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Guitar Rhythm and Technique

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Desi Serna

Guitar instructor and founder of
guitar-music-theory.com



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by Desi Serna

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Guitar Rhythm & Technique For Dummies®

Published by:
John Wiley & Sons, Inc.,
111 River Street, Hoboken,
NJ 07030-5774,
www.wiley.com

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Published simultaneously in Canada

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2014958346

ISBN 978-1-119-02287-9 (pbk); ISBN 978-1-119-02288-6 (ebk); ISBN 978-1-119-02289-3 (ebk)

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Introduction

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Rhythm is the pace and pattern of a piece of music. Technique is the procedure and skill used to sound notes. *Guitar Rhythm & Technique For Dummies* is where you get a grip on keeping time and hone your guitar-playing chops so that you play music well and progress to new levels.

About This Book

This book covers a wide array of rhythm and technique topics, with focus on the most used and most practical skills. You get a grip on keeping time and playing strum patterns, as well as reading and counting basic rhythms. Your fretting-hand fingers get in shape by working with guitar articulations such as hammer-ons, pull-offs, slides, and bends, and you explore various ways in which you can finger chords and fret scales in order to play to your strengths. On the other hand (literally), you work with various methods of flatpicking, fingerpicking, and hybrid picking — skills that add variety to your playing. You also produce harmonics, play in alternate tunings, use a slide, and work with a tremolo system. Throughout the entire book you see references to popular songs and familiar artists, which helps you connect the concepts to the music you know and love — the types of songs you regularly hear on Top 40 and classic-rock radio stations.

The traditional approach to rhythm usually emphasizes all the aspects of standard musical notation and covers the gamut of note values and time signatures. This book focuses only on what you need to know in order to play popular strum patterns and read the most basic of rhythm charts. Instead of making you work to develop advanced skills at high levels of proficiency, this book serves as an overview of the most practical of guitar techniques that are common to popular styles and useful to increasing your versatility.

Here's what sets this book apart from other guitar resource materials:

- ✓ **The practicality and efficiency of the content:** If you don't need to know a certain topic or technique to play guitar and understand popular music, I don't present it here.
- ✓ **The number of familiar song references:** Say goodbye to learning abstract ideas without knowing how they apply to the music you know and love! I refer to some of the most popular songs and famous guitarists of all time in the pages that follow.

As you work your way through this book, keep in mind that sidebars and Technical Stuff icons are skippable. Here are a few other things to note:

- ✓ All the information applies to both acoustic and electric guitar unless otherwise noted.
- ✓ I use six-string guitars and standard tuning in all examples and figures unless otherwise noted.
- ✓ You can apply much of the information in the book to bass guitar, too.
- ✓ I use a right-hander's perspective throughout the book.
- ✓ You have to look up and practice popular song references on your own. I don't include the music here. (If you're not sure where to find the music for a given song referenced in the text, check out www.musicdispatch.com, www.musicnotes.com, or www.sheetmusicplus.com.)

Within this book, you may note that some web addresses break across two lines of text. If you're reading this book in print and you want to visit one of these web pages, simply key in the web address exactly as it's noted in the text, pretending as though the line break doesn't exist. If you're reading this as an e-book, you've got it easy — just click the web address to go directly to the web page.

Before beginning the book, be sure to get your fingers and guitar prepared for optimal playing. Make sure the nails on your fretting hand are trimmed and filed so that they don't interfere with your fretting of the strings. Also, make sure that your guitar has been professionally set up so that it's easy to play and stays in tune.

Finally, in case you're curious, I use the programs GuitarPro (www.guitar-pro.com), Neck Diagrams (www.neckdiagrams.com), and Sibelius (www.sibelius.com) to create notation and diagram figures.

Foolish Assumptions

This book is geared toward experienced beginners and intermediate guitar players. At the very least, you need to know the basics of guitar playing. You should have completed a beginner-level course, like *Guitar For Dummies*, and be able to play your way through many simple songs. Advanced guitarists can benefit from this book by filling in gaps that may have been overlooked over the years and sharpening skills that were never given the proper attention they deserve.

Whatever the case may be, to get the full benefit of this book, you need to know and be able to play and read the following:

- ✓ Open chords and open-chord songs
- ✓ Power chords and power-chord songs
- ✓ Barre chords and barre-chord songs
- ✓ Some melodies and riffs
- ✓ Guitar tab and neck diagrams

You don't need to be an expert on these concepts; you just need a working knowledge of them. You don't have to know how to read standard musical notation, either, because what you need to know about the staff is covered.

If you still need to learn the basics and acquire the skills listed here, I suggest you start with *Guitar For Dummies*, by Mark Phillips and Jon Chappell (Wiley).

Icons Used in This Book

In order to highlight different types of information, I mark certain paragraphs with the following icons:



The Tip icon points out tips, tricks, shortcuts, and more that make your life as a guitar player a little easier.



The Remember icon points out especially important concepts that you don't want to miss or forget.



