



# GUITAR THEORY

An Introduction to Music Theory For Guitar

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**Guitar Theory**  
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**By Marc Miller**

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## Introduction

As I sit here writing this introduction I'm listening to my favorite band, but in a very different way than I used to. I've always listened to music going back as far as I can remember, and I imagine I would hear the same things almost everyone else would hear. I'd hear the singer out front, guitars, drums, melodies, catchy choruses I would want to sing with, screaming guitar solos, etc. I've always loved listening to music, but I would have never guessed just how much I wasn't hearing. It wasn't until after I learned music theory that a whole new world of understanding opened for me.

*I hear the guitarists climbing a scale as the singer follows with them, causing a build up toward an upcoming chorus. The chorus hits, the chord progression changes into a new modal center, giving just a hint of sadness to an otherwise happy sounding tune. The singer emphasizes the bluesy sounding notes at the perfect time to drive home the new feel established in the chorus. I hear a piano in the background playing with the chord progression and adding melody notes that add a counterpoint harmony to the vocals. The vocals have 3<sup>rd</sup> harmonies added at the end of each line, and the lead guitarist is descending to the root note at the end of each line while the singer ascends to the root note, creating another counterpoint feel with a resolution at the end, adding more depth and layer to the chorus.*

I always wondered if being able to analyze music would take away some of the magic and mystery behind it, but it has only heightened my enjoyment of it. Hearing how each musician contributed to the overall feel using different timings and note choices, and how they work with each other toward making the overall sound.

I played guitar for quite some time with little to no understanding of music theory. I relied on my ear, trial and error, and copying what I saw other guitarists doing. I wouldn't be surprised if 90% of guitarists out there are doing the same thing, maybe more. It was when I learned music theory that the door to endless possibilities swung open. After learning even just the basics of theory, I improved as a guitar player 5 times over, and you will too. I've had the honor of meeting some really great guitarists, and they all had one thing in common, they understood music theory.

So why does it make such a difference?

A poet needs to have a mastery of the English language; they need to know a lot of words both unique and complicated to express themselves fully and in interesting ways. However what good would it be to know a lot of interesting sounding words but not have any idea what they mean? As guitarists I think we often get caught up in trying to get faster or playing flashy riffs that look impressive, but in the end if you don't understand what it is you're doing, it means so little. I've met guitarists that could play insanely fast and complicated riffs, but had no idea what key they were in and couldn't apply their technique to an original song, other than maybe through a lot of trial and error.

If I can teach you one thing only, it's this: The key to music isn't in the technique, it's in expressing yourself. That's all the guitar is really, a tool that can allow you to express yourself musically. We all have something inside of us we want to express to others, an endless array of emotions and therefor an unlimited source of music. The guitar is nothing but a bridge between you and the listener, where your emotion and feeling is transferred from you to them, through sound. So the way to become the best musician you can be is in making sure that "bridge" is accurately and effortlessly expressing what you are trying to convey. Technique is a big part of that, if you want to express yourself through a

complicated pattern of notes you need your fingers to be able to pull it off. But what is more important is understanding the language of music and knowing WHAT TO PLAY, not just having the technique to be able to play it.

Think for a moment about a song that has always moved you emotionally. Maybe it's an uplifting song that has a way of making you smile no matter how bad you feel. Maybe it's a song full of sadness that brings you to tears, or maybe it brings back a memory of an old friend or a certain time in your life. In any case, it probably wasn't flashy technique that made you feel that way. The song made a connection with you because the writer was able to transfer their emotion through the music in a way that you could understand it and relate to it. To me, that is what makes a great musician, the ability to make that connection with the listener. No one needs to teach you how to have feelings and emotions, we all have that. The key is using the guitar to express those feelings without it being an obstacle to overcome, but instead a tool that helps you to achieve it.

That's why learning music theory is so important, and absolutely worth your time. As I speak to you I picture someone who loves the guitar, someone who truly wants to master the instrument and can easily express themselves through it. If you are reading this you have clearly made the choice to learn more about music and how it works, and with that I would say congratulations, you have taken the first step toward unlimited possibilities. Let's get started.

