

PRACTICING SECRETS FOR GUITARISTS



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Introduction

When I first started learning how to play guitar, no one taught me how to practice. Years ago, as a 15 year old high school student, I had no concept of what it meant to practice effectively. I would take the material my teacher gave me, go home, sit down in my bedroom with my book, and try to play whatever it was he had given me that day. Sometimes, I was successful, but many times, I only ended up frustrated, confused, and wondering if there was something wrong with my ability as a guitarist. My hope is that this book will help you avoid the frustration and confusion I dealt with.

In this book, I'm going to give you very effective strategies and techniques for practicing, which I use on a regular basis. Not all of the strategies will be applicable in all situations, but if you use them when you can, I am certain you will see your rate of progress improve greatly.

Over the years and through my studies, I've come to learn that practicing is more about the mind than it is about the hands. You will find that I spend a good amount of time dealing with concepts that involve more thinking than playing. This is on purpose. Much of what ails us as guitarists is our mentality. We are easily distracted, preoccupied, and sometimes, we just get bored. To this day, I still find that my greatest obstacle is my own mind.

Finally, I want to say something that should be obvious, but is not so clear to many people who pick up the guitar. Learning guitar can be difficult. Becoming a great guitar player without the help of someone who can help you avoid many common pitfalls can be a long, painful journey. It takes time, dedication, patience, perseverance, and effective strategies. If you feel like your playing is going nowhere, it probably has very little to do with your natural talent and more to do with things you will read about in this book.

To your success,
Nicholas Anderson
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Chapter 1

First Things First

If you are reading this book as a beginning guitarist, you are going to have a massive advantage over someone like myself when I was a beginning guitarist. As a 15 year old high school student, I had no clue how to practice, what it meant to practice effectively, how to organize my practicing, how to know if I was practicing correctly, or even if what I was practicing was important for my goals.

Truth be told, I did not have any goals other than to be really good and able to play my favorite songs. Those are not bad goals per se, but they are not effective goals if you want to make rapid progress as a guitarist.

If you are reading this book as an experienced guitarist, you obviously picked it up because you sense that there is something lacking in your practice routine. Otherwise, why read a book about practicing?

Wherever you are as a guitarist, my hope is that this book will give you some effective strategies for improving the rate at which you progress in your playing. One of the first things you need to learn is this: First things first.

If you want to make serious progress, you are going to have to make sacrifices. Becoming a great guitar player requires, more than anything else, time; hours upon hours of practice time. That is what first things first means here. Improving your skills as a guitarist must be one of the first things in your schedule of priorities.

The great guitarists who we all look up to did not become great players because of their natural talent alone. Natural talent by itself does not take anyone to the top of their respective professions. I have known many musicians who had a ton of natural talent but zero work ethic. They were good players, but not great players. They could have become great players if they had not relied on their natural talent so much.

The combination of a lot of natural talent and work ethic can make someone a great guitarist, but so can the combination of little natural talent and work ethic. If you feel that you do not have a lot of natural talent, do not assume you cannot be great. If you got a late start in music, do not assume you cannot be great. When Beethoven was young,

a teacher told his parents he would never be a good composer. Because of this, Beethoven did not compose any high quality music until he was in his mid-thirties; however, he is universally acknowledged to be one of the greatest composers ever. It is a shame that a teacher sold him short.

It is a greater shame that people sell themselves short. If you are of the mentality that you cannot become a great guitar player, you probably will not, but only because you believe you cannot. I address this elsewhere in the book, however, you need to stop thinking that way immediately. Nothing is going to hinder your progress as a guitarist more than your own negative thoughts. Your own negative thoughts will stop you from putting in the time and effort needed. You will not put first things first with this type of mentality.

However, if you do put first things first, and implement the strategies in this book, I am certain you will make significant progress in your guitar playing.

Chapter 2

Schedule Your Practice Time

You need to schedule time to practice. This may seem obvious, yet most people do not do it. Most people do not live lives that are scheduled and organized.

But if you are going to make serious progress in your guitar playing, you need to do exactly that. You need to have your life, to a certain extent, organized and scheduled so that you make time every day to practice your guitar.

You do not need to practice eight hours a day to make a lot of improvement in your playing. In fact, a lot of people can make a lot of progress with only 1 to 3 hours, depending on your lifestyle and goals.

If you are a parent and have a full time job, you are not going to have three hours to practice every day. In fact, you might find it difficult to get a half an hour of practice in every day.

I am not that concerned with how much time you have. I just want you to schedule time so you can practice. This may mean that you need to make some decisions about what is important to you.

For instance, if you spend a lot of time watching TV, you may need to cut back on it. Instead, take a half hour out of that time and spend it practicing guitar. It may seem like a big sacrifice, but if you really want to make a lot of progress in your guitar playing, you cannot let practicing be something you do only when you think about it, feel like it, or when you have time in your schedule. You are going to find very quickly that you do not have time in your schedule *if* you do not make practicing a priority.

If you do not have a family and a full time job, or you do not need a full time job to support yourself, you are going to have the luxury of scheduling time when you want to and when it is most convenient for you.

What you need to do in that case is pick the best time possible to practice. If you are not naturally an early riser, deciding to get up at 4 o'clock in the morning and practicing for four hours is a really bad idea.

If you are like me and every day around 2 o'clock, all you want to do is go to sleep, practicing at 2 o'clock is also probably the worst thing you could decide to do.

Keep that in mind when you are scheduling your time to practice. You need to pick a time when you are alert, have energy, when you are not distracted by other things, when you do not have other responsibilities that need your attention, and when you really have time to focus on practicing. That is the best time to do it.

What I recommend is for about a week, write down everything you do every single day. Write down when you get up, when you eat breakfast, the time it takes you to shower and get ready in the morning, when you are working, whatever you do. Everything that you do, whether it is watching TV or brushing your teeth, write it all down for a week and then go back and look at what you have done and you will find time to practice in there somewhere.

You will find things that are taking up too much time or you will find that you are just wasting a lot of time doing things that do not matter. Being able to look back on the week and seeing how you spend your time will show you that you actually do have enough time in your schedule to practice.

Most people only feel like they are busy. Most people are not as busy as they say or as busy as they think they are.

Chapter 3

Organize Everything

You must be organized to get the most out of practicing. Most people do not have an organized method of practicing.

