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The Contemporary Studio Guitarist: Practices and Adaptability

by

Luis Alberto Rodrigues Gomes Da Silva

SCHOLARLY ESSAY

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts in Music
with a concentration in Jazz Performance
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ABSTRACT

In this study I explore the role of the studio guitarist through a critical and contextual perspective, focusing on the professional, musical, and practical realities that shape this line of work beyond traditional genre-based boundaries. Rather than relying solely on stylistic analysis, it approaches the studio guitarist as a multifaceted musical practitioner whose effectiveness depends on versatility, adaptability, technological fluency, and an awareness of collaborative dynamics within the studio environment. By drawing on both historical context and present-day professional practices, the study examines how studio guitarists respond to changing aesthetic expectations, production demands, and increasingly complex recording technologies. A central component of this research is a series of interviews with prominent contemporary studio guitarists, including Larry Carlton, Steve Lukather, Kraig McCreary, JD Simo, and Andrew Synowiec. Their views offer a sense of how studio work unfolds—stressing not only the skills involved, but also the ways decisions are made and how musicians position themselves within professional settings. Taken together, these viewpoints help clarify what it means to work as a studio guitarist in music industry. Ultimately, the study positions this role not only as an artistic endeavor but also as a professional practice that requires constant adjustment, awareness, and reinvention in response to an ever-evolving musical landscape.

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PREFACE

The professional work of the contemporary studio guitarist is a combination of musical expectations, technological systems, and collaborative production environments. While studio guitarists contribute to a vast range of recorded music, the conditions under which this work takes place—and the specific skills required to sustain it—are often only indirectly addressed in academic literature. This project grew out of a broader interest in looking at studio guitar practice from a perspective that goes beyond style alone. Instead of treating it simply as a question of genre or musical vocabulary, it considers the work of the studio guitarist as something shaped by a combination of historical developments, ongoing changes in technology, and the everyday realities of the music industry.

My work with this topic has been based on my practical experience in performance and recording contexts where adaptability, efficiency, and sound awareness are central to professional success. Within these environments, the studio guitarist is routinely expected to navigate diverse musical situations, respond quickly to aesthetic directives, and contribute musically in ways that support broader production goals. Such expectations necessitate a form of musicianship that extends beyond instrumental proficiency alone, encompassing an awareness of recording processes, sonic context, and workflow.

While this study does not position equipment as an end in itself, it acknowledges that the tools used by studio guitarists—whether instruments, amplification systems, effects processing, or recording technologies—play a meaningful part in determining musical outcomes and professional practice. In real studio situations, these tools operate within bigger both artistic and professional contexts, shaping the way sound is produced, how musical parts are approached, and how efficiently studio work happens. Recognizing this relationship provides a useful entry point for examining the

studio guitarist's role contemporary settings.

A large portion of this work is grounded in interviews with active contemporary studio guitarists. Their experiences offer a direct window into the day-to-day realities of studio work—realities that are not always captured in academic discussions. Listening to these guitarists talk about their work makes it much easier to understand what their day-to-day life in the studio actually looks like. It shows, in a very practical way, how players adjust to different technological setups, respond in the moment, and find ways to maintain long-term careers within constantly changing conditions. In this sense, their contributions help anchor the project in lived experience, connecting broader ideas to the practical demands of working in the studio. These firsthand accounts are further supported by analytical observations and performance-based examples, which help place the discussion in a more concrete musical context.

At a broader level, this project contributes to an ongoing conversation about studio guitar work as something that is constantly changing rather than fixed. It approaches the role of the studio guitarist with an awareness of both musical and technological factors, without reducing one to the other. In doing so, it aims to bring academic perspectives closer to the realities of professional practice, offering a more grounded understanding of a form of musicianship that continues to play an essential—if often understated—role in contemporary recording culture.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

To provide historical context for the contemporary role of the studio guitarist, the following section briefly outlines some important developments in the recording industry during the mid-twentieth century. The period following World War II was characterized by an economic growth, which led to an increased volume of recorded music in the United States. Musicians benefited from a surplus of employment opportunities generated by the expanding music and entertainment industries, ranging from recording music for radio and television advertisements to creating soundtracks for film. Major record labels such as Capitol Records, Warner Records, RCA Records¹, and others required large numbers of musicians to perform for their top-selling artists, including Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra, and Peggy Lee². Consequently, guitarists experienced a sharp rise in demand during this period.

By the 1950s, the electric guitar was already beginning to reshape the music industry in noticeable and lasting ways. It became a defining feature of emerging styles—especially rock 'n' roll—with artists such as Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly, and Little Richard³ demonstrated not only the instrument's sonic possibilities but also its capacity for expressive and dynamic performance. The ability to amplify the guitar—and to experiment with feedback and distortion⁴—changed how music

¹ Capitol Records, Warner Records, and RCA Records are major American record labels that were central to the U.S. recording industry, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, operating large studios and regularly employing top-tier studio musicians for commercial recordings.

² Elvis Presley (1935–1977), Frank Sinatra (1915–1998), and Peggy Lee (1920–2002) were among the most influential American recording artists of the mid-twentieth century, each achieving widespread commercial success and shaping popular music through their association with major record labels, radio, film, and television during the postwar recording boom.

³ Chuck Berry (1926–2017), Buddy Holly (1936–1959), and Little Richard (1932–2020) were key early figures in rock 'n' roll whose recorded output in the 1950s contributed to the electric guitar's emergence as a defining voice in popular music.

⁴ In electric guitar performance, feedback refers to the loop created when amplified sound from a speaker is re-captured by the instrument's pickups, producing sustained or resonant tones, while distortion results from overdriving an amplifier or signal chain, altering the waveform to create a harmonically rich and saturated sound.

was performed and experienced, both on stage and in recorded form. Within this environment, the presence of the guitar became increasingly prominent, and with it, the demand for skilled guitarists in studio settings grew considerably.

As the recording industry expanded through the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, a number of highly influential studio musician collectives began to take shape. Groups such as the Wrecking Crew, Booker T. & the M.G.'s, the Nashville A-Team, the Funk Brothers, and the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section⁵ played a central role in producing some of the most recognizable recordings of their time. Their work can be heard on a wide range of well-known tracks, including “California Dreamin’,” “Crazy,” and “Respect.” What is particularly striking about many of these musicians is that their expertise was not necessarily the result of formal academic training in the styles they performed. Instead, their success often depended on their ability to listen closely, adapt quickly, and move fluidly across different musical contexts.

This pattern continues to resonate in contemporary studio practice. Many of today’s leading studio guitarists have similarly developed their skills outside of strictly genre-specific academic frameworks, relying instead on a combination of technical ability and stylistic flexibility. In this sense, the development of the studio guitarist is less a linear progression and more an ongoing process shaped by creativity, adaptability, and the need to respond to changing musical and technological conditions.

From the early implementation of the electric guitar in the 1930s to the rapid technological transformations of the late twentieth century, studio musicians have remained closely connected to the evolution of recorded music. They have not simply followed these changes; they have worked within them, adjusting their approaches to new tools, new expectations, and new musical demands. Their role

⁵ The Wrecking Crew, Booker T. & the M.G.'s, the Nashville A-Team, the Funk Brothers, and the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section were influential mid-twentieth-century studio ensembles—often functioning as “house” bands or recurring pools of first-call session players—whose performances underpinned a substantial portion of commercially successful recordings in rock, soul, R&B, pop, and country music.

in the studio has consistently required a balance between precision and creativity—combining technical control with an intuitive understanding of style in order to meet the needs of producers, arrangers, and the recording process as a whole.

Studio musicians such as Al Hendrickson, Tommy Tedesco⁶, and members of the Wrecking Crew were important entities in the creation of iconic recordings. Although their work often occurred behind the scenes, their contributions were instrumental in defining the sound of multiple generations. Their influence extended beyond performance, shaping arrangements and production decisions that have become defining features of recorded music. As Al Hendrickson once reflected: "They (the studios) were such a nice place to be because you got to play all kinds of music and stay home."⁷ Their adaptability, technical expertise, and collaborative approach established benchmarks for success and set enduring standards for studio musicians worldwide.

The professional path of the studio guitarist has developed in close connection with changes in recording technology and the broader music industry. In the early days of recording, technical limitations meant that musicians often had to deliver complete performances in a single take, with little room for correction. As multitrack recording and, later, digital technologies became more common, expectations shifted. Precision, flexibility, and efficiency became increasingly important, and studio guitarists were often required to do more than simply perform their parts. In many cases, they also took on the role of problem-solvers, finding practical and creative ways to meet the demands of the recording environment.

