



Playing Guitar

by David Hodge



A member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

This book is dedicated to the memory of Thomas “Todd” Lange.

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Introduction

Making music on the guitar may seem nothing short of magical to you. Guitarists seem to create emotions out of sound when they play—the harplike notes of a lullaby; the sad bending notes of a blues song; the pulsing, hard-edged drive of a rock anthem; or the cocky twang of a country tune.

Whatever kind of music you enjoy, you can play it on a guitar. You can strum chords to sing over. You can fingerpick mesmerizing melodies and harmonies and bass lines. You can beat out exciting dance rhythms with your fingertips.

Learning to play the guitar is not hard. The basics of playing are the same no matter what type of guitar you have or what type of music you want to play. You don’t even have to be able to read music.

Idiot’s Guide: Playing Guitar is designed to get you started playing guitar right away, even if you’ve never even held a guitar before. You’ll get a thorough step-by-step rundown of all the fundamentals of playing, and then learn to expand on those basic skills with more intermediate guitar techniques.

If you’ve always wanted to learn to play the guitar, then get ready to make some magic.

Get ready to make some music!

How This Book Is Organized

This book is divided into five parts:

Part 1, Getting Your Gear, introduces you to the guitar and helps you understand which one might be best for you—at least as a first guitar! You’ll also learn to change your guitar’s strings and some basic maintenance tips.

Part 2, Warming Up to Play, teaches you how to tune your guitar as well as how to hold it properly to get the best playing out of both your left and right hand.

Part 3, Getting Good with Rhythm, gives you a solid foundation in the basics of making, strumming, and changing chords.

Part 4, Growing Beyond the Beginner Stage, builds on the skills you picked up in Part 3. Here you’ll get introduced to playing half-barre chords and different styles of fingerpicking in addition to left-hand slurring techniques such as hammer-ons and pull-offs. Your guitar playing will take a huge leap forward.

Part 5, Adding Theory to Your Playing, helps you take your skills even further. You’ll learn about using capos and transposing, explore different guitar tunings, and discover some alternative picking styles.

Introduction

You'll also find that almost every topic in Parts 3, 4, and 5 contains numerous musical examples and exercises, all designed specifically for this book to help you learn quickly and easily. Plus you'll get a number of songs that serve as examples for the different ideas and techniques you read about. In fact, all the songs incorporate parts of the accompanying exercise as part of the arrangement. You'll find these bits taken from the exercises color-coded into the music of the songs.

Due to copyright issues, all the songs you'll find in *Idiot's Guide: Playing Guitar* are traditional songs in the public domain. But each song has also been arranged specifically for this book in order to create fun, musically interesting pieces for you to play and enjoy.

But Wait! There's More!

Throughout this book you'll find songs and exercises with links to online audio tracks. Wherever you see the headphones icon, point your browser to idiotsguides.com/playingguitar, click on the appropriate track, and listen to the sample exactly as it should be played!

All these recordings have been produced professionally in a studio in order to give them the best possible audio quality. Thanks to Todd Mack and Will Curtiss of Off the Beat-n-Track Studio in Sheffield, Massachusetts, for recording, mixing, and mastering the audio; and special thanks to my good friend Nick Torres for his great singing on many of these songs.

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I also would like to thank John Reichert for use of his photo on the "Playing in a Group" pages.

Finally, as always, I have to thank the people who do so much to inspire and motivate me on a daily basis: Paul Hackett, the creator of Guitar Noise (www.guitarnoise.com); my youngest brother, Tom; and my great friends Laura Pager and Greg Nease, whose hands also are literally all over this book—that's him posing for all the chord charts and fretboard photos.

And to Karen Berger (who took the photo for Part 1 and Gene Autry's guitar), no amount of thanks will ever be enough. Fortunately, I have a lifetime to keep giving them to you.



The Guitar—Past and Present

Today’s guitars come from a very long family tree, dating back beyond the Scandinavian lutes and the Arabic ouds of the eighth century. During the Renaissance, guitars were much smaller, with very thin necks sporting eight to ten gut strings, usually set in pairs, or “courses.” Still, just as today, they were both strummed to provide rhythmic accompaniment and plucked to create musical melodies.

In the 1800s, guitars began to look a lot more recognizable as guitars, with six strings and larger bodies. The designs of Antonio de Torres, in particular, led to the instrument we call the modern-day classical guitar.