When I was studying classical guitar in college, I had a binder that everything I was studying went into. I did not have it organized in any particular manner. I would shuffle through it, pick something that was interesting to me at the time, and practice for a while. Then I would grow bored and choose something else to practice. Of course, I worked on the material my teacher recommended, but otherwise, my practice was fairly unstructured and random.

Do not make that mistake.

What you need to do is you need to get a binder - two or three-inch, depending on how much material you have. Divide everything into categories: scales, arpeggios, songs, improvisation, ear training, sight-singing, music theory, composition - whatever you need for the material you are working on. Get dividers and make categories for each section of material. Divide your music into those categories and put them into a three-ring binder. Now everything is organized and clear, and you can find what you need quickly.

You should always have a pencil and eraser, so you can write on your music, track progress, and make notes about what you are working on. You also need a timer. I use the one on my smartphone. A timer allows you to ensure you do not spend too much time on any single item. You can also use it to remind yourself to take breaks.

You need a practice schedule. I have included a template in the back of this book that you can copy and use (see Appendix A). You need a goal setting sheet for each time you practice. Every day, when you sit down to practice, you should write down goals for that session. At the end of the session, you should write down if those goals were either met or if you made any progress toward those goals. You should also write down what you need to do in your next practice session to make progress toward those goals (for help with this, see Appendix C).

Finally, you need to have a sheet where you can record the progress you are making toward long term goals. I have created a sheet you can use for that as well, also located in the back of the book (see Appendix D). Take a look at that and you will see how easy it is to track your progress and see that you are making strides toward your long term goals.

Chapter 4

Be Prepared

This piggybacks on what I said about being organized. If you are not organized, you are not going to be ready to practice at all times.

The first thing you need to do is make sure that you get everything organized for your practice sessions ahead of time. But the other component of good preparation is to have everything ready at all times so there is no time wasted setting up all of your stuff, getting your guitar out of the case, getting your binder out, getting your music stand out, getting your metronome out, tuning your guitar, etc.

When I say, “Have everything ready at all times,” it means, if it is possible. I realize it may not be possible for everyone. In fact, it is not possible for me to do this, but if I could, I would have everything ready to go at all times.

What I mean is that you need to have a place designated for practicing, so that you never have to get your guitar out of the closet, open up the case, pull it out, get out all your equipment, get out your binder, et cetera, and get ready to practice.

If it is possible, have your binder already out or maybe on a shelf right next to where you practice. Have your music stand out and set up. Have your chair ready if you practice sitting down, or at least have it close by so it is easy to access.

Your metronome and tuner and everything else you need to practice should be already set up so all you need to do when it is time for you to practice, or even if you just feel like practicing on a whim, all you need to do is sit down, pick up your guitar, tune it, and you are ready to go.

That is what I mean when I say you should have your equipment ready to go at all times.

You need to do this so you do not waste time, but that is not the only reason. It is also so that it is easy for you to practice. When you have to grab your guitar out of the closet and take it out of the case, you have created a barrier for yourself. Then, you have

to grab a music stand. Then, you have to get your music. You might spend 10 minutes doing all of this, so you can start practicing.

Although 10 minutes may not be a lot for some people, if you are like me and work full time, have a family including small kids, 10 minutes of time is a lot. I do not like to waste time doing things that are unnecessary when I want to practice. Having everything ready to go, as much as possible, is very important.

Say you only have 10 minutes to practice on a certain day. If you do not have everything set up, you are going to waste perhaps half of that time getting everything ready. If this is the case, you are not going to practice at all, because it really is not worth it.

When everything is set up and ready to go, and all you have to do is sit down, you can actually create time to practice that you did not have before because you do not have to waste time getting everything ready.

Clearly, being prepared is a very good idea. It will actually create time for you to practice, which means more improvement, less time spent reaching your goals, and if you are taking guitar lessons, it means less money spent in the long run.

Think about how you can implement this. If you do not have a space you can designate specifically to guitar playing, then you need to at least see what you can do to implement part of this.

For instance, I do not have a specific space I can designate to a chair and a music stand and my guitar being out. Instead, I put my guitar in a place that is easily accessible to me, but not to my kids. I have my music easily accessible at all times. I have a metronome and a tuner on my phone, so I have those everywhere I go. I always have picks either on my guitar wedged in between the strings or in my pockets.

If I want to practice and I have only 5-10 minutes, it is not a problem. It is very easy for me to get everything out and play.

The other part of this is that you can eliminate the need for always having some kind of music to follow. You do not always have to have written material to work on. You can always work on scales, if they are memorized. You can work on picking or

fretting technique. You could work on playing without a lot of tension in your hands, arms, shoulders, etc. Most people need to work on that a lot.

Think of techniques or exercises you can practice that do not require you to have some kind of written music out. If you can eliminate the need for that, you can practice even if you are working with a tight timetable.

In short, anything you can do to shorten the amount of time it takes you to get ready to practice will help you because it will help you practice more and prepare less.

Chapter 5

Take Breaks

If you are fortunate enough to have hours upon hours to practice, you need to schedule breaks in between your practice sessions.

I used to practice for two or three hours at a time and I always found that after about an hour, it was hard to maintain the same type of focus, the same type of clarity, the same type of engagement in my practice. Because of the fatigue that tends to set in, I recommend that you do not practice for more than 45 to 50 minutes at a time before you take a 10 or 15 minute break.

When you take a break, stand up. Walk around. Get some water. Do something that you enjoy but keep it to 10 or 15 minutes. You need to give your hands and your arms and your back – really, your whole body – a chance to relax. This is especially important if you tend to play with a lot of tension. If you shrug your shoulders or bend over, or maybe you just tend to play with a lot of tension in your arms and in your hands, which is something that you need to work on if you do, you do run the risk of injuring yourself.

Not only does practicing take a lot of physical engagement, but if you are really practicing, it takes a lot of mental engagement. It takes a tremendous amount of focus and 100 percent of your energy to really maintain high quality, effective practicing. Taking a short break will help you maintain that kind of focus over a longer period of time. Do not underestimate the value of taking a break, and do not take the attitude that breaks are wasted time.

Chapter 6

Practice at the Right Time of Day

You need to practice at the right time of day. I cannot tell you what that is, that is something you need to figure out for yourself. This goes back to what I have said about being organized, practicing, and some suggestions I have made about not being distracted. But this may not be totally obvious to everyone.