At the same time, roughly the period between 1940 and 2000 brought significant cultural

⁶ Al Hendrickson (1927–2000) and Tommy Tedesco (1930–1997) were prominent American studio guitarists active primarily in Los Angeles during the mid-twentieth century, contributing extensively to film, television, and popular music recordings and playing central roles in the development of the modern studio musician profession.

⁷ Jim Carlton, *Conversations with Great Jazz and Studio Guitarists* (Pacific, MO: Mel Bay Publications / Bill's Music Shelf, 2009), 20

changes that reshaped how music was produced and consumed. The emergence of rock 'n' roll, the growing influence of television and film, and the expanding global reach of the music industry all contributed to new possibilities—and new challenges—for studio musicians. Within this context, the ability of studio guitarists to adapt while maintaining a high level of professionalism becomes especially notable. Their work not only supported individual recordings but also played a meaningful role in shaping broader cultural trends within recorded music.

This scholarly essay integrates historical analysis with firsthand accounts and practical insights drawn from interviews with established professional musicians. One of the most influential studio guitarists of the twentieth century Larry Carlton⁸, acclaimed studio guitarist and Toto co-founder Steve Lukather⁹, fellow Los Angeles session player Andrew Synowiec¹⁰, Nashville-based guitarist JD Simo¹¹, and Chicago veteran guitarist Kraig McCreary¹² are featured in this study. Their testimonies offer critical perspectives on how professional guitarists have adapted to the evolving demands of the music industry. By examining key figures and pivotal historical moments, this essay reveals the substantial impact of studio guitarists on the broader music industry while also addressing the cultural and technological forces that have shaped their work. The findings seek to bridge historical understanding and contemporary practice, providing guidance for aspiring musicians navigating

⁸ Larry Carlton (b. 1948) is an American guitarist widely recognized as one of the most influential session musicians of the 1970s and 1980s. Based in Los Angeles, he contributed to hundreds of recordings, including seminal albums by Steely Dan, Joni Mitchell, and Michael Jackson, while also maintaining a successful solo career that blends jazz, blues, and contemporary fusion.

⁹ Steve Lukather (b. 1957) is an American guitarist, songwriter, and producer best known for his work with the band Toto and for his extensive career as a Los Angeles-based session guitarist on numerous commercially successful recordings.

¹⁰ Andrew Synowiec (b. 1980) is an American guitarist and composer known for his work as a Los Angeles-based studio and session musician, contributing to film, television, and commercial recordings across a wide range of musical styles.

¹¹ JD Simo (b. 1985) is an American guitarist and songwriter associated with Nashville's contemporary music scene, known for his work as both a session musician and bandleader, as well as for his engagement with vintage guitar aesthetics and modern recording practices.

¹² Kraig McCreary is an American guitarist based in Chicago, recognized for his work as a session and touring musician across blues, rock, and popular music contexts, as well as for his long-standing presence in the Midwest professional music scene.

today's rapidly changing musical landscape.

Research Questions

A set of questions was presented to the interviewees to provide a comprehensive understanding of their profession, tracing its development from the outset of their careers to the present day. The following section outlines these questions in detail.

1. Can you describe your early musical background, including how you first became involved in music, your primary influences, and the nature of your formal training in music and guitar? Additionally, how did your early listening habits and influences contribute to the development of your musical identity?
2. From your perspective, what competencies are essential for success as a studio guitarist? How critical are skills such as sight-reading, improvisation, harmonic fluency, and arranging, and what degree of proficiency do you believe is necessary in each area to function effectively in professional studio settings?
3. When encountering a new piece of music for the first time, what aspects of the chart tend to receive your immediate attention? For instance, do you prioritize stylistic cues, technically intricate passages, formal markers such as codas or tags, or the placement and function of solos or dense accompaniment figures? How do these considerations shape your initial approach to the music?
4. Given your extensive experience working across multiple genres and with diverse artists, how do you approach stylistic adaptation in your playing? What technical, musical, or cognitive skills do you consider essential to maintaining versatility as a guitarist across varied musical contexts?

5. How do you negotiate the balance between personal musical identity and the constraints of highly prescribed arrangements? In situations where a composition establishes very specific parameters, how do you assert a recognizable personal voice—one that allows listeners to identify your playing, even within an otherwise airtight musical framework?
6. From an equipment perspective, how do you approach achieving stylistic authenticity and a distinctive sound across genres such as jazz, rock, funk and country? If so, what specific elements of your setup would change, and what criteria do you use to determine which equipment best aligns with the musical and aesthetic demands of each session?
7. How would you describe the evolution of studio session work over the course of your career? In particular, how did changes in recording technology influence industry practices, expectations of guitarists, and your own approach to studio performance?
8. In your view, is the role of the full-time studio guitarist still a viable career path in today's music industry? What conditions make it viable—or not viable—now?
9. How have technological developments—such as home studios, remote recording workflows, and widespread access to professional-quality equipment—reshaped demand for studio guitarists? Relative to earlier decades often described as a “golden age,”¹³ do you perceive opportunities as expanded, reduced, or restructured?

¹³ In this study, “golden age” of the recording industry refers to the 1970s and 1980s, a period characterized by financially robust record labels, active A&R departments, and significant investment in professional studios, allowing for extended recording budgets, sustained artist development, and consistent employment for session musicians.

CHAPTER 2: VERSATILITY AS A CORE PROFESSIONAL SKILL

One of the most frequently discussed aspects, both in the literature and in the interviews, is the importance of being flexible enough to perform across a wide range of musical genres. In a studio setting, a guitarist may be required to play on a country track, record a commercial jingle, or contribute to any number of other musical contexts. Regarding this versatility, JD Simo explains:

“I just sort of instinctually fish around and try and find something that I think makes it cool, and all the things that you’re mentioning, all my loves of different music, and all the different obsessions I’ve had, and still have, you know, they’re just, they just end up being different things that I can tap, you know, that I can utilize.”¹⁴

The Guitar Player Book (1978) presents a compilation of magazine articles on important guitarists like Billy Bauer, James Burton, Glen Campbell, Buddy Emmons, Chet Atkins, and Laurindo Almeida¹⁵. All these guitarists worked in studios either in Los Angeles or in Nashville¹⁶, and they recorded an extensive amount of music.

By reading their profiles, I realized that they had similar backgrounds when it comes to playing music. They all listened to a wide range of musical styles and, therefore, they played a variety of genres as well. James Burton¹⁷ gave one example about the nature of the studio musician. He mentioned the necessity of being a “chameleon” in order to play what each song requires.¹⁸

¹⁴ JD Simo, interview by Beto Rodrigues, Champaign, Illinois, November 2024

¹⁵ Billy Bauer (1915–2005), James Burton (b. 1939), Glen Campbell (1936–2017), Buddy Emmons (1937–2015), Chet Atkins (1924–2001), and Laurindo Almeida (1917–1995) were influential twentieth-century guitarists whose work across jazz, country, classical, and popular music helped shape the professional standards, stylistic vocabulary, and studio practices of modern guitar performance.

¹⁶ Los Angeles and Nashville emerged as major centers of studio recording in the mid-twentieth century, hosting networks of influential recording studios that supported film, television, popular music, and country music production, and fostering professional communities of studio musicians whose work shaped the sound and methods of the modern recording industry.

¹⁷ James Burton (b. 1939) is an American guitarist widely regarded as a pioneering figure in rock and country music, known for his influential work as a session and touring musician with artists such as Ricky Nelson and Elvis Presley, as well as for shaping the vocabulary of electric guitar playing in popular music.

¹⁸ Jim Ferguson, *The Guitar Player Book*, First edition (Saratoga, CA: Guitar Player Books, 1978), 56-59.

Another example of the importance of the skill of being versatile is found in the publication *Hal Blaine and the Wrecking Crew* (2003), an autobiography about one of the most important collectives of musicians that helped shape the sound of commercial music in the '50s, '60s and '70s. Hal Blaine was a studio drummer, who was present at over 35,000 sessions, and his drumming was featured in one-hundred and fifty US top-ten hits, forty of which went to number one. In his book, Blaine shares some important accounts with readers of how some sessions played out.

In some of the narratives, Hal mentioned about the background of some musicians. He states:

“The country musicians who joined us weren’t exactly academics, though they added important new elements to our chemistry. The jazzers could keep a constant tempo and guys like Glen Campbell, Billy Strange and James Burton would bring wild, off the-the-wall solos that had never been heard before. Putting all of this on rock and roll record was totally fresh.”¹⁹

Accounts such as this are essential in demonstrating that musicians often came from diverse training backgrounds and, as a result, contributed distinct musical perspectives to recorded works. This document is particularly significant to the present study because it offers firsthand testimony from an individual who directly observed thousands of recording sessions, providing rare insight into studio practices as they unfolded in real time.

