song ‘Wheels Of Confusion’ (1972) is a typical demonstration of this. In overlooking this dimension, Cope has not addressed the core issue that Iommi, as a soloist and improviser, primarily falls into the category of a traditional blues-rock player, relying heavily on pentatonic and blues scales in a manner that hardly represents any kind of radical change. It is one of the essential arguments of this essay that Blackmore’s solos are much more representative of a stylistic approach that would influence successive metal artists, so the pre-existing concepts of hard rock and heavy metal solos and how they are considered to differ in their construction and meaning beyond the notes must be explored.

Discrepancies in Hard Rock and Heavy Metal: Conceptual and Contextual

Allan Moore states: ‘Hard rock solos tend to be based on conventional box positions and will be highly virtuosic in their execution; heavy metal solos may be less concerned with speed and more with distortion. In hard rock these solos tend to grow out of the material the guitar is already playing…whilst the heavy metal solo is more likely to arrive as if from nowhere.’ (2001, 149). This statement needs to be addressed in two halves, the first part that ‘hard rock solos are virtuosic in their execution and that metal solos are less concerned with speed and more with distortion’ is a highly debatable notion. Perhaps Moore is equating virtuosity with audibility or accessibility in this regard, as hard rock solos draw upon a long established formula of blues based scales and phrasing (Temperley, 2007, pp.332), and that in turn may invoke a greater sense of familiarity with the listener. There is also a contradiction in the way he references the box based formula approach beforehand, as virtuoso guitarists are not typically confined to static playing positions on their instrument. Regarding speed, metal guitarists, if anything, are more inclined, like Blackmore, towards rapid, virtuosic displays on their instrument (Bayer, 2009, 81), especially if the underlying tempo of the song is at a high bpm as it often can be in modern metal styles like thrash.
Example 1. Deep Purple ‘Burn’ guitar solo sample. Transcription from Billmann and Scharfglass.
A comparative analysis of Blackmore’s solo on Deep Purples’ ‘Burn’ (1974) and Iommi’s solo on Black Sabbath’s ‘War Pigs’ (1970) demonstrate fundamentally different approaches to speed and knowledge of the fretboard. Both solos have commonality in their use of successive semi-quaver runs, but closer inspection reveals discrepancies in tempo and note choices. In ‘War Pigs’ the tempo set under the solo is 88 bpm compared with ‘Burn’ at 196 bpm, over 100 bpm faster, making the semi-quaver phrases in ‘Burn’ a far more intense physical practice. Iommi, in terms of his note choices and fretboard positioning, stays directly within a minor pentatonic box pattern in the twelfth position, limiting his vocabulary to five notes, some of which are attained by string bends to alter the pitch but allow him to stay in a fixed position (see Example 2). This approach to playing is in keeping with Moore’s definitions of a hard rock solo. ‘Burn’ differs in that Blackmore initiates the solo from the third position, utilizing the blues scale with its flattened fifth, a Db in this case. Blackmore, in the next section of the solo, moves to the tenth position for a set of legato and rhythmically varied phrases that lead an open G-string pedal melody that starts in the twelfth position and finishes in the third position by way of a sequenced descent in G minor played on the single G-string (see Example 1). The solo concludes in the third position where it began, lending it a sense of theme. This display of tonal and musical variety clarify Blackmore’s status as a virtuoso that influenced later virtuoso exponents of the heavy metal style such as Randy Rhoads (Walser, 1992, pp.280) and Yngwie Malmsteem (Walser, 1992, pp.263), compared with Iommi’s more conservative and limited approach to soloing. This also helps challenge Moore’s assertions regarding heavy metal, speed and virtuosity.

