



*The 8 Roadblocks to Avoid
When Learning Guitar
(And What To Do About Them)*

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Learning to play guitar can be a fun and exciting adventure.

Though in some ways it's also simple, it's not always necessarily easy.

For years I've sat in consultation appointments with budding music makers and listened to their hopes and dreams. They are looking to me, the "professional," to teach them how to play guitar with grace and ease. Of course, they are always quick to preface their requests with some version of "I don't want (read: "deserve") to be famous," or "I only want to play with others if I'm good enough." Then, after I implore them to let their imaginations rule, I hear how much it would mean to play and sing a simple love song to their spouse, jam with their friends on the weekend, create a simple song of their own, or retreat after a tough day at work and relax by playing a few favorite tunes on their guitar in the comfort of their own home.

I'm often sincerely touched by these dreams. Sometimes I'm confronted with how I take for granted this precious gift I have to be able to create, record, and perform my own original music. I'm also aware that this gift is not doled out only to a few select, anointed people who are born exceptionally "talented." Though learning to play guitar really is simple, it's not always necessarily easy. I hear story after story of how people create what could be described as "obvious barriers" to learning the joys of expressing themselves through music. I've done the same thing myself. It's from that place that I write this article, both to help you avoid some of the most common and insidious pitfalls and to remind myself of what I've learned and don't want to ever forget. Ideally you are reading this before starting on your musical journey, or at least in the early stages. However, even very experienced guitar players can benefit greatly from the advice that follows.

These eight "roadblocks" are distilled from a long list, which I have whittled down to the most common and problematic. They are in no special order.

1. Looking For the Quick and Easy Way Out

Everyone is looking for the magic bullet. It's built into our DNA, and rightly so. I certainly wouldn't want to be programmed to look for the most difficult way of doing things. Life would be nothing but struggle. Years of evolution have ingrained in us the desire to look for the easiest and fastest way to get something done—and the marketing world knows it! Need to lose a few pounds? Take a pill or go on the hottest new diet. Want a degree? Sign up online and get it in a quarter of the time. Need a liver transplant? Stop by the new EZ-Well Outpatient Clinic and they'll swap one out and have you home in time for dinner. OK, maybe not yet, but I see the marketing potential.

You can blame the advertising world if you want, but they are really just responding to the demand that we consumers have created. Consider these headlines I got off the Internet: "10 Easy Lessons To Play Guitar Like A Pro"; "Be A Guitar God In 30 Days" and "Be A Guitar God In 7 Days" (same company); "Rule the Guitar Neck by Learning the 3 [yes, only three] Killer Guitar Control Secrets"; "Fast. Easy. Fun."

Are you ready to sign up? I am. I like fast, easy, and fun. And I have signed up. Not specifically for any of these offers, but for others like it in different areas. The thing is, we all know deep

down that these promises are inherently flawed. Not that there aren't better and faster ways to learn, but the flaw is in the idea that there's a way to get something of value without paying the price.

I say "inherent" because we as human beings place value on things we know are difficult to obtain. The more difficult, the more value. When we watch a musician play a beautiful, intricate passage with ease and grace, we know it's taken years of dedication and practice to be able to do that. It's the dedication and discipline that we admire, not the notes themselves. It's who the person has become in the process, and deep down inside that's what we want for ourselves. If a robot played the same passage perfectly you might be impressed by the technology, but admiration would not be a part of the experience. We all know at some level that the real value comes through the process.

When I tell potential students how I developed my guitar system I half-jokingly tell them that if I could I would put the information on a chip and implant it in their brains. Then they would immediately know what I know and have the skills I have acquired over forty-plus years (fast, easy, but maybe not fun). We laugh a little and say that would be great, but I know—even if most of them can't express it—that's not really what they want. What they really want comes from the journey more than the destination. During the process of learning to play guitar they will confront their fears and inadequacies. They will develop patience, persistence, concentration, focus, and humility. Most of all they will experience the self-esteem that comes from taking on a challenge and following through. They will be a little closer to expressing who they really are to the world. There's no quick, easy fix that will give them this on any lasting basis. And that's as it should be.

Don't Bypass the Laws of Nature—Tap into What's Already There

Most people don't fully realize the tremendous powers they already have built in. One of those powers is the ability to break things down into small, doable pieces and persistently build one skill on another skill. Another is the incredible power of habit. Once set in motion, the power of habit tends to take on a life of its own, for better or worse. You can choose for better. Once you develop the habit of practicing it can be easier to progress than you would anticipate. Finally, most of us underestimate the power of holding a vision in our minds of what we want and persistently working towards that vision. Developing that "muscle," so to speak, is well worth the price of admission by itself. *Hold a vision, create a plan, break it down into small steps, start working on it, make more decisions as you go, then don't stop until you are there.*

Chunking It Down

How does one eat an elephant. One bite at a time.

When my oldest daughter Melanie turned 9, she asked me to teach her to play guitar. I was happy to hear this and I suggested that it would be best if she took lessons from one of the instructors in my employ. My thinking was that she would benefit from a less personal relationship. To my initial surprise she refused and told me if it wasn't with me she wouldn't take lessons. I was recounting this dilemma to a friend over coffee one day. He asked me a question I'll never forget. He said, "Are you sure you want to give up the opportunity to have your daughter listen to you uninterrupted for thirty minutes every week?" Then he asked, "What kind of difference could you make in her life if you took that opportunity?" That got my attention, and I pondered that question for days.

After a few days I felt compelled to undertake the challenge. I asked Melanie to give me a few months to prepare. You see, playing guitar was important, but I saw the opportunity to do even more. I saw this as an opportunity to teach my daughter life skills that would help her be successful in whatever she did. The particular skill I had in mind was the ability to break down a complex project into small sequential pieces and then follow this plan until she achieved a worthy goal. *Hold a vision, create a plan, break it down into small steps, start working on it, make more decisions as you go, then don't stop until you are there.*



During the months before we started I pretty much locked myself away in my home office and worked for hours and hours with one question guiding me: “How can I organize my guitar lessons to teach this skill?” The key came to me after a few days. What I needed was a model “blueprint,” in this case for learning the complex skill of playing guitar. By following this plan, or “blueprint,” she would both learn to play guitar and have a mental model of how to break a complex project into pieces. I had been a guitar instructor for ten years and was considered quite good, but now I began organizing my materials and creating new ones to fit this new plan.