Returning to the Wrecking Crew, *The Wrecking Crew: The Inside Story of Rock and Roll’s Best-Kept Secret* (2012) offers detailed accounts of their studio work and professional routines. Among the frequently cited narratives is guitarist Tommy Tedesco’s account of the intense level of practice required to sustain full-time employment in the music industry, including descriptions of physical strain resulting from prolonged technical preparation.²⁰ Such accounts further illustrate the breadth of instrumental proficiency expected of studio guitarists, as well as the necessity of additional

¹⁹ Hal Blaine and David Goggin, *Hal Blaine and the Wrecking Crew*, Alma, Mich: Rebeats, 2003, 58.

²⁰ Kent Hartman, *The Wrecking Crew: The Inside Story of Rock and Roll’s Best-Kept Secret*, 1st ed, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2012, 65-68.

technical skills, including advanced sight-reading ability²¹.

In a similar vein, the article “Offers Tips for Surviving Nashville” (2010) presents guitarist Brent Mason’s²² perspective on the realities of working as a professional musician in Nashville. Mason, currently one of the most in-demand studio guitarists in the city, outlines key characteristics necessary for becoming a first-call musician. He emphasizes qualities such as stylistic adaptability—describing the ideal studio guitarist as a “chameleon”—and underscores the importance of developing musical understanding through close listening to highly skilled players.²³ As Mason states, “Knowing different styles benefits me tremendously.”²⁴

Another guitarist whose studio career warrants particular attention is the English-born Albert Lee²⁵. Lee made a significant impact on the music industry beginning in the 1970s, after relocating from England to the United States and recording with artists ranging from Eric Clapton²⁶ to Emmylou Harris²⁷ as a member of her Hot Band. *Country Boy* (2019), a comprehensive biography of Lee, traces his development as a guitarist and examines several foundational elements that contributed to his versatility in studio settings. Factors such as growing up in a Gypsy family, early exposure to a wide range of musical styles, and learning songs by ear played a crucial role in shaping Lee’s distinctive musical voice.²⁸

²¹ Kent *The Wrecking Crew: The Inside Story of Rock and Roll’s Best-Kept Secret*, 178-179.

²² Brent Mason (b. 1959) is an American guitarist widely recognized for his work as a leading Nashville session musician, whose recordings have helped define the sound and technical vocabulary of contemporary country music.

²³ “Offers Tips for Surviving Nashville.” *International Musician*, April, 2010, 23.

²⁴ “Offers Tips for Surviving Nashville,” 23.

²⁵ Albert Lee (b. 1943) is an English guitarist known for his highly versatile studio and touring career, particularly within country and rock contexts, and for his influential work with artists in the United States following his relocation from England in the 1970s.

²⁶ Eric Clapton (b. 1945) is an English guitarist and songwriter whose influential career spans rock and blues traditions, widely recognized for his work as both a band member and a session contributor, as well as for his impact on the development of electric guitar performance in popular music.

²⁷ Emmylou Harris (b. 1947) is an American singer and songwriter whose work has been central to the development of country and Americana music; her backing ensemble, the Hot Band, was known for its high level of instrumental virtuosity and played a significant role in shaping the sound of her recordings during the 1970s.

²⁸ Derek Watts, *Country Boy: A Biography of Albert Lee*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2019. 17-27.

Continuing on this subject, Andrew Synowiec refers to one of the most celebrated studio guitarists, Tommy Tedesco, as an example. Synowiec remarks:

“You really have to wear so many hats now. Back in the day, if you think of someone like Tommy Tedesco, he had to play, he had to be able to read—that’s what people knew him for—and he also had to be flexible and able to take direction.”²⁹

Kraig McCreary offers his perspective on the same idea, attributing his diverse musical upbringing as a significant advantage. He explains that his exposure to a wide range of styles shaped his adaptability as a studio guitarist. As McCreary recalls:

“My past was good for me in that I always enjoyed many different kinds of music. I was listening to a lot of different material, so if someone wanted a country feel or a reggae feel, I could respond to that. My main focus had always been rock and blues—Cream was probably my biggest influence when I was a teenager, so Eric Clapton and that kind of style. That served me well, especially through the 1980s and into the early 1990s, when guitar was featured on just about every commercial.”³⁰

To summarize this aspect of the discussion, McCreary offers a clear and definitive perspective on the subject.

“Thing I would say to you is just to be as versatile as you can, to understand as much as you can about the different styles of music, about the way that you produce sounds, about the way sounds are captured.”³¹

McCreary also offers an important perspective regarding the role of ear training in his professional development. He emphasizes that possessing a highly trained ear has been a central asset throughout his career, enabling him to navigate diverse musical situations with efficiency and accuracy. According to McCreary, this skill is not merely beneficial but fundamentally necessary for anyone pursuing work as a studio guitarist. He states “The ear thing saved you a lot... It did”³²

²⁹ Andrew Synowiec, interview by Beto Rodrigues, Champaign, Illinois, March 2025.

³⁰ Kraig McCreary, interview by Beto Rodrigues, Champaign, Illinois, May 2025.

³¹ McCreary, interview.

³² *Ibid*

Session guitarist and author Chris Standring³³, a musician with more than three decades of professional experience in the recording industry, offers an important perspective on the role of the studio guitarist as a “jack-of-all-trades.” Drawing from his extensive career in studio work, Standring emphasizes that versatility is not merely an asset but a fundamental requirement for sustained success in the studio environment. He argues that the modern studio guitarist must be prepared to navigate a wide range of musical styles, interpret parts “in the style of” other players, and adapt quickly to the demands of producers, composers, and contractors. According to Standring, this adaptability often extends beyond stylistic fluency to include strong sight-reading skills, familiarity with multiple instruments, and the ability to deliver convincing performances under tight time constraints. His insights underscore the reality that, while specialization can lead to artistic distinction, the “jack-of-all-trades” approach remains central to consistent employability and long-term relevance in studio guitar work.³⁴

In closing this discussion on stylistic versatility, Synowiec articulates one of the defining characteristics of the professional studio guitarist. His perspective underscores the necessity for adaptability across genres, tonal palettes, and musical functions, emphasizing that versatility is not merely a desirable skill but a fundamental professional requirement. Synowiec states:

“That’s just what I sort of just described, which is [the studio guitar player] is like this Rolodex of sounds. And, you know, press a button and he sounds like Brent Mason. Press another button, and he sounds like Slash, you know, or whatever you know.”³⁵

Taken together, these accounts from literature and firsthand interviews consistently demonstrate that stylistic versatility is a defining requirement of professional studio guitar work. The

³³ Chris Standring (b. 1969) is an English guitarist and composer known for his work in contemporary jazz and for a career that integrates studio recording, composition, and production across film, television, and commercial music contexts.

³⁴ Chris Standring, *The Essential Studio Guitarist* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 2000), 7.

³⁵ Synowiec, interview.

ability to move fluently across genres, adapt to rapidly changing musical demands, and draw upon a broad palette of influences emerges as a foundational skill for sustained employability in studio environments.

CHAPTER 3: SIGHT-READING IN PROFESSIONAL RECORDING CONTEXTS

Contrary to common assumptions regarding the professional requirements of studio musicianship, the interviews conducted for this study suggest that exceptional sight-reading ability is not necessarily a decisive factor in determining success as a studio guitarist. While sight-reading proficiency is unquestionably a valuable skill, the collected sources indicate that it is not universally regarded as a prerequisite for sustained professional work. Instead, many interviewees emphasized the importance of highly developed aural skills, noting that the ability to quickly internalize musical material by ear often plays a more critical role in studio settings than flawless notational fluency. To illustrate this perspective, McCreary says: “Like I said, I have a really good ear and most of the stuff that we did in jingles was fairly simple. You know, a few chords. There might be some tricky time signatures to accommodate the film.”³⁶

In a similar vein, guitarist and composer Standring reflects on the role of sight-reading in professional studio practice, offering insight into how this skill functions within real-world recording environments. He states:

“First, I should point out that “sight-reading” is entirely relative to how hard the part is. If a writer puts the equivalent of a Bach fugue in front of you (extremely unlikely), he certainly will not expect you to read it on sight. If he wants the best performance, he will send you the part ahead of time. Second, it is not a question of being a great sight-reader, but more of understanding music, that is really essential here. The dots on the page are merely a means to an end. It is the performance that counts.”³⁷

Taken together, published sources and the perspectives of working musicians suggest that sight-reading in the studio is best understood as a flexible, context-dependent skill rather than a fixed standard. What is expected from a guitarist in this regard tends to vary depending on the musical style,

³⁶ McCreary, interview.

³⁷ Standring, *The Essential Studio Guitarist*, 11.

the pace of the session, and the specific demands of the project. In many real-world situations, composers and producers are not necessarily looking for flawless first-take performances of complex material, especially when that material has not been previously seen.