Some people enjoy getting up at 4 o'clock in the morning. They are called weirdoes. These people get their best work done at this time of day.

Other people hate getting up early in the morning and would rather stay up late at night. Maybe night time is the best time for you to practice or, if your schedule allows for it, maybe mid-morning is the best time. Personally, I need to have about 10 cups of coffee to be invigorated and feel ready to get some work done.

The point is that you need to figure out what the best time of day for you is to practice and then set that time aside specifically for practicing. This might take some time to figure out. It might take a little bit of experimentation. Spend 7-10 days getting up early in the morning and practice. Record how you felt when you practiced, how distracted you were, and how much you were able to accomplish. Try practicing at night and do the same thing. Do the same amount of time. Record everything and compare those two sessions or those two times and figure out which one seemed to be the best for you.

For some people, it is going to be obvious. You know you are a morning person. You already get up early, so that is the best time for you. If that is the case, you do not need to waste your time experimenting with the time you practice.

But for some people, your practice schedule is not set or you are not very organized and you do not really know what is going to be best. If that is the case, you need to systematically go about figuring out the best time to practice.

When you finally do figure it out, stick with it. You may find that, in the long run, the time to choose is not best, or it needs to change for various reasons. That is fine. The point is to choose a time and stick with it, so you can practice consistently.

There are many reasons musicians in general make little progress in their playing. Consistency is one of them. Do not take this for granted.

Chapter 7

Track Your Progress

This is one of the most important things you can do to help your long term motivation. Tracking progress over the long term will help in a few different ways.

First, when you track your progress over time, you will see how fast (or slow) you are reaching your goals. This is good, because it helps you see whether your practice time is effective or ineffective. If progress is very slow for a long period of time, it may mean you do not practice enough, do not practice effectively, or are practicing the wrong things. I say very slowly for a long period of time because everyone, from time to time, is going to hit a plateau. Progress is going to be slow. There may be physical or mental barriers that need to be broken before you can reach the next level, and sometimes that can take a significant amount of time. If your progress is slow, it may be for this reason.

Second, if your progress is rapid, you are going to see that reflected in your records. This usually creates even more motivation because you can see the fruit of your labor. You will know that your practicing is making a difference and be even more determined to reach your goals. By seeing rapid progress, you will also see that your goals are attainable and may even be able to calculate when you might be able to reach your next goal.

Third, you will see how your progress fluctuates over time. You may begin to see patterns in the progress you make. It may turn out that at certain times of the year, you tend to practice a lot more and therefore make more progress. On the other hand, you may find that at other times, you practice less and therefore make less progress. By seeing these fluctuations, you will be able to guard yourself against being lazy at certain times of the year or even certain days of the week.

You may be wondering what you should track as you practice. Is there a way to measure how good you are, objectively? Yes and no. There are certain aspects of your playing that you can definitely measure and track by using a metronome. There are other

aspects that cannot be measured objectively, but that you can take note of and see whether you are improving or not.

A few things you can measure with a metronome include:

- Scales
- Arpeggios
- Rhythmic accuracy
- Tremolo
- Vibrato (yes, this can be measured using a metronome!)
- Ability to change chords smoothly and easily

All of these should be tracked on a regular basis. A few things that cannot be measured objectively with a metronome include:

- Playing songs without mistakes
- Phrasing
- Lead/Improvisation ability
- Songwriting/creativity
- Picking hand position
- Fretting hand position
- Body tension

This is not, of course, an exhaustive list, but these are some of the more fundamental aspects of playing that you should be paying attention to when you practice. It is important, especially for the items that cannot be objectively measured, that you take notes on a regular basis. Write down the problems that are occurring, how frequently they occur, what you are doing to fix the problem, and how effective your efforts appear to be. If you do this, you will be much more aware of how well you play and be able to zero in on problems much more effectively than you would otherwise.

I cannot stress how important it is to track your progress. Many guitar players become discouraged and frustrated because they do not see themselves making progress. I sometimes have students tell me they do not feel like they are making much progress, however, I will respond by telling them that 2, 3, or 4 weeks ago, they were struggling with a certain problem but now are playing much better and do not even think about it, whatever issue they were struggling with. The student then realizes that they *are* making progress. Often, the student does not see the progress they are making because they have not been keeping track of the problems they have been facing.

Chapter 8

Avoid Distractions

One of the first things you need to do if you are going to practice more effectively is get rid of as many distractions as possible in your practice environment.

I realize that some of these suggestions are not going to be very practical for some people because of the situation that they find themselves in: maybe you have small kids, maybe you have roommates, or maybe your living situation does not allow for all of these suggestions to be possible. If you cannot implement all of these suggestions, implement as many as you can, and then try to work around the other things that may cause distractions.

The first thing that you should do is avoid practicing around other people. This is probably the most difficult to implement for some people because, like I said, you have small kids, siblings, or roommates. If it is possible, practice in a room or a space where you aren't around other people all the time. An office or a bedroom that people do not go into very much is a good choice.

Conversely, do not practice in the living room, the family room, or a high traffic area. Those are not good places to practice. You need to be by yourself as much as possible to avoid the distraction of other people.

If it is not possible for you to get into a room or an area where you can practice alone, talk to the people you live with and tell them that your practicing requires a great amount of concentration and that when people try to talk to you or barge into a room or turn on the TV or music or whatever, that it is extremely distracting and that you would appreciate it if they would try to accommodate you when you are practicing.

If you doubt what I have just said about it taking a great amount of mental energy, then you are probably not getting as much out of your practice as you could and the rest of this book is going to be very helpful to you.

Secondly, do not practice in a room that has a TV, computer, or a radio in it, if possible. There have been studies done that show when a person practices in a room that

has a TV in it, they get less out of their practice. This is true not just when a TV is on, but even when a TV is simply present in the same room! Even if the TV is off, it can be a distraction because you see the TV or computer and you start to wonder, “Oh, when is that show on tonight?” or “What time is it?”, or you remember that something is going to be on TV later and you start thinking about that instead of practicing or you start wondering what is happening on Facebook or Twitter.

