



# GUITAR IN 5 MINUTES

## HOW TO LET A GUITAR CHOOSE YOU (aka How To Choose A Guitar)

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## INTRODUCTION

Hello! This PDF is designed for those who know nothing about guitars, want to buy one, and haven't the slightest idea where to start. If you have some experience with guitars, some of this stuff might be old hat to you. We apologize. Our focus here at Guitar In 5 Minutes is generally on the **ABSOLUTE BEGINNER** - the person with zero experience who is intimidated for whatever reason of those scary teenagers/punk dudes/sullen folk behind the guitar store counter who have traditionally been the repository of guitar-based information.

A helpful guitar store owner/clerk is worth their weight in gold. For example, Rudy of Rudy's Music Stop on 48th Street in NYC. The staff of Alex Music also on 48th St. in NYC during the 80s and 90s. Anybody at Richboro Music in Richboro, PA. Mandolin Bros. on Staten Island, NY. The list goes on, but oftentimes the closest guitar store to you has staff that are neither very friendly nor helpful. Also, I think it's good to be armed with a little knowledge in any sales transaction - that way you can feel more secure that the person on the other end is not ripping you off.

Feel free to print this PDF and take it into the store with you. I do recommend for your first guitar buying an instrument **in person**. That way you can play it, hold it, and see if it "feels right". This is the **MOST IMPORTANT PART** of buying a guitar - it needs to **FEEL RIGHT**. More about that under the MYSTICAL section below.

During this PDF, I may use terminology that is unfamiliar to you. I will do my best to explain everything as clearly as possible, but you may want to check the glossary.

## SO YOU WANT TO BUY A GUITAR: PRACTICAL

As of this writing, there are over 3500 different guitars for sale on the Musician's Friend website. Where could you even start? Some possible starting points:

- **Your musical hero plays a specific kind of guitar.** For example, Dimebag Darrell played a Dean ML early in his career. John Lennon played a Rickenbacker 325 Capri when the Beatles started. The guitar is supposed to be fun, and it is a real kick to play a guitar that helps you walk in your hero's footsteps.



- **You want to play a specific kind of music.** If you are interested in studying classical music, you'll want to start with a nylon-string classical acoustic guitar. If you want to play traditional bebop jazz, you'll want something fat toned and possibly with a hollow/semi-hollow body. If shredding modern rock is your thing, you'll want something with a whammy bar, a Floyd Rose, possibly an extra string, and maybe with some sort of points on the end to be used as a weapon at those "intense" gigs.
- **You have X number of dollars to spend.** You can spend over \$10,000 on a guitar, or you can spend \$100. Ultimately, your budget may be the determining factor of what kind of instrument you purchase. For your first guitar, I suggest being frugal. After all, if you really enjoy playing, you can always upgrade. The other part of this is that so-called "starter" instruments are much better made than they used to be. I bought one of my students a bottom-end Squire Stratocaster for \$125 for his Bar Mitzvah. It was such a nice instrument, I almost bought one myself! However, you also want to make sure that you have a guitar you enjoy playing. If you don't like the guitar, you won't have as much motivation to play. Which leads us to...

## SO YOU WANT TO BUY A GUITAR: MYSTICAL

There is a reason that I called this PDF "How To Let A Guitar Choose You". No matter what you believe about why we are here on this blue marble called Earth, what's out in the Universe, and why haven't the aliens contacted **you**, the following is something to consider:

- **Guitars are made out of living wood.** Unless they are plastic (kiddie guitars) or steel (dobro), wood is the basis of all guitars. Wood is not considered dead unless it is completely drained of water, and guitar wood requires some moisture to resonate. So, your guitar is actually in the technical sense **alive**.
- **You will have the best experience with an instrument that "feels right".** It's like picking a college, a boyfriend/girlfriend, or a new pair of shoes. All the objective criteria can be there (right size, looks great, has high-speed internet access in the dorm), but if it doesn't "feel right" then you are wasting your time. For those unfamiliar with intuition and intuitive practices, I recommend the books of Shakti Gawain, specifically *Developing Intuition*. Don't



worry if this doesn't make sense. In a few pages, I'll coach you on how to follow your intuition during the buying process.