I applied the psychology I’d learned in college, teaching methods from the Yamaha Music Educational System, a variety of personal development workshops and seminars, my years of teaching experience, and my own experience learning new skills as an adult. After several months I ended up with a three-level system, with twenty steps to each level. Each step involved some element of playing guitar and followed principles I had outlined from the beginning: 1) each step needed to sound somewhat complete by itself and lead to a sense of accomplishment, and 2) it had to be sequential and prepare her for more complex material in the future. I built in a review after every five steps. When we got to the end of each twenty-step level, it was time to review the entire level and prepare to perform all twenty steps.

The main reason for reviewing this way is to provide the student with every opportunity to master the fundamentals before going on to more complex material. From my experience teaching I had found that most students practiced to about 70 percent of the skill level required to learn one lesson before moving on to new material. If this continues, the typical student eventually hits a wall and gets stuck because they’ve never mastered the earlier material. My approach was to get that 70 percent when I taught the step the first time, then 80 percent when we reviewed after five steps, and then 90–95 percent when we reviewed the entire level.

The other reason for all the review was to provide a clear, built-in path to a feeling of accomplishment. When learning a complex skill like playing guitar it is common to feel like you are progressing one day and feel like you’re at a standstill the next. Sometimes you may even feel like you’ve regressed from the week before. But feelings are not a reliable indicator of your progress. What I set out to do was to provide a clear road map that you could refer to at any time to see your progress along the path. If you were on step number 13, you could see that you had progressed halfway through level one, and you knew exactly what you had to do to complete the level. This is more objective than wondering whether you are progressing. The review at the end gives the student a chance to experience their progress. When they go back to the earlier steps, most students find that they are easier than they remember. This is because they have reached a higher skill level. When they practice and successfully play all twenty steps

they usually experience the sense of accomplishment that comes from taking on a challenge and completing it. This prepares them, both skill-wise and emotionally, for new challenges.

Through my desire to make a difference in my daughter's life, the Starland Guitar System was born. Over the past twenty years I've refined it, added to it, developed a teacher training system, and even created an online version. Melanie took lessons for about three years and learned to play guitar well. She told me years later that I was a bit of a taskmaster. Though I don't remember this, she told me that when she was relaxing at home I would often remind her she should be practicing. Such is the downside of having your dad as your instructor. She has gone on to become a successful entrepreneur who makes a difference in the lives of emerging fashion designers, visual artists, models, and musicians through her company, [Graffiti Beach](#).

2. Trying to Understand Too Much Too Soon

The mind is a powerful tool when it is used properly. As the famous psychologist Abraham Maslow stated in 1966, "It is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail." This statement, known as the Law of the Instrument, refers to our tendency to over-rely on familiar tools. For most people, especially adults, that tool is the thinking mind or intellect.

As adults we have been conditioned to rely on our intellect to succeed in many aspects of our lives, all the way from grade school through our working life. Understanding concepts and solving problems helped us get through that sixth-grade math test and helped us climb the corporate ladder. When learning a skill like guitar, it might seem natural to try to understand the

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Abraham Maslow

concepts first, then practice the skills. I can tell you from my own experience and that of many others that it just doesn't work. In fact it's a significant roadblock for many adults.

The problem is that the mind latches on to this failure to completely "get it" and uses it as justification for not wholeheartedly practicing the material. This resistance to practicing actually prevents many of the "ah-ha" moments that would otherwise come with time. I sometimes look back on my college years and think we spent much more time talking about music than playing and creating inspired music. In a way it was easier for me to think about music than to actually create and play something that might be judged by others. Theory and understanding does have its place, and it has real value—it just doesn't replace practice, patient curiosity, and opening your heart to inspiration.

The way to solve this problem is, as best you can, to let go of trying to fully grasp music theory, and especially why something works. Accept it at face value and adopt an attitude of patience and curiosity. Learn small bits of theory and apply them. Theory may be interesting, but if not applied it is almost always lost. A big issue for me was practicing an exercise when I didn't fully understand the relevance of it. Over time I have found, as some of my instructors had hinted, that the understanding often comes after you have practiced and assimilated the material. The key phrase in what I've just said is "as best you can." Getting hung up on the mind-chatter you

hear in your head leads to self-criticism and less practice. If you have perfected letting go then you probably are already an enlightened being and don't need this book anyway. The rest of us will go for "the best we can" and keep practicing, knowing more will eventually be revealed.

3. Using A Bad Sounding or Super Funky (Broken) Guitar

When I was in grade school I played trumpet in the school band. Now to say I wasn't first chair would be an understatement. I was one of the students who most often got poor excitable Mr. Friedman to turn red and break his baton on his music stand. I don't think trumpet was my calling. It didn't help when someone stole my trumpet from the classroom and my parents replaced it with an old, beat-up, used instrument that barely worked. I understand why they didn't want to spend money on a good instrument. I didn't seem that excited, I'd lost one instrument already, and my practicing was disturbing their TV time. If you haven't heard what a student sounds like practicing trumpet you may not have as much compassion for my parents as you should.

I quickly became frustrated with the valves sticking at the most inopportune times and could never quite tell if the squeaky notes were my fault or the instrument's. That combined with the embarrassment of showing up at school with an instrument that looked like a something I had recovered from a junkyard pushed me to put an end to my trumpet career.

Trumpet wasn't my thing, and I soon moved on, first to the mandolin, then bass guitar, and finally to the love of my life—the six-string guitar. One thing I learned from this experience was how difficult is to learn on an instrument that doesn't work properly.

