

Practicing With Purpose

A common problem I run into when teaching guitar students, either privately or in clinics, is the lack of purpose in regards to their practicing routine. Without a definite goal in mind, it is easy to spend hours noodling aimlessly on your instrument, either jamming on tunes and riffs. Although I strongly believe in jamming on familiar tunes and learning new ones, if a guitarist (or any instrumentalist for that matter) wants to progress on their instrument, having specific goals and a strategy to reach them is a must. Any musician who has spent the time and discipline mastering their instrument will no doubt agree to the fact that you can accomplish much more in one hour of purposeful practice than four hours of playing without direction.

Following are a few tips that can help you set goals for a better and more effective practicing time.

1. Notes On The Fretboard. It seems that every other instrumentalist other than the guitarist know the notes of their instrument. Learning the notes of your guitar is the foundation for learning everything else (chords, soloing, scales, etc.) and without note knowledge you are greatly limited. Rather than trying to memorize the insurmountable amounts of notes chromatically (eg. E, F, F#, G etc.) try learning them per fret. An example would be to learn all the notes on the first fret, starting from the lowest note to the highest. You can also start by taking one note eg. "E" then locate it

on each string. Then do the same to F, F# etc. Use this exercise as a warm up on your guitar, which generally takes about five to seven minutes.

2. Chord Knowledge. Once you've learned power, barre and open chords, it's time to learn extended chords. Extended chords are chords that you often see written as E9 or A13 etc. (There are tons of books available as resources for all types of chords.) Although a lot of these chords are used in jazz and some blues, they appear in all genres of music and make your playing more interesting. Spend time learning the formula of chords and how chords are formed, which brings me to my next point.

3. Theory. Power is knowledge and studying theory helps you understand the structure of music and demystifies it. Once you understand how chords and scales are created and the function they have in songs, you will feel much more in control of what you are doing and know where you are heading.

4. Reading. This is one area that most guitarists greatly lack in. Since guitarists tend to learn mostly by ear (or tablature), reading (manuscript) is one area that most guitarists greatly lack in. Although at first reading seems to be a little tedious, it can open the doors to a lot of opportunities and is the sign of a true professional. Learn to work with a metronome whenever you read music. At first, practice reading chords throughout and then work on reading notes. There are also many books available on reading and/or you can work with a teacher.

5. Ear Training. As previously mentioned, guitarists seem to mostly use their ears for learning the guitar, but ear training takes it one step further. You should be able to identify intervals (the distance between two notes) and know the different sounds of chords, (if they are major, minor, dominant etc.) It's also a good practice to sing with your guitar. An example would be to play a chord and then sing all the notes individually as you play them. This is a great exercise to develop your ear.

6. Improvising. Scales are the basis for learning to improvise (solo) on the guitar. Although, you don't want to sound like you are playing a scale while soloing, you want to become familiar with the available notes and use them as a guide. Usually the first scales guitarists will learn for modern music is the

Pentatonic Minor scales. Major Pentatonic scales are also popular as well as the Dorian mode (used frequently in rock). For Blues you can learn the blues scale or the Minor Pentatonic. All of these scales can be found in scale books or you can look on the Internet for sites that post scales. Record a progression on a tape recorder (with a metronome or a drum machine) and then use it to practice your scales. Immediately incorporate scales into songs using bends, pull-offs, hammer-ons etc. to make your solo interesting.

7. Right And Left Hand Technique. Developing independence in your Right and Left hand will allow you a more smooth execution while playing your guitar. This means that you teach your fingers to be able to play individually and to play slow and clean sounding. A good exercise for the left hand is to take a riff that you know and play it very slowly allowing very little movement of your fingers. Your fingers should hover just above the strings and only move when they strike the note. Each finger should get its own fret and there should also be little movement with your pick. Always use a metronome which not only teaches you how to keep time (which many guitarists have a hard time with) but by increasing the beats incrementally, allows you to slowly pick up your speed. Keep in mind that sloppy technique can be corrected only by learning to first practice slowly and gradually increasing the tempo while maintaining accuracy and smoothness.

Other points that will help in your practice routine are:

- Log your practicing routine, what you play and how long you play on a calendar therefore you can identify your progress.
 - Split up your time doing some of the points one day and then whatever is left do the next day.
 - Systemize your practicing routine in a way that works for you and start with the basics building from there.
 - Keep updating and changing your routine as necessary to accommodate your progress.
- Remember to always learn exercises that you can quickly put into the context of a song – since the ultimate goal is to play great songs. Good luck and happy practicing!



by Vivian Clement

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