Moore’s second observation, that hard rock solos develop from pre-existing material and metal solos having more of a stark impact upon arrival, is closer in
line with the musical evidence, and typifies other differences between Iommi and Blackmore respectively in their approach towards solos. Robert Walser analysed the guitar solo in heavy metal as symbolic of the tension between individual society, and implies notions of freedom from the collective, or in this case the band and the formula of the song (1993, 54). In looking again at the solos of ‘Burn’ and ‘War Pigs’ from the perspective of their inception into the song, it can be observed that Iommi’s ‘War Pigs’ solo develops from phrasing in the lower ledger lines that utilize many of the same notes that are played in the wider song, the rest of the solo develops from this material and is a more gradual process of pitch ascent, the underlying harmonic material is restricted to an E5 chord made simply of the root and fifth (E and B) that creates a tonal neutrality that is neither major nor minor. ‘Burn’ in comparison, arrives with a greater sense of purpose, Blackmore’s playing is aggressive and fast from the outset and the intent to define the guitar solo as an autonomous aspect of the song is clear. The chord progression that accompanies the solo is different from the rest of the song giving it a unique harmonic identity, creating a composition within a composition as such. In much standard hard rock, guitar solos often take the place of a final verse and are composed over the existing verse material, sometimes this material is stripped back of any additional melodic or harmonic complexity to allow the guitarist to work within a safe, simple formula. This is evident in Led Zeppelin’s ‘Good Times, Bad times’ (1969), and more significantly, Black Sabbath’s ‘Paranoid’ (1970). The two important aspects of the underlying nature of heavy metal soloing, moment of impact and creation of a new section or underlying harmonic material, are key features of the genre that separate it from hard rock. Jake E. Lee’s guitar solo from Ozzy Osbourne’s ‘Bark At The Moon’ (1982) is played over a chord progression that differs from the rest of the song material and Kirk Hammet’s solo on Metallica’s ‘Master Of Puppets’ (1986) wastes no time in subjecting its listeners to rapid flurries of triplet phrases from the moment it begins. All of this is in line with Walsers’ analysis of the function of the guitar solo in heavy metal as implying a sense of definition and freedom in an often rigid and inflexible music genre. With this comprehensive understanding it is now possible to see how pivotal Blackmore was early on in shaping and informing these notions in ways that Iommi was not.

Formation of Influences

In establishing general concepts of heavy metal solos and Blackmores’ unique approach in comparison with his closest contemporaries, a closer examination of his musical language is required to both better understand where it came from and how it influenced other guitarists in turn. At the centre of what made his style stand out at the time is possibly down to a fusion of disparate influences that led to a broad repertoire of musical techniques and devices that drew from the extremes of blues, rock and roll and classical music and that could be argued, make up the wider language of soloing in heavy metal (Walser, 1992, pp.268).

By his own accord, Blackmores earliest influences were guitarists like Hank Marvin and Jimi Hendrix (McIver, 2004). This is not hard to see in some respects, both Marvin and Hendrix, like Blackmore, had a preference for Fender Stratocasters. The Stratocaster is characterised by its bright sound and the range of tonal variety available on its three single coil pickups (O’Connor, 2016, pp.1036).
Interestingly, this is an area that puts Blackmore at odds with Page, Iommi and successive metal practitioners as both Iommi and Page were Gibson players (the S.G and Les Paul respectively). The key difference in the Gibson sound was the introduction of the humbucker pickup in the 1960s. This pickup was useful in filtering out unwanted frequencies and created a thicker tone with greater sustain, though with less tonal versatility than the Stratocaster (O’Connor, 2016, 1038). A key feature of the Strat that was influential in metal though, was the use of the tremolo-arm or whammy-bar and the influence of Marvin and Hendrix on Blackmore is notable here. Marvin’s style of playing with The Shadows in the early 1960s utilized the tremolo arm heavily on songs like ‘Apache’ (1960) in which in the nature of the song title and stylistic use of the tremolo arm would seem to be evoking and re-contextualising the American frontier.

Hendrix use of the tremolo arm is even more dramatic, it can be seen and heard at its most experimental during the performance of ‘Star Spangled Banner’ at Woodstock in 1969. In this performance, Hendrix utilizes the whammy bar to create new sounds on the guitar that have been cited as mimicking the sounds of bombs falling and exploding in what has often been read as a critique of the Vietnam war (Gordon, 2017, pp.228). This technique is referred to as a “dive-bomb”, though whether the its name is directly related to Hendrix Woodstock performance is unclear. In his work with Deep Purple in the 1970s, Blackmore was a keen user of the tremolo arm, the guitar solo in Black Night (1970) is initiated by aggressive whammy bar vibrato which is also a notable feature of the solos in ‘Burn’ (1974) and ‘Highway Star’ (1972). Randy Rhoads’ conclusion of the guitar solo on ‘Over The Mountain’ (1981) and Eddie Van Halen’s seminal ‘Eruption’ (1978) both feature use of the tremolo-arm in a context similar to Blackmore, in that it is used more for dramatic and theatrical effect than as anything particularly musical.

Blackmore’s general attitude towards rock and blues music is complex and sometimes contradictory. In an interview with Trouser Press in 1978, Blackmore refers to the Blues as ‘…too limited…’ and infers that he only utilizes them as an improvisational tool (Young, 1978). In regard to rock and roll he says ‘I don’t listen too much rock n’ roll really.’ Then later in the interview says ‘I’m very interested in extreme rock n’ roll’ (Young, 1978). Throughout various interviews Blackmore spends much time playing down the rock aspects of his playing and instead focusing on his classical music influences and credentials. He cites Bach and Segovia as important influences (McIver, 2004) and states that he was more influenced by violin players than guitarists (Young, 1978), similar to the influence of the violinist Nicolo Paganini on Yngwie Malmsteen (Everett (ed), 2008, 219).