There is a somewhat romantic myth about the guy who gets a barely functional instrument and through innate talent, persistence, and sheer fortitude manages to make beautiful music with it. I recognize a subtle version of this when potential students tell me they've heard it's best to start on a steel-string acoustic guitar because if they can learn to play on that they will be able to play anything. By this reasoning you should learn to swim with weights strapped to your arms and legs.

It may be possible to bear the pain in your fingertips until you develop callouses by learning on an acoustic guitar, but it is nearly impossible to learn on an instrument that doesn't work properly. Some of the culprits are a bent neck, high action (the distance between the strings and



the fret board), old, dead-sounding strings, buzzing strings, a guitar that won't stay in tune, or one that just simply sounds awful. Learning a new skill is hard enough without having to struggle with the inadequacies of the instrument. When learning a new skill it's best to lower the bar as much as reasonably possible by practicing on an instrument that works right, is in tune, is adjusted properly, and sounds good.

I really do understand the difficulty in deciding how much you should spend before you know whether there is potential and commitment. First, consider that everyone has potential. That is a given. We are not given a desire without the means to fulfill that desire in some fashion. I have found from my teaching experience that everyone can develop a level of competence with an instrument—at least enough to enjoy playing music—unless they are medically tone deaf.

Second, the way to develop that potential is to make a commitment, not the other way around. You make a commitment by fulfilling the basic requirements to learn to play, including obtaining an instrument that is up to the task, getting lessons from a competent instructor, setting aside time to practice, and sticking with it for a reasonable period of time.

It doesn't have to cost a fortune to obtain an instrument that works right and sounds good. If you already have an instrument, have it checked out by a competent repair person. He may be able to adjust it and tune it up to sound and play beautifully. If you don't have an instrument, or if it would be cost-prohibitive to fix the one you have, consider buying a new one. It really doesn't cost a lot to get a guitar that plays and sounds good these days. You can thank manufacturing in Asia for that. I'm amazed at what you can get for a few hundred dollars; affordable, quality instruments like that just weren't available when I was a child. Finally, it may be best to rent an instrument. That way you can get a good instrument to start on, and you can decide later if you'd prefer to buy a different type or a more expensive version. Fix an old one, buy a new one, or rent one—that's all there really is to it. Struggling with a funky instrument is not an option if you really want to play guitar.

4. Creating Bad Habits from the Beginning



One of the most common mistakes made by guitar students I meet as the Music Director at Starland is trying to learn on their own or taking lessons from someone (e.g., a friend, family member, or neighbor) who is not a trained, professional guitar teacher. They usually realize that they are stuck and want some help. What they don't realize is that they have acquired some bad habits that are biting them in the proverbial booty—big time. Some of these bad habits are minor inconveniences, but others are real show-stoppers. Practicing can actually work against you if you are practicing incorrectly. Practice does not make perfect, but correct practice will make you better and better. I'm going to list some of the most common problems so you'll have

some idea what to watch out for. This is by no means an exhaustive list.

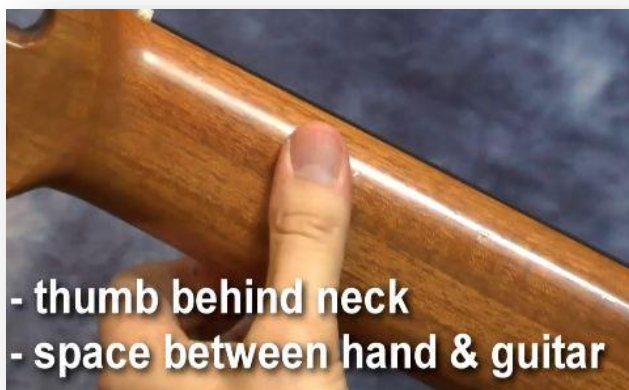
Treat Your Body Well (no sitting hunched over, tilting the guitar up, lowering the head or straining the neck, etc.)

It may not seem like a problem at first but eventually pain in your body from poor body positioning will make it difficult to play. The back and neck are particularly sensitive areas. Get a music stand if you don't have one and raise it so you don't have to lower your head to see the music. It's tempting to slump over your guitar so you can better see what you are doing. Bad idea! I wish I'd had more coaching on this when I was younger (or that I'd listened when I did). To this day I have issues with my back that I've learned to manage but never completely alleviated. A foot-stool, if used properly, can help if you are playing a classical guitar, but you'll still have to watch for slumping.

Also, sitting while practicing with the guitar slumped down will make it difficult later if you need to stand while playing. You'd be surprised at how even a slight shift in the position of the guitar makes playing seem totally different. Use a strap if you think you will ever want to play standing up. Tighten the strap so the guitar rests very lightly on your thigh. If this is done properly the guitar will be in the exact same position when you stand. Problem solved!

The Left Hand And Thumb Will Get You

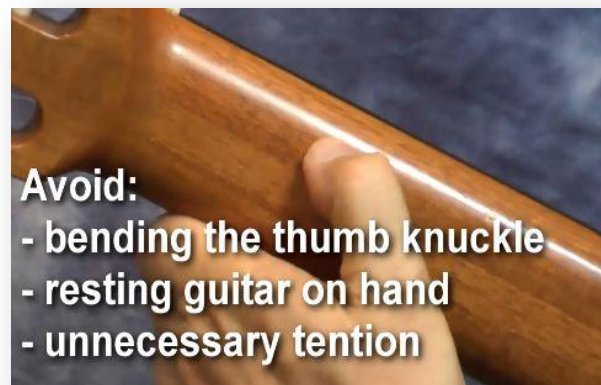
I've seen great rock guitarists who play with their thumb wrapped around the neck of the guitar. I



wouldn't suggest they do it any differently, but I believe they play well in spite of some bad habits, not because of them. I recommend a traditional left-hand and thumb position for students. This means the ball of the thumb rests on the back of the neck, with some space between the neck and the palm of the hand. You'll have more flexibility to stretch across the neck and finger more complex chords as you progress. The most important thing is to relax. Use just enough pressure to hold the hand in place, and no more. The habit

of exerting excessive pressure will slow you down, cause pain in the hand, and make you tired. It's also a difficult habit to break.