For this reason, sight-reading remains an important part of studio musicianship, but it does not function as the defining measure of professional competence. Placing too much emphasis on it as a kind of gatekeeping skill can overlook the broader set of abilities that studio guitarists rely on in practice—particularly their capacity to listen, adapt, and respond musically within the moment.

CHAPTER 4: PERFORMANCE ACROSS MULTIPLE MUSICAL GENRES

As discussed above, it is essential for the studio guitarist to demonstrate a high degree of flexibility and the ability to perform convincingly across a wide range of musical styles. Each style, however, demands a distinct set of technical skills, interpretive approaches, and aesthetic considerations, requiring the musician to respond thoughtfully to the musical material presented. In this context, we will look into how several of the most frequently encountered studio styles should be approached and interpreted. The observations also address the role of equipment selection in supporting stylistic authenticity and effective performance within these genres.

Jazz

With regard to jazz performance, Standring offers a perspective on how phrasing and, most importantly, rhythmic feel should be approached within this genre. He emphasizes the importance of internalizing the stylistic nuances that define jazz interpretation, particularly in studio contexts where clarity and authenticity are essential. Standring also addresses considerations related to instrument choice, outlining the types of guitars that are most effective in achieving the tonal characteristics commonly associated with jazz performance. He states:

“If the music is authentic, swing jazz style (Count Basie may be), you will want to pull out your hollow body jazz guitar with fairly heavy gauge strings. Go for a flat tone with a little extra bass and do not get bendy with the other instruments. This style of playing should be blended with the other instruments. Try to feel swing music in 12/8 time when it is written in 4/4.”³⁸

From a performance standpoint, jazz phrasing tends to rely on a very subtle kind of placement, where notes often lean slightly toward the end of the beat or phrase. This is not always something that can be easily captured in notation, but it plays a crucial role in creating the sense of swing. It gives the

³⁸ Standring, *The Essential Studio Guitarist*, 25.

music its forward motion while at the same time allowing it to breathe, which is a defining feature of the style. When accompanying, the general approach is usually to avoid overplaying. Simplicity tends to be more effective, though what that looks like can vary depending on the musical setting. In more traditional jazz contexts, guitarists are often expected to provide a steady “four-on-the-floor” feel, emulating the kind of approach associated with Freddie Green.³⁹ Here, the focus is not on filling space with complex voicings, but on supporting the groove with consistent time and clear harmonic movement. By internalizing these fundamental concepts of phrasing and accompaniment, a guitarist is generally well prepared to navigate studio sessions in which jazz performance is required.

Contemporary Rock

Contemporary Rock represents one of the most common forms of session work in the professional life of both guitarists and musicians. The stylistic characteristics of this repertoire and era are strongly influenced by prominent figures such as Steve Lukather and Dann Huff⁴⁰, whose work helped define the aesthetic expectations of rock-oriented studio performance. In contrast to jazz performers, rock guitarists rely to a much greater extent on overdriven and distorted guitar tones. As a result, they are required to develop and command a broader palette of timbral variations within distortion-based sounds in order to respond appropriately to diverse musical contexts. In this regard, Chris Standing articulates the following perspective.

“Any quality tube preamp will reproduce an authentic rock overdrive sound. The classic rock sound has traditionally come from Marshall amplification [...] A small amount of stereo chorus is very effective to make the sound bigger and wide, A delay of about 500ms with a long feedback (about four repeats) will emulate the “Steve Lukather” sound very nicely. The Gibson Les Paul and Fender Strat were the two guitars used extensively for this.”⁴¹

³⁹ Freddie Green (1911–1987) was an American jazz guitarist best known for his long-standing role in the Count Basie Orchestra, where his understated rhythmic style became a defining element of big band accompaniment and an influential model for ensemble guitar playing.

⁴⁰ Dan Huff (b. 1961) is an American guitarist, producer, and songwriter known for his work as a leading Nashville session musician during the 1980s and 1990s, as well as for his subsequent career as a prominent record producer in country and popular music.

⁴¹ Standing, *The Essential Studio Guitarist*, 26.

During the interview process, when Steve Lukather was asked to describe the equipment, he typically brought to contemporary rock recording sessions in Los Angeles during the 1980s, his gear was notably concise. He stated the following:

“Well, I mean, we didn't get into mega equipment until, like, I'd say, like, 1983, 1984. That was a rack mounter. But prior to that, it was like using Fender Deluxe and I'd bring a Les Paul, a Tele, a 335, a Strat, or something like that, and some acoustic. And you show up ready for a run.”⁴²

Several stylistic considerations must be taken into account when performing with overdriven guitar sounds in rock-oriented contexts. One primary concern is that highly saturated tones tend to reduce harmonic clarity, causing individual chord tones to sound blurred or indistinct when compared to the relatively clean timbres commonly employed in jazz performance. As a result, certain harmonic practices—such as extended voicings or chromatic substitutions—are often avoided in rock repertoire, as closely spaced or dissonant intervals may produce undesirable sonic artifacts. To mitigate these issues, many guitarists simplify their chord voicings by omitting the third and emphasizing the fifth, thereby reducing harmonic ambiguity while preserving structural stability. These considerations are particularly relevant when using high levels of distortion; by contrast, when a less saturated or cleaner tone is employed, such limitations are significantly reduced, allowing for greater harmonic complexity without compromising clarity.

Authentic Rock

Authentic rock and roll performance is fundamentally grounded in the sonic aesthetics of the 1950s and 1960s. This historical orientation implies that studio guitarists working within this tradition typically favor significantly lower levels of overdrive, aiming instead for tones that more closely reflect the clarity and dynamic responsiveness of early electric guitar recordings. In this context, Chris

⁴² Steve Lukather, interview by Beto Rodrigues, Brasilia, Brazil, January 2026.

Stranding delineates the essential equipment requirements in a concise and focused manner, outlining the core elements necessary to achieve this stylistic authenticity.

“The music of this time period was almost always performed on jumbo hollow body guitars that were otherwise used to play jazz. Solid body guitars were just coming onto the market, so to capture the original sound, you might want to pick up a Gibson 175 or similar hollow body guitar. A Gibson 335 might also do the job, or an old Gretsch. [...] An old tube combo amp would sound great for this. Maybe a Fender twin reverb an or an old Vox AC30. These amps sound great when cranked up as they add a bite to the guitar sound without really adding distortion to it.”⁴³

From a performance perspective, an effective and stylistically appropriate approach for the studio guitarist is to rely primarily on the blues scale or the minor pentatonic scale. These scalar frameworks are strongly associated with the rock and roll idiom and function as foundational melodic resources within the style. Their consistent use not only reinforces genre authenticity but also facilitates idiomatic phrasing that aligns the guitarist’s improvisational language with established rock and roll conventions.

Funk

Performing guitar within a funk ensemble presents distinct challenges due to the density and complexity of typical arrangements, which often include extensive horn writing and prominent keyboard textures. Within this context, the guitar occupies a carefully defined sonic space, situated between harmonic accompaniment and rhythmic reinforcement. Consequently, the studio guitarist must approach part construction with a high degree of precision, ensuring that each gesture contributes clearly to the overall texture without overcrowding the mix.

As noted by Chris Standring, two primary performance approaches are commonly employed in funk guitar playing. The first emphasizes tightly articulated rhythmic figures, characterized by short, staccato chord attacks that reinforce the groove. The second approach is more overtly percussive,

⁴³ Standring, *The Essential Studio Guitarist*, 28.

involving muted-string techniques that articulate common tones across chord progressions or throughout a song, thereby functioning as a rhythmic layer rather than a harmonic foreground.⁴⁴

Larry Carlton, one of the most influential and prolific studio guitarists in popular music history, offers particularly valuable insight into the approach to funk guitar performance within a studio context. When addressing the construction of rhythm guitar parts, Carlton emphasizes principles that extend beyond stylistic conventions and instead focus on precision, restraint, and rhythmic clarity—elements that are essential for the professional studio guitarist. He states:

“When it comes to playing rhythm on a funky blues, muted parts with accents can fit the bill nicely. Heavy muting also gives a real percussive feel, where the pitch itself is sometimes barely audible. [...] The funky double-stop parts played on the upper strings didn't commit to major or minor because they avoided the 3rd as well. One approach for getting the feel just right is to intertwine your part with the bass so the two work like a rhythm unit. I always like to start a part simply, with lots of space, and then gradually add to whatever motif I've established.”⁴⁵

With regard to equipment, the foundational setup largely parallels that used in rock and roll contexts; however, distortion is applied in a lesser degree. Funk guitar performance a tone that cuts through the texture with clarity, favoring clean or minimally driven sounds that allow the instrument to be heard with precision and rhythmic authority.

