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Want To Shred Like Yngwie? Study The Science Of Speedy Picking

Troy Grady uses slow-motion camera to reveal secrets of some of rock's best guitarists.

By Chris Harris

A few years ago, when Troy Grady's relationship with his longtime girlfriend ended, he decided to start his own band — thinking, of course, that it would be an excellent way to pick up girls. But it had been years since he had even touched a guitar, having shelved his mighty ax for most of his college years at Yale University.

Before heading to New Haven, Connecticut, to hit the books, Grady had spent years practicing the guitar. He worshiped the masters — guys like Yngwie Malmsteen, Eddie Van Halen and Paul Gilbert — and had studied their instructional videos in pursuit of playing perfection. But in time, Grady realized he'd plateaued. He'd gotten as good as he was going to get, and no amount of practice was going to make a dent.

But his renewed interest in the instrument, following what



TROY GRADY DEMONSTRATES THE SCIENCE OF SHREDDING
PHOTO: MTV NEWS

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but his renewed interest in the instrument, following what he called his "girl drama," inspired him to ask a number of questions: First and foremost, why isn't everyone who picks up a Strat able to shred as fiercely and adroitly as Malmsteen? It was a question that plagued him. Why was it, he wondered, that with the guitar, there were the greats and the schlubs, but no one in between?

"The basic idea is that lots and lots of people struggle with developing really good guitar technique, and a lot of people come to the conclusion that they just don't have it," he explained. "[But] the reality is Yngwie is doing very specific things that you don't know about. What's weirder is he doesn't know about them either — or he knows about 50 percent of them.

"The problem with guitar," Grady continued, "is it's not a level playing field. In piano, for instance, it's much more level. People go to music conservatories and study piano their entire lives, and they all kick ass — even the ones that felt they weren't competitive enough. In guitar, there's actually just a big difference between people who

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would be considered impressive in your typical guitar store show-off kind of thing. Most people could develop a level of skill where anyone would listen to them and know they're good."

So three years ago, Grady set out to discover just what set guys like Malmsteen apart from dudes like, well, himself. He bought a \$2,500 slow-motion camera and created a computer program called ShredCam, which helps Grady use the video he's captured to painstakingly analyze the moves of various shredders. He plans to release a documentary titled "Cracking the Code" where he'll attempt to isolate the mechanics virtuoso guitarists use to skillfully rock out, and to determine what constitutes efficient shredding. He'd like to finish the project next year and screen it at film festivals.

The ShredCam can be affixed to the body of the guitar, and is aimed at the pickups. Grady hasn't yet been able to film Malmsteen or Gilbert's riffing, but he has captured the work of experts like Texas-based guitar prodigy Rusty Cooley, Berklee College of Music professor Joe Stump, fusion player Marshall Harrison and bluegrass master Orrin Star — all at 120 frames-per-second. And what the camera reveals is the technique these players have developed, but never realized they had.



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"With this high-speed camera, we can actually reveal what those things are, and playing will become a lot more straightforward for everybody," theorized Grady, who owns a headhunting business in New York. "This camera's revealing stuff that hasn't been revealed yet, because these guys don't even know it. They're maybe 40 to 70 percent aware of what they're doing at any given time. If you're a guitar player, you'll be like, 'Holy sh— I had no idea that's what was going on.' "

So what are these secrets? Grady said at the heart of virtuoso shredding is "economy of motion." He said guitarists like Malmsteen have developed various methods to get more from their picking.

"The issue of playing fast and clean is moving the pick across the guitar's strings at a high speed. But there's a quarter inch of space between each string, and you're moving this piece of plastic across each string and then you have to move to the other one, without banging into any others," he said. "That's a major source of inefficiency. There's a simple way to avoid that, by not switching strings, moving up and down on a single string to create different sounds."

With his findings, Grady hopes to help fledgling shredders



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With his findings, Grady hopes to help fledgling shredders synchronize their right- and left-hand motions when playing even huge numbers of notes and maintaining pick direction. With odd-numbered riffs, which make switching strings more difficult, Grady said he's discovered a picking technique called "scooping," a more effective way to get that pick across strings. Most of his subjects also utilize "sweeping," where one pick stroke darts across two different strings, making it easier to play guitar faster.

"Generally, guitar teachers will tell you to practice this lick over and over again, and you'll get better," he explained. "It's not that simple. You'll just end up playing it a million times before it gets better. With this video, novices should be able to pick up a guitar and use these tricks to significantly improve their playing."

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