



By [Larry Dobrow](#)

When we celebrate double-reverse-super-awesome guitar players in this space, we tend to focus on a single guy and his body of work. This is all fine and good when the discussion turns to Richard Thompson or Jimmy Page, whose virtuosity can sustain a 700-word column. But most of the players out there? They inspire the occasional pumped fist and “you might like this, maybe, if you’re in the mood – MP3 attached” email, but little enthusiasm for a full-bore career/catalog appreciation. Which isn’t to say that these assorted guitar C-listers don’t occasionally soar as close to the sun as that Icarus guy who used to manage Iron Maiden (at least, that’s how I understand it). If you look hard enough, there exists at least one Guitar God moment in just about every musician’s oeuvre... okay, maybe not Jewel’s.

So let’s dub today’s exercise “Whammy Bar Mix Tape: Vol. 1.” What follows is a list of seven guitar-ish songs that, owing in equal part to my total lack of taste in music and my unwavering fondness for tracks I first encountered when I was 12, never fail to pump (clap!) me up. I ask you – better yet, I *challenge* you – to give each a listen and tell me that the individuals involved don’t do a perfect job of matching song with tone, riff and style.

Styx, “Too Much Time on My Hands”: If this weren’t a family publication, I’d say something here along the lines of “Tommy Shaw looks and sings like a little itty bitch.” That said, the blond tresses and stuck-pig wails can’t obscure the frequent genius of the guy’s playing. Check out the way his “Too Much” solo darts between the chorus refrains, or the swervy feedback that eases the song into its third verse. Shaw’s guitar work here should be held up as a prime musical example of having lemons/making lemonade.

Spinal Tap, “America”: Ironically enough, this jokey song (“God bless Johnny Appleseed!”) boasts better prog-rock guitar than just about anything in the Genesis or Yes catalog. I saw Spinal Tap in concert a few years back; the concert underwhelmed me, frankly, because the musicianship was too friggin’ professional. Seriously – the recasting of “Sex Farm” as a Chili Peppers-ish funk number, complete with horns, took my attention away from rejoinders about “poking your hay.” Separately, please join with me in praying that future editions of Microsoft Word make it easier to get the umlaut dots over the “n” in Spinal Tap.

Matthew Sweet, "Girlfriend": The song commences with siren-like feedback and ends with a blast of bent-string fury. In between, I count approximately 32 solos and 744 quick-hit fills. I don't know a whole lot about the late Robert Quine, who handled a bulk of the guitar duty on Sweet's first few discs, but on this track his playing falls somewhere between "volcanic" and "homicidal." That's high praise, by the way.

Bruce Springsteen, "Prove It All Night" (live): Not just any live version, but the [one played](#) on December 15, 1978 at San Francisco's Winterland. Bruce tends to divide the guitar community: generally, if you like the guy's music (raising and waving hand enthusiastically), you like the way he bends and grunts and sweats his way through twangy, decidedly non-artful solos. If you don't, you see him as a Telecaster hack. For the nonbelievers, this run through "Prove It All Night," which builds to an orgiastic guitar frenzy before a single word is sounded, should come across as revelatory. Remember: they're not saying "boooo," they're saying, "Bruuuuuuce, you have some sweet-ass tones here, duuuuuuuude."

Big Country, "In a Big Country": Mr. Guitar, meet Mr. Bagpipes. I'm sure you two kids have a lot to talk about, so I'll be out back cranking up some Pogues and inhaling room-temperature beer through my toothless mug... On some level I have accepted that really, really, really shrill guitars serve as a stand-in for the 'pipes here, but a guy can dream, can't he? According to Wikipedia, dueling six-stringers Stuart Adamson and Bruce Watson achieved the sound "through the use of the MXR Pitch Transposer 129 Guitar Effect." Okay, then.

Lenny Kravitz, "Always on the Run": While I recognize that Slash ranks among the few hair-metal graduates who deserves serious consideration as a riffsman, I'm not a fan. His few bluesy excursions notwithstanding, most of Slash's runs up and down the fretboard strike me as the six-string equivalent of a 100-meter dash. On this guest slot, however, he transforms a by-the-numbers blues progression into something considerably more, spitting out a killer central riff (which threatens to veer off track at any moment, but never does) and a chunky ascending solo that just as quickly dives back into the middle registers.

Billy Idol, "Blue Highway": Steve Stevens is mostly remembered for his hair, his leather pants and the unintentionally silly way he slung his guitar to and fro during the "Rebel Yell" video. Which is a shame, as his nimble, fret-skippin' fills elevate the Idol canon well above comparable '80s dreck. Like a great free safety, Stevens operates well in space; on "Blue Highway," you hear what the guy can do within and without just such a framework