



Double-Tracking Lead Guitars, Part 1

In an age when few want to play lead guitar at all, not to mention twice, an article on double-tracking guitar solos might seem pointless, but for those players keeping the faith, this one's for you.

This month we'll discuss the pros and cons of double-tracking lead guitars and ways to get around common problems. For those new to the concept, double-tracking is when the guitarist performs and records the same exact part twice, usually turning one performance to the left side of the mix and the other to the right. It's frequently done for rhythm guitars, but less often with leads. What follows are some modern home studio audio recording techniques and tips to help you record these guitar solos.

Why Do It

First off, why double track? Lots of reasons:

- Two guitars performing the same thing sounds fuller (like a chorus compared to a single voice).
- Alternating between doubled and single-guitar creates variation.
- You can use two different guitar sounds for a new tone.
- You can use two different articulations (one legato, one staccato).
- After a decade of no guitar solos in popular music, we have to double-up to make up for lost time.
- Impress other guitarists.

If all of that sounds good to you (and I know the last one does), here's how to do it.

The Method

For starters, you should be able to play the lead part note for note, so take some time to memorize it. Some feel this will rob their lead playing of spontaneity, but if you feel this is true, just improvise your first performance ("Guitar 1") and then learn it for the doubling ("Guitar 2").

In theory, double-tracking is simple. Just record Guitar 1 like any other lead part, then turn Guitar 1 all the way to the left (or right). Turn the live Guitar 2 to the other side. Then, wearing headphones, listen closely to Guitar 1 while recording Guitar 2. That's it!

Problems and Solutions

If that sounds too easy, you're right. There are a lot of problems to worry about, but you can avoid some by doing Guitar 1 well, so we'll focus on that first.

When you record Guitar 1, be sure that there are no **strange anomalies** within your phrasing or timing that you cannot duplicate. The tremolo bar is a good example. You've got to repeat any dive bombs or other tricks exactly later. Pinch-harmonics are another problem, as it's hard to get the exact harmonic you want. Any harmonic will often do the trick, too, so you've probably learned to not care which one you get. The good news is that getting a different harmonic (or none at all) on Guitar 2 can work fine or be better. I did this on purpose on "Still at Large" from my album, *The Firebard*.

Slides can be easier, since they're sloppy anyway, but that only helps with fast slides. These should start from the same place (roughly) and go the same distance at the same speed. It helps to improvise a couple times and notice where you're starting. If the slide is prominent and in the rhythm track, you can try one of my tricks, which is to start Guitar 1 from a certain note, such as A in A major, and slide Guitar 2 from C#, so they start in harmony.

Slow, expressive slides are more trouble. These need to start from the same place more exactly. The amount of finger pressure can be a factor in the slide's sound, too. This is more problematic when that pressure must change as you go, and if the slide's speed changes. All you can do is practice and be aware of speed, pressure, start and stop point, and the emphasis placed on the destination note (how much pressure and vibrato are you using?).

Bends are tough, too. If you're not consistent and precise with the speed of your bend, hold, and release, the variation when you double will be out of tune. Quickly bent and released notes can be easier, but don't count on it. You may be more consistent with a given technique, such as bending with your fingers, the Floyd Rose, or the old tuner trick, but you won't really know until you try doubling and simply can't do it. To make matters worse, bending is generally an expressive thing, so being controlled about it may rub you the wrong way. The solution is good technique through practice.

Vibrato usually isn't an issue because most people tend to use the same vibrato each time they play a line, so you may be in luck here. It tends to be applied unconsciously as well, meaning you'll do it the same without ever realizing it. Still, make note of what you're doing and the speed of your vibrato. If the lead is almost painfully slow, with long drawn-out notes and vibrato that starts after a few beats, then changes speeds and vibrato types, these variations create more room for error. Then again, such a lead is so expressive that doubling is probably not wise anyway. This is one reason I didn't double the final lead guitar on "Epic" (many slow slides were the other).

Finally, **extraneous noise** in Guitar 1 is hard to duplicate exactly, and why would you want to? If Guitar 1 was perfect except for some weird sound in it, you have to ask yourself how important doubling is and how noticeable the sound is. A finger sliding on a string can be easier to duplicate, and if only one side does this, it can be okay. It's a judgment call. With recording software like ProTools, it's possible to fix it in the mix, but if you aren't sure, double-track anyway and worry about it later. You can always turn Guitar 2 (or 1) off. You could also save the Guitar 1 with noise but re-perform it. Maybe another attempt would be even better – and not have the noise.

If you're starting to think all of this is an endorsement for **speed**, because that would reduce bends, vibrato, and slides as issues, not so fast. That's when **timing** becomes the biggest issue of all. Without good timing on Guitar 1, you'll really feel the pain later. Practicing with a metronome, while a good habit, may not help with a troubling passage. Maybe the drum groove or rhythm guitars are slightly off, or DAW-induced latency is disturbing your feel, or you're just having a bad day and can't do something right. What to do?

It sometimes helps to hard-pan Guitar 1 to one side while playing it, and/or wear headphones. This way, you can focus on the rhythm section on one side while fitting in your lead notes on the other. Turning down the lead guitar helps, too, for if the lead is too loud while you're playing, it obscures the timing underneath. For latency, try reducing or eliminating it altogether with a no-latency setting. Be aware that on some days, your sense of timing will simply be different/off, just as you might like a guitar sound one day and think it's terrible the next. Perseverance is king.

Conclusion

If all of this is starting to sound impossible, just wait until Part 2 of this column! Seriously, though, double-tracking is not as hard as it seems. With a little practice it can even be fun, and most of these ideas will help you get a great performance for Guitar 1 anyway. You also might be more ready for doubling than you think. Try doing it a few times and see what your problem areas are, then work on them. Next time, we'll focus on the more problematic Guitar 2.

Brief Biography

Randy Ellefson is an instrumental guitarist with a Bachelors of Music in Classical Guitar, Magna Cum Laude. His debut album was released in June 2004 on Guitarosity Records. The album's title, *The Firebard*, is a nod to his experience with tendinitis, which took away his playing for five years before he fully recovered it and rose from his ashes. For more details, mp3s, tabs, articles, videos and other cool stuff, visit the official site, www.randyellefson.com, or email Rand at mail@randyellefson.com.