This next tip is going to be nearly impossible for some people to do, but you need to do it. Turn your phone off when you practice. I know - that is heresy to some people. But if you really want to improve in your guitar playing, and if you really want to make a lot of progress when you practice, you need to get rid of as many distractions as possible. Turning off your phone is going to pay big dividends because you are not going to see that Facebook notification. You are not going to get that text message. You are not going to get the phone call that interrupts you. Ninety-nine percent of the things coming from your phone that would distract you are not that important. They can wait. Think seriously about implementing that. If it is too much to ask, then at least put your phone on silent and maybe turn it upside down or put it away from you, so that you do not see the notifications on it. But, like I said, most things can wait. Twitter really is not that important, is it?

The last distraction that you need to avoid is by far the most difficult one to avoid. TV is bad enough. Your phone is bad enough. A person interrupting you is bad enough. But the number one thing you need to avoid is your own *wandering mind* and this is something that you cannot get away from. You cannot get away from your own mind and that is what makes it so difficult because when you practice, you find that sometimes after even five minutes, you start to have wandering thoughts and you lose your concentration.

Chapter 9

Practice In Short Segments

One of the things I mentioned before was that you need to avoid the distraction of yourself, meaning that when we practice, we tend to become bored, our mind wanders, and as a result we practice ineffectively. It is as predictable as the sun rising. It is our nature to become bored with repetitive activities. Unfortunately, practicing often consists of repetition - a lot of repetition.

Practicing in short segments is a very effective way to avoid boredom. When I say short segments, I mean anywhere from two to five minutes at most. I often recommend that my students use three minute-segments on any given technique or piece they are working on.

Why do I recommend that? I recommend this because the latest research has shown that when you are doing an activity repeatedly, the neurons in your brain actually begin to get tired and, in a sense, lose interest. Not only do we consciously become tired and lose interest in what we are doing but our unconscious mind becomes tired as well.

After about three to five minutes is when our neurons begin to “lose interest” in what we are doing. It turns out that it actually does not do us a whole lot of good to practice an arpeggio for an hour because even if we could hold our attention consciously, our neurons lose interest.

With that in mind, let us look at what this would look like practically. Say you have a scale, an arpeggio, chords, and an etude.

You have these four items that you are working on. What you could do is you could just write those four things down and then practice each one for three minutes and keep going through that cycle. Each cycle would take 12 minutes to complete and you could go through the cycle 3 times if you had around 30-40 minutes of practice time. That is the easiest way to use this concept.

But what if you want to really work the scale more than anything else? You could write out a schedule that looks something like this:

Scale / Arpeggio / Scale / Chords / Scale / Etude / Scale / Arpeggio, etc.

What this does is it keeps you interested. It keeps you focused. It keeps your neurons “awake” and you hit all of those areas multiple times. What research has shown is that when you practice with this method, you actually remember more the following day than if you practice in large chunks of time on a single piece of material.

Put this into practice. Write down all the things that you have to work on and set a timer for three minutes. Go through your practice routine in this way for several weeks and see if you feel like it improves your memory, keeps you more focused, and helps you get more out of your practice sessions.

Chapter 10

Isolate

Most guitarists do not have any idea what it means to isolate. Most guitarists do not have an instructor who teaches them how to isolate and work on specific techniques, specific parts, or a specific hand. The idea of isolation is critical to your success as a guitarist. If you implement this idea into your practicing, you will see much faster improvement than if you do not.

The concept of isolation recognizes that the right hand and the left hand are not the same. That should be obvious, but it is not. Of course my right hand and my left hand are not the same, but it is not so obvious when you observe how guitarists usually practice. When guitarists are practicing, they tend to focus 99.99% of their attention on the fretting hand and completely ignore the picking hand. They practice as though the picking hand does not need or deserve any attention.

Your picking hand, however, is doing very different motions than your fretting hand because your picking hand requires a very different set of training ideas than your fretting hand does. That is why you need to isolate each hand and treat them differently because they require a different set of training methods.

Take an example: you are going to work on your major scales. Most people, when they want to work on the major scale, are simply going to play the scale up and down and that is all they are going to do. They are not going to worry about what their picking hand is doing. They are focused only on the fretting hand, because the fretting hand is the one playing the notes.

That is okay, but it will only take you so far, especially because there are specific problems that arise in the picking hand that need to be dealt with. A better approach is to work solely on the fretting hand. Do not play anything with the picking hand.

Instead of trying to play through the scale and missing a bunch of notes because your picking hand does not know what it is doing, is not secure, or does not know how to

skip to the different strings yet, you cut out the picking hand altogether and you just play the scale with the fretting hand.

Another good example would be a piece that requires the picking hand to play a complicated arpeggio while the fretting hand is playing a series of chords. There may be difficulty in some of the chords, but the bulk of the work is going to be focused on the picking hand because of the complicated arpeggio pattern being played. Stop playing the fretting hand and give yourself a chance to work out the arpeggio pattern slowly and methodically. It is not going to sound very interesting because you are not playing anything with the fretting hand, but it will give you a chance to focus only on the hand that has the biggest challenge.

Isolating one hand is a very powerful way to practice. As I said, your hands are performing two very different functions and need to be trained using different methods. Once you have worked on them individually, put the two together and you will find that isolating them can be very useful and help you make a lot more progress than constantly playing with them together.

Chapter 11

Use a Metronome

The next thing you should consider doing is using a metronome. You can get a metronome app, if you have a smartphone or tablet, or you can buy an actual metronome. They are not expensive. You should learn how to use a metronome and use it on a regular basis.

Before I discuss when and how to use a metronome, I will caution you first. One situation in which you do not want to use a metronome is when you are learning something new. It does not do you any good to have a timekeeper when you are trying to work through something you have never played before. Do not start using a metronome in your playing until you are at least comfortable playing a piece at a slow pace, and preferably when it is memorized.

You do not need to use a metronome with everything you do. If you are a relatively new guitar player, you probably do not need to use a metronome at all until you have gained the basic skills necessary to play guitar. Once you reach that point, you should use a metronome often and consistently. With that, let us now talk about why you should use a metronome and how to get the most out of it.

One benefit of using a metronome is that it can be used to measure your technical progress. It can show you how fast you are able to play, how accurate you are, if you are able to keep time, and how tight you play with others. For example, say you are playing a scale and your maximum speed is 80 beats per minute. You can use a metronome to track the progress you make by writing down your maximum speed each week, month, and year.