The Technical Stuff icon highlights technical information (go figure!) that you can skip if you're short on time (or if you just want to focus on the need-to-know stuff).



The Play This icon points out the audio tracks and video clips I've recorded to illustrate various rhythms and techniques throughout the book.

Beyond the Book

As if all the great information in this book weren't enough, you can go beyond the book for even more!

I've recorded numerous audio tracks and video clips so that you can listen to and view various rhythms, techniques, and more throughout the book. Go to www.dummies.com/guitarrhythmtechnique to download these files.

Be sure to check out the free Cheat Sheet at www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/guitarrhythmtechnique for all sorts of super-handly info, including a rhythm pyramid, finger exercises, and a warm-up routine.

Finally, you can find articles on following a lead sheet, singing and playing at the same time, getting the U2 sound, using a capo, and using accompaniment and tracks at www.dummies.com/extras/guitarrhythmtechnique.

Where to Go from Here

As with all *For Dummies* books, you don't have to read this book from beginning to end. You can start anywhere you like. However, because some musical concepts build on others, you won't be able to jump into some lessons without knowing what comes before them. For example, you can't read and play eighth- and sixteenth-note strum patterns in Chapters 3 and 4 until after you get to know the music staff and note values in Chapter 2. That said, Parts I and II focus on reading and playing rhythms, primarily strum patterns and keeping time. Parts III and IV focus on techniques, primarily how you use your hands to manipulate the strings and sound notes. Part V puts everything in the book to good use through exercises and practice routines. Part VI gives you a little something extra to work on before you finish up.

You don't need to learn and master every technique covered in this book. Pick and choose which techniques to focus on. Even the pro players mentioned in these pages have special areas of expertise. For example, Eddie Van Halen's trademark technique is finger tapping, while Bonnie Raitt prefers to sound notes by using a slide. Each of these artists plays to his or her strengths and in ways that best suit his or her style. You may choose to focus on techniques that apply best to acoustic guitar, if that's your preferred platform. You may focus on techniques heard in rock guitar solos if that's the area in which you want to improve.

As you work through this book, work with each concept one at a time. Take breaks from the text to practice and rehearse what you read about. Your goal is to commit a skill to both your mental memory and your hand memory before reading on and playing more. With

some concepts, you may learn them after only a few minutes of practice; others may take hours. Take as much time as you need to practice playing and rehearsing the topics I cover here. This isn't a race. Enjoy the process and make everything stick — that is, work with the concepts until they become a permanent part of your playing.

It's not enough to play something new off a page in this book. You need to play each rhythm and technique in context (that is, in actual songs) to really understand what to do with it. That's why I reference so many songs throughout this book. You don't need to look up and learn every single song I mention, but try to play through a few examples every time you learn a new concept. You don't have to learn every song in its entirety, either. If I reference a song because it features a specific strum pattern, then just focus on playing that part of it. If my focus is on a particular technique, then just play through the part that features it.

Part I

Getting Started with Guitar Rhythm and Technique

getting started
with

**guitar
rhythm &
technique**



For Dummies can help you get started with lots of subjects. Visit www.dummies.com to learn more and do more with *For Dummies*.

In this part . . .

- ✓ Find out how to use a metronome as a pacesetter and to develop rock-solid timing.
- ✓ Get to know the most basic parts of the music staff so that you can find your way around a lead sheet.
- ✓ Work with note values, rests, and time signatures to play strum patterns and develop your rhythm-guitar skills.

Chapter 1

Rhythm and Technique in a Nutshell

In This Chapter

- ▶ Getting an overview of rhythm and technique
- ▶ Access the audio tracks and video clips at www.dummies.com/go/guitarrhythmtechnique

In this chapter, I explain why it's beneficial for you to develop your sense of rhythm and sharpen your technique. I also give you an overview of the different topics you explore as you work through this book. When you have an idea of what the whole program is about, you have a clearer picture of the road that lies ahead.

Recognizing the Importance of Rhythm and Technique

Every aspect of guitar playing requires some level of skill. As much as you might like to jump straight to playing familiar songs by your favorite bands and improvising like your favorite guitarists, the truth is that you need to work on developing your technique before you can achieve success on your instrument. Sure, you can pick up on things here and there as you go, but if you're serious about getting good, why not take a more purposeful approach, one that produces better results in a shorter amount of time? The progress of many guitarists is hindered not because they lack the ability to play well, but because they don't follow the steps necessary to progress. How can you sound as good as the next person when the next person has learned tips and tricks that you haven't yet been introduced to?



All guitarists, regardless of style, make use of the same basic techniques. How much you use a particular technique, or how far you take it, is a matter of preference and part of what defines your sound and style.



You can get a taste of what rhythm and technique is all about by watching Video Clip 1 and listening to Audio Track 1.

