

7 Steps to Success on the Guitar

A guide to learning guitar later in life...



Forward

There are few things in this world that are more satisfying than pursuing a passion. Unfortunately, many passions remain unquenched in our earlier years as we, necessarily, focus our priorities on raising families, earning a living and chasing careers.

Then comes the time in our lives when the hectic pace of scraping and clawing our way up in the world no longer holds the same level of urgency than it did before.

We've "paid our dues" – the kids have moved on and have their own lives, we've accomplished career goals (or retired), we've made our mark on the world – and our thoughts turn to the unrealized dreams of our younger days. Our focus turns to accomplishing those "pursuits of passion" that have sat dormant, on the back burner, for so many years.

These passions can run the gamut from learning a new craft, pursuing a hobby, starting a business, beginning that novel, enrolling in an art class, or.... taking up the guitar!

However, learning guitar "later in life" has its own set of challenges. Those challenges can include – marketing demographics, changes in the learning process, and physical constraints.

Marketing Demographics

Because the majority new guitar students fall into the 12 to 25 year old demographic, most guitar lesson programs target this age group. Marketers understandably "follow the money" and tailor their guitar lesson programs to the younger crowd, leaving the mature guitar student with fewer choices for getting started on the guitar.

Changes in the Learning Process

Additionally, as we age the learning process changes. We don't "soak up" new information as readily as teenager. We develop mental blocks to learning and our lives are full of distractions.

That's not to say that we are incapable of learning new things as we get older. It's only to say that the process of learning later in life may need to be approached from another angle more suitable to our degree of life experience.

Physical Constraints

We get older and, as much as we fight it, our bodies don't always cooperate the way we would like them to. Aches and pains in joints, arthritis, decreased muscle development, and slowed reflexes all contribute to the need to approach learning guitar from a different perspective than a younger student.

The good news is that all of those challenges facing the mature guitar student can be overcome!

Each and every day, new guitar students from "our generation" successfully learn how to play guitar and make their own music. They experience the unbridled satisfaction of "finally" turning their dream into a reality and are working daily to improve their skill level and increase their knowledge of music.

If you've always dreamed of learning how to play the guitar – if making your own music is one of those un-quenched passions that's ready to burst out – then this guide for getting started on the guitar was meant for you.

Enjoy!

Keith Dean

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Introduction

The following “**7 Steps to Success on the Guitar**” is presented to you as a guide to learning guitar “later in life”.

In keeping with the old adage that “a well built house starts with a solid foundation”, this guide is meant to give you the key building blocks to get your guitar playing journey off on solid footing.

While this guide does not necessarily focus on specific guitar playing techniques, it does give you the concepts and tools that you will need to become familiar with prior to beginning a course of study on the guitar.

By taking a few moments to concentrate your efforts on these “7 Steps” you will save yourself a considerable amount of time and frustration as you begin your journey on the guitar.

Many new guitar students have used this guide as a starting point, and gone on to achieve great success on the guitar. And my sincerest hope is that you will too!

7 Steps to Success on the Guitar

Step 1 - Get a Guitar (Duh!)

It stands to reason that, for the person who wants to learn how to play the guitar that “getting” a guitar is fairly obvious. It’s pretty much a no-brainer!

However, the key here is not so much getting “a” guitar, as much as it is getting the “right” guitar for you.

In fact, getting the right guitar for your particular needs and goals is critical to your long term success on the guitar. Get this first step wrong and the likelihood of failure increases dramatically.

The good news is that choosing a good “first” guitar does not have to be complicated, or overly expensive.

As someone who once owned and operated a music store, I can attest to the fact that there are many good brands and models of guitars on the market that are well built and have a “playability” factor that rivals more expensive models, but at a fraction of the cost.

Here are some points to consider when choosing your first guitar:

▪ Think about what style of music most interests you

We all have different likes and dislikes when it comes to music and if you focus your attention and practice time on a style or genre of music that “speaks” to you, then the learning process will be more fun, and you will make faster progress on the guitar.

Some guitars are more suited to certain styles or genres of music.

In general, when choosing a guitar you will have 3 options:

1. **Acoustic Guitar** - A hollow body “box” style guitar with “bronze wound” strings that requires no amplification.