In addition to the equipment outlined in the rock-oriented context, the guitarist Dennis Coffey⁴⁶ identifies the wah-wah pedal as one of his primary effects devices for funk. Coffey notes that this pedal featured prominently in several of his recordings at the Motown recording studios, where it contributed to the distinctive rhythmic and timbral character associated with his guitar work.⁴⁷

Country

⁴⁴ Standing, *The Essential Studio Guitarist*, 31.

⁴⁵ Larry Carlton, *335 Blues* (TrueFire video lesson), accessed January 17, 2026, <https://truefire.com/larry-carlton/335-blues/>

⁴⁶ Dennis Coffey (b. 1947) is an American guitarist best known for his work as a member of the Funk Brothers, the Motown Records house band, and for his influential contributions to soul and funk recordings,

⁴⁷ Dennis Coffey, *Guitars, Bars and Motown Superstars*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2009.

Country music represents one of the most commercially successful genres in the United States and, as a result, provides substantial employment opportunities for studio guitarists. The majority of professional recording activity associated with this genre is centered in Nashville, which is widely regarded as the national hub of country music production.

In terms of stylistic approach to studio guitar performance within this genre, two figures are frequently cited as foundational models: Albert Lee and James Burton. Their playing exemplifies the technical precision, clarity of articulation, and idiomatic phrasing that define country guitar aesthetics and continue to inform contemporary studio practice.

With regard to equipment, Chris Standring outlines a fundamentally minimal and utilitarian setup, emphasizing reliability, tonal clarity, and stylistic appropriateness rather than excessive signal processing or elaborate configurations.

“You will want to get a biting trebly sound out of your guitar for any solo fills or lead lines. A Telecaster or Strat using the back pickup will be perfect. Go straight into a Fender twin reverb amp or similar sound, get a very clean sound with a touch of reverb, and you are all set. No effects.”⁴⁸

Also in country guitar performance, compressor pedals are widely used to even out dynamics, increasing sustain while preserving note clarity—particularly in clean or lightly driven tones. This allows for greater consistency in articulation, especially in hybrid picking⁴⁹, where individual notes must remain balanced and clearly defined.

More broadly, compression contributes to the characteristic “polished” country sound by enhancing attack and maintaining presence within the mix, enabling the guitar to sit forward without excessive volume. Its use has become especially prominent in modern country and crossover styles, where clarity, sustain, and rhythmic precision are essential components of the genre’s sonic identity.

⁴⁸Standring, *The Essential Studio Guitarist*, 41.

⁴⁹ Hybrid picking combines a pick and fingers to pluck non-adjacent strings, enabling flexible articulation common in country guitar.

In a similar vein, the book *The Guitar Greats* (1984) includes a detailed section on James Burton. The authors present a comprehensive biographical account that addresses Burton's formation as a professional musician, his approaches to learning music, and his entry into the world of studio recording.⁵⁰ The discussion also considers aspects of the equipment he employed across various recording sessions, and these observations align closely with the conceptual framework and technical principles previously articulated by Standring.

With respect to performance practice, several characteristics are particularly distinctive in country guitar playing. One such feature is the articulation of single-note lines, which are typically executed with a short, staccato attack that emphasizes clarity, precision, and rhythmic definition. Another highly prevalent stylistic element is the frequent use of double-stops, most commonly involving intervals of thirds and sixths. These intervallic combinations constitute a core component of the country guitar vocabulary and are central to the genre's melodic and harmonic idiom.⁵¹

Another widely employed technique in country guitar performance is commonly referred to as "chicken picking". This approach involves the simultaneous use of a pick and the picking-hand fingers, creating a hybrid articulation that enhances both rhythmic precision and dynamic contrast. While the pick is used to articulate individual notes or accented attacks, the middle, ring, and little fingers are employed to pluck or strum additional strings, often within chordal or double-stop figures. This combined technique allows for a sharp, percussive attack and contributes significantly to the distinctive rhythmic drive and articulation associated with country guitar playing.

⁵⁰ John Tobler, John and Stuart Grundy, *The Guitar Greats*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 33-43.

⁵¹ Standring, *The Essential Studio Guitarist*, 41.

Classical

Lastly, with regard to classical guitar, Chris Standing observes that when a session requires a highly authentic classical performance, it is often preferable to engage a specialist trained specifically in the classical tradition. In such cases, the stylistic and technical demands of the repertoire may exceed those typically expected of a generalist session guitarist. Conversely, there are many situations in which session players are hired not to deliver a fully idiomatic classical performance, but rather to provide a stylistic approximation—a “flavor” of classical guitar—where versatility and the ability to evoke characteristic elements of the style are prioritized over strict faithfulness to tradition.⁵²

From a practical standpoint, it is essential for the studio guitarist to realize that classical guitar performance is generally rooted in previously notated material, with significantly less emphasis on improvisation. Rather than prioritizing spontaneous creation, the performer must demonstrate careful attention to the written notes and their musical realization. This includes a heightened sensitivity to phrasing, articulation, and especially dynamics, which are often more nuanced and explicitly detailed than those typically encountered in lead sheets or chord charts for pop or rock contexts.

In terms of equipment and technique, the requirements likewise differ substantially from other studio settings. The use of a proper nylon-string instrument is fundamental, as it produces the timbral qualities associated with the classical idiom. Sound production relies heavily on the fingernail, making right-hand technique a central component of tone formation. Consequently, aspects such as nail shape and maintenance—particularly careful filing—are of critical importance to the performer’s sound. In contrast, external equipment such as amplifiers plays a comparatively minor role, as tone is primarily generated through the physical approach of the performer rather than through electronic enhancement.

When examined in conjunction, these stylistic examples demonstrate that effective studio

⁵² Standing, *The Essential Studio Guitarist*, 39

guitar performance is not achieved through stylistic mimicry alone, but through an informed balance of technical command, tonal awareness, and contextual sensitivity. While each genre carries its own conventions with regard to phrasing, articulation, harmony, and equipment, the underlying professional requirement remains consistent: the ability to interpret musical situations quickly and respond in a way that supports the overall recording. This interpretive responsibility places the studio guitarist in a role that extends beyond stylistic execution, requiring active musical decision-making shaped by the demands of the session. As the following section will explore, this same adaptability often leads studio guitarists to move beyond predefined parts, engaging instead in the creative process of shaping and developing guitar parts within recording sessions themselves.

CHAPTER 5: GUITAR PART DEVELOPMENT IN STUDIO PRACTICE

One very important observation that emerged consistently throughout the interview process is that studio guitar work extends well beyond the accurate execution of written material. The findings indicate that a significant portion of a studio guitarist's responsibilities involves the creation and development of original parts, requiring a high degree of creative input during the recording process. In many professional studio contexts, guitarists are often provided with only a basic chart outlining chord progressions, rather than fully realized parts. Under these conditions, the musician is expected not only to interpret the written material but also to contribute musically engaging and stylistically appropriate content.

Consequently, the role of the studio guitarist frequently encompasses responsibilities traditionally associated with both composition and arrangement. Rather than functioning solely as a performer of pre-composed material, the guitarist must simultaneously shape harmonic, rhythmic, and textural elements in real time. In this context, JD Simo articulates the following perspective.

“If I hear something, I'm thinking to myself, “okay”, what can I do to make this better, and I don't get as intrinsic in my own mind, I just sort of instinctually fish around and try and find something that I think makes it cool.”⁵³

In this respect, Steve Lukather recalls that, in the majority of recording sessions in which he participated, he was expected to devise his own guitar parts rather than perform fully notated material. He emphasizes that this practice was a standard aspect of studio work during that period and reflects the broader expectation that session guitarists contribute creatively to the recording process. He states the following:

“They used to hire me just to come up with parts that were better. They'd just give me chord charts with, like, you know, slashes and rhythm notation. Occasionally, a line or two to read.

⁵³ JD Simo, interview by Beto Rodrigues, Champaign, Illinois, November 2024

But most of the time, I got hired to do whatever I wanted to do.”⁵⁴

With regard to guitar part development in studio practice, Larry Carlton articulates his approach with notable intentionality. Rather than immediately playing during the first run-through of a piece, he emphasizes the importance of attentive listening. As Carlton explains:

“I like to just listen to the band playing on the first rundown. I don’t play anything. I just listen to the band. Once I’ve done that, I decide what I’m going to play and the parts that I’m going to play.”⁵⁵

This deliberate restraint allows him to evaluate the arrangement, the overall sonic landscape, and the interaction among the instruments before contributing his own material. In doing so, Carlton demonstrates a fundamental principle of studio musicianship: the guitar part must emerge from the musical context, not precede it.