## **Pre-requisites and About this Book**

Before diving into music theory I feel it's important that you at least have a general concept of the guitar and how it's played. Though it's certainly possible to study music theory at the same time you start playing an instrument (and many do) I think it's a good idea to play the guitar at least for a little while first. Get a feel for how the notes sound depending on what fret you are on, learn your basic chords even if you don't totally understand how they work. Learn a few simple songs and get your hands used to playing notes and forming chords. That way when you start learning music theory you can immediately start applying these concepts into your playing. Also get to know the basic terms surrounding the guitar. Such as what it means to "fret a note", slide, bend, hammer on, pull off, etc. I am assuming before tackling music theory you already have that general knowledge and are ready to start understanding the music theory behind your playing.

If you are not familiar with these terms, I recommend you start first with a beginner's book for playing guitar, learning the basics of the instrument, etc. There are hundreds of books out there and thousands of free sources of information on the internet to get you started.

# Chapter 1: Notes – The Building Blocks of Music

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The first step to understanding music theory is understanding notes. I call notes the building blocks of music because notes combine to form scales and chords, which combine to form phrases and progressions, which combine to form songs. In Western Music and through much of the world the notes are labeled with letters: A thru G, in alphabetical order. So we have 7 different letters:

**A B C D E F G**

This is the basic alphabet of music and you will be working with this concept throughout your musical lifetime.

After understanding this initial concept, next know that there are notes that can fall in between these letters as well. These notes can be referred to as sharp (#) or flat (b). Sharp means raising a note in pitch, flat means lowering it in pitch. So for example, the note in between A and B can be referred to as A# or Bb. There is no difference in sound between A# and Bb, just two different ways of labeling the same note. This brings up our first term to become familiar with: “**Enharmonic**”. Enharmonic describes two notes that have the same pitch. A# and Bb are enharmonic, they refer to the same note, just two different ways of labeling that note.

I'm sure your next question would be: "Well if it's the same note, why have two different names for it, why not just one or the other?" It's a good question and the concept of A# and Bb being the same note can be confusing at first. The answer is that you would either call that note A# or Bb depending on the context of the situation. In this way music is very much like language. The words "money" and "dinero" mean the same thing, they both mean currency right? However you may use one term or the other depending on the context of the situation. In this example you may say "dinero" in Mexico and "money" in the U.S. It all depends on who you are talking to and the context of the situation, but really they are just two different labels for the exact same thing. Over the next few chapters we will talk about when to use the sharp label and when to use the flat label. But for now, let's write out the order of the notes again, but this time including the sharps and flats that can fall in between the notes:

**A A#/Bb B C C#/Db D D#/Eb E F F#/Gb G G#/Ab A**

The first thing you may notice is that some notes do not have a note in between them. Specifically between **B and C** and **E and F**. This is very important to remember and I recommend you commit that to memory now. There is no note

The next thing to notice is that there are a total of 12 notes, after 12 the order starts over back at A again.

Let's pause here for a moment and take a look at the guitar neck and see how this relates to the fretboard. First you should know what note each string on the guitar creates when it is picked (without fretting any notes).

The lowest string on the guitar (the thickest string, lowest in pitch) is an E note when played open. The second string is an A, the third string is a D, the fourth is a G, the fifth is a B, and the sixth string (the thinnest) is an E again. Here is a picture showing each string of the guitar when played open:





You will want to memorize what each string is when played open. As you can see above, the order is EADGBE. Next let's start on the low E string (the thickest string) and name each note in order going up the guitar neck one fret at a time.

So when played open you get an E note.

1<sup>st</sup> fret is an F note (remember there are no notes in between E and F so it goes right from open E to first fret F)

2<sup>nd</sup> fret is F#/Gb

3<sup>rd</sup> fret is G

4<sup>th</sup> fret is G#/Ab

5<sup>th</sup> fret is A

And so on... Here is a chart showing the notes of the low E string:

E												
B												
G												
D	◇		◇		◇		◇		◇			◇
A												
E												
	F	F#/Gb	G	G#/Ab	A	A#/Bb	B	C	C#/Db	D	D#/Eb	E

As you can see the string progresses from E in the open position and then goes through the entire order of notes. Then finally at the 12<sup>th</sup> fret you end up at “E” again and the order will repeat past the 12<sup>th</sup> fret. The 13<sup>th</sup> fret will be an “F”, the 14<sup>th</sup> fret will be an “F#/ Gb” and so on.