- **Let the guitar choose you.** Let's suspend our disbelief and do a little playacting. If that guitar you are holding in your hands could talk to you, what would it say? Is it like a sad little cocker spaniel puppy with sad eyes saying "Please take me home with you"? Or is it like a ferocious pit bull saying, "Hands off"? Or maybe it's a ferocious pit bill that's saying "I'm **YOUR** master now"? Or a little yippy puppy that's incredibly annoying? Now that you are convinced I am completely out of my gourd, let me tell you the purpose of this exercise - to find a guitar that you have some *connection* to. If the guitar could talk, would it want to go home with you? Don't overthink this. If the answer is "Yes", then you and the guitar are probably perfect for each other.

None of this is cut and dried. You may have a strong connection to a guitar just because it is a white Fender Stratocaster like Jimi Hendrix's. But even among white Strats, there is an incredible amount of variation. Is it brand new? What year was it made? American, Mexican, or Asian? No matter how you slice it, when you buy a guitar you will have to make....

## DECISIONS

### Big Decision #1 - Acoustic? Electric? Or acoustic/electric?

Here are your choices:

**Acoustic** guitars were originally just called guitars. Then, with the development of the electric guitar, a term was needed to distinguish the two. These are the traditional guitars, usually made of "tonewoods" (wood with resonant properties) with soundholes.

SUB-CHOICE: Acoustics come in two flavors: nylon-string and steel-string. Most rock/jazz people use the steel-string; nylon-strings are primarily for classical and folk. The width of the neck on a classical guitar makes it a bit harder to learn for people with smaller hands; the steel strings are harder to fret at first. Ultimately it depends on what **sound** you want and what **style** of music you want to play.



**Electric** guitars require electricity to be fully operational. This usually comes in the form of an amplifier and a speaker. The electricity goes from the amplifier to the guitar and channels the sound through metal pickups on the guitar body back to the speaker. Unless you are a hardcore rocker who has no interest in ever playing an acoustic guitar, I **recommend starting with an acoustic**. Here are my suggested reasons:

- 1) You will build finger strength more quickly with the acoustic; the strings are generally heavier. This will make you a better player in the long run.
- 2) Operating a guitar amp and learning about volume, tone, and how to control them is learning another instrument. So, instead of learning one instrument, you are trying to learn two instruments at the same time. I think that discourages learning and is definitely the tougher path.
- 3) If you are still an aspiring member of Slayer or Mastodon and unconvinced, consider this: at some point in your career, your massive success will require you to release an acoustic ballad on a 12-string guitar. 12-strings are twice as hard to play as regular acoustics. If you have no experience playing an acoustic guitar, learning 12-string at that point in your career will require a **ton of work**. And who wants to work when they're a big, rich, rock god? Better to start with the acoustic, then breeze through the electric, and before you know it, you are a metal Santa Claus.

But if you are set on an electric and there ain't no shiftin' ya, then here are your options:

#### SUB-CHOICES:

- 1) **Brand?** The main brands of electric guitar are Fender and Gibson and their subsidiaries (Squire, Epiphone, etc). Paul Reed Smith is a distant third, and most other brands of guitar are patterned after models made by Fender and Gibson.
- 2) **Style?** There are many, many different styles of guitar. I will give you four of the most common, distinguished by their shapes, pickups, sounds, and famous users:
  - a) *Stratocaster*: a Fender style with two or three usually single-coil pickups. Jimi Hendrix used mostly Strats. A bright, clean, "twangy" sound. Strat styles are generally the ones with "whammy" bars that hang off the bridge and bend the strings to produce those "dive bomb" sounds.
  - b) *Les Paul*: a Gibson style with two humbucker pickups. Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin used mostly Les Pauls. A fat, crunchy rock/jazz tone.
  - c) *Telecaster*: a Fender style with a variety of 2 - 3 pickup combinations. The first electric guitar style, it originally had 1 single-coil and 1 humbucker pickup. Keith Richards's main guitar is a Telecaster. A bright, rich, cutting tone.
  - d) *SG*: a Gibson style with either P-90 single coil pickups or humbuckers (anywhere from 1 - 3). Frank Zappa mainly used Gibson SGs, as does Angus Young from AC/DC. Initially designed as a lighter version of the Les Paul with brighter tone.



- 3) **Body type?** All of the above guitars are **solid body**, meaning that the guitar body is made of one or two pieces of wood. The other two choices are **hollow body** (mostly for jazz) and **semi-hollow body** (i.e. Gibson ES-335).
- 4) **What kind of amp?** First choice: combo amp (built-in speaker) or standalone amp head (speaker not included)? Second choice: tube or solid state (different sounds)?
- 5) **Effects?** Most electric guitars on albums in rock music are not “clean tone”, meaning that they have some kind of effect on the natural sound. Some sample effects styles are *distortion, reverb, delay (digital and analog), flange, compression, tremolo, noise gate, and wah*. I wouldn't recommend starting out with a bunch of effects, but I also want you to follow your bliss and if you are dead-set on it, then by all means you can research these things on the Internet. Perhaps there will be a further publication on effects...