Expanding upon the notion of the guitarist functioning as an arranger within the studio environment, Larry Carlton further emphasizes the importance of spontaneous arrangement in the role of the accompanist. As he explains:

“You have to be able to improvise arrangements on the spot to be a great accompanist. It is what you do with the phrases around the vocals that can make the whole thing sound more connected. I think there is a good example of how to think like an arranger. When Joni Mitchell sings, ‘Help me, I think I’m falling,’ I do a rake across the strings, and it makes her next phrase, ‘in love again,’ really cool because she has a chord to sit down on.”⁵⁶

Carlton’s statement underscores a central component of professional studio guitar practice: the ability to think compositionally in real time. Rather than merely supplying harmonic support, the guitarist actively shapes the emotional contour and structural cohesion of the song through carefully placed gestures. In this example, the subtle rake across the strings functions not as ornamentation, but as an intentional connective device that enhances the vocalist’s phrasing and strengthens the continuity

⁵⁴ Steve Lukather, interview by Beto Rodrigues, Brasilia, Brazil, January 2026.

⁵⁵ Larry Carlton, interview by Beto Rodrigues, Illinois, February 2026.

⁵⁶ Carlton, interview.

between lyrical statements.

Continuing the discussion of the studio guitarist as a professional whose role extends beyond that of a performer alone, seasoned Los Angeles–based guitarist Richard Smith⁵⁷ offers a relevant perspective. With an extensive career spanning television, commercial jingles, and recording sessions, as well as previous teaching experience at the University of Southern California, Smith articulates the multifaceted responsibilities that define contemporary studio guitar work. He states:

“I truly believe that above the requisite artistic level of proficiency in one, and hopefully more, styles of music, the essential factors of becoming a successful studio player are interpretation, interpretation, and interpretation. Studio players are almost always in a position of interpreting or realizing the producer’s, composer’s or artist’s musical vision. If you as a guitarist can quickly formulate the part that this person is hearing in his head, whether you are reading it the way he hears it or coming up with a great part on the spot in a timely fashion, you will be very sought after. This to me is a selfless, challenging, and rewarding musical experience.”⁵⁸

The balance between creative input and musical restraint emerges as a defining characteristic of professional studio and sideman guitar work. As discussed throughout this chapter, guitarists are frequently expected to devise their own parts rather than simply execute fully notated material. However, this creative responsibility is consistently framed within the broader obligation to support the musical vision of the artist and the song itself. In *The Codependent Guitarist: The Art of Being a Sideman* (2021), the article examines the professional realities of sideman guitarists and highlights the interpretive discipline required in such roles. Drawing on insights from seasoned practitioners, the article reinforces the notion that artistic success in studio and supporting contexts is measured not by technical display, but by musical appropriateness. Session/studio guitarist Will Kimbrough⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Richard Smith is an American guitarist, recording artist, and professor of studio/jazz guitar at the Thornton School of Music, University of Southern California in Los Angeles, whose extensive solo recordings and professional teaching career reflect a broad engagement with contemporary music performance and studio practice.

⁵⁸ Standing, *The Essential Studio Guitarist*, 72.

⁵⁹ Will Kimbrough (b. 1964) is an American guitarist, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist known for his work in Americana and roots music, including collaborations with Emmylou Harris and Rodney Crowell, exemplifying the contemporary studio-touring hybrid musician.

articulates that “The song is the sacred thing here. It’s not about your incredible chops and speed. The artist wants you to play the song.”⁶⁰ This perspective encapsulates a central finding of the present study. Although studio guitarists are not typically engaged as primary creators, their work often involves interpretive and creative decision-making within the recording process. These decisions are guided by the needs of the composition, the artist, and the recording context. In this way, professional studio musicianship is defined not by self-expression alone, but by the ability to align creativity with musical purpose.

⁶⁰ Michael Ross, “The Codependent Guitarist: The Art of Being a Sideman.” Web log, *Premier Guitar* (blog), April 1, 2021.

CHAPTER 6: PRESENT-DAY RECORDING PRACTICES

When addressing the subject of recording music in the present day, the sources consulted for this project reveal a range of perspectives regarding contemporary studio practices. Interviews conducted for this study, alongside additional external sources, indicate that there is no single consensus on how recording sessions are approached today. Instead, these practices reflect a coexistence of traditional methods and technology driven workflows.

Technological advancements have played a significant role in reshaping how musicians prepare for and participate in recording sessions, particularly with regard to equipment. The logistical demands once associated with transporting multiple amplifiers and large pedalboards have been substantially reduced. With the advent of advanced digital modeling technology, compact hardware units capable of accurately simulating classic amplifiers and effects have become widely adopted. Products such as the Kemper Profiler, Neural DSP Quad Cortex, ToneX system and Universal Audio amplifier modeling pedals including the Dream '65, Woodrow '55, Ruby '63, and Enigmatic '82⁶¹ have emerged as benchmark references for contemporary amplifier simulation.

As a result, many guitarists now approach recording sessions with a streamlined setup, often integrating these devices directly into the digital audio workstation. This workflow allows players to access a wide range of tones without the need to transport multiple amplifiers, offering increased efficiency and flexibility within modern studio environments.

Despite these technological shifts, traditional practices have not been entirely replaced. Several

⁶¹ The mentioned products are digital audio devices designed to emulate the sound and dynamic response of traditional guitar amplifiers and effects. These systems allow musicians to capture, reproduce, or model the tonal characteristics of classic and contemporary amplifiers in a compact and portable format. When used in studio environments, such devices can be recorded directly into a digital audio workstation, offering tonal consistency, reduced setup time, and flexibility without the need for physical amplifier cabinets or microphones

interviewees emphasized the continued relevance of physical amplifiers in studio work. Guitarist Andrew Synowiec, for example, maintains the practice of bringing amplifiers to recording sessions. He pointed out that:

“Oh, I definitely still bring amps. Yeah, to me, that's [amplifier simulation] still not the same. If I can I bring them. I mean, most of the time there's cartage, so you just show up and all your stuff is magically there. It's like you have your preferences, which, like mine is to use an amp, and so that, to me, is easy and fun, and I like all that stuff.”⁶²

At the same time, Synowiec clarifies that bringing amplifiers to a session does not preclude the frequent use of direct recording methods. He notes that, in practice, he rarely knows in advance what a given session will ultimately require, and for that reason he often records directly without committing to a specific amplifier sound at the tracking stage. In these situations, “going direct” does not imply the absence of tone shaping, but rather a workflow in which the guitar signal is captured cleanly and processed later using contemporary amplification and processing technologies. This approach allows for greater flexibility during production, enabling tonal decisions to be made after the performance has been recorded. He explains:

“I also am a realist, and I know that, okay, somebody's gonna have to a lot of people are gonna need me to go direct. So I have, like, all of that stuff too. I have a bunch of different options for that.”⁶³

Within this context, digital modeling systems and amplifier simulation platforms play a crucial role, as they allow the guitarist to adapt quickly to stylistic or aesthetic changes without the need to re-track parts. Synowiec's practice thus illustrates how traditional and technological approaches coexist in modern studio work: while physical amplifiers remain an important part of his sound and workflow, direct recording and post-production processing provide a practical solution to the unpredictable and fast-paced demands of contemporary recording sessions.

⁶² Synowiec, interview.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

On the other hand, JD Simo represents a more traditional approach to contemporary recording sessions. While he continues to favor established recording practices, he also acknowledges that a number of modern studio guitarists are increasingly comfortable working with and incorporating emerging technological tools into their workflows. According to Simo, these differences reflect not only generational shifts, but also variations in professional background, studio expectations, and individual adaptability. He remarks that:

“The recording process really hasn't changed much. Yes, there's a lot of technology. I don't really pay much attention to it. It doesn't really come into play that much for me. There are people, there are colleagues of mine that are masterful at integrating new technology into their rigs, into their workflow. For me, I get option anxiety, and this is where every player is different.”⁶⁴

Taken together, these perspectives illustrate that contemporary studio guitar practice is not defined by a singular technological approach, but rather by the ability to navigate multiple workflows with flexibility and discernment. While advancements in digital modeling and direct recording have expanded the range of available tools and increased efficiency within modern studio environments, traditional amplification practices remain artistically and professionally relevant. The coexistence of these methods underscores a broader shift in studio musicianship, in which adaptability and preparedness outweigh allegiance to any one technology or workflow.

For today's studio guitarist, professional success depends less on the exclusive use of analog or digital systems and more on the capacity to respond effectively to the musical, logistical, and aesthetic demands of each session. In this sense, technology functions not as a replacement for established practices, but as an extension of the interpretive and practical skill set that has long defined the role of the studio guitarist.

⁶⁴ JD Simo, interview.

CONCLUSION

This project began with a curiosity about how to better understand the role of the studio guitarist beyond the usual focus on style or technical ability. Instead of viewing studio guitar work mainly in terms of genre or instrumental skill, this essay approaches it as a more complex professional practice—one that is shaped by historical developments, ongoing changes in technology, and the everyday realities of working within the music industry. In doing so, it becomes clear that studio musicianship is less about fixed categories and more about a set of adaptable skills, informed decision-making, and an ongoing reaction to changing musical situations.