As you get better, the metronome mark will increase. It will go higher and you will be able to see how much progress you are making because you will see, for instance, three weeks ago, you were playing at 80 beats per minute, but right now, you are playing at 120, which is an increase of 50%.

By tracking this, you will be able to look back and see that you really are getting better. If you do not use a metronome, it is going to be very difficult to measure and see progress.. You may feel intuitively that you can play faster, but you will never really know objectively how much faster you are becoming and how long it has taken to reach that point.

The second way a metronome helps you is it will help you work on your rhythmic skills. Here, you set the metronome to a mark that is comfortable for you. A moderate tempo is fine, you do not want it to be too fast. Next, play a piece of music and listen to the metronome as you play. The first time you do this, you will find out that you are all over the place in relation to the metronome. I will warn you now – it can be frustrating. You will find that you speed up here, slow down there, and have a hard time staying in sync with the metronome. However, the more you work with a metronome, the easier it will be.

One more way to use a metronome is to simply clap or tap along with it (you do not even need a guitar for this). By simply tapping along, you begin to develop a sense of timing and rhythm. If you can clap perfectly in sync with a metronome, you will be able to play well with other musicians. This is a skill that is difficult to learn without using a metronome. Set the metronome to a slow tempo and clap along with it. If you are accurate, the metronome click will almost disappear (depending on the volume level of it and your clapping).

This is something that you can do when you are away from the guitar, too. Bring a metronome in the car and tap along when driving, traveling, or waiting around for an appointment. Just use headphones so the people around you do not go crazy.

Chapter 12

Set Goals – One of Your Most Powerful Tools

Setting goals can make or break you as a musician. In fact, setting goals is such a powerful tool that if there is nothing else you take away from this book, it should be this. You must set goals. Otherwise, your practicing is aimless and haphazard. I am going to talk about short, mid, and long-term goals, beginning with short terms goals.

Short term goals include anything that can be achieved in three months or less. You can set three month goals, monthly goals, weekly goals, and even daily goals. I recommend having all of them.

You should have goals for each practice session. This focuses your practicing and gives you something to achieve, as well as something by which you can measure your progress. A good example of a daily goal would be to play a scale you are learning perfectly 20 times. Doing this forces you to focus not only on that one scale, but also on every note of that scale, because the goal is to play it perfectly. By the end of a week of doing this every day, the scale will most likely be memorized.

Another good daily goal would be to smoothly change between the chords in a particular song (this is good for advanced players, too – think jazz changes). Again, this forces you to zero in on something and really pay attention to what is going on in each chord.

There are literally thousands of daily goals you can come up with, you just need to think about what you are working on and what you would like to achieve. Be realistic and keep these goals manageable. As I said before, any goal that takes three months or less to achieve, I consider a short term goal.

One of the reasons you need to have short term goals is so you can track and record your achievements. You need to have some successes that you can look at. You need to have a way to measure and see that you really are making progress. If you want to play a thousand notes per minute, which is extraordinarily fast, but you can only play

300 notes per minute right now, how will it be known if you are making progress toward that goal unless you are tracking it with short term goals?

Short terms goals – daily, weekly, monthly, and quarterly, are the perfect way to break down long terms goals and track your progress toward them. I cannot stress how important it is to actually write down these short terms goals and track your progress. Being able to look back at what you have accomplished will help you see that you really are becoming a better guitarist, which has the added benefit of keeping you motivated.

Mid-term goals I define as being a goal that will take approximately a year to achieve. Some examples of mid-term goals could be memorizing all the major, minor, harmonic minor and pentatonic scales in every position and being able to fluidly change between them without hesitation. It could be improving your speed from 300 notes per minute to 500 notes per minute. Another mid-term goal could be memorizing and being able to perform a large number of songs so that you can perform for several hours at a time.

Mid-term goals are essential because they give you a big goal to work toward that is not going to take a lifetime to achieve. Having a major, long term goal is great, but too often that goal is so far in the future that it does not provide the right kind of motivation. In fact, having a lofty, long term goal can actually be detrimental to your success if you do not break it into smaller, more achievable components.

As an example, imagine a person who has \$35,000 in debt. He wants to pay off his debt so that he no longer has that burden on his back. If he sets out to pay off the debt without a plan, he is going to get bogged down by the fact that he is only paying off a very small portion at a time and will feel like he is never going to achieve his goal. However, what if he broke the debt into smaller parts, as shown below?

Debts	Amount Owed
Credit card 1	\$500
Credit card 2	\$800
Car 1	\$3,200

Car 2	\$4,000
Student Loan 1	\$7,000
Student Loan 2	\$9,000
Student Loan 3	<u>\$10,500</u>
	\$35,000

Now, \$35,000 is in far more manageable parts he can focus on instead of obsessing over the entire amount due. As he pays off the smaller debts first, he achieves victories along the way that help him see he is making serious progress toward his long term goal. The same principle applies to achieving your long term goal as a guitarist.

Before you do anything else, get out a sheet of blank paper and write down a few mid-term goals that you would like to achieve. If you are not sure how long some of your goals will take, do not worry about it. You may find that some goals take much shorter to achieve, while other goals take longer. The point right now is not to guess correctly how long it will take to achieve each goal; it is to get direction and purpose into your practicing so you are making progress toward those goals. After you have written down 5-10 mid-term goals, cross out the ones that are least important to you right now and focus on one or two that you are excited about. Start breaking those goals into smaller parts so you can begin setting short terms goals, as discussed above.

Together with short term and mid-term goals, you need to set long term goals. Although long term goals can feel far away, it is a good idea to have in mind where you want to be in 5 years. Long term goals will help you stay focused on the ultimate prize. This is important because there are times when practicing is not fun. In fact, there are times when practicing is a lot of work. Long term goals make persevering through the work worth the effort. They give purpose and meaning to the work. Otherwise, practicing can become nothing more than a chore without any real purpose.

Long term goals should be specific enough to give you an idea of what you need to do to achieve them, but not so specific that you spend a lot of time thinking about exactly the type of player you want to be. A good example of a long term goal is to be a

proficient blues guitarist. Notice that I said proficient, not virtuoso. You may become a virtuoso someday, but it will probably take longer than 5 years and may be unrealistic to set a goal as high as virtuoso at this point in your career. Depending on how experienced you are, however, virtuoso may be realistic (and you should try to be realistic with all the goals you set).