‘Low’ and ‘High’ Art

Blackmore has the potential to come across as a highly opinionated and slightly difficult character in interviews, as someone wishing to distance himself from the ‘low’ art of rock and be taken seriously as a exponent of ‘high’ art. The truth is, as is often the case, is somewhere in the middle. Analysis of his soloing demonstrates a fusion of both the rock and classical dimensions of his playing, that were unique in the way they came together to create a seamless style that would become the blueprint for guitar soloing in heavy metal.
Blackmore himself notes that ‘When I started the guitar, my father insisted I learn to read music and play classical stuff…, which I failed miserably at. But the melodies and the discipline stuck with me.’ (McIver, 2004). This sense of melody and discipline can be seen to be working in dialogue with Blackmore’s blues and rock influences to create solos that have a greater sense of structure than his contemporaries, many of whom just operated within the pentatonic box pattern.


An analysis of the solo in ‘Smoke The Water’ (1972) demonstrates not only Blackmore’s use of various fretboard positions and note sequencing techniques, but also his mixing of the traditional blues scale with the Dorian mode, lending his licks a greater sense of colour with the added major sixth (see Example 3). These two bars in the eighth position are a complex feat, especially when considering that the next phrase moves to the third position, when this hybrid scale is revisited (see Example 4). Another aspect of what Blackmore is doing here is the fact that he is following the chord structure of the underlying material, thus placing more emphasis
on tonal movement that in turn lends a greater sense of definition and form to the solo as a whole. The solo in ‘Highway Star’ (1972) starts with blues derived material but in its later stages also demonstrates an awareness of chord and melody relations in its use of a sequence of single string arpeggios that are influenced by baroque models in their fundamental structure, in particular, Antonio Vivaldi’s Violin Concerto in D minor (Walser, 1992, 269). Blackmore solos seem to follow a structure begin with a blues based familiarity and gradually progress to more ambitious classically based techniques, creating a sense of ascent that could be read as the movement from ‘low’ to ‘high’ art.

The Guitar solo in ‘Burn’ follows a similar pattern to the solo in ‘Highway Star’ in the way that the solo begins with a blues-based familiarity that transitions into Baroque devices that is strongly influenced by the organ works of J.S Bach, namely Toccata and Fugue in D Minor. The chord progression that accompanies the latter part of the solo is simply a transposition of part of Toccata and Fugue in D Minor to G minor. Not only is the harmonic structure a clear tributary gesture to Bach, but also the manner in which Blackmore re-appropriates some of the Pedal note melodies of the piece on the guitar, that again, reflects the underlying chord-melody relations within its arpeggios.

At the centre of what makes Blackmore’s style successful and influential in its ambitions is the way that the influences of blues and classical have fused convincingly into a single new language. It is not simply for novelty or simple experimentation, but the meeting of two complimentary extremes that shaped the direction of a metal style of guitar as opposed to a hard rock style. After Blackmore, many of the most influential guitarists in metal had come from studying classical music (Walser, 1992, 264). Metallica’s Kirk Hammett further popularised the fusion style with his solos in songs like ‘Fight Fire with Fire’ (1985) and ‘Master Of Puppets’ (1985) in the more extreme forms of metal. In the even more transgressive sub-genres of metal, what Blackmore had begun with his divergence away from blues models reached its conclusions in the death metal bands of the late 1980s (Death, Morbid Angel), where blues influences have almost disappeared completely, save for some string-bending techniques. Instead of fusion, many of extreme metal’s more imaginative soloists drew upon diminished arpeggios and modes of the harmonic minor scale to improvise and compose solos’ thus concluding metals’ evolution from a blues based style to a language of its own.

As well as influencing the direction of heavy metal in general, Blackmores style was also highly influential in development of neo-classical and progressive styles of metal, most notably practiced by bands like Dream Theatre and Merciful Fate (Bayer, 2009, 81).

Conclusions

It is apparent that the nature of guitar soloing in heavy metal is marked by a greater sense of definition, intent and virtuosity than hard rock which is marked by a more formulaic approach. Underlying structural changes that mark the solo sections in heavy metal songs lend the solo greater importance, where as hard rock solos play out over pre-existing material and have more of a feeling of going through the motions.
Blackmore was a pioneering figure in encoding these aspects in what would become heavy metal music, and analytical comparisons with Iommi demonstrate that Blackmore’s style is more indicative of a breaking with blues traditions through a complimentary fusion of techniques and influences that bring together the extremes of ‘high’ and ‘low’ art.

The process of divergence initiated by Blackmore would lead to the eventual diminishing or disappearance of blues based models of guitar soloing, as heavy metal evolved and fractured into various sub-genres in the 1980s.

Bibliography


