

How To Play Guitar



Playing Guitar - Do You Have To Practice?

For years now I have heard and seen discussions concerning how much time (if any) should be spent learning compared to just playing what you already know. This question comes up time after time, year after year. And always there are two sides.

On one extreme, you have the viewpoint that theory should be learned right up front and guitarists should learn to read notation right away. Reading music would be the primary interface through which they would play the guitar. Their entire experience with a guitar would emerge through the understanding and application of theory.

On the other extreme, there is the viewpoint that nothing should be studied and you should just go play whatever you can.

I think most people are somewhere in between these two thoughts. Most people understand that some information can be beneficial and there is a practical limit to how much theory is useful. I would have to place myself in this category, however, I do understand that classical guitarists have taken advantage of a strong understanding of theory for centuries. No small matter and this creates a very strong argument for learning theory and reading music. It works, if you survive the process and you happen to like classical music!

The common argument to this approach is, "it's too much work". But a more accurate statement might be; it is not the direction most of us want for ourselves. Playing a style that does not keep your interest, is a recipe for disaster. You probably will not survive the process.

Is there an argument for not learning anything besides songs? I think you can start an argument but it's pretty weak. And if you look close enough you will see that everyone does learn some things before they start to play. Almost everyone has been shown a couple of chords by friends or teachers. So we all do learn new things, the question is how much.

Time and time again I hear people talking about the correct approach to guitar. What is the best way to learn. The answer is as varied as guitar players themselves. And as usual the answer is different for everyone. Some people are willing to put in more time than others. Some people are searching for something specific. Some people want to play a form of music so simple that deeper investigation seems unnecessary. There are a

million reasons why we play guitar and the expectations for any one person will run the spectrum.

I will say this, if you put pertinent information in front of anyone, in exactly the way they like to get information, they will delight in the process of digesting it and using it. We all like to learn new things, only we like to learn in very specific ways. When that process is working well, people have a tendency to experience a burst of learning and possibly develop a refined sense of direction and a higher state of excitement.

When a person finds a way to learn what they want, it is an electrifying experience. But the way we learn is as important as what we learn. I have come to understand this concept by trying to play guitar through reading musical notation. I hated it and my results show it. It was not until I learned how I liked to learn that I really engaged the process. Once I developed a tactile feeling and some understanding, reading sheet music was acceptable and I could learn from it.

A sense of direction is the other half of learning. What are you going to do with the information once you get it and can you put it to use? Remember information equals power. The more you know the more you can do. Information combined with playing different kinds of things on a guitar can open the doors to self expression. If you develop the ability to lay down searing hot leads and create strong emotional statements you might like it. A lot! That is combining information and tactile experience to create a piece of art. For me it is the big payoff. It is one of the main reasons why scales continue to be a big deal to me. The avenues of self expression it opens is the reason why I started to study scales in the first place.

I believe you can compare this to other talents you develop. If you work at them not only will you get better, you will develop a liking for it over time. Take sketching for example. I cannot sketch to save my life. I did at one time develop the ability to the point that an art teacher noticed it, but then I quite working. My ability to sketch went south and the thought of picking up some chalk was not appealing at all. I could have been at least passable but I quite working. All positive feedback was shut off. I generated no additional fun sketching and my motivation for doing so dried up.

Get the idea? If you work at something you will develop your interests! You will answer the first round of questions running around your head and that

will cause the second round of questions to make themselves known. Your curiosity will be piqued. A sense of excitement develops. As you investigate the answers to your questions, your fingers get work which will yield a sense of accomplishment and mechanical development, furthering your commitment, skill level and understanding.

Understanding is another huge component. If people understood what scales did for them, they would be a part of almost every person's bag of tricks. When a scale player learns to harness the power of scales to create secondary lead lines it is a very cool moment. You can watch it and see their hard earned skills ignite their sense of creativity. I have seen it happen several times and I find it very gratifying to watch the process take hold. A strong sense of understanding comes out of this investigation and development. The results can represent a big payoff as well as a much higher level of confidence. People that learn to solo, often times want to do it all day long for awhile. It becomes too much fun to stop. They are enjoying the big payoff.

These interlocking components all work together and they create some direction of their own. They build on the learning process and bleed over into other areas.

Think about this. If you play scales all over the fretboard, you will have to travel to all the areas and sound all the notes (sooner or later). Your ears will hear all these notes and the different timbre from each string. They will become more familiar with these concepts because they will hear them often. Your ear training will get a big benefit from playing scales. Your ears will hear more notes and they will try to develop a mental understanding of what they are hearing.

If education is feed into this equation, your brain will start to help your ears sort everything out. The result is you get smarter and you develop your sense of hearing notes and your fingers get a workout. You get stronger and more precise finger movements from playing scales. Every part of your body and mind get a performance boost from doing it. Once again this will feed a pleasure center in your brain and you will like playing a guitar a little more. The process will feed on itself and you get better as a part of it. The only problem is you have to put in the work before you get anything out of it.

Guitar players that experience significant growth in abilities go through this, almost certainly. They may use different tools and training not discussed here but the mental processes are still present. This is how human beings work. We all go through the same experiences once the leaning process has been engaged.

The real up front differences from person to person is how they like to get their information and how much time they will spend developing. If they can get information in a way they like, they will. But finding the exact way they like to get it may be harder than it sounds. And then each person must figure out how much time they will devote to this. These two factors are big preliminary indicators of the chances of passing through the barriers and becoming a guitar player. Since I knew I really wanted this up front. I made sure I put in the time and effort and put this discussion to rest early. With time I became addicted to the learning process and the benefits I received. As I have said before, the results will keep coming and it will get easier to use them. The results will also magnify over time.

If a person engages the learning process easily, they will probably continue to learn things as they go.

Compare a person who has leveraged this type of learning to a person that puts no commitment into the learning process. After ten years what kind of differences do you think are present?