2. **Electric Guitar** - A solid body guitar with “nickel wound” strings that requires the use of an amplifier to be heard.

3. **Classical Guitar** - A hollow body guitar with “nylon” strings designed for “finger style” playing.



▪ **Choose a guitar that is most suited to that style**

If you have an idea of the musical direction you want to go in then choosing the right guitar will be much easier.

For example:

Rock & Roll – Quite often rock music is associated with the electric guitar and the use of an amplifier to produce distortion and volume. However, there are many rock songs that use an acoustic guitar for rhythm.

Country – Many country music songs are played on acoustic guitar, but lead solos (as well as rhythms) are often played on electric guitars.

Blues – Many blues artists play electric guitars, but much of the traditional blues music was played on acoustic guitars.

Jazz – Contemporary jazz guitar is often played on “hollow body electric” guitars – a guitar that evolved from combining various elements of the electric and acoustic guitars. However, there are a number of jazz artists that play solid body electric guitars as well as acoustic guitars.

Pop, Funk, Dance – Modern pop, funk and dance music is often played on electric guitars.

Folk – Traditionally, folk music is often played on acoustic guitars.

Flamenco & Classical – These styles of music often employ the “finger style” technique of playing and are usually played on classical type guitars.

▪ **If you can't decide...**

If, at this early stage, you just can't make a sure decision as to what direction you want to go in musically, don't worry too much. In general, a good “all around” guitar that will get you going and give you a solid foundation for learning the basic techniques and concepts on the guitar would be to choose an acoustic guitar.

Regardless on what style of guitar you choose to learn on in the beginning, keep in mind that one of the most important consideration is to...

▪ **Make sure the guitar is a “good fit”**

As human beings we're all made in various shapes and sizes, and fortunately so do guitars.

You want to be sure to choose a guitar that is most comfortable to you, one that fits your body, your hand size, and arm length.

Although many guitars are bought online and through catalogs, there is no substitute for actually “laying hands” on a guitar prior to purchase.

When guitar shopping I would highly recommend making a trip to your local music store and getting a feel for various guitar models in terms of fit, comfort and tone. Ask an associate at the store to assist you with the process and make recommendations.

▪ **Keep in mind...**

Choosing the right guitar at the outset is a crucial first step in the process, so take your time and shop around.

I have seen many students who rushed into a decision, or who tried to learn on an old guitar sitting in the closet, that ended up quitting the guitar in frustration because the guitar did not play well, or was not a good fit for them.

This can all be avoided and your journey on the guitar will be much more successful, and satisfying, if you start out on the “right” guitar for you!

Step 2 - Start with the Basics

Once you've decided on a guitar, it's perfectly natural to be anxious to get started. You're ready to dive in and start playing right away!

However, just like taking the time to choose the right guitar, spending some time in preparation to "play" the guitar will save you a ton of energy and frustration in the long run.

As with any new venture or undertaking, there is always some basic information and concepts to become familiar with before proceeding.

It's like learning to drive a car. Before mastering the actual act of driving down roads and maneuvering through traffic – we must first learn how to start the car, shift the gears, work the accelerator, brakes, turn signals, and windshield wipers etc.

On the guitar there are some basics to learn and get comfortable with before we even play the first chord or note.

Some of the most important will include learning:

- **How to hold the guitar**
- **How to hold the pick**
- **How to "fret" the guitar**
- **How to tune the guitar**
- **The names of the parts of the guitar**
- **String names and numbers**
- **How to read TAB, music charts and chord diagrams**

If you are not in a guitar lessons program or working with an instructor, the information above can be readily found online, including the tutorial section of AdultGuitarLessons.com.

<http://www.adultguitarlessons.com/tutorials>

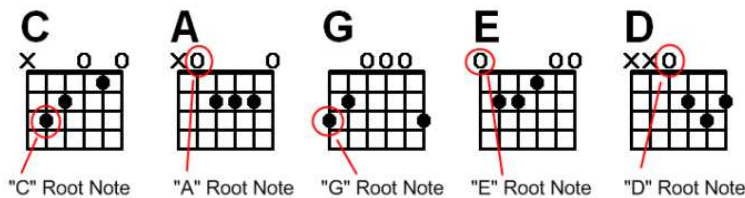
Step 3 - Learn the Basic Open Chords First

Once you get familiar with the preceding guitar basics then it's time to start playing!