Whatever you hope to achieve in the long term is your 3-5 year goal. Whether you want to be in a band, play in your church music group, or be able to play lead guitar freely, set it as your long term goal. Do not worry about exactly how long it will take to achieve.

Long term goals, just like mid-term goals, can and should be broken down into shorter, more attainable goals. Long term goals are essential, but in reality they are only as good as the smaller goals that you make in order to achieve your long term goal. You may not be sure about exactly what needs to be achieved in order to reach your long term goal. Do not worry about that. Do what you can to get a clear idea of what you need to accomplish and start working on it. Anything worth pursuing is worth doing wrong or poorly at first. As you become better and more knowledgeable, your goals will become clearer and more refined. You will find that some goals are easier to attain, some will take longer, and that there are things you need to learn that you did not realize when you first set out to achieve your ultimate goal. That is to be expected. The road to success is hardly ever a straight line. You are going to go through difficulties, but as Jimi Hendrix said, "Sometimes you want to give up the guitar, you'll hate the guitar. But if you stick with it, you're gonna be rewarded."

And you are going to be rewarded.

Chapter 13

Identify and Solve Specific Problems

There was a study done recently by a university in New York. The researchers were comparing two groups of people and wanted to find out what set two groups of people apart from each other. Both groups were professional basketball players. The first group was very good at free throw shooting. The other group was very bad.

What the researchers wanted to know was why the first group was so good and the other group was so bad. After all, they were all professional basketball players. They were all extremely skilled; in fact, they were the most skilled basketball players in the world. Yet, one group excelled in this one area over the other. Why was one group so much better than the other? They conducted a study and found, among other things, two primary reasons why the first group was better than the other.

The first group that excelled set specific goals for each practice session. They might set a goal to make 10 of 10 free throws. This helped them measure their progress and see how good they were. The second group did not set specific goals. They practiced just as much but their only goal was to be better. They had no way to measure if that was actually happening.

The difference here is that one group was specific and the other was vague. The group that had a benchmark of 10 for 10 could see very clearly if they were actually getting better. The second group had nothing specific to measure their progress with.

The other aspect of their practicing that set the first group apart is that when they missed a free throw, they would try to determine what they did wrong, specifically. When they missed, they would identify, for instance, that they did not follow through, or their elbows were too far out from their body and it threw them off or that they did not bend at the knees enough - whatever that may be. They then sought to correct that specific problem.

The second group made simple, vague generalization about what went wrong when they missed a free throw. Instead of identifying that they failed to follow through,

they would simply say they did not use proper form. They failed to identify the specific cause and therefore could not fix the problem.

I hope you see how this can apply to guitar playing. Yes, playing basketball is very different than playing guitar, but the same principle applies. Say you are learning a new scale and every time you get to the second string, you make a mistake. And say for the sake of the example that the problem occurs because you have been playing three notes per string throughout the scale until you get to the second string. On the second string, you only play two notes and because of that, it throws off your picking hand.

What you need to do is determine exactly what is going on to fix the problem. If you ignore the problem and say to yourself, “Well, I am messing up on that so I just need to practice it more,” the truth is that you are not identifying the specific problem and you are not going to fix it, at least not very quickly or efficiently. If you identify why you are making a mistake when you get to that string, then and only then can you actually fix that specific problem. Here is another example. Say you are learning chords and chord changes. You have a particularly difficult chord change that you are working on at the moment. You could set a general goal to become better at the chord change, but that is vague and really not very helpful. A better goal would be to change between the two chords perfectly 20 times in a row. That is a measurable goal that will give you instant feedback on your progress. You can actually tell if you are reaching your goal or not and what this will do is it will make you concentrate more and focus more on actually reaching that goal. You will slow down so that you do not make a mistake.

Even though basketball is very different than playing guitar, there are ways that this study can really help you if you apply them intelligently to improve your guitar playing.

To recap, set specific goals. Do not be vague. Be very specific about what you want to achieve in each practice session and in each exercise you go over. When you make a mistake, identify the mistake you make and identify a solution to that problem, then work the solution.

If you consistently apply this in your practicing, you will see significant achievement and progress. You are going to see your practice sessions produce more results because you are specifying what your goals and problems are and you are solving those problems. This can be a very powerful tool for you to use as you practice and I encourage you to take it seriously, apply it, and see for yourself how much of a difference it can make.

These two concepts alone can help you make massive progress. They will save you hours upon hours of wasted practice time because, typically, what we do when we practice is we get lazy and we just keep going over the same thing over and over again - even though we are making mistakes and even though we are not really getting anywhere. When we practice like this, we only reinforce the bad habits and mistakes we are supposed to be fixing.

Chapter 14

Persevere

This might seem obvious but it is not. The sad truth is that most people who pick up a guitar and try to play will give up within the first year.

This happens for various reasons. It could be because they had a bad teacher who did not know how to help them succeed. It could be because they find out they do not like guitar, and that is fine. It could be because they had a teacher who gave them way too much material to work on and they became overwhelmed and felt like they could never succeed, so they gave up. It could be because they found out it was too much work. It was too hard and they were not enjoying it.

The point I want to make is that you need to persevere. I am not going to sugarcoat this. Learning how to play guitar is not necessarily easy. There are a lot of difficulties that come along with playing guitar. Your hands have never moved like this before. You are asking your fingers to do things that feel completely unnatural.

When you are a beginner, you mute strings you are not supposed to mute. The strings buzz all the time. You cannot seem to find the right string with your picking hand. Everything comes slowly. Trust me, though, all of that will go away with time, consistency, and effective practice.

If you can get through the first year and have some success, and if you can persevere through learning how to play chords, which can be difficult for some people, you are going to find out that playing guitar actually becomes much easier and much more enjoyable.

That is not to say that there are no difficult things about being a more advanced player. There are. But so much of the difficulty of playing guitar happens at the very beginning because everything you do is so unusual and feels very odd.

Whether you are a beginner, intermediate, or an advanced player, you need to remember that there are always going to be challenges. There is always going to be work.

Even very advanced players still work on their guitar playing. There is always work to be done. But it is totally worth it if you have a goal in mind, if you have an end game, because the brutal, honest truth is that the work is hard.

