

## THE IMPORTANCE OF GREAT BASIC SKILLS

My basic goal with my students of all ages is to get them to a place, as quickly as possible, where they can play the music THEY like, play it well, and are able to teach themselves going forward without needing a teacher. In other words, I try to turn my students into REAL guitarists, REAL musicians, as opposed to the kind of players who come home after school or work every day and keep hacking away at downloaded tab songs that they can't even play. I'm sure you know some of those "hackers", you may even be one yourself!!! There is an absolute wealth of guitar instructional material in the form of book/CD sets, DVD videos, YouTube videos, guitar magazines, online guitar instruction, etc. The problem is that if you don't have good basic skills on the guitar, all that stuff that's out there is impossible to follow. That's what I focus on: GREAT BASIC SKILLS (all you hotshots out there remember that even the most advanced guitar styles are still built on basic technical and musical skills). Even long-time players who have "hit the wall" and can't seem to progress always need some help with some aspect of their basic technique.

## PRACTICE TIME

Whenever you see a really great guitarist or other musician, it's tempting to say to yourself, "That guy/girl is really TALENTED, I wish I could do that!!!"

In reality, "talent" is almost a complete myth invented by lazy people to explain why they can't do something as well as somebody who is really good at it. Any performer who you admire for their "talent" would be the first to tell you that they have spent many hours a week, for years, if not decades, practicing and working on their "talent". Learning to play a musical instrument well takes a lot of work, but for people who really love music, that work is fun, even addictive. Being musically "talented" simply means being drawn to music and having a strong desire to play music. People who have the good fortune to grow up in a family that really loves music, or even plays music themselves, have a fairly strong advantage over people who grow up in a family that doesn't really appreciate music, but even that disadvantage can be overcome with a strong desire to play. This family musical background does give some people the appearance of having innate "talent," but the fact is, being a real player involves a serious commitment of time and effort for everybody, including "talented" people. "Talent" really means "extreme motivation and full dedication".

Many potential students ask me how much they should practice. The answer to this question is, "that depends on how good you want to be, and how long you want it to take". For a busy young person or adult who has a fairly strong interest, an absolute minimum of 3 hours total weekly is the bottom line—anything less than this will result in very minimal progress, which will result in the student not being able to play anything that sounds like music even after a year or two. This is a fact, based on over 30 years of teaching experience that I have had.

A student with a strong music background on another instrument, or even guitar, may be able to progress faster than a total beginner, but if you can't fit at least 3 hours a week of practice into your life, then you should probably take up stamp collecting or some other suitable hobby!! I am well aware of how busy people are these days, but people who are pretty serious about playing the guitar well often put in an hour or two every day, and that's not a problem for them because they love music. Serious musicians who have professional or semi-professional interests usually devote most of their spare time to practicing, many hours a week. If you (or your child) is considering taking lessons with me, you should be prepared to practice because you want to do it, it's as simple as that. If you are a real music lover, you will enjoy practicing and seeing yourself turn into a great guitar player, so practicing will probably not be an issue for you.

## **DEVELOPING STRONG TECHNIQUE**

I put a great emphasis on the development of really strong technique, and this is the area that almost all "hackers" are deficient in, and many of them don't even realize what's holding them back.

## **WHY TRYING TO PLAY SONGS TOO SOON IS NOT TOO SMART**

Most teachers promote the illusion that you can start playing songs right off the bat, even at your first lesson. This is a really incompetent way to teach, and is totally misleading to inexperienced musicians. Think about it. Do you really think it's possible for a beginner to play a Led Zeppelin riff, or a Brad Paisley lick, or a bluegrass run, or fingerpick like James Taylor? Even some of the punk rockers that aren't very good guitarists are still out of the reach of beginners that don't even know 2 chords. A beginner guitarist has about as much chance of being able to play a famous guitar song as a first-grader has of being able to write a critically-acclaimed novel. And yet, that's how most guitar teachers try to teach. It's ridiculous. That being said, my students who are "doing their homework" will start playing songs even within a few weeks, as their skills develop, but the difference is my students

will actually sound good! Being able to play some cool songs that you like is important--that's what it's all about! But putting in some serious effort in your first year toward developing solid basic skills will enable you to play probably 90% of all the popular guitar songs in the world, and play them well, just like the record!! We all know some long-time guitar hackers who can barely strum a country and western song at a barbeque. Guitarists who try to learn to play using nothing but song tabs are usually doomed to failure, even though it may take them a number of years to realize it!!!

### **SOME OF THE AREAS I FOCUS ON:**

Strumming techniques and styles / Keeping good time

Chord Vocabulary and Chord Theory

Alternate Picking / Lead Playing

Ear Training / Developing a great "ear"

Improvising / Jamming

Music Theory / Chord-Scale relationships

Reading and Writing Charts

Playing Songs that you like.

Songwriting (If you are interested)

### **DEVELOPING GREAT "FEEL" and "GROOVE"**

Essentially, I try to develop really strong musical *instincts* in my students. The real essence of almost all guitar-based music has a lot to do with strong rhythmic "feel" and flow--"groove". All the great guitar music that people love, whether its rock, country, blues, jazz, R&B, bluegrass, whatever....it all has a strong rhythmic feel, even mellow stuff like James Taylor or Jack Johnson. So, I really stress rhythm and "feel," the same elements that make a great bass player or drummer.

## I MAY NOT BE THE BEST TEACHER FOR YOU IF...

It's important to find the right teacher. For many people, I would definitely be a good choice, but I am NOT the right guy if your main interest is:

Classical – I have some classical background on other instruments, but I do not play classical guitar, and do not teach it.

Heavy Metal – I have no personal interest at all in metal guitar, and do not play it or teach it, even though my methods would still give you a strong foundation to pursue metal guitar in a competent way.

## ABOUT LEARNING TO READ STANDARD MUSIC NOTATION

I generally work with students on learning to read standard music notation (the type of music notation, for instance, that pianists and horn players read). If the student is young (Grade 4 to Grade 7), basic music reading is a good place to start. It is less painful for the fingers than chord playing and students learn about the elements of music in this way. Once a student reaches about 13 and wants to begin on guitar, it is much harder to get them to read the music. I think this is because the books and materials that have been prepared to help students learn to read music must start at a very basic level. In other words, 'the songs won't be particularly cool'. The basic nature of the songs in music reading books for guitar is necessary to enable the young student to progress without confusion or frustration. It is also easier for them to recognise what they are playing rather than just have the sound of the chord sequences in a song. Music reading is a skill that takes practice, and has a very important use in music making. The ability to read and write basic chord charts is essential as it allows us to record our music in written form. Chord chart reading is an essential skill. (More so than single note reading). The rhythmic aspects of reading music allow us to pick up a chord chart and be well on the way to turning it into music in a short time if we understand the details written on the music.

Contemporary guitar players mainly need to develop a functional knowledge of theory, a great ear, solid rhythm, a vocabulary of licks, and a strong understanding of different styles.