

Pete Huttlinger


Learn some cool pop fingerstyle grooves and get helpful practice tips from this former John Denver sideman and up-and-coming soloist.

by Doug Young



Pete Huttlinger is known for his fast, clean, and melodic fingerpicking style, as well as his mind-boggling solo arrangements of pop tunes like Steely Dan's "Josie" and Stevie Wonder's "Superstition." The versatile Nashville guitarist paid his dues as a sideman for many popular artists, including the late John Denver, but after winning the prestigious National Fingerstyle Championship at the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas, in 2000, Huttlinger has concentrated on his solo career. He has released several acclaimed CDs, including *Naked Pop* and *The Santa Rita Connection*, which showcase his compositions as well as his arranging skills. Huttlinger's catchy and melodic tunes add a touch of Nashville-style fingerpicking flash to his jazz, pop, and country influences. Huttlinger has also shared his expertise in a series of popular instructional DVDs, including *A Guitarist's Guide to Better Practice* (Homespun, www.homespuntaapes.com), and at workshops like the Swannanoa Gathering in Asheville, North Carolina, where I talked to him about

arranging pop tunes, practice routines, and developing speed and cleanliness.

 TO HEAR PETE HUTTLINGER'S MUSIC, go to www.petehuttlinger.com.

You've created some great arrangements of pop tunes. How do you go about arranging a new tune?

HUTTLINGER My number-one principle is to not do anything I've heard anyone else

do. For example, for the hymn "In the Sweet By and By" [recorded on *Hymns for Guitar*], I thought that a Texas-swing sort of thing might be nice. So I started with this groove [Example 1] as an intro. The bass lines are

Lick of the Month

Pete Huttlinger uses this flashy lick, which fits over an A-B7 chord progression, in his arrangement of Stevie Wonder's "Superstition." "This is the lick in the tune I have to practice the most, if I want to nail it," Huttlinger says. Of the run he plays in the first bar, he says, "John Coltrane would do this thing where he'd play triads up in minor thirds. I realized that would sound too outside, but if I just did one of them, A to C, I'd get an A7⁹ sound. I finish with a B blues-scale run." To hear the Lick of the Month, go to www.acousticguitar.com/lick. Password: valentine

♩ = 104

A B7 E

Ex. 1: Western Swing Intro Groove

♩ = 180 **E6**

Ex. 2: What Would James Taylor Do?

Capo III **A A/C# D/F# Bm7 E_{sus4} A A/C# Bm7 E_{sus4}**

♩ = 100

Ex. 3: Harmonized Scale Arpeggios

♩ = 128

all muted. The chord is sometimes muted and sometimes not, to emulate the right hand of a piano or a horn section. Once the tune starts, I keep the bass line going along with the melody. It's a great study in counterpoint, but it also makes a fun arrangement.

Another example is my arrangement of "On Eagles' Wings." It's in the key of C, but playing it in C didn't do anything for me. So I started trying different keys. When I hit A, I thought, "Oh, wait a minute, this sounds good." I put a capo on the third fret, so I'm being true to the original key of C. But when I see a capo on the third fret, I think James Taylor. So I thought, "WWJTD—what would James Taylor do?" I started messing with an intro [Example 2], thinking about doing something in James Taylor's style. What he does is play bass notes just before the beat, but he plays them strong enough that you might think that's where the beat is if you're not paying attention.

How do you practice a difficult tune like your arrangement of "Superstition," where you play bass, melody, and even the horn parts?

HUTTLINGER Very slowly! The intro's easy. But when adding the melody, I literally take a half measure at a time. When I arranged that, I knew what I wanted to play, but I had to train my fingers. At first I was hearing each

part individually. But the trick is to not really listen to the individual parts. I'm not thinking of separate parts, I'm thinking of each group of notes as one thing—seeing chords. You know, a lot of players learn Bach's Bourrée in Em. That piece threw me for the longest time because I kept listening to each part. Until I started hearing the piece as a whole, I couldn't really grasp it.

You play so cleanly! How do you do that?

HUTTLINGER It's all in the right hand. I spend a lot of time practicing right-hand exercises, and what I do is play things slow. I can play fast, but when I'm practicing, I play slow. Before the concert last night, I sat down for 15 minutes and played some things like this [Example 3]. Just a simple harmonized E major scale, making sure I hit every note perfectly clean.

The other thing about playing clean is getting separation of the notes. For example, if a tune uses an alternating bass, I really want to hear a muted bass. The other notes have to be crystal clear. Even with, say, a jazz tune with a lot of chord changes, you have to be sure every note comes out clearly. Left-hand strength also helps. I plant my fingers down firmly, even my little finger, so the notes ring and don't sound wimpy.

The key to playing clean is to not play anything faster than you can play it perfectly. I practice extensively with a metronome. Play at a tempo that feels good, then knock it up five clicks and see what you get. Push yourself to the point where you can't play cleanly and then go back to where you started. It'll feel perfect. But be honest with yourself; is it really good, or just good enough? Well, "good enough" isn't good enough. When it's right, it's good enough!

WHAT HE PLAYS

- **Acoustic Guitars:** Collings OM1 with a Sitka spruce top and mahogany back and sides, Collings OM1A with an Adirondack spruce top.
- **Strings:** Light-gauge Elixir Polyweb.
- **Picks:** Acrylic nails and a John Pearse thumbpick.
- **Onstage Amplification:** Fishman Acoustic Matrix undersaddle pickup, AER Compact 60 amplifier.
- **In the Studio:** Neumann KM84 condenser mics, Macintosh computer with Pro Tools, Universal Audio 2610 tube mic preamp.