Bewildered yet? There are also Jaguars, ES series, Gretsches, Jazzmasters, Flying V's, and numerous variations on the above styles. You have many, many decisions when buying an electric guitar. To say nothing of amplifier choices. But, if you are marching the electric path and your intuition is telling you that this is “right”, don't listen to me. You can get a Squire Strat and a Pignose 7-100 amp for about \$200. Effects can wait, and you can get started on playing with those essentials. Eric Clapton recorded “Layla” on a Pignose amp, by the way. Listen to the sound of THOSE guitars (actually about 18 guitars overdubbed). There is nothing “wrong” with starting this way, despite my recommendation. My goal is to give you the best advice to speed your learning process, and certainly not to kill your enthusiasm.

**Acoustic/electric** (or *electro-acoustic*) guitars are acoustic guitars with built-in pickup systems for amplification. If you want an acoustic guitar and playing on using it to play live in a club or some formal performance setting, you'll have to consider some form of amplification. That's how it's done in the 21st century. If you are just playing for yourself or in intimate settings, then the amplification option is probably not needed and you can skip these.

Things to keep in mind:

1) **You can always get a pickup system installed AFTER you buy the guitar** and learn how to play. Some of the acoustic/electrics (especially on the lower end) sacrifice the quality of the guitar for the built-in amplification. Personally, I think a lot of built-in acoustic pickup systems stink. They sound tinny and don't do the guitar justice.



I use a Fishman Acoustic Pocket Blender system (circa 1996) on my Taylor 714 Grand Auditorium. To date, I have not found anything that replicates the excellent sound of this system which is unfortunately no longer made. I have not tried the Taylor Expression system which comes with all their new guitars, but I have tried the Fishman Aura modelers and I would describe them as “adequate”. Moral: *if you find an acoustic amplification system you like, stick with it.*

2) **If you buy an acoustic/electric, make sure you test the sound of the pickup before buying.** Insist on plugging it in and turning up in the store. Preferably on something that will be “close” to what you will use live, be it a PA system or acoustic amplifier. When they plug you in, make sure all the EQ and tone settings are flat (set treble, mid, and bass to 5). Have the salesman play a “D” chord. Do you like the sound?

3) **PA or amp?** Just like with an electric, you’ll need some kind of amplifier. You can buy stand-alone acoustic amps, or if you are going to be singing and playing you’ll want to consider a PA system. Again, this is really only for people whose goal is to perform live, and *you don’t need to buy all these things at once especially if you are just starting out!*

Whew! Tired yet? Here is your next big decision:

## Big Decision #2: How much are you going to spend?

This is, of course, entirely up to you. Most people have some kind of limit to their financial resources (I know I do!). Here are my suggestions:

- 1) **Don’t skimp.** You want an instrument that you will be happy with, not one that is going to break in half if you look at it the wrong way. That guitar from Sears may be \$20, but it probably won’t last more than 3 months and in the meantime will be miserable to play.
- 2) **Don’t splurge.** There is no need for your starter guitar to be a John Cruz ’62 Relic Stratocaster. You probably won’t appreciate it, and what if you get bored with playing? Then you have a \$5000 room ornament. If you can afford it, then by all means, but you probably don’t need that much guitar to start.
- 3) **Don’t let money be the only factor.** This goes back to letting the guitar choose you. You want an instrument that “feels right”. If it is \$50 more than you wanted to spend, aren’t you worth it? Conversely, maybe that \$150 Fender acoustic feels more right than a \$500 Taylor. You don’t have to spend a lot of money to get the right guitar.



We are almost ready to go guitar shopping. Hurrah!

I suggest answering the following before you leave:

- 1) Why am I buying a guitar?
- 2) Knowing that, what kind of guitar do I want?
- 3) What's my spending limit?

### Big Decision #3: I am ready to buy! Where do I go? What do I do when I get there?

I recommend going to a brick-and-mortar guitar store in person for the first purchase. Alternately, you can buy a guitar from the classified ads or Craig's List but **be sure to try it out in person before buying**. You'll have more protection as a first-time buyer buying from a store than from an individual (warranties, service plans, etc). Google "guitar stores" and your area, and you are ready to go!