One thing you will definitely want to do is memorize the notes of the guitar fretboard. This is a process that will take some time, as you can see there are a lot of notes on the fretboard. However there are ways to make the memorization a little easier. Memorize them a section at a time or a string at a time. Memorize the location of the C Major Scale, or in other words the notes that are not sharp or flat.

(You probably aren't familiar with the C Major scale, but no worries! Much more on this later, for now just know that it consists of all the notes that are not sharp or flat: A B C D E F G, and memorizing the locations of these notes is a great way to memorize the guitar fretboard).

There are all kinds of ways to go about mapping out the fretboard in your mind. Below are some charts that can help you get started. Let's call this your first assignment for learning music theory:

# Assignment: Order of the Notes and Memorizing the Fretboard

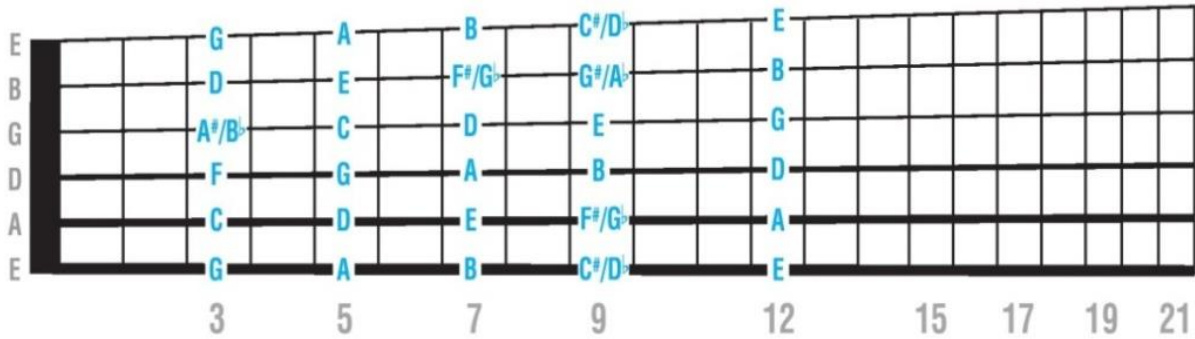
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Be able to write all the notes in order and commit this order to memory:

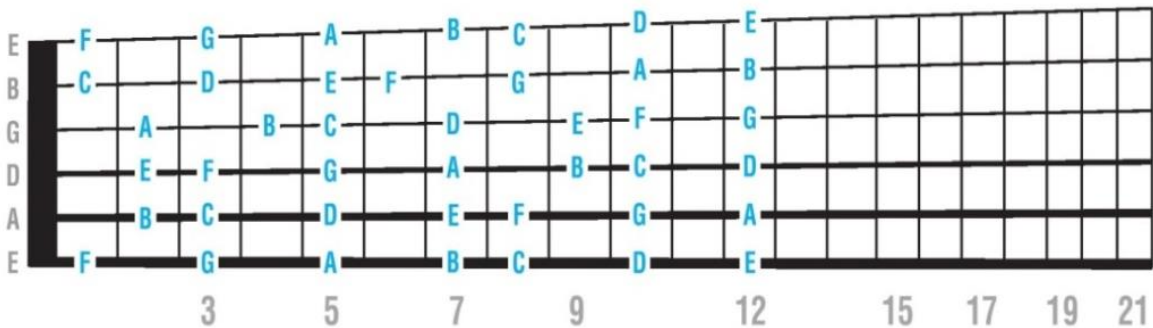
**A A#/Bb B C C#/Db D D#/Eb E F F#/Gb G G#/Ab A**

Then start learning your guitar fretboard using the diagrams below to help:

Learn the notes along the fret markers:



Learn the notes of the C Major scale (all the notes that are not flat or sharp)





take it a step at a time and take the time needed to really absorb this information. I promise it is worth it!

2. I'm not going to lie to you and say that learning guitar or music theory is easy, but I will tell you that I believe everyone has the natural talent and ability to do it. What separates those who are successful from those who are not is that the ones who are successful spent a lot of time practicing it and really applied themselves without giving up. Make these assignments and memorization a part of your daily routine. Name the notes in order while you are driving to work. Ask yourself what note is on the 5<sup>th</sup> fret of the A string while you are eating your lunch. Immerse yourself in these studies and spend a lot of time on them. That is the only way you will truly master the material. The good news: though it's a lot of work, the payoff in the end is worth every minute of it.