While Torres was creating guitars in his native Spain, Christian Frederick Martin was designing and building guitars in Nazareth, Pennsylvania. And in the 1890s, Orville Gibson, who had no formal luthier training, manufactured guitars at his home workshop in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

The strength of these American designers’ guitars proved to be a match made in heaven for the steel strings that were being introduced to the world at the turn of the twentieth century.



This 1950’s steel-string acoustic guitar was played by legendary American folk singer Gene Autry.



This Panormo from 1836 shares many similarities with today’s classical guitars.

The Three Types of Guitars

Most guitars can be put into one of three distinct categories: *classical*, *acoustic*, and *electric*. There are, of course, exceptions, not to mention many different subcategories within each type.

It’s important to note here that you can play almost any kind of music on any kind of guitar. You just have to know that the music you make is going to sound different depending on the guitar you use to play it.

Classical guitars have nylon strings and are used to play classical music or flamenco music (there are flamenco guitars, too, which are smaller, lighter versions of the classical). But you’ll also hear them in many other musical genres, such as jazz and Latin music.

Acoustic or steel-string guitars are far and away the most popular of guitars, and there isn’t a musical genre in which you won’t hear someone playing one. While classical guitars are almost all identical in overall appearance and shape, acoustic guitars come in many different subcategories.

Electric guitars are the brash kids of the family. They come in two main types: solid body and hollow (or semi-hollow) body. It’s impossible to think of music without electric guitars. You’ll hear them in rock, blues, jazz, country, and just about any other type of music you can think of. Electric guitars usually have very narrow fingerboards, and the strings are much lighter than those of an acoustic.

It’s a common debate among guitarists as to whether it’s best to learn on a classical, an acoustic, or an electric, and there are good arguments for each type of guitar. Ultimately, though, you should figure out what kind of guitar will make you happy, excited, and eager to play every day, through the good, the getting better, and the great days of practicing ahead of you. If you think you’ve made a bad choice of guitars, then you’re not going to play it, and that would be a shame—not to mention a waste of a good guitar.

Plus, remember that your first guitar is very probably going to be just that—the first of many you’ll play and enjoy throughout your lifetime.



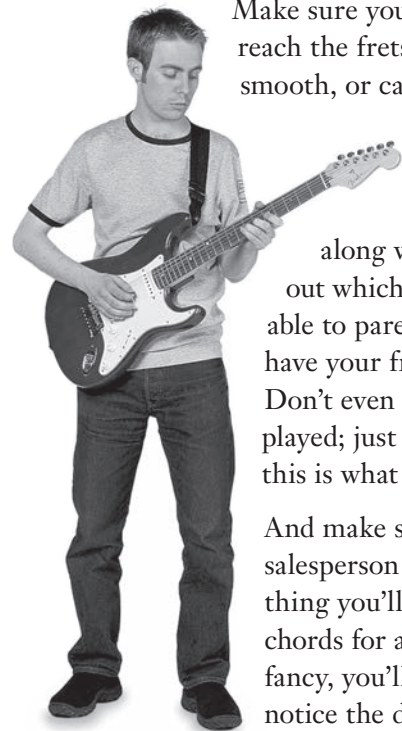
Classical Acoustic Electric

Getting Your Guitar

Just as people choose to play the guitar for many reasons, there are all sorts of guitars to choose from. If you think there's only one "right" guitar for you, you might miss out on many that will make beautiful music with you.

You want a guitar to fit you like a shoe does (or should!). Many people assume that they can just sit down and play any guitar, but beginners have to take a lot of things into account. The first is comfort. You may never have played a guitar before. You may never have held a guitar before. But you certainly know what it's like to be uncomfortable—and you really want to play attention to that when you're trying out guitars.

This is even more important if you're planning to buy a guitar online. If you've never tried to even hold a guitar before, you could end up ordering something that you cannot play, and instead of looking at other guitars you might just give up the instrument. You owe it to yourself to get your hands on as many different types of guitars as you can, just to see what works for you in terms of the instrument's size and shape.