You can certainly buy a guitar from the Internet, but make sure that you have some kind of protection (i.e. a 30-day or 60-day money back guarantee) so that if you don't like it you can send it back. I would also encourage first-time buying from some kind of store (even an Ebay store) as opposed to an individual for more protection. **Make sure you know how your purchase is protected before you buy**. This is just common sense.

Some things to remember once you get to the store:

- 1) **Try as many guitars as possible.** Since you have most likely narrowed down your selection somewhat, try as many guitars within your selection criteria as possible. For a first time buyer, I recommend trying things both in and out of your price range. See, hear, and feel the difference between a \$1000 guitar and a \$200 guitar. This will give you a hands-on comparison.
- 2) **Play the same thing on each instrument.** My super-duper, high-powered, fabulously-wealthy guitar hero/mentor recommends a "D" chord, because that is the chord that tends to be the most different intonation-wise between different instruments. If you



are a complete beginner (my target audience), at least pluck the open strings individually so that you can feel the guitar resonating in your lap. Do the same thing on every guitar, and you will have a basis on which to tell the difference between the guitars. If you can't play at all, have the salesman play a D chord or at least the same song on each guitar you try.

- 3) **Be brave if you meet resistance.** A lot of guitar store employees are frustrated musicians who don't want to be there and don't want to be helpful. But you *deserve* good service. If they don't help you in a way you feel you deserve to be helped, **leave and don't come back.** There is no excuse for poor customer service. The best musicians will be the best customer service personnel, because how you approach anything bleeds over into how you approach the instrument. That's what I believe, at any rate.
- 4) **If you are not brave, take a friend.** Chances are they will be nicer to you if there are two of you. Find a supportive friend (maybe even a guitar player who will play for you) and take them with you. If you are both women, they will probably be falling all over themselves to help you.
- 5) **Let the guitar choose you.** So you have narrowed it down to three or four guitars that all sound awesome and technically seem great. There is nothing wrong with picking the one that makes you feel cool, or that matches your eyes, or that reminds you of that time you saw Megadeth. Let your intuition and instinct be your guide in the final decision. Pick a fun guitar. Pick a guitar that you think looks good in the mirror. Be open to strange signs.

Three technical things to check out before finally purchasing:

- 1) **Make sure the instrument stays in tune.** Have the salesman or your guitar friend tune the guitar and then really wail on the instrument and see if it stays in tune. Within reason, of course - you don't want to break it or freak them out obviously. But you do want to see if it stays reasonably in tune. If it doesn't, it may not be the guitar - it may be the age of the strings. Ask how old the strings are.
- 2) **Take a look down the neck.** This is called "sighting the neck". Look down the neck from the nut side (the side with the tuning pegs) as if you are a carpenter checking to see if a board is straight. The ideal neck is one that **slightly curves up.** You want to make sure the upper frets are parallel to the nut. If the frets seems uneven, or the fretboard seems to bend in one direction or another when you are doing this, then the neck is warped or twisted. On cheaper guitars, you are likely to find less-than-ideal necks.



- 3) **What's the action?** The “action” refers to the height distance of the strings from the fretboard. Higher action is harder to play, but more useful for things like string-bending and and slide playing. Lower action is easier to play, but you may encounter string buzz. Ask the salesman if the action can be adjusted.
- 4) **What kind of case?** Does it come with a case or is that extra (usually extra)? Many acoustic guitar come with “chipboard” cases. If you are travelling the guitar at all, you will want a hardshell case which will cost extra. If not, then a soft gig bag or lighter case will probably be fine but remember that this offers the guitar less protection.

## BIG DECISION #4 - Who is going to teach me how to play this sucker?

This depends on how motivated you are. There are many free resources on the Internet with guitar instruction and advice. Beware - frequently online tablature can be wrong and free advice is just that - free. There are also a myriad of instructional books, some good, some dull, some great that can teach you.

If you are serious about learning, you probably will want to find an in-person teacher or, if that's not affordable, an online course like my own [www.guitarin5minutes.com](http://www.guitarin5minutes.com). Yes, a shameless plug. But whichever path you take, at least you have made an educated decision in buying your guitar and (hopefully) you have found an awesome instrument!

## Happy playing!

Chris Huff

Questions? Comments? Email me at [chris@guitarin5minutes.com](mailto:chris@guitarin5minutes.com) .