

How to Buy Your First Guitar

This manuscript will help give you a few good ideas on purchasing guitars. Read it a few times and keep these ideas in mind when you go shopping. If you are a total beginner and don't play a stitch of guitar, then take someone along with you shopping who does. The knowledge of that person can save you a lot of possible grief in the long run! Now, let's get started...

DECIDE WHAT YOU WANT...

Decide what you want first. Talk to musicians in your local music scene. Try to meet with a private guitar instructor not affiliated with a music store before you buy. Purchase a few guitar player magazines and look through them. If you can't get a general idea that way, (which is by checking out the ads and pictures of what the famous players are using), then flip to the advertisers index for a run down of the various guitar company advertising pages. Go to those pages and take down each web-address of guitar companies that interest you so you can visit their websites for more information.

Get catalogues and company brochures, (often available from your local music store). Read everything else you can find related to guitars that you are interested in. Google all makes and models and read what people are saying in online discussion forums and threads. Learn and read everything that you can so you can make a decision you'll truly be happy about in the long run.

ACOUSTIC OR ELECTRIC?

An acoustic guitar is probably the way to go for the beginner student on a budget. There are no amplifiers or patch cords to buy, just take it out and play! As well, if you aren't sure about your long term interest for the months and years of practice ahead, an acoustic can be far more cost saving and sometimes less of a hassle to sell second-hand in the event that you give-up on your interest.

Electric guitars are more expensive since they will require amplification. And, a good guitar practice amp can cost upwards of two-hundred dollars, or more. If you can afford it however, they do offer a little more room for sound experimentation since their signal can be run through relatively inexpensive sound processors. Another plus to electric guitars is the fact that they do have lower action and are somewhat easier to play than the acoustics. However, keep in mind that the nylon string acoustics make for excellent beginner models. They are easy to play and quite inexpensive.

THE TEST DRIVE:

When you go looking at guitars, don't just look! Grab each one, hold it and examine the shape of the neck. The width and shape should accommodate the size of your hand. It should feel comfortable. If you have smaller hands perhaps a smaller neck would work better for you. Keep in mind that you will be holding this instrument for hours and hours practicing each week. It should feel comfortable.

CHECK THESE THREE POINTS:

- 1.) ACTION - How easy the strings are to depress.
- 2.) INTONATION - Is the guitar in tune with itself. (Play chords up the neck to check).
- 3.) FRET EDGES - Are they clean and smooth, or sharp and poorly machined from the factory.

CHECK THAT NECK:

Always check the guitar neck for any twisting or bowing. Especially if buying used. Remember that guitars are basically wood & steel and wood can warp! This tends to be a far bigger problem with used guitars, but over the years I have seen new guitars with the dilemma. Honestly though, it is very rare to see in a new instrument.

To check for straightness, sight down the fingerboard from the headstock towards the bridge. Then sight down the neck from the bridge to the headstock.

Stay away from guitars with any neck problems, there is no easy repair solution for this problem. A guitar with a warped neck is simply a defective instrument and of no good immediate use.

FOR ACOUSTICS - HOW DOES IT SOUND?

The simplest way to define music is the interaction of sound and silence. When checking out an instrument you want to purchase, who cares about the silence part! So, play it! Strum it, pick it, play those strings. Play it in different parts of the store. If you do not play well, take a friend who does and get them to play the guitars that interest you.

The resonance is what you want to check for. Especially in terms of acoustic guitars, a great one is loud, and has very good sound projection. This is very important and can even vary from one guitar to another when comparing the exact same companies and the exact same make and model.

FOR ELECTRIC GUITAR SHOPPING: PLUG IT INTO AN AMP!

Plug electric guitars in to a good quality amplifier, (one with a 12" speaker and upwards of 80 to 100 watts). Set the amp to a clean dry tone at a low volume. This means no overdrive, no distortion, no chorus or reverb - nothing. Does the dry sound impress you? Is it super clear? Are there any odd sounding snaps or crackles. There shouldn't be. Also check that every pick-up is operating properly. You can easily check if each pick-up is on and working by touching it with anything metal. A key, paperclip, or ring will do fine. A loud pop sound should occur when any pickup is turned on and touched by a metal object. Ask the store clerk what the configuration of the pickups is in relation to the pickup selector switch. Make sure that each pickup is on and working when it is supposed to be.

When plugged in rotate the volume and tone dials a few times. Switch the pick-up selector switch to different settings. Listen for loud cracks or pops. There should be no loud crackling at all. Keep in mind that switches will make some minimal noise on changing selections, but loud crackling sounds are certainly questionable. Good guitar electronics and good wiring will always be reasonably quiet.

Electric guitars can sound different played through different amplifiers, dry and dirty. So, turn on the overdrive setting after testing the clean setting. Also, the electric guitars can sound quite different when comparing different makes and models on the market. Do your research and spend time shopping around from store to store.

STORES... WHERE TO BUY..?

We always firmly suggest that you buy from a Music Store, in-person rather than other retail outlets, or over the internet by mail-order. Big box stores such as; Wal-Mart, Sears, Best-Buy, Costco, etc. can be great places for general daily merchandise, however stick to the music instrument dealers when it comes to overall quality, knowledgeable sales staff and after-sales service. We also **do not** advise that a beginner or intermediate level player go to the pawnshops or buy privately from the weekly classifieds. Simply put, unless you are extremely knowledgeable about guitars, stick with making your guitar purchase from from a well-known and respectable musical instrument dealer.

SALESPEOPLE: CAN YOU TRUST THEM?

That is a very simple maybe. Some are definitely sincere and want to see you happy with your purchase. Others just want you to purchase! You should also be aware that salespeople may want to up-sell you to a certain brand, either for commission purposes or if the store is overstocked in that model. The salesperson may even offer to cut you a special price to help you change your mind.

Some music stores pay their staff on a commission basis and some stores keep their staff on salary. Both sales staff can have positive and negative effects on your shopping experience.

Commission Based Salespersons:

The commission based salesperson will often try and up-sell you to buy additional items like guitar straps, a guitar bag, a tuner, a metronome, books, etc. While some items might be in your good interest, often you may not require additional items. For this reason beginners should find themselves a teacher first, (preferably one who does not work in a music store). Musicians that teach from their home, or who work for music schools that only offer instruction, (no instrument sales), tend to be non-biased. They will work with you and guide you along to a good purchase of an instrument and related equipment that you will require at your level. On the up-side the commission based salesperson has hopes in your repeat business, and more specifically you buying from them again. They have an interest in your satisfaction, (since they depend on loyal customers and building relationships).

Salary Based Salespersons:

The salary based salesperson might have limited interest in your long-term happiness. This of course is a generalization. However, keep in mind this salesperson is not invested with you. They are not making a long term relationship. Your next visit to the store may mean little to them, since you buying from them or another salesperson makes no difference. They can sell to you one day and often forget your name the next time you walk in. On the plus side, they tend to keep more in line with your instrument purchasing budget and won't have much interest in up-selling you products.

Your best bet is to check out quite a few stores before you buy. Write things down - in front of the salesperson - and decide based upon what you want and what you can afford. Also, ask around. Speak to musicians in your town about what stores they prefer. And, ask about any long-term relationships they might have with any particular sales-staff member in a specific store.

Remember these tips and good luck shopping!