Flatpicking Guitar
Improvising

General Concepts

You need to practice improvising just as much (or more) as you would anything else.
- Use Peghead Nation Play-Along Tracks
- Find a rehearsal band or friend to play with
- Use iRealPro or similar practice software
- Record yourself

You should be able to internalize the music you're improvising on.
- Time signatures: 4/4, 3/4, 6/8, etc.
- Length of phrases: 2-bar, 4-bar, 8-bar, 12-bar (the blues)

To do this you need to play with other people a lot — not just practicing improvising, but playing rhythm, melody, singing, etc.

Get comfortable making mistakes
- Don't dwell on your mistakes while you play — keep moving forward
- Don't judge your playing (good or bad) while you play

Learn the vocabulary of the music you want to play. Playing bluegrass, jazz, or any other style is not just a matter of playing the right scales, etc. Ignoring the vocabulary of a style of music would be like wanting to sing Beatles songs without having to learn the words or chords.

General Exercises

Learn simple melodies you already know on the guitar. Your goal is to be able to transfer what you hear to the guitar.

Practice noodling with no rhythmic or harmonic structure on one tonality.
- Think of a tonality or scale as a group of notes that can be played in any sequence.

Don't worry about learning the entire fingerboard, but concentrate on becoming fluent in one area.

- Scales should be hardwired into muscle memory.

Think of tunes and solos you've learned as groups of phrases.

- Memorize the individual phrases so they are hardwired into muscle memory.

Compose solos to tunes you want to improvise on: improvising is just composing on the fly. If you can't compose over time, you won't be able to do it in the moment.

Specific Exercises

Building Blocks
- Learn the building blocks of each song you want to improvise on: scales, chords, arpeggios.

Melodic Signposts
- Find/determine melodic signposts in the tune.

- Target melodic signposts by creating melodic lines (of 1, 2, 4 measures) that lead into the signposts.

Chord Tones
- Target chord tones by creating melodic lines (of 1, 2, 4 measures) that end on the chord tones.
- Target notes:
  - Moving from I chord to IV chord: target 1, 3 of IV chord
  - Moving from IV chord to I chord: target I, 3, 5 of I chord
  - Moving from I chord to V chord: target 1, 3, 5 of V chord
  - Moving from V chord to I chord: target 1, 3 of I chord
  - Moving from IV chord to V chord: target I, 3, 5 of V chord
  - Moving from V chord to IV chord: target I, 3 of IV chord

Common Tones
Find common tones between chords to allow you to sustain one note over chord changes
- I chord and IV chord:
  - root of I chord = 5 of IV chord
  - third of I chord = maj7 of IV chord
  - fifth of I chord = sus 2(9) of IV chord
  - root of IV chord = sus4 of I chord
  - third of IV = 6 of I chord

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- I chord and V chord:
  - fifth of I = I of V
  - root of I = sus4 of V
  - third of I = 6 of V
  - third of V = maj7 of I
  - fifth of V = sus2(9) of I

- IV chord and V chord:
  - root of IV = 7 of V
  - third of IV = sus2(9) of V
  - fifth of IV = sus4 of V
  - root of V = sus2(9) of IV
  - fifth of V = 6 of IV

Create melodic variations of tunes you know.
- Add notes
- Remove notes
- Offset phrases: start phrases a beat late, early, etc.
- Stretch phrases: end late
- Shrink phrases: end early
- Syncopate basic melody

Practice melodic patterns, repeating four- or three-note patterns on each note of a scale. For example:

- Pattern #1: 1231 (referring to steps of the scale). Repeating this pattern gives you 1231, 2342, 3453, etc. Then reverse: 8768, 7657, 6546, etc.
- Pattern #2: 1234, 2345, 3456, etc. Reverse: 8765, 7654, 6543, etc.
- Pattern #3 (triads): 1351, 2462, 3573, etc. Reverse: 8648, 7537, 6426, etc.
- Pattern #4 5431, 6542, 7653, etc. Reverse: 5679, 4568, 3457, etc.

These are just a few examples of the thousands of possibilities. Create your own.

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