If you feel strain or over tensing of the muscles, stop and release. Shake the hand out. Then start over. Do this whenever needed to release the tension and to keep the habit of over-tensing from developing. If necessary, slow the tempo down to something more manageable. You can always speed up little by little.



That Strumming, Finger-Picking Right Hand

What do a rough, abrasive strum, a harsh-sounding, uneven finger-picking pattern, and a stiff handshake have in common? If you guessed too much tension in your right hand, you are correct. And what is the solution to this problem? Class, repeat after me: *relax, relax, relax!*

OK, all kidding aside, I know that's easier said than done, especially when you're trying to play something that you've not properly prepared for. Do you ever find yourself in a hurry to do something or get somewhere? Welcome to the club. It's human nature, but skipping steps when learning to play an instrument usually causes trouble later. This is what I was trying to do when I asked my classical guitar teacher to teach me "Recuerdos De La Alhambra" before I had developed a smooth tremolo pattern in my right hand with exercises and simpler songs.

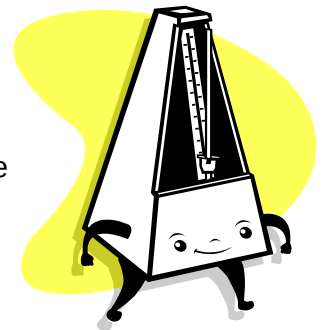
There are two keys to keep in mind. The first is to use a sequential series of exercises and songs that prepare you for the more complex techniques coming up. When you feel tension, stop, relax, shake out the hand, and come back at it. The second key is to play the exercises as slowly as you need to. In other words play them slowly enough to play them correctly and in a relaxed state. Then pick up the speed, little by little. Be willing to slow down when tension creeps in. Use a metronome to keep track of your progress.



This is where a good instructor with a systematic approach really helps, but it is possible to make progress by yourself with quality teaching materials and by reminding yourself to slow down, relax, and be patient.

The Metronome That Slowed Down and Sped Up

I'll never forget the time I was working on timing with a student. I put the metronome on at a slow speed and asked him to play along. After a few minutes of struggling to synchronize with the beat he declared, "I think the metronome is broken." I thought he was joking, but to my surprise he went on to tell me he'd practiced the song many, many times and that there had to be a problem with the metronome. He *insisted* that it was slowing down and speeding up. What could I say? I was pretty sure the metronome worked fine. Over the course of several lessons and changes to his practice routine we both came to understand what was going on—and it wasn't that the metronome had a mind of its own.



Guitarists are notorious for practicing alone, with no way to keep track of tempo. When they get to a difficult chord or passage they usually slow down slightly. Makes sense. What wasn't as obvious was that over time this slowing down and speeding up began to sound normal to my student. Without other players or another source of consistent time like a metronome or drum machine to keep time with, his mind adjusted to the up and down timing. He lost the ability to discern that he was speeding up and slowing down. Until then I had never realized fully why my

instructors had me play slowly with a metronome.

Over the years I've concluded that one of the biggest problem habits, and the most difficult to break for self-taught guitar players, is this inconsistent timing. It's especially noticeable with chord changes. Changing chords with a slight hesitation gets to be a habit that's difficult to break, mostly because after a while the student can't hear that he's hesitating. As an instructor I have students play the changes with me slowly without stopping. I'll go as slow as I need to go so the student can change chords without hesitating or slowing down. Then little by little I speed it up.

You can do this on your own by practicing with a metronome or drum machine. Many keyboards have a built-in drum machine. A metronome is simple, portable and gives you numbers to track your progress. The trick is to go as slowly as you need to go in order to change chords without hesitation. Most people err on the side of playing too fast too soon. Isolate just two or three chords. First practice the changes without a beat. Then put on the metronome and see how you do. If it's difficult, slow down. If it's easy, speed up the beat little by little. Record the number that feels right and start there the next practice session.

A related bad habit is uneven or inconsistent strumming. My experience is that this tends to work itself out over time if you are doing the other things right. It does help early on if you practice a few basic, simple strums until they are smooth and even. You can build on these strums and they'll give you a framework you can add to. Again the key is to stay relaxed, especially in the wrist. A smooth strum is achieved by a relaxed wrist, a slight wiggle in the pick if you are using one, a twisting motion in the lower right arm and, of course, lots of correct practice. When using a pick it's easier to learn using a thin pick, because the flexibility of the thin pick makes it easier to get a smooth sound. You can progress to a medium or hard pick as you become more accomplished.

5. The “P” Word: To Practice or Not to Practice

The single biggest contributor to lack of progress and frustration while learning to play guitar is lack of consistent practice. The second is practicing the wrong things, or practicing the right things incorrectly. Let's get this out of the way right now: Yes, you will need to practice. It's really not a bad thing. In fact, most people's negative image of practicing comes either from being forced to practice during childhood, or from not practicing and feeling guilty. We're not going to go back and change your childhood (though I have some ideas about that we can talk about later).

Here's something I'll ask you to consider: you can commit to practice and do it. Yes, everyone is busy, and it can seem tedious and even boring. I apologize if you were expecting a compassionate, coddling discussion of how hard it is to make time, etc. Maybe I had a tough childhood myself. The way I look at it is, if you jumped off a fifteen-foot rooftop you wouldn't make excuses when you hurt yourself. Gravity is a law of nature. We all know that when you jump you're going to fall, and it hurts. No one argues, no one blames gravity, it just is. Well, I'm going to state another law of nature that may not be quite as apparent. If you practice something over and over, you will get better. If you don't, you likely won't. We'll have to define “better” as easier and faster according to how you practice it. This also means that if you practice something wrong it will become easier and faster to play it wrong. Sounds like an important concept.