Looking historically, the expansion of the recording industry in the years following World War II created new kinds of opportunities for guitarists, gradually establishing the instrument as a central presence in popular music production. The work of studio collectives such as the Wrecking Crew, the Funk Brothers, and the Nashville A-Team helped define many of the professional expectations that still exist today. What stands out about these musicians is not simply their technical ability, but their approach: a reliance on listening, flexibility, and the ability to solve musical problems in real time. Many of them were not formally trained in every style they were asked to perform, yet they developed a capacity to adapt quickly and convincingly. This suggests that long-term success in the studio has never depended solely on specialized training, but rather on a broader, more practical musicianship.

One of the clearest themes to emerge from this study is the importance of versatility. Across both interviews and written sources, versatility appears not as an optional skill, but as a central requirement of the profession. Studio guitarists are often expected to move between styles—jazz, rock, funk, country, and others—sometimes within the same session. This kind of flexibility goes beyond simply knowing stylistic vocabulary; it also involves an awareness of tone, familiarity with equipment, and the ability to interpret musical directions quickly and accurately. Several sources described this

role using metaphors such as a “chameleon” or even a “Rolodex of sounds,” emphasizing that the job requires access to a wide range of musical identities rather than a single, fixed voice.

The findings also complicate common assumptions about the role of sight-reading in studio work. While reading skills are certainly useful, they do not appear to function as an absolute requirement in the way they are sometimes portrayed in academic settings. Instead, interviewees consistently pointed to the importance of strong listening skills, musical intuition, and the ability to understand and respond to musical ideas in real time. In many professional situations, parts are simplified, shared in advance, or communicated aurally rather than read directly from notation. For this reason, placing too much emphasis on sight-reading can obscure the broader musicianship that the work actually demands—musicianship grounded in comprehension, adaptability, and effective performance.

Another important aspect of studio guitar work is the role of creative input. Contrary to the idea of the studio musician as someone who simply executes prewritten material, the evidence gathered here points to a more active and creative role. Guitarists are frequently expected to develop parts, shape textures, and contribute to the overall arrangement. At the same time, this creative freedom operates within clear boundaries. Decisions are typically guided by the needs of the song, the direction of the producer, and the broader artistic vision of the project. In this sense, one of the defining challenges of studio work lies in balancing individuality with restraint—knowing when to contribute and when to step back.

When examining different stylistic contexts—such as jazz, rock, funk, and country—it becomes apparent that each brings its own set of technical and musical considerations. However, the underlying expectation remains consistent: the guitarist’s role is to support the musical situation effectively. Choices related to tone, phrasing, articulation, and harmony are ultimately shaped by what

best serves the recording as a whole. Stylistic knowledge, then, functions less as an end goal and more as a practical tool that allows the musician to meet professional expectations with clarity and efficiency.

Technological developments have added another element to the mix. The usage of digital modeling, home recording setups, and hybrid workflows has gradually reshaped the current studio practices, influencing how guitarists approach their work on a practical level. At the same time, these changes have not fundamentally altered the core demands of the profession. Skills such as musical judgment, clarity of interpretation, and the ability to collaborate remain central. In this way, adapting to new technologies can be understood as an extension of the same flexibility that has always defined studio work.

When these aspects are considered together, they point toward a larger way of understanding the role of the studio guitarist. Instead of fitting into fixed definitions, the job is better understood in terms of a more flexible kind of musical proficiency. It depends on a kind of musical ability that is constantly adjusting—where versatility, awareness, and the capacity to respond in the moment become far more important than any single, rigid definition of what the job is supposed to be. It is a role that continues to evolve, designed by both historical precedents and present-day conditions. By bringing together firsthand accounts from working musicians with historical and analytical perspectives, this study offers a more grounded understanding of studio guitar practice as both an artistic pursuit and a professional reality.

Ultimately, the studio guitarist occupies a position that at the same time is essential but often overlooked within recorded music. Their contributions shape the sound of countless recordings, even when their presence remains largely invisible to listeners. By examining the skills, perspectives, and working methods that sustain this profession, this study aims to offer a clearer picture of what studio

guitarists actually do—and why their work continues to matter.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEWS

This appendix presents selected excerpts from interviews conducted with Larry Carlton, Steve Lukather, J.D. Simo, Andrew Synowiec, and Kraig McCreary.

Larry Carlton

Beto Rodrigues: Mr. Carlton, can you talk a bit about your early years as a musician? What were some of your main influences when you first picked up the guitar?

Larry Carlton: Well, you know, I started playing the guitar when I was about six years old. As I got a little older, I started listening a lot more. That's really where things opened up for me. I remember hearing players like Joe Pass and Wes Montgomery, and that kind of pulled me into jazz. At the same time, I was also listening to The Beatles and the things on the radio.

BR: Mr. Carlton, when beginning a recording session, and upon being presented with the musical material, what is the first step you typically take?

LC: I like to just listen to the band playing on the first rundown. I don't play anything. I just listen to the band. Once I've done that, I decide what I'm going to play and the parts that I'm going to play.

BR: How do you negotiate the dual role of performing in a session while also contributing as an arranger, particularly as an intermediary between the producer and the artist? In your sessions with Steely Dan, for instance, you contributed to the preparation of charts. Could you elaborate on that process?

LC: Yes, I did, the sessions for "Aja" I charted most of the music. You have to be able to improvise arrangements on the spot to be a great accompanist. It is what you do with the phrases around the vocals that can make the whole thing sound more connected. I think there is a good example of how to think like an arranger. When Joni Mitchell sings, 'Help me, I think I'm falling,' I do a rake

across the strings, and it makes her next phrase, ‘in love again,’ really cool because she has a chord to sit down on.

Steve Lukather

BR: What do you think are the most important skills for succeeding as a studio musician? Things like sight-reading, improvisation, and chord vocabulary—are those essential, or are there other skills that matter just as much?

SL: Well, I mean, when I was coming up, you had to know all about stuff. I could read, but my sight reading wasn't legendary. They used to hire me just to come up with parts that were better. They'd just give me chord charts with, like, you know, slashes and rhythm notation. Occasionally, a line or two to read. But most of the time, I got hired to do whatever I wanted to do.

BR: When you walk into a session and they hand you the music, what's the first thing you look at?

SL: I usually try to show up early, just in case there's something more challenging to read and I need a little extra time to get ahead of it. Once I'm in the studio, I'll get settled, say hello to everyone, and take a quick look at the chart. The first thing I'm really checking is how dense it is—whether there's a lot of information or if it's something more straightforward. Sometimes you look at it and think, “Okay, this is manageable—I'm good. At the end of the day, though, we're not just there to read what's on the page. We're hired for our creativity as much as anything else.

BR: How do you go about playing in different styles?

SL: Some of the material was a bit outside of what I would normally play—maybe not exactly in my wheelhouse—but I always trusted my ears. No matter the style, I felt like I could find something that worked. I've always had that instinct to come up with a part, even if it was something small, that would fit the track. That's really why I stayed busy. It wasn't because I was out there playing big solos

all the time. Sure, a few of those became well known, but most of my work involved coming up with smaller, more functional parts—little hook-based ideas that supported the song. That was especially true on a lot of pop and R&B sessions, including work connected to Michael Jackson and Quincy Jones, as well as artists like Michael McDonald and Stevie Nicks. A lot of those sessions covered very different styles, and the expectation was always the same: show up and make it work. Most of the time, there were no rehearsals and no demos—you just had to be ready to create something on the spot.

BR: Do you already know what gear you're bringing to a session, or do you figure that out once you get there?

SL: Well, I mean, we didn't get into mega equipment until, like, I'd say, like, 1983, 1984. That was a rack mounter. But prior to that, it was like using Fender Deluxe and I'd bring a Les Paul, a Tele, a 335, a Strat, or something like that, and some acoustic. I'd also bring a small pedalboard, just a few things like a compressor, some delay, and, back then, tape echo units like the Space Echo. I remember using the original Boss chorus as well, and sometimes I'd try to convince the engineers to let me record in stereo by using two tracks.

JD Simo

BR: Can you tell me a bit about your background in music and how you got started?

