

Guitar

The Basics

Column #27 – The Last Word

Throughout this series of lessons we have sought to expose you to things you should be aware of, things you should include, things you need, and things you should strive toward in your pursuit of growing as a guitar player. It is by no means an exhaustive set of lessons. It was never intended to be. It is, as is described in the preamble, geared toward the transitional period between beginner and intermediate playing ability. It is designed to expose you to things you really should have an awareness of and to pursue, at least to the degree that you understand the concepts being discussed and can play something that demonstrates your understanding.

Part of the problem I have seen time and again, as a music teacher, is that people consider themselves to be "intermediate" level players far too early in their progress. Being able to play some songs is not the hallmark of intermediate ability. It is an expected outcome of learning chords and strum patterns, and using them to play songs. This is not said to be cruel. It is said to inform and to help you understand what you should be striving to become, to accomplish, if you have a desire to play well.

And we have tried to keep all these lessons relevant to guitar in general, that apply to both acoustic and electric guitar playing. Both disciplines require much the same foundation to be established as a matter of course. This foundation is common to both disciplines. Beyond that, each then begins to take a different path because of the nature of the specific instrument.

It is our hope you will review these lessons again and again to remind you what you should be familiar with, what you should be striving toward, what you should embrace. It is less about the specific lesson than it is about the discipline of becoming a reasonably competent guitar player. Anyone can play a guitar, but not everyone can make it an enjoyable experience, first as a player, then for those with whom you play and, finally, the audiences in front of which you will perform.

There is so much to music, which is why it is a lifelong pursuit, not a dalliance or flirtation, at least for those of us who are "serious" about making music. And if you want to be a professional musician, then it is all the more important for you to study these lessons and understand everything being demonstrated must be embraced, learned, and incorporated into your thinking, your musical vocabulary - that you actually use, not just know and understand. And then you will be ready to make the transition into the "intermediate" classification.

In each level, there are three core phases in learning and understanding. The following is a **guideline**, not a strict definition of facility at each level - everyone is different; every teacher uses a different methodology or approach. This is mine. My standards of excellence are different, and may be different than yours, too. It's okay.

- **Beginner - Level One:** here you are just learning chords and strums, easy songs are learned incorporating the chords and strums you are learning; learning to work with a

metronome for time keeping skills; transitioning smoothly between chords "at tempo", meaning at the speed the song requires; Barre chords are introduced, and songs using them; the Major scale is introduced; early ear training begins; memorizing fret board notes begins

- **Beginner - Level Two:** here you begin to expand into finger picking and more complex strum patterns; chord knowledge increases beyond basics; introduction to the Pentatonic minor scale and easy solos to help gain confidence with the scale; fret board notes are understood; introduction to notation begins (for those who wish to read); time keeping skills should be starting to settle in; you should be starting to hear things on records that you recognise, major and minor chords, even dominant chords
- **Beginner - Level Three:** here you are comfortable with more complex chord changes and songs; have expanded your chord knowledge, beginning to understand chords rooted on the 6th, 5th, and 4th strings; a few Jazz style standards should be part of your repertoire to solidify expanding chord knowledge (examples: Autumn Leaves, A Foggy Day, Let's Fall In Love); and if you are reading, the afore mentioned melodies should be within your grasp; here, too, you are beginning the first part of the transition to Intermediate ability; your ability to jam/play with other musicians should be starting to develop, and your ability to grab ideas and play them a little quicker should be starting to take hold

A note on progress: Your progress is going to be different than someone else's progress. You may be slower or quicker than another person. Where someone else is in their progress is irrelevant to your progress. And it doesn't matter if they are quicker at grabbing and applying ideas than you. Maybe they have more time to practice. People who work at a regular job have less time to devote to music. Life makes demands upon us. Lighten up on yourself. If you are persistent and stay with it, you too will progress and grow and achieve the level of ability you are striving to attain.

The Intermediate level is not as much about more complex songs as it is about expanding your overall knowledge.

- **Intermediate - Level One:** transition to Intermediate ability is taking place; continuing improvement in multiple versions of all chords you know, not just 6th, 5th, and 4th string rooted, but inversions and altered voices should be getting more clearly understood; you should be able to build any chord, in any key, anywhere on the neck - there should be no chord you can't figure out; improvement in playing melody lines (lead guitar lines); you are improving your ability to decipher easier songs off audio only, at least rhythm parts and maybe easier solos, even parts of more difficult songs
- **Intermediate - Level Two:** fret board knowledge from nut to 12th fret should be clear, and any note can be recalled within a second at any position on any string; if reading, then your ability to sight read should be improving to the point that you can "cold read" an easy melody (such as "Autumn Leaves" or "A Foggy Day"); you should be able to play "authentically" in at least three styles of music (not necessarily "well", but passably so in a way that is true to the style); soloing should be comfortable, and your ability to play clear and clean (without distortion pedals) should be well developed; if speed is a goal, you should be starting to articulate 16th notes at around 100 bpm fairly well; you should

be able to hold your own, rhythmically, in any band or jam situation in music styles you are comfortable playing; playing in a band and making some money should be attainable as long as you know your limitations and play music at a level that is enjoyable by audiences that are not composed of your friends