I am consistently amazed when I hear fully grown, mature adults tell me some version of this story during a consultation at Starland: “I took lessons on the guitar (or flute, piano, violin, etc.) and never really progressed. I must not be talented. Maybe I should try another instrument or maybe give it up altogether.” I then ask how the practicing went. They tell me *they didn’t really practice* (I can feel my face flush as I write this). The first time I heard this, I sat speechless for a few minutes. I was dumbfounded and couldn’t think of what to say. *You jump off, you fall, it hurts*. Since then I’ve found a way to be supportive and explain that they didn’t really give it a fair try. I suggest we pick the instrument they’d really like to play and make a commitment to practice every day for a minimum amount of time.

Here are some ideas on practicing that have worked for me and my students:

Same Place: Try setting up a specific place to practice. Have your guitar and other tools (metronome, picks, etc.) there and ready to go. Set things up so it’s as comfortable and easy as possible to get started. Perhaps put up some inspirational photos (OK guys, I’m thinking favorite guitarists, not pinup girls). Not only will this eliminate the need to decide where to practice, but when you sit down to practice you’ll find it becomes easier and easier to let go of what you were doing and get in the mental space. Most writers know this trick. When they sit at their writing desk or go to their writing corner, the mind shifts to “writing mode.”

Same Time: Another good habit—perhaps a little more difficult, but quite effective—is to practice at the same time each day. You are invoking the power of habit. Do you ever spend much time thinking about whether or not you should brush your teeth in the morning? Most people could be half asleep, but they find themselves at the sink with the brush in their mouth going up and down before they realize what’s going on. For many years you’ve done the same thing (i.e., brushing teeth each morning) and your mind goes to default unless you consciously choose otherwise. I know I’ve been guilty more than once of driving while thinking of something else, only to realize that I’ve taken several turnoffs out of habit. If I’m going somewhere I usually go it works out fine; otherwise I have to backtrack. You can use this tendency to your advantage by scheduling a practice time each day and sticking to the schedule for twenty-one days (some people say a month). You’ll find you begin to naturally shift into practice mode at that time about three to four weeks into it, and the decision to practice becomes easier.

30-Minute Sessions: I recommend that beginners practice for thirty minutes daily, then play more for fun if you have time. Here’s what’s going on. If you decide to practice for forty-five minutes or an hour, and you have a hard time keeping your commitment, it will erode your confidence in yourself and add guilt to the process. Of course if you really can keep a forty-five-minute practice-session schedule with no problem, then knock yourself out. Most people are better off starting with thirty minutes and expanding after they’ve experienced success for a month or more. Less than that thirty minutes and you won’t get much out of the practice—it takes five to ten minutes just to get warmed up. Two fifteen-minute sessions are not the same as one thirty-minute session. Also, remember you’re developing your concentration, focus, and attention-span “muscles.”

My practice sessions are usually forty-five to fifty minutes. I take a short break—walk, stretch, breathe—then start again. I’ve found that if I practice for longer than an hour my concentration goes down. Then the value of my session dwindles quickly.

48-Hour Rule: For the first six months (I prefer a year) do not let forty-eight hours go by without

practicing. Your mind is creating new pathways. They are infant seedlings. When you don't water them with repetition, within forty-eight hours they wither and die. You'll find yourself going forward and backwards a lot if you regularly let more than forty-eight hours go without practicing. Once your seedlings have developed into strong saplings this particular rule does not apply.

Don't Look Back: When you miss a day (or two...) of practice, don't look back. Just get back on the horse and move forward. Don't get in the habit of justifying a missed day by promising yourself you'll practice twice the next. It usually doesn't work (but if you *can* practice twice in a day, go for it). Guilt and self-criticism won't help. In fact, it will probably make it difficult to get going again. Everyone misses some practice time. Success in the long run is more about how quickly you recover.

Have A Plan: Know what you're going to practice. There's no absolute one way to do this, but I like to divide a practice session into warm-up, exercises, new material, then something I can play fairly well as a positive ending. It could look something like this:

- Five minutes: warm-up exercise (speed developer #1)
- Five minutes: chord change exercise
- Fifteen minutes: new material
- Five minutes: a familiar song (end on successful note)

Total: thirty minutes

The above is just one example, and no plan will stay the same. Be willing to change up when necessary, even in the middle of a practice session. Having a plan will help you get going, and a weak plan is better than no plan.

Play For Fun: After your thirty minute session, play something for fun. Try making up something (that's how I started as a composer). Try something from a YouTube video. Play some songs you already know. There's no pressure. You did your practice, which will keep you improving and moving forward. With no progress you would eventually get bored and quit. But if you stick to only your lesson material you will always be working at the level of incompetence. You see, the idea of lessons is that as soon as you get something down it's your teacher's duty to move on to something else. By reserving some time to play just for fun you will remember why you wanted to play in the first place.

There's one last issue I'd like to address, since I've been asked about it many times: practicing while doing something else, like watching television. I really enjoy practicing my basic warm-up exercises and routine techniques while watching YouTube videos, software instruction videos, or television shows, while listening to an audio book, or even reading a novel. It's kind of like how people at gyms read while on the treadmill or work out to music. It makes it fun and passes the time more quickly. I even like certain shows better when I'm practicing because they don't take much brain power to follow what's going on and I feel more productive.

That said, I would never recommend practicing something new while doing anything else. In addition, in front of the television should not be the only place you practice. If you do not give new material your full attention you will slow down your progress tremendously. If you are a beginner, most of what you will be practicing is new. In this case you probably should skip practicing while doing something else, or at least do not consider it part of your daily thirty-

minute practice session. The mind can't do two things at once. Multitasking is somewhat of a myth in that your mind actually jumps back and forth between two or more things. It's not focusing on them simultaneously. If you were really focusing on what you're learning you couldn't follow the show, and vice-versa.

6. Practicing the Wrong Things in the Wrong Order

As I mentioned earlier, I consider this the second show-stopper to learning the guitar. Why would I say that? Over the years I've literally talked to thousands people in my capacity as a music director. I conduct something called a Musical Learning Needs Analysis. This is a system of questions I've developed to help me uncover enough information to make recommendations on how best to proceed. I take into account a variety of things, including what kinds of music the student likes, what lessons they've had in the past, what bad experiences they've had, and what their hopes and dreams are. The one thing I hear over and over again from guitar students is that they have tried to learn from books, video, or a friend or relative, and they can't seem to make significant progress. When I ask what they have been learning, I discover that they are often practicing something not even remotely close to what is appropriate for their level of experience, interests, and goals.