You will want to start with learning how to play guitar chords, and the first (but most important) chords you will need to learn are the 5 major open chords known as...

▪ C-A-G-E-D chords

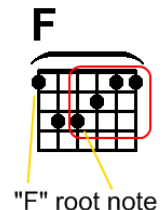
Although the C-A-G-E-D (pronounced “caged”, just like it looks) guitar chords are considered to be the most basic, the truth is that most chord forms on the guitar can be eventually traced back to these most common chord elements.



We could spend a lot of time discussing the theories behind the C-A-G-E-D system, but for now it's only important to learn how to actually play the chords.

▪ Then learn the “dreaded” F chord

Although not technically one of the C-A-G-E-D chords, the F chord is a very important one to learn that is loosely related to the other open chords.

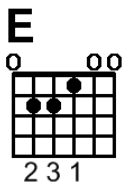


And that's where the “dreaded” part comes in. The F chord is the first “barre” chord that most new students learn, and can be challenging in the beginning (the good news is that we all go through the challenge and eventually play the F chord easily!).

Another good “early” chord to add to this list is the B chord. This one is also a “barre” chord and not an open chord, so it does not qualify as a C-A-G-E-D chord.

▪ **Pay close attention to chord “shapes”**

The “shape” of a guitar chord can be thought of in terms of the *pattern* the notes make when looking at a chord diagram.



As you continue your studies on the guitar you will find that there are many chord shapes that are repeated in other chords played in various positions on the guitar neck.

By learning to envision these basic chords as *shapes* in the early days on the guitar, you can then refer back to them when learning new chords later on.

The importance of memorizing chord shapes cannot be overstated.

▪ **Play hundreds of songs!**

Once you have these basic chords under your belt you will actually have accumulated the skills to play hundreds, if not thousands, of popular songs.



As you go on, you will discover that many songs in popular music, songs that we are all familiar with, are comprised of only 3 or 4 chords that simply repeat over and over.

And by knowing how to play just these basic chords you will now be able to play many of those hit songs by yourself.

Step 4 - Treat Strumming Like “Drumming”

For many new guitar students one of the biggest challenges in the beginning is learning how to strum the guitar.

One of the reasons for that is because students tend to get so caught up in the technical aspects of strumming that they lose sight of the fact that...

▪ Strumming is “Drumming”

The main purpose of strumming the guitar is to keep the rhythm of the song – just like a drummer does in a band situation.



Quite often it's the “beat” of the song that a listener will first respond to. Think about it from your own perspective - when you listen to a song and your foot starts tapping to the beat, or you bob your head, or your body begins to move.

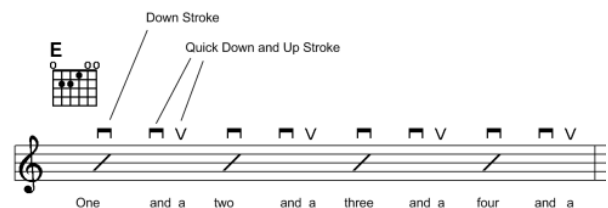
When that happens you are experiencing an emotional response to the music. You are “feeling” the music.

And when strumming the guitar you are acting as the rhythm section of the song, you are the “drummer”.

So even though there are technical aspects to master when learning how to strum, it's very important to keep in mind that strumming is simply keeping the beat and conveying the rhythmic “feel” of the song.

▪ Learn the most “common” strumming patterns first

Just like with chord shapes and patterns that repeat themselves, there are a number of common strumming patterns that you will hear time and again.



Count Out Loud When First Attempting This

Once you get familiar with them you will begin to recognize them repeatedly in many songs, and of course, play them yourself.

Learn the basic common strumming patterns and you will not only be able to play a plethora of familiar songs – you will also be able to use those basic strumming patterns as a basis to develop more complex patterns later on.