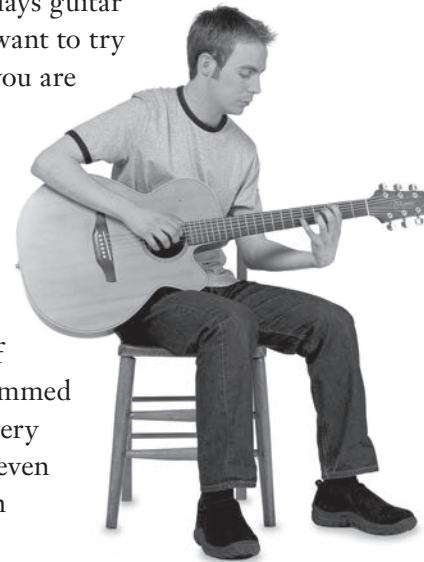


Make sure you can both stand and sit comfortably with the guitar. Can you easily reach the frets of the neck with the fingertips of your left hand? Is the neck smooth, or can you feel sharp edges of the frets as you slide your hand along?

While sitting, can you strum and pick the strings with your right hand without making your right arm uncomfortable?

If at all possible, bring a friend who plays guitar along with you when you shop. Initially, you want to try out whichever instruments strike your fancy. If you are able to pare down your choices to a handful, then have your friend play each one while you listen. Don't even look at the guitar while it's being played; just listen to what it sounds like. Because this is what you're going to sound like.

And make sure your friend (or the store salesperson if you're on your own) plays the sort of thing you'll be playing as a beginner—simple strummed chords for a start. If your friend plays something very fancy, you'll focus on the fancy playing and won't even notice the different sounds and tonal qualities each guitar has.



Also keep in mind that your new guitar is probably going to be only *part* of your purchase. You're going to want to get a case. Cases are often, but not always, included in the price of a guitar, so make certain before you buy your instrument whether or not a case comes with it.

Whether you play sitting or standing, it's good to have a guitar strap if you're going with an acoustic or electric guitar. And it certainly doesn't hurt to have picks (and extra picks) as well as a spare set of strings when you're just starting out.

If you buy an electric guitar, you're going to need an amplifier. Electric guitars (and acoustic-electric guitars) also need a cable (often called a "cord" or a "lead") to connect the guitar to the amplifier.

A tuner is essential and will last you a lifetime if you treat it well, although you will need to replace the batteries from time to time. And a guitar stand is certainly worth thinking about adding to the list, as are both a music stand and a metronome. If you've decided on a classical guitar, check out a footstool so you can play even more comfortably.

Most people play guitar right-handed—even many lefties, such as Paul Simon, David Byrne, and Mark Knopfler. If you're left-handed and undecided on which way to play, give yourself a simple test: without thinking about it, pick up a broom or a yardstick and pretend to play. Even playing "air guitar" will work. Take note of which hand is doing the strumming. Chances are likely it will be your left, and if so you'll want to seriously consider getting a left-handed guitar. Rhythm is essential to playing, and most guitarists prefer to leave that important job to their dominant hand.

If you buy your guitar at a store, be sure to have it *set-up* before it leaves the shop. A set-up for a guitar is a bit like a tune-up for a car. The guitar tech will check your instrument's action and intonation, as well as make sure there are no fretting problems. Often you'll get a cleaning and a fresh set of strings as well (although they may ask you to pay for the strings). Ask if your store includes a set-up as part of the cost when buying a new instrument, as many do.