But here's what really concerns me. Their assumption is almost always that there must be something wrong with them. Not their friend's or relative's lack of teaching experience, not their choice of materials, but their own ability to learn. Now, these are the people who have decided for whatever reason to give it another try. That's why they've come to me. I can't help but wonder how many more people have given it a shot under similar circumstances and will never come back to it. *Been there, done that, it didn't work. I must not have what it takes. I'll never really know.*

Playing any instrument is a rather complex skill. As with learning any complex skill, there are principles to learning that, while they may not guarantee success, at least make it much more likely.

Learn the fundamentals. Depending on the style of music, some fundamentals are more important than others in the beginning. For example, it is more important to learn good note-reading skills when playing classical guitar than it is when playing rock guitar. But there are always fundamentals, and learning them first will give you a solid foundation to work from. Skipping important fundamentals will cause you undue pain and suffering.

Small steps. Imagine trying to get to the top of a three-story building with no stairs or ladder. You'd have to scale the side of the building. No problem for Spider Dude, but for the average person it would be slightly demotivating. Now imagine putting a ladder against the side of the building. Even if you're afraid of heights like I am, you could just avoid looking down while you

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put one foot up after another. Very doable.

Prepare, prepare, prepare. Use exercises or simpler versions to prepare for more difficult material coming up. For example, to prepare for the infamous bar chord I use an exercise that strengthens the index finger long before I present the first bar chord. Before learning a song in a particular key I have the student play simple chord progressions in that key. If someone has stiff fingers I start with a simpler “G” chord and expand to a more difficult one later, then an even more difficult one after that. All three versions of that chord will be useful later on, depending on what they are playing. In a way they get three chords for the price of one. This all requires a very experienced instructor with a good system, or possibly a well-thought-out system delivered through multimedia (DVD or Internet).

The Stairway to Playing Beautiful Guitar

When I was a young guitar teacher I had several students who wanted to learn the then-popular song “Stairway To Heaven” by the band Led Zeppelin. I could understand their motivation. That was one of the songs that inspired me as a young teenager to go from being an avid music listener to practicing guitar for hours on end. Being the “good” teacher, I would encourage them to learn some basics first. For the next several months they would occasionally ask me if and when it was time to learn something “cool.” Finally I would give in and teach them the beginning of the elusive “Stairway,” the mark that they were on their way to becoming a real guitar player.



At first their practice time doubled, and I could see wisps of smoke coming from their ears from how hard they were working. The more determined continued this way for months as I showed them more and more of the song. Eventually though, even the most die-hard had to admit that it just didn't sound great, or at least not much like the album (yes, it was albums in those days). Then they would begin the process again with another cool lick or song like *Smoke On The Water*, *Iron Man*, *Crazy Train*, etc. (I guess I'm dating myself).

After about a year of teaching I began to realize something that I couldn't quite see when I first began learning guitar myself. The students could in fact muddle through some cool licks and parts of songs, but they weren't learning anything that would actually lead to really being able to play guitar. In fact, they were developing some bad habits, like tensing their fingers and poor hand position, to play something they weren't properly prepared for. These bad habits would have to be undone later if they were going to progress. *And I was to blame, and some of my own first teachers were guilty of the same offense.*

I did realize early on, whenever I watched or had the privilege of jamming with a more accomplished guitarist, that there was something missing in my playing. It wasn't about knowing the right notes. I could learn to play songs by listening to the albums, buying sheet music, or having someone help me. Yes, it was work, but I knew I could do it. There was something more elusive that I couldn't figure out, a kind of ease or fluidity that made a big difference. It almost seemed like some kind of mystical element. I did begin to wonder if some people were just born with it, and I wasn't.

The first big breakthrough came when I took classical guitar lessons in college from a sought-after instructor named Jim Bertram. I had taken classical guitar from another teacher in order to be eligible to audition with Jim. It was a combination of luck and a good timing that he accepted

someone as undistinguished as myself in classical guitar. He happened to have several holes in his schedule when I showed up with the minimum acceptable skill level. He did mention once, in his typically calm, unenthusiastic demeanor, that he liked that I was a pretty determined young man.

I'll never forget our first meeting. I was very nervous, but I still proceeded to tell him what I wanted to learn, as I had done with previous instructors. In particular I wanted to master a song called "Recuerdos De La Alhambra" by the well-known composer Tarrega. It required a particular tremolo technique and I had been working on this song for quite a while. Jim listened patiently, then put down his guitar and asked to see my nails. He took out a file and proceeded to show me how to properly shape my nails on my right hand. He explained what kind of file to use and instructed me to buy a special grit of sandpaper to finish off the process. The lesson was over. I was ready to get down to action, but my instruction was to work on filing my nails properly for the week until our next lesson.

The following lesson I began to reiterate what I wanted and needed to learn. I was sure we were ready to get down to "serious business." Jim listened again, then asked to see my nails. He pulled out a file and made a few corrections as I sat quietly. He then told me something that changed the way I approached music lessons. He said he would not teach me "Recuerdos"—at least not for several years—because I wasn't ready. Not only would I butcher a beautiful composition at my current skill level, but I would retard my overall progress by not preparing properly. I could learn the notes, but it wouldn't sound like "Recuerdos" until I was ready. Furthermore, the way the lessons would work was that I would follow his program. He would dictate which songs and exercises I was to work on, and if I trusted him and worked hard I would be happy with the results.

That was difficult for me to hear. I'd never had a teacher refuse to teach me a particular song indefinitely. I'd never actually had a teacher tell me what I needed to learn. I'll have to admit I was a little afraid. What if I didn't like the music? What if I got bored? What if I wasn't good enough to keep up? One of the best things I've done in my music-learning career, if not my life, was to just go with it. I wish I could thank Jim for what he did for me, but unfortunately he died in a motorcycle accident before I got the chance.

