

Guitar Technical Services

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Due to a customers request here are my list of Do's & Don'ts for guitars.

This was prompted by Nigel who wrote:

Hi Peter,

I am fortunate in that I have read your tales and find them very interesting and helpful, and now have a better understanding of how technical the guitar set-up is, but I expect a lot of people do not understand this.

I think if you have the time, a guide for people new to guitars would be great, items such as what to do and what NOT to do. (The 10 most common ways to kill a guitar based on your customers mistakes.) Thanks again for your time yesterday its always a pleasure talking to an expert.

Regards Nigel

So, here is my list (although I'm not limiting it to 10) and I am happy to include anything you may feel I have left out.

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Don't List for Beginners

- ◇ Don't adjust the truss rod (neck adjuster rod) as it may break or cause the guitar to become unplayable
- ◇ Don't Store the guitar in a place you would be not be comfortable in yourself, like loft, conservatory, airing cupboard, bathroom or kitchen, outhouse, shed – all have excesses of heat, cold, damp, humidity or water.
- ◇ Don't clean lacquered surfaces with a polish which has naphtha, wax or silicon added as they may have a derogatory affect on the lacquer
- ◇ Don't leave a guitar on a guitar stand because accidents happen – example: the wind billowing curtains, pushing it over; children or drunks running into it! Repairs can cost more than a new guitar!
- ◇ Don't adjust intonation when the strings get old - buy new strings first. Adjusting intonation with old strings is like treating the symptom but not the illness.
- ◇ Don't take the internet or forum advice as truth about "how to do stuff" - they can be wrong or misguided! Damage may result from experiments. If in doubt ask another source - preferably a reputable, professional technician.
- ◇ Don't use the Allen keys or adjusters supplied with the guitar just because you feel a desire to try them out – you may never get the guitar back to how it was before you started!
- ◇ Don't change your gauge of string 'just for a change' as it will change the geometry because of the change to greater of lesser tension. It will need to be properly adjusted/set-up for the new gauge of string.
- ◇ Don't use lemon oil on lacquered fretboards or get it on other lacquered surfaces as it will soften and destroy the lacquer.
- ◇ Don't raise the magnetic pickups (on electric guitar) too close to the strings as it may affect the intonation. Remember that height is taken/set when fretting the LAST fret.
- ◇ Don't cut/lower the nut slots (string holders at the headstock) as it may make the guitar unplayable. Also a larger/thicker string could wedge into the slot and break the nut in two.
- ◇ Don't take all the strings off at once, as it may cause the truss rod inside the neck to bind, which can take days to settle down again. It may also expose transducers to accidental damage - found inside the acoustic bridge-plate (underneath the saddle).

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The Do List

- ◇ If choosing a guitar for the first time, get the shop assistant to play each one using the same tune (ad nauseam) and use your ears to compare the sound each produces. If the guitar is expensive, that's what you have to pay to get the sound you like. If it's cheaper then you have found a bargain. Remember no famous brand-named guitar, however expensive, can guarantee a good sound. Price is usually an indicator of good build quality but cannot guarantee sound quality.
- ◇ Something that the guitar teacher should check – only press the string down sufficient to voice the note off the fret. If you press too hard, the frets will wear out quicker, the wooden fingerboard will become rutted and it's harder work on the hand (beware: carpal-tunnel-syndrome or repetitive strain injury can occur – this is to be avoided.)
- ◇ Use an electronic tuner because pitch pipes can be up to a quarter-tone off key.
- ◇ Songs using 'drop tuning' need a re-set so that the optimum play is achieved and normal or higher tension will not suffer from insufficient relief in the neck.
- ◇ Clean matt finished guitars with light soap and water and wipe dry immediately. Clean lacquered surfaces with a polish like Mr Sheen or Pledge (UK brands) which have NO wax or silicon added and remove/polish off quickly.
- ◇ Change strings regularly –the intonation will flatten thin treble strings when old or really poor. Worst case was a semitone out (flat) on the 12th fret!
- ◇ Treat rosewood or ebony fingerboard woods with a little lemon oil every 6 months just before fitting new strings. That way the excess oil is wiped off and the new strings wont be affected by the oil.
- ◇ Only fit the same gauge string as supplied by the manufacturer or get a professional to change the set-up to the new preferred gauge.
- ◇ Store the guitar in a protective case or bag – even tiny amounts of house dust can enter the spaces in electrics and moving parts and clog things up over time.
- ◇ Use a circuit breaker on electric guitar amps to prevent venue or neighbours' dodgy wiring from electrocuting you through the guitar.
- ◇ Lastly – ask a question if you're not sure of what to do as it's easier to explain before a mistake is made than try to fix one afterwards - just because you were too proud to ask.

Special thanks to Nigel, for pointing out the obvious that this was a list begging to be written!