▪ **Use a Metronome to practice**

Learning new strumming patterns in the beginning can feel a bit awkward. That is because you are training your hands and fingers to do things they've never done before.



One of the best ways to overcome that is to use a “metronome” to practice your strumming.

A metronome is a time keeping device that produces an audible “click” and can be set at various “speeds”, known as “beats per minute” or BPM.

When attempting a new strumming pattern, play along with a metronome, and set the BPM's on a very slow tempo.

Then when you are comfortable playing the strumming pattern slowly, gradually increase the BPM and practice it at the increased tempo.

Keep repeating that process until you are able to play the pattern at the full tempo of the song.

Try this, it really works! Just be patient with yourself.

Metronomes can be found at your local music store, or online dealers, and there is also a good free one online that I use quite a bit at <http://www.webmetronome.com/>

▪ **Get comfortable with the technique, then “Let Go”**

As mentioned earlier, learning strumming is one of the most challenging aspects of playing guitar for many new students.

But it's important to keep in mind that in order to master strumming, you have to master your “mind” and move from “over-thinking” the technical aspects of strumming, to simply “feeling” the music and keeping the tempo, just like a drummer.

Yes, it's good to learn the technique. But try not to get overly caught up in perfecting every nuance of every stroke of a pattern you are learning.

Get comfortable with the basics of the pattern you are working on, then “let go” and just “play” without “thinking” too much about it.

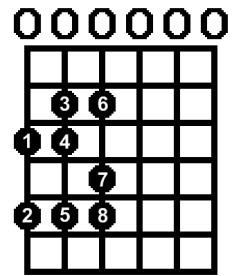
Play from a purely emotional perspective. If you're “feeling” it, so will your listener!

Step 5 - Learn the “Patterns”

One of the nice things about learning how to play guitar is that you can learn various “patterns” in one key, and then apply those same patterns to other keys.

On a piano, for instance, you do not have this luxury. The fingering for various scales and chords are different, and have to be memorized separately.

But with the guitar you can learn, for example, the pattern of a major scale – then simply slide that same pattern up or down the guitar neck to the appropriate root note to play the scale in another key.



We touched on this same theory earlier in discussing chord “shapes”. These shapes are simply the “pattern” of the chord, and once that chord pattern is learned in one position, that same pattern or shape can often be applied to produce other chords in a higher or lower key.

In terms of scales on the guitar, start by learning the major scale patterns in the various positions. Typically the first note on the lowest string will be the “root” note of that scale.

For example – a major scale pattern beginning on the note located on the 3rd fret of the 6th string would be a G major scale because that “root” note is a G.

If you slide that same pattern up two frets to the note located on the 5th fret of the 6th string, you would then be playing an A major scale.

In conjunction with that, also work on memorizing the note names of the notes on the 6th and 5th strings. This will help you quickly be able to locate the root note of most any scale and chord.

By concentrating on learning scales in terms of their patterns, then you only have to learn that pattern once to play it in virtually any key, anywhere on the guitar neck!

Step 6 - Focus, Focus, Focus

Way back in pre-historic times – when I first picked up the guitar – the only way to learn how to play was by having someone show you, or by reading a book, or by listening to vinyl records.

Nowadays, with the advent of the internet, things are much different. Today there is an unlimited amount of guitar related information out there at our finger tips, and on one hand, that is a great thing. But there is a negative side to it as well.



Because it's so easy to get distracted – to jump from one website to the next, or from one YouTube video to another – many new guitarists get lost in a vicious cycle of chaos and become a casualty known as the “Google Guitar Player”.

The “Google Guitarist” is one that sits down in front of the computer and begins working on a lesson, then gets bored or distracted, and moves on to something new. With renewed enthusiasm they start on the new lesson, work on it for a few minutes, and then as the interest level wanes, they and move on to another, and another, and another.

Eventually they become frustrated because they never really master any one technique or concept on the guitar and many simply give up on the guitar, thinking that they will never “get it” or don't have the talent to learn.

The only way to overcome this malady is with “focus”. The new guitar student must develop the ability to “put on blinders” and concentrate wholly on mastering one lesson, technique or concept at a time.