7. Taking Yourself Too Seriously

Adult guitar students often ask me, "Am I too old to learn?" On the surface it kind of seems like a silly idea that someone might be too old to play guitar, short of not being able to move their fingers anymore. In fact, adults have many advantages over children: control over their own time, the ability to decide to practice without being reminded, the intellectual

capacity to understand musical concepts, and many more. But my years of teaching experience have shown me that some people have an easier time learning than others. Why is that? This area of learning psychology fascinates me because I am an avid adult learner. I want to know what I could do to learn new things with less effort (yes - easier, faster, and more fun). Through

"Do not take yourself too seriously. You have to learn not to be dismayed at making mistakes. No human being can avoid failures."

my studies and observations I've concluded that the main reason for the perception that children learn more easily than adults is that most adults, me included, take themselves way too seriously.

There are many ways of "taking yourself too seriously." One is being unwilling to practice songs or exercises that are simple or "childish." Some adults tell me they want to learn but don't want to have to play "Mary Had a Little Lamb" or something similar. Another manifestation is having a hard time following the instruction of a professional teacher and having to do things your own way. This is one of my favorite M.O.s. I think I know what's best for me, so why not tell the instructor what to teach me? I've come to realize over time that this attitude short-circuits a large area of learning.

For purposes of this explanation let's divide the world of knowledge into three arenas. First there are the things that we know that we know. We are usually pretty comfortable with this area. Then there are the things that we know we don't know. This area we usually feel pretty comfortable with also. It's here where we look for guidance from an instructor. The third arena is the things we don't know that we don't know. These are the things we can't ask for help with, and we have no access to them unless we let go of pride and allow an instructor guide us. It's also the area that has the biggest potential for growth.

Finally, the fear of looking foolish or feeling incompetent is probably the biggest stumbling block. Children don't usually have this problem because they are learning new things every day in school, and they are constantly around others who are learning new things. There's no time to get attached to "knowing" when every day is filled with new learning experiences. Ah, the joys of childhood. Actually I remember thinking as a child, *I can't wait to know everything so I can get this "learning stuff" over with.* Boy was I in for a surprise. It's never over.

As adults we tend to get comfortable in a world where we feel reasonably confident. We get into a groove with our jobs, our relationships, our daily routine. We get comfortable with the secure feeling of knowing what to expect, of being in control. The downside is that this makes it more difficult to do something we don't feel confident about. To travel from the land of incompetence to competence you have to make mistakes and appear foolish.

What Does Spanish And Guitar Have In Common?

Hola. ¿Como esta? Many years ago I decided to learn to speak Spanish. I enrolled in my local community college, took all three quarters that they offered, did my homework, and received an "A" in each quarter. At the end of this illustrious education I found that on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being low; 5 being high) my conversation skills were at about - 1. I was not a happy camper. I worked hard, I had what appeared to be a knowledgeable, competent instructor, and I still couldn't speak Spanish. Regrouping, I found an ad for a Spanish immersion program that involved traveling to Spain for two weeks and staying with a family who spoke no English. I hadn't traveled out of the country much, and I had never traveled alone, but I was ready to stretch and give it a shot. I figured if I got bored sitting silently at dinner with my hosts or got tired of watching TV in Spanish I could hang out with the other class members and chat in my native tongue.

On the way over on the plane the instructor laid out the schedule and the rules. As I lay drowsily in my plane seat most of what she said went in one ear and out the other. One thing did get my attention though. For two weeks we were to refrain from speaking any English. *Nada.* Really? Yes, Spanish or silence. I realized that this was going to be quite an experience, and it was.



Fina, Udo and Andres

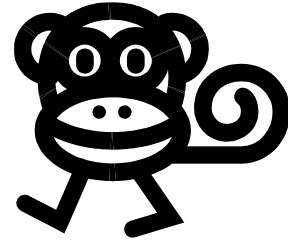
I stayed with Andres, Fina and Udo (their dog). Even though the verbal communication was minimal at first, we quickly became friends. Andres was particularly patient with my feeble Spanish skills, and little by little I became able to express my wants and needs, starting with “*donde está el baño*” (where’s the bathroom) and progressing to “*prefiero no comer carne*” (I’d rather not eat meat—a concept they never quite understood). To this day we keep in touch by e-mail. I consider them friends, and they are big fans of my music and have all my CDs. After a year of college-level classes I could barely put a sentence together verbally (writing was cool), yet by the end of two weeks in Spain I was talking up a storm. What was different?

One can point to the immersion aspect. Being surrounded by the language—hearing Spanish spoken in the cafes, on the television, over the intercom at the bus station, and every day at home—was certainly a big help. Also, I think being in a different culture helps you to think differently and better understand how a speaker in that culture thinks. But now, after years of reflection and experience, I’ve come to see what the biggest difference was. In Spain I couldn’t retreat to my comfort zone, my default competency, English. I was forced to “become as a child” so to speak, and fumble with what little Spanish I knew and had picked up along the way. I remember having a little digestive issue and trying to explain to the vendor at the fruit stand that I wanted to buy some prunes. *What the heck is the word for “prunes?”* I kept thinking. I must have spent five minutes trying to get across what I wanted, but I did it, and I got a taste of success. At the time I would never have done that in the U.S. Even if I were speaking to a native Spanish speaker I would have resorted to English as soon as I felt uncomfortable, or asked someone for help.

Isn’t that how children learn to speak? They listen, imitate, fumble, and try again—and again, and again, until they get it right. They haven’t learned yet to feel foolish for not knowing, but they learn quickly enough. I don’t mean it as a criticism, just a statement of fact. As adults we really are quite happy to impart our fears and values to our children. Some of this is helpful, even necessary for survival. Some just causes us problems. When you hesitate to play something for your instructor for fear of making a mistake, it’s holding you back. When you resist trying something new for fear of looking foolish, you are cutting yourself off from a world of discovery. After all is said and done, what is life for anyway?