No one likes practicing scales. It is not fun. In fact, it can be downright boring. But if you know why you are learning those scales, if you know that after you learn the scale really well, you are going to be able to take a solo or be able to start learning how to improvise and play awesome riffs, or if you know that “after I learn these 15 chords, I am going to be able to play pretty much any song I want to, and it is going to be awesome,” or if you know that after you memorize all these arpeggios and all these different keys and all these chords, you are going to be able to play jazz like a beast, then it makes the work worth it.

Remind yourself of this. There is always work to be done but there is also a goal in mind and the goal, the vision of that goal - being able to do what you want to, having freedom to do what you want with the guitar, having the freedom to express yourself through music, having the freedom to be able to play with other people, being able to blow away an audience with your guitar playing skills, if that is your goal – that is what makes the work worth it.

You have to persevere. You have to push through the difficult times. You have to remind yourself of your goals when it seems like everything about guitar playing is difficult and there is nothing fun about it. Those times will come when all you want to do is burn your guitar and give up. But you must not give up. Those times will pass and you will be a much better guitar player if you persevere, and you will have a great sense of accomplishment and become even more motivated.

When those times come, you have to remember your goals. You have to remember and you have to persevere because I will tell you, after playing for 18 years, it is totally worth it.

I can do a lot on the guitar. I can express myself quite freely on the guitar and it is totally worth it. Persevere through the difficult times and you, too, will find that it is worth it.

Chapter 15

Replace Negative Thoughts with Positive Thoughts

Now, as you are playing, you are probably going to become discouraged at some point and you are going to think things like, “I will never be able to do this. I will never be able to play this chord right. I will never be able to play this scale. I will never be able to –” You have to stop.

When you are talking to yourself like that, stop. You have to tell yourself that you will achieve. You have to tell yourself, “Maybe right now I cannot play this chord, but I will. I will play this chord.” Instead of saying, “I will never be able to improvise,” instead, say, “You know what? Right now, I may not be able to improvise. But I will be able to improvise.”

You have to be careful with your mentality. The way you think has a huge impact on whether you are going to succeed or not. This is not some positive thinking name-it-and-claim-it mentality teaching. This is nothing like that. It is simply the truth. If you believe you are going to fail, you are probably going to fail. If you believe you will achieve what you have set out to achieve, then you are far more likely to achieve it. If you believe that you will achieve something, you will achieve it.

I will tell you from experience that I have gone through those times. It seems silly now but there was a time when I thought I would never be able to play an F major barre chord. If you have ever had experienced playing the F major barre chord for the first time, you know that it is not easy.

But now, I do not even think about it. It feels like the easiest thing ever. But there was a time when it was extremely difficult. It is during those times when you need to really watch the way you talk to yourself and the way you think, but down the road, the things that feel impossible will seem silly.

You need to have a positive attitude about these things. Yes, there are going to be difficulties and there are going to be things that are hard to achieve. But if you stick with it, you will achieve them. So you need to remind yourself that maybe you cannot do

something at this point but you are going to be able to eventually. Tell yourself, “I am going to stick with this and I am going to achieve this goal.”

And then, you will.

Chapter 16

Relax

Many guitarists play with a lot of tension in their body. This is something that you need to pay attention to. You need to pay attention to how much tension there is in your playing, whether it is in your fretting hand or picking hand, whether it is in your fingers, the amount of pressure you are putting against the strings, or whether it is in your arms or shoulders, neck, or in your body as a whole.

Too much tension can hamper your playing. It forces you to use a lot more energy than it takes to play guitar and can also lead to injuries. You can hurt your wrists by playing with too much tension. You can hurt your shoulders and your back by playing with too much tension. It can also limit the amount of time you are able to play. If you have intentions of playing concerts, or for any length of time, you really need to learn to play with a very relaxed body.

Of course, that does not mean that you play without any tension, it is impossible to play without tension because you have to have some amount of tension to move the muscles in your body. But try playing your guitar with as little tension as possible, just in your fretting hand, and see how lightly you can press the strings down and still get them to sound without buzzing.

Playing without tension has other benefits as well. Not only are you protecting your body from injury and conserving energy so you can play for a longer period of time, but you can also actually play faster.

If you want to play fast, you have to stay relaxed. A lot of people, when trying to play fast, naturally tense up. The added tension causes a couple of things to happen. First, you use a lot of extra energy, which means that although you may be able to play fast for a short amount of time, there is no way you will be able to maintain it. Second, the added tension actually restricts your ability to move correctly.

This is very counterintuitive but it is true. When you tense your muscles up, it actually restricts them from moving fluidly and from moving freely. So when you want to

play fast, the tension in your hands, your arms, your wrists, or even in your back, that tension actually prevents you from going as fast as you could.

Ironically, when you are playing slow, there should be more tension than when you are playing fast. Playing slow actually requires more intensity. The faster you play, the more relaxed you need to be.

So this has more benefits than just being able to play longer and protect yourself from injury. It will actually enable you to play faster if you play without a lot of excess tension.

It is difficult to do but it can be done and it is something that you should work on. The way to begin working on this is to play slowly, play scales slowly, play arpeggios slowly, or whatever it is. Play slowly and focus more on the amount of tension in your body – your entire body, including your face, your shoulders, your hands, your arms, your back, everything.

Pay more attention to the tension in your body than you really are paying attention to the actual music you are playing. Of course, you do not want to play everything wrong, but the focus is on how much tension you can get out of your body when you are playing. How relaxed can you actually be when you are playing?

Then as you begin to get used to that, you begin to play without a lot of tension. You can begin to speed up and you will probably notice that it does get more difficult to play without tension when you speed up. Just speed up in small increments so that you can still focus on playing in a relaxed way.

Chapter 17

Practice Smarter, Not Harder

You have heard the old saying, “Work smarter, not harder.” It is good advice. The same thing applies to practicing your guitar. You need to practice smarter, not harder. In some cases, that simply means do not practice longer, practice better.

With strategies that you have read in this book, you have the tools you need to practice smarter, not harder. What I would suggest is go through this book again and reread it with a pen or pencil, or a highlighter in hand, and highlight the most important points for you.

You may not be able to implement everything in this book right away but you should be able to pick out several ideas that will help you become a better guitarist, to help you organize your practicing and help you schedule things, help you track your goals, and help you make a lot more progress in your playing than you would otherwise.

So go back through this book again, reread it, highlight the key points and then make yourself an action plan. Make yourself something that you can stick to, something that you can hold yourself to, so that you actually implement the ideas in this book because that is where the rubber meets the road.