- **Intermediate - Level Three:** here you should be able to play most anything that is not overly complex; you should be starting to hear what is really happening; you should be able to pull a guitar part, particularly rhythm parts, from almost any average song you hear; your ability to understand the scale being used in a solo should be clear, even if you can't quite play it "note for note" you at least understand what they are doing

At this point you are truly an Intermediate level player. Now, be aware that you will "live" here for a while, even five to ten years. Transitioning to being an Advanced level player takes more than just years, just as it has taken you maybe three to five years to be considered Intermediate (assuming daily dedication and focused learning).

Remember this is a fluid thing based on your life and responsibilities to work and family; some folks take up to ten years or more to become this level of proficient - and that's okay. Part of what keeps people in the Intermediate stage is the fact that with so much technique already learned, it takes time to get good at it, where it really feels natural and you don't have to think about things you're doing too much. More complicated things still demand your attention, but your rhythm playing and general soloing abilities should be easy by now, and sound "professional" and cleanly executed.

At this point, perhaps even as you have entered into the Intermediate stages, you might begin focusing on fewer styles, narrowing your focus. That's okay, even if it is a bit limiting in your acquisition of knowledge. The main point of you becoming a guitar player has always been about doing what you love. Now you can pursue that love with the knowledge you can and will achieve the higher goals you have.

Players transitioning into the **Advanced level** ability have usually already chosen to focus on a singular or narrowed set of music styles, so it is difficult to break advanced level playing into distinct parts. Suffice it to say that at this point, you should be easily able to make a living playing music, even to get some work in a studio (especially if you can read and are good in multiple styles); and if you are dedicated to the process, a career is absolutely assured. Just be smart with your ego (keep it in check - be genuinely humble), and especially your money!

There will be times of employment drought, and you need to save for those times, so you can get through until the next gig. And don't be opposed to moving to another market and facing the "starting over" reality it will necessitate. You go where the work is. It will not come to you - not at first, and not until you have a reputation as a reliable, stable (no drugs) and capable musician. If you are truly good at what you do, you will not be unemployed or remain unknown for long; reputations don't always follow you to new markets, but if you are hard to work with, you will bring that with you and undermine your own progress in adapting to any new environment.

A good reputation can be ruined in one minute, and a bad reputation will take years to overcome - unless it is undeserved, and then only when people in the know understand "who" is

responsible for the bad report you got, and if that "who" is just envious or known to be too critical. And never think you're the best player in the room - even if you are. You can learn from even the least capable people; trust me on this.

One last thought...

Never achieve a point at which you think you no longer will benefit from taking lessons. You may not need to do weekly, even bi-weekly lessons. You may do once a month stuff. If you're touring, you may be out of town for three to six months. But when you can, grab a lesson - even in a city where you are gigging, find a good teacher, ask around. Go to the local music store and ask who's a good teacher. It's a hit and run thing, but let them know you're in town gigging, have them come see you to assess what you might need (put them on the guest list so they don't have to pay!). They can then tailor a lesson on something they see you lack or are struggling with in playing.

At home, find a teacher who helps you to think about, to view, and consider musical approaches, directions and ideas in ways you may not have considered; this is worth the price of admission. A good teacher may cost you \$60-80 a lesson. Pay it if their knowledge - and especially their ability to impart it in a way that informs - is what you require. I have taught people who were far better players than me, but because I have knowledge they do not possess, I am able to teach them. I'm not intimidated by their ability. And they do not judge me because I cannot do what they can. They value what I know, that they want and need to learn.

As you advance in your playing, here is the thing you need to do: start teaching. You don't have to take on a whole roster of students. You can take on five to ten over a two week period, so 10 to 20 lessons a month. When you teach, you have to explain how things are done, demonstrate concepts and make sure the student achieves the results. When you do this, you are refining your own knowledge and understanding... and exposing your own shortcomings. And make sure you have a couple 10-12 year old kids. Why? Because you have to simplify concepts for them. You can't talk with them like adults. This really challenges your ability to articulate concepts.

And you will learn from them. I have learned from beginning students more than I ever thought possible. It's amazing. It's humbling, too.