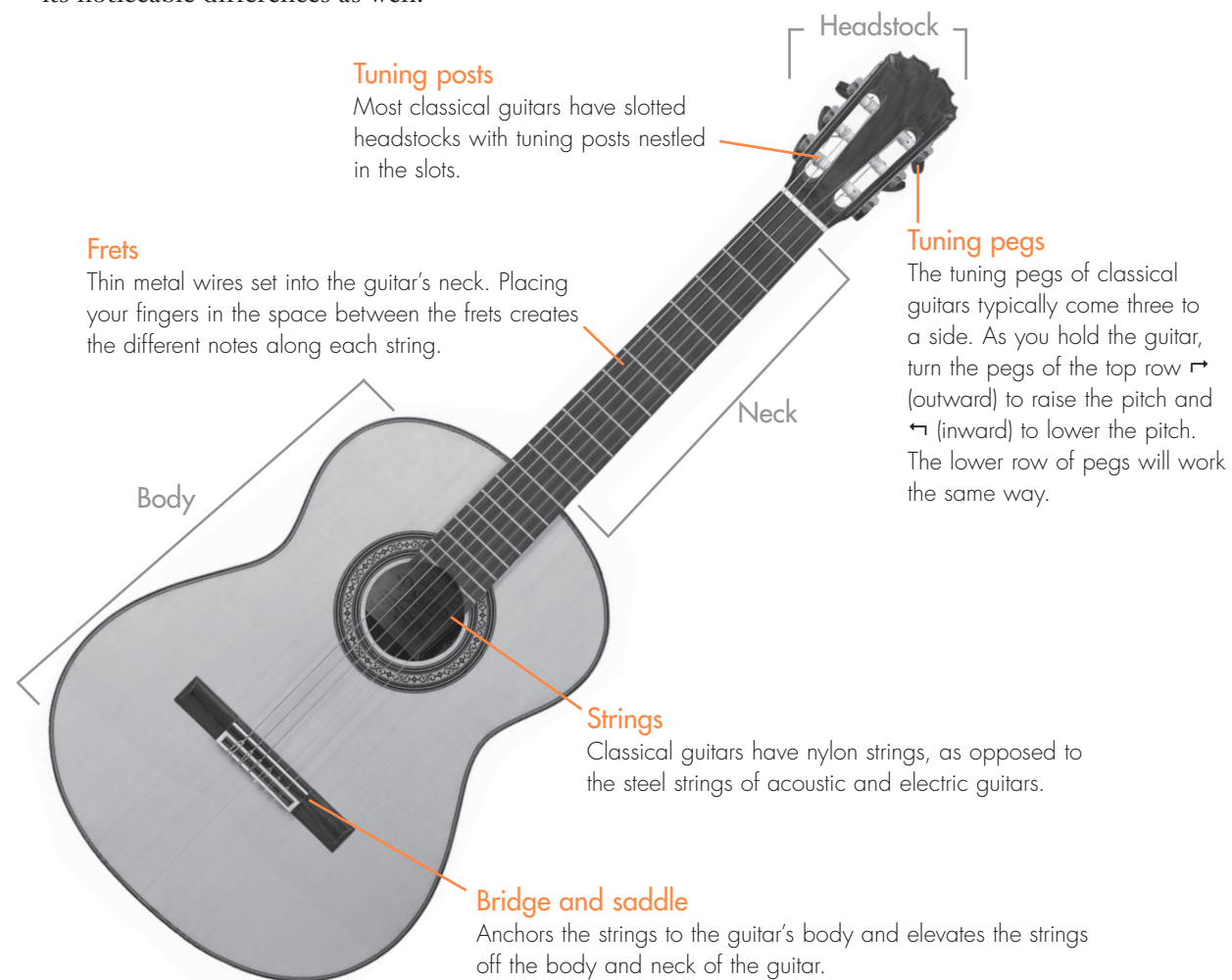
Assess if you play left-handed or right-handed by noting which hand instinctively strums the guitar.

Classical Guitars

Classical guitars are the grand patriarch of the guitar family, direct descendants of the first six-string guitars that began to appear at the very end of the 1700s. Generally, they are slightly smaller than typical acoustic guitars (particularly the dreadnought style) but have a wider fingerboard, allowing for easy spacing of fingers on the frets, and slightly shorter necks (the fingerboard joins the body at the twelfth fret instead of the fourteenth, as most acoustics do).

Guitar Anatomy

Any guitar—classical, acoustic, or electric—can be broken down into three main parts: the headstock, the neck, and the body. All three types of guitars share many of the same parts, but each has its noticeable differences as well.



Ramirez 1880 flamenco guitar.

Guitar Woods

Most guitarists prefer their classical and acoustic guitars to have “solid wood” tops, as opposed to wood laminates. Traditionally, the tops of most acoustic guitars are spruce, although the specific types of spruce can vary. Cedar is also used for the tops of guitar bodies, particularly on classical guitars and acoustic guitars marketed to fingerpicking players. But cedar is softer than spruce and scratches very easily.

Rosewood, mahogany, cherry, and maple are often used for the back and sides of a guitar, while rosewood and ebony are popular choices for the fretboard.

Flamenco Guitars

They may look almost exactly like classical guitars, but flamenco guitars are built with lighter, thinner tops to give the instrument's sound a bright percussive edge and more volume than the typical classical guitar. The string action (the height of the strings from the frets) is also set lower than that of a classical guitar.

Many guitar manufacturers also produce “half-sized” and “three-quarters sized” guitars, which are often referred to as “student guitars.” Not that long ago you could only find student guitars in the classical style, but nowadays they come in acoustic and electric models as well.