It’s not a new concept. I won’t pretend I can quote scripture, but I think almost everyone is familiar with the passage in the Bible that goes something like, “Unless you become like little children you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.” That was what, a couple thousand years ago? Even Jesus told people to return to some aspect of childhood to get the big prize, and I don’t think he was talking about shrinking down to little bodies and wearing diapers. It doesn’t matter if you’re Christian or not; the principle is the point. Letting go of fear and letting go of taking yourself too seriously will remove a big stumbling block to learning to play guitar with ease and confidence.

8. Listening To Your Chatty Monkey



In a way this is an extension of “Don’t Take Yourself Too Seriously.” I’m talking, of course, about your own self-talk. That’s the little voice in your head that is constantly chatting. You don’t have one? Right! Stop reading this for a minute and listen. Do you hear thoughts like, “this guy must be a little off”? That’s what I’m talking about. The mind is constantly commenting, evaluating, judging, and criticizing. The reason I refer to the mind and you as two separate things is because they are not the same. Your mind is an aspect of you. A tool, if you will. And it’s a useful one as long as You are in charge of it, not the other way around. Most people don’t perceive the difference, and that’s where the problem begins. They assume that all their thoughts are “real” and have substance. That is not true; they are just thoughts.

How could I *not* listen to my own mind? My mind is my friend—right?

I could write a book or two on this subject alone, but for our purposes I’m going to stick with two aspects of this mind chatter that apply to playing guitar: negative self-talk and destructive limiting beliefs. Here’s some of the stuff that has gone, and occasionally still goes, through my head:

- I’m not talented
- Some have it and some don’t
- I’m too old and set in my ways
- I’m too young and inexperienced
- Old dogs can’t learn new tricks
- My hands are too small and can’t stretch far enough
- My fingers are too big and don’t fit between the strings.
- I don’t have enough time (this could be a limiting belief or a choice to spend your time elsewhere)
- It’s not in my genes
- I’m not from a musical family (my parents don’t even listen to music)
- If God wanted me to play guitar she would have given me longer fingers (give me a break!)
- It will take years to learn
- Aren’t music lessons just for children?

Do any of these ring a bell for you? Do you have some new ones I haven’t heard yet? Let me know.

I’m sorry to have to break this to you, but your mind lies. Do not take your thoughts too seriously. None of the above ideas are true—unless you believe them! I have a phrase I say to myself that has helped me tremendously. It’s “thank you for sharing.” I was taught years ago that

when dealing with customers it's impossible not to make judgments on whether they will buy your services based on how they're dressed or how they present themselves. Just listen to your judgments, then say to yourself "thank you for sharing." Then proceed to make your best presentation and treat them with the same respect and dignity you would if they walked in with a \$1,000 suit on. See if your mind was right or not. I have found my initial judgments to be dead wrong many times.

Try this. Say to yourself "I'm not talented." Then say, "thank you for sharing," and proceed to practice like you're destined to be an incredible guitarist. Notice I didn't say you sit in your room repeating to yourself, "I am talented, I am talented, I am talented." That's because I've found that doesn't work that well. I just hear my mind bounce back with, "Yeah right." Acting in the direction of what I want seems to work better, which in this case means practicing.

The Chatty Monkey and Mind Games

Now there are some mind games I want to give you the heads-up on that you can expect from Chatty Monkey. That's no neophyte sitting up there in your noggin. One insidious trick I have to watch out for is this: I'll get an idea to try an exercise or song that's three steps above where I am skill-level-wise. I work on it, struggle with it, don't perfect it, and hear my mind proclaim, "See, you're not talented." Tricky tricky! It's a setup, though I'll admit it's more obvious now while I'm writing this than at the time I'm experiencing it. If I really wanted success I would have chosen a step closer to where I was at and built up to the more difficult material. Say "Thank you for sharing," and find a simpler exercise that will be a stepping-stone to where you want to be.

Another trick is to miss a day (or two...) of practice and then indulge in self-criticism: "I'm being lazy, I don't keep my commitments, maybe I should skip the next lesson, I don't want my teachers to see my lack of progress, I'm not worthy of a good instructor," and so on down, down, down. I can hear my own self-critic saying "Yes, that's it!" What's the new response? "Thank you for sharing." Now go practice with all the focus and presence you can muster.

One that still gets me is comparing myself to someone else, usually one of my very gifted friends. I played a concert with my friend John Gilliat from Canada about a year ago. He's a very gifted guitarist whose fingers move at lightning speeds. Watching him brings up thoughts like, "I need to go practice for three days straight without resting," and "Give it up altogether." After our concert, to my relief, he complimented me on my guitar playing and told me how much he enjoyed performing with me. Apparently what he and other people appreciate about my playing is how I seem to hit the right note at just the right time, with subtle inflections that tug at the heart-strings. I'm not John. I never will be, and I don't need to be. "Thank you for sharing." Now to practice being the best version of myself I can be.

I hope you've enjoyed *The 8 Roadblocks to Avoid When Learning Guitar*.

If you're anything like me, you'll probably need to read through them again, or at least keep them handy to review from time to time. Being able to express myself through music has meant a lot to me throughout my life. I couldn't imagine a life without making music. I wish for you a lifetime of musical adventure. If you experience even a fraction of the joy and fulfillment that I've experienced through creating music and playing the guitar, the many hours I've spent writing this article will have been worth it.



The Guitar Student Blessing

May the music flow from your fingers, and may your path be challenging but rewarding. When things get difficult, may you look inside and know you have what it takes, and may all your learning experiences be an incredible adventure worth living.

Tomas Michaud



Tomas Michaud is a guitarist, recording artist, entrepreneur, music educator, and father. He is the owner and Music Director of the SF Bay Area's premier music education facility, Starland Music Center in Alameda, CA, (StarlandMusic.com), and has taught or consulted with thousands of students over the past thirty years. He is the author of six CDs of Contemporary Instrumental World Music, and his latest, *Beauty and Fire*, has consistently charted in the top ten.

You can find out more about Tomas and his music on Amazon.com, iTunes, and at his web site: <http://www.WorldMelodies.com>.