For the beginner this could mean choosing one course of study or lesson program and sticking to it before moving on. It's not nearly as glamorous and exciting as jumping all over the web, but you will find that practicing the guitar with "focus", on one subject at a time, will take you a lot further, a lot faster, than using a "scatter gun" approach.

Step 7 - Forget About It !!!

You've worked on your chords, studied your patterns, practiced your strumming, memorized your chord progressions. Now it's time to "forget about it" and really play guitar.

One reason that music is called the "universal language" is that it speaks to us all on an emotional level. Whether it's a driving rhythm that gets our feet tapping, or a haunting melody that overwhelms our soul, triggers a memory or brings us to tears - when we listen to music, we respond emotionally.

On the other side of that, when we "play" music, our ultimate goal should be to play with emotion, to play from the heart, and to play with "feeling".

And the only way to do that is to "forget about it". To just forget about concentrating on the technical aspects of playing, to turn off the "internal editor" and let all the things we have learned and practiced fade to the background and simply become tools that can be accessed as needed, so that we can express ourselves musically with emotion.



It's very much like the "driving" analogy that we used earlier in discussing learning the basics – you reach a point with driving where you no longer consciously think about accelerating, braking, and maneuvering through traffic – you just do it. You can drive, almost on auto-pilot, while thinking about your day at work, or listening to the radio, or talking on the cell phone – all without a conscious thought to the mechanical act of operating a vehicle.

Playing the guitar should become like that for you. One way to "practice" learning to play from an emotional point of view is to allow for a few minutes at the end of every practice session for some "doodle" time.

This is the guitar players' equivalent to "recess", the time when you can do and play anything and nothing you play is "wrong". Just a time to play whatever comes off your fingers, and to play for the pure enjoyment of it.

You will find by doing this, that you will eventually tap into the emotional side of your musicality and learn how to love playing with feel. It is also from this technically unencumbered perspective when aimlessly doodling on the guitar that many great songs are written.

This is where the magic happens, so practice your lessons, chords and scales, but when you're really ready to play guitar, don't forget to...forget about it!

Unofficial Step # 8 – Have Fun!!!

Playing guitar is not rocket science. It doesn't require a degree in engineering, years of intense study in an institution of higher learning, or a commitment of 20 hours a day in order to be successful.

It only requires a little bit of desire and passion.

We play guitar to make and create music, to relieve stress, to relax, and to add something special to our lives. For all those reasons and more, learning how to play the guitar should be fun!



I have friends that are passionate about playing golf. They get out on the golf course every chance they get. They study golf. Some take golf lessons. They talk about golf. They eat and sleep golf.

Yet when they get on the golf course all civility seems to go out the window and they turn into angry wild creatures, tossing clubs, spewing cuss words, faces etched with frustration and hostility.

But still...they keep coming back for more!

I occasionally hear from students who are experiencing that kind of frustration with learning how to play the guitar. They're upset that their hands won't "cooperate", or they don't seem to "get it", or they're convinced they just don't have the "talent" for it.

However, there are other guitar students who plow through these periods of frustration seemingly with ease.

Why is that?

Because they're having fun!!!

It's just like my friends who play golf. They may beat themselves up over a few bad shots, pitch a fit over a missed putt, or cry like a baby as their ball splashes into a water hazard – but at the end of the day (in some perverse way...) they're having fun!

I'm reminded of that familiar saying...

"It's not the destination – it's the journey" ...

Learn to embrace those periods of frustration. Know that we all make mistakes and hit speed bumps on the road to becoming successful on the guitar.

Know that none of us came out of the womb knowing how to play guitar. Eric Clapton wasn't born with a Strat in his hands while playing '*Sunshine of Your Love*'. Every guitar player you've ever seen or heard had to sit down, at some point, and figure out how to play an E chord, or how to play a major scale, or a barre chord. It's a process that **we all** go through in the beginning!

Also know that every time you pick up the guitar you are advancing, and improving and getting better. Sometimes only in little, almost indiscernible steps, and other times in giant leaps.

But regardless of where you are on the road to success on the guitar, travel that road with the knowledge that the road never ends and that it's a trip well worth taking. Enjoy the ride and have fun!

Keep on Picking!

Keith Dean

www.AdultGuitarLessons.com