JD: Yeah, like many before me, I was four or five years old, and for me, I saw Elvis on television, and I also saw The Blues Brothers movie right around the same time. I was about four years old, and I was very taken, initially, with Scotty Moore and also with James Burton, with Elvis—but mostly Scotty Moore in the very beginning. And then, in The Blues Brothers movie, there was a ton of stuff in that film, but Steve Cropper specifically—I just thought he was really cool. So those were the initial things that made me interested in music. I got a guitar, and there was a little music store in

the neighborhood I grew up in, on the north side of Chicago, where I took some lessons—kind of around kindergarten going into first grade. And I just took it really seriously. I was really in love with it right from the onset and studied it—music, the guitar, and everything related to it—as if it were a subject in school. I mean, I was really lucky. Growing up in the neighborhood I did, we had an amazing library that had not only every record known to man at my disposal, but also lots of different videos. That ranged from documentaries about artists like the Beatles, Elvis, or the Rolling Stones, to Miles Davis and B.B. King, and all kinds of other things—old Muppet Show episodes, old Ed Sullivan Show performances, 1960s films—just a wide range of material. So, I had access to all of that, and I would go every week and reload. That’s the beautiful thing about music—or film, or painting, or literature—one thing you like can lead you to ten other things. Just as a brief example, I loved Steve Cropper, right? Then I found out he was in Booker T. & the M.G.’s, so I started checking out all of their records. Then I realized they played on all of these recordings for a label in Memphis called Stax, so I went and explored that. From there, I got into other Stax artists, and then found out that Isaac Hayes made these really important solo records later on in the ’60s. So the point is, whether it’s a writer, a musician, a producer, or even a recording studio, all of these things branch out into dozens of other things. I just kept following those connections throughout my childhood. I started playing in bars when I was nine or ten years old, sitting in with bands. Then I started working for real around twelve—actually getting hired to play in bar bands and things like that. That continued throughout my teenage years. I left school at fifteen, and by that point, I was already touring somewhat regionally. That quickly turned into national touring, playing with a variety of different groups.

BR: Could you walk me through a typical studio session?

JD: Usually, the producer will have some sense of what the general or loose arrangement is going to be. Typically, whoever is leading the session will chart out the song as we listen—either to a

work tape, to the artist playing it on acoustic guitar, or at the piano—however they choose to present it. From there, we pretty much jump right in and start playing it down.

BR: How do you deal with playing so many different styles? Like, one day you're a rock player, the next day you're a country player—do you think of those as different boxes you step into, or is it more of a natural flow for you?

JD:

I used to be more methodical about it. Now it's a lot more instinctual. If I hear something, I'm thinking to myself, "okay", what can I do to make this better, and I don't get as intrinsic in my own mind, I just sort of instinctually fish around and try and find something that I think makes it cool, and all the things that you're mentioning, all my loves of different music, and all the different obsessions I've had, and still have, you know, they're just, they just end up being different things that I can tap, you know, that I can utilize. They're all there, and I can tap into them when I need to. At the same time, the producer ultimately dictates the direction. If I'm playing something and they're hearing it differently, then it becomes my job to interpret what they're asking for. A lot of the time, it's about understanding what they really mean. It's similar to how actors work with directors, or writers with editors. Over time, you start to learn how certain producers communicate. They might say, "I want it to sound like this or that," but often that reference isn't exactly what they're after. So, it becomes a kind of translation process. For example, they might say they want something that sounds like the Beatles, but what they're really looking for is a jangly texture or a certain kind of feel. You start to learn how to interpret that language—the way each producer describes what they're hearing. The other important thing is not getting too attached to what you're playing. If something isn't working, you just move on and offer another option. You might say, "What about this?" and try something different. And you can't take it personally if they don't like what you're doing. It's not about you—it's about

solving a problem and serving the track. At the end of the day, it's not your record.

BR: How has technology changed the way you do your job in the studio?

JD: The recording process really hasn't changed much. Yes, there's a lot of technology. I don't really pay much attention to it. It doesn't really come into play that much for me. There are people, there are colleagues of mine that are masterful at integrating new technology into their rigs, into their workflow. For me, I get option anxiety, and this is where every player is different.

Andrew Synowiec

BR: Talk a little about your background. How did you start in music? What kind of influences do you have?

AS: Sure, yeah. I mean, I grew up in the '80s as a garage band kid, like most of my peers. I think there was less competition for your attention, so music was really all I wanted to do. It was just me and my guitar in my room, practicing. And I took private lessons. I grew up in a kind of medium-sized town in the suburbs, so it was like—I always say, places like LA or New York, where there are a lot of musicians and a big entertainment industry, in some ways that's great, but there's also a lot of competition. Where I grew up, in some ways negatively, there wasn't a lot of competition.

BR: How did your career develop in a way that led you to become a first-call guitar player for studio work?

AS: Well, you know, I sort of dipped my toe into all the different things you can do as a guitar player. Back then, it was more specialized—you would pick a lane and stay in it. Now, I feel like everybody does a bit of everything, maybe even myself included. But in those days, it was like you'd go to school and come out as a jazz player, and that's all you did—you had one hollow-body guitar and that was it. Or you were only a classical player, or only a studio player. I took a lesson with one of the more well-known players in my area, and he said, "Man, you'd probably be a really good studio

player,” and I always kept that in the back of my mind. But the first few recording situations I was in, I didn’t like it. I heard my guitar back and thought it sounded bad. It also felt like there were all these people in the room just talking to hear themselves talk—and honestly, some of that still happens today. At the time, I was around 17, and I thought, “I don’t know if this is for me.” Being a live player seemed more exciting. But as I got older, gained more life experience, played more live, and had better studio situations, everything kind of reversed. I was in school at the University of Miami, in a program called studio music and jazz. I think I went in expecting to become a jazz player, but I was never 100% a jazz purist. Even during my “I want to play like Wes Montgomery” phase, I’d still listen to Pantera on the weekends. I chose the University of Miami because it seemed like a well-rounded environment. There was no internet back then, but I read Guitar Player magazine and saw that Steve Morse had gone there—he was one of my biggest inspirations. I also loved Pat Metheny, who was associated with the school, along with Jaco Pastorius, Andy Timmons, and working players like Will Lee. I even met someone locally who had gone there. It just seemed like a great place to become well-rounded. I still went in thinking I’d be a jazz soloist, but over time, that became less appealing. I started to want to contribute to something bigger. Jazz felt like a very specific niche—creating music for a very specific audience. I realized I wanted more variety, and I felt like my abilities could be used in more ways rather than putting all my eggs in one basket.

BR: So, what skills do you need to be an active studio musician—such as sight-reading, improvisation, and chord vocabulary? What do you think is truly necessary to succeed as a studio musician?

AS: A good internet connection and knowing how to use Dropbox. No—I mean, I’m sort of joking, but it’s all part of it. You really have to wear so many hats now. Back in the day, if you think of someone like Tommy Tedesco, he had to play, he had to be able to read—that’s what people knew

him for—and he also had to be flexible and able to take direction. All of that still applies, but now you also have to be an engineer and a producer, an orchestrator, and a technician. You need to know how to send an Audio Movers link, get that set up, run Zoom, and handle all of that. And then there's also sending invoices and following up on them.

BR: When it comes to sessions nowadays, do you still bring amps, or do you mainly use amp simulators and similar tools?

AS: Oh, I definitely still bring amps. Yeah, to me, that's [amplifier simulation] still not the same. If I can I bring them. I mean, most of the time there's cartage, so you just show up and all your stuff is magically there. It's like you have your preferences, which, like mine is to use an amp, and so that, to me, is easy and fun, and I like all that stuff. I also am a realist, and I know that, okay, somebody's gonna have to a lot of people are gonna need me to go direct. So I have, like, all of that stuff too. I have a bunch of different options for that.

BR: How do you incorporate your personal identity into work that is extremely tight?

AS: Well, I guess a lot of times you don't, and you have to be okay with that. That's something I do think about, because I tend to see things like a pendulum. On one side, you have this guy. That's just what I sort of just described, which is [the studio guitar player] is like this Rolodex of sounds. And, you know, press a button and he sounds like Brent Mason. Press another button, and he sounds like Slash, you know, or whatever.

Kraig McCreary

BR: What were your first influences, and how did they shape you as a musician?

KM: My past was good for me in that I always enjoyed many different kinds of music. I was listening to a lot of different material, so if someone wanted a country feel or a reggae feel, I could respond to that. My main focus had always been rock and blues—Cream was probably my biggest

influence when I was a teenager, so Eric Clapton and that kind of style. That served me well, especially through the 1980s and into the early 1990s, when guitar was featured on just about every commercial. Thing I would say to you is just to be as versatile as you can, to understand as much as you can about the different styles of music, about the way that you produce sounds, about the way sounds are captured.

BR: What skills do you think are important for a studio guitarist? What is essential?

KM: I would say the ear. The ear thing saved you a lot... It did.

BR: And how does that compare to the importance of sight-reading?

KM: Like I said, I have a really good ear and most of the stuff that we did in jingles was fairly simple. You know, a few chords. There might be some tricky time signatures to accommodate the film, but the ear saves in the most important thing.