I tell my all students the following: “I could give you the best material, the clearest examples, the best explanation possible of the concepts I am teaching. I could give you the greatest private lesson you have ever had and if you take it home and do nothing with it, you have wasted your time and your money.” That is exactly what is going to happen to many people who read this book. You are going to read it. You are going to close the book and you are going to do nothing with it. You will have wasted your time.

Put this into a plan. Take action. Get out a piece of paper and a pen. That is all you need. You do not have to have anything fancy or even that organized: just a blank piece of paper and a pen. Go through the book and highlight the things you could implement right now. Then write down a plan to actually do it, so you have something

you can go to every day or every week, or as often as you need to. If you do this, you will redirect yourself on a regular basis. It is easy to get off track. It is easy to fall back into bad habits. You have to fight against it, especially if you have been playing for a long time.

You will revise your plan as you become better. Your plan will be more refined as the time goes on. But you need to have some kind of plan, any kind of plan, to implement the ideas in this book. Otherwise, it is just another book you read once and forgot. Do not let that happen.

You must implement. You must take action. Implement the ideas in this book and you will see greater results in a shorter amount of time. I am very confident of that.

Secondly, in addition to having a plan, you need to work on doing what you are implementing. This might seem a little bit odd but you need to implement what you are implementing.

What I mean is you need to make sure that you are sticking with what you are implementing. If you have been playing for a long time you have habits. You have routines that you go through. You have ruts that you get into and if you are not actually implementing the things I have talked about in this book, you are going to naturally fall out of the new plan and go back to whatever your routine was.

You need to catch yourself. Make sure that you are not falling back into your bad habits. If you continue to fall back into your bad habits, you are just going to be working harder, not smarter. Make sure you are actually keeping track of what you are doing and you are sticking to your schedule and you are staying engaged and you are not letting yourself be distracted.

Those two ideas, reviewing this book, making an action plan and then making sure you are implementing everything are the things you need to do to practice smarter. It is really that simple. It may seem like there are too many ideas in this book. For some people, there might be. For others, perhaps not. If it seems overwhelming, do not worry. It really is as simple as having an action plan and then making sure that you are actually implementing that action plan.

Do not worry about the details and all the concepts we have talked about. Do not worry about getting everything perfect or everything right or everything “just so” the first time. Just do it. Take action.

Take action, because if you implement these ideas, your practice times are going to be so much more productive and you are going to see so much more improvement that it is worth doing wrong the first time so you can eventually do it right.

There is no downside to this. It does not cost you any money. It does not take very much time. It is going to make you a better guitarist. Anything worth doing is worth doing wrong the first time. Just try to implement whatever you can and then continue to work on it. It is really that simple.

Chapter 18

Get An Expert Teacher

Finally, you really need to get an expert who can watch you play and who can point out the good things you are doing and the bad things you are doing.

You need someone who knows exactly how to take you from where you are today to where you want to be in a year or two, or five or ten, or however long it takes.

Too many guitarists think that they are just going to go on YouTube or they are going to get a method book and they are just going to learn from that and everything will be great and it will work out and they will become a virtuoso in no time.

The truth is, it takes a long time to reach those types of goals. A lot of guitarists waste a lot of time, develop a lot of bad habits, do things in the wrong order, and they just lead themselves into confusion and frustration and they do not end up making the kind of progress they would like to make.

This all happens because they do not get a teacher who knows what they are doing. If you do not live locally where I teach, then I would highly encourage you to find someone who can teach you. Find someone who is an expert teacher, who can guide you through the maze of guitar playing, music theory, improvisation, songwriting and all the aspects of being a great musician. Find someone who really knows what they are doing – an expert – and take lessons from them.

Now, if you live near the Olympia, Washington area, then I highly encourage you to contact me through my website, www.OlympiaGuitarLessons.com, and schedule a free trial lesson. We will discuss where you are in your playing, what your frustrations are, and where you would like to go. I cannot take on every person who comes through my door, but if you really want to be a better guitarist, you will be welcome in my program.

There is no obligation on your part but I strongly encourage you to contact me and set up your free lesson so you can have someone who knows exactly what they are doing and exactly how to get you where you want to be. I look forward to working with you. I hope you have enjoyed this eBook.

I look forward to seeing you succeed!

Appendix A – Weekly Practice Schedule

Use this sheet to plan for the week ahead and stay focused on your musical goals. In the space provided below, write your top three goals for the week.

For each day below, list the items or exercises you will work on, as well as how much time you will spend on each one. These should be related to your top three goals listed above.

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Friday

Saturday

Sunday

I have these problems and/or questions:

I am making progress in these areas:

Appendix B – 12 Week Speed Tracker

In the first row, write down each item you want to track your speed on. Each week, test yourself to see how fast you can play each item cleanly. If you do not see progress over time, you will know that your method is either ineffective, or you are not dedicating enough time to practicing the technique.

	Scales	Sequences	Arpeggios				
Week 1							
Week 2							
Week 3							
Week 4							
Week 5							
Week 6							
Week 7							
Week 8							
Week 9							
Week 10							
Week 11							
Week 12							

In the space below, write what method you are using to build speed in each category.

Over time, you will be able to see which methods are working and which ones are not.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

Appendix C – Daily Goals

Date: _____

Today's Goals:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

I made progress in these areas today:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Tomorrow I need to work on these items, skills, or techniques:

Appendix D – Long Term Goal Tracking Sheet

Today's Date: _____

My ultimate goal is (be as specific as possible):

The areas I need to improve on or master in order to reach my ultimate goal are these:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

In 90 days evaluate the progress for each area. Rate each area from 1-10 (1 being struggling, 10 being mastery*) how much progress you are making and note anything specific that you need help with.

Evaluation Date: _____

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

In one year, evaluate the progress you've made. Rate each area from 1-10 and note anything specific you need help with.

Evaluation Date: _____

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

* Note: "Mastery" does not necessarily mean virtuosity. If your ultimate goal is to be able to play songs around the campfire, you do not need to know every chord in all inversions or every major, minor, harmonic and pentatonic scale. Mastery simply means a level of proficiency to be able to play the music you want without struggling. Essentially, if you can play the music you want with ease, you have reached the level of mastery you need for your ultimate goal.