Reading and Playing Basic Rhythms

Your journey to improving your guitar playing starts with a look at rhythms. *Rhythm* is the time in which you sound notes. It affects the feel and groove of everything you play. Developing your rhythm doesn't require you to read music like a concert violinist, but it's helpful to get to know the basic components of a staff and how music is rhythmically notated, which is precisely what Chapter 2 focuses on. This information will not only help you to improve your strumming, but also prepare you to read the slash notation commonly used in performance charts.

Developing Your Strumming Technique

In this book, you work with some aspects of standard notation strictly as a means to improve your guitar playing. Seeing how measures of music are subdivided, counted, and strummed will take the guesswork out of your rhythm playing and help you get your pick-strokes in order.

Aside from dissecting the strum patterns used in popular music, you work with developing essential rhythm guitar skills such as floating, resting, damping, scratching, and accenting. These techniques contribute to the feel and sound of a rhythm part and help you to develop a strong groove whether you're playing folky acoustic guitar songs, electric rock rhythms, or funky chord comps. Various rhythms, strum patterns, and strumming techniques are covered in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

Honing Your Fretting-Hand Techniques

There is far more to the left hand (or the right hand if you're a lefty) than simply fretting notes on the fretboard. Guitarists use fretting-hand fingers to hammer into notes as well as pull off, slide, and bend. These techniques, called *articulations*, help you execute passages, produce unique sounds, and be more expressive. In order to advance as a player and be successful as a musician, you need to develop these performance skills and know how they're notated in a guitar score. You work with articulations at length in Chapter 7.

In addition to developing technique, you also need to know how to play to your strengths. Perhaps some of your struggles are caused by a belief that there are "proper" and "correct" ways that things should be played on guitar. The truth is, your hands don't work in exactly the same way as someone else's hands, and sometimes you need to explore unconventional ways to fret and finger chord shapes and scale patterns in order to find what best suits you. You get started with this process in Chapter 6.

Honing Your Picking-Hand Techniques

There is far more to the right hand (or the left hand if you're a lefty) than simply brushing the strings. To reach any level of proficiency with guitar, you need to develop the techniques of picking with a flatpick (also known as a plectrum) and plucking with the fingers.

Skilled players alternate their picks, synchronize their hands, cleanly sound notes, and mute idle strings — all at the same time. When you break down the mechanics of picking alone, you see that various means of picking exist — including alternate, sweep, economy, inside, outside, cross, and hybrid (all techniques covered in Chapter 10).

Popular music features guitar parts that are played using both a pick and fingers. All guitarists put down the pick from time to time and opt to pluck strings using fingers. Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven," one of the most famous guitar compositions ever, opens with a fingerpicked acoustic guitar. Many folk-inspired songs, like "Dust in the Wind" by Kansas, are propelled by rhythmic patterns that are fingerpicked, not strummed.

Using fingers also lends well to styles where chords and melodies are played together. In some cases, a flatpick is held and used together with fingers for a hybrid of the two methods. In other cases, the picking hand is used to slap the strings and produce percussive sounds. All these techniques are explored in Chapter 11.

Using Whammy Bars

Playing guitar isn't always about manipulating the strings with your hands. Sometimes a piece of hardware is involved, like a tremolo system, which is a spring-loaded bridge that is used to add vibrato, as well as dive away from and scoop into notes. It's what Stevie Ray Vaughan used to add mellow vibrato on his song "Lenny," and what Jimi Hendrix used to conjure up the sounds of bombs and ambulance sirens in his Woodstock performance of "The Star-Spangled Banner." Also called a *whammy bar*, the arm that extends from a tremolo system can be pushed and pulled to create faux-slide guitar sounds with notes that slide up and down, into and out of pitch. All these techniques are laid out for you in Chapter 12.

Playing Slide Guitar and Using Open Tunings

Sometimes guitarists don't fret notes in the normal manner of pressing the strings down to the fretboard using their fingertips; instead, they use a glass or metal object to slide along the tops of the strings. Think of the signature guitar riff at the beginning of Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Free Bird" or anything by Bonnie Raitt. These objects, called *slides*, are usually worn over a fretting-hand finger, and their use is commonplace in popular music.

One of the things that helps to facilitate the use of a slide is an *alternate tuning* (anything that differs from standard tuning). Slide players usually opt to tune the strings so that the open strings produce a chord like E major or G major. These tunings can be used with or without a slide. You get to know them in Chapter 9.

Getting Your Practice In

Any good book on rhythm and technique provides exercises useful for getting the most out of your practice time. Throughout this book, you come across countless figures to rehearse and use for developing your newfound skills. Chapter 13 is geared toward reviewing and running down your rhythms, and it does so in a manner that will make you feel more confident the next time you're called to perform a part by reading it off a rhythm chart. In Chapter 14, melodic patterns are introduced. Sometimes called *scale sequences* or *picking patterns*, these patterns not only provide melodic ideas that are useful when improvising and composing, but also serve as some of the best exercises to sharpen your picking, fretting, and hand synchronization.

Chapter 2

Getting to Know the Music Staff and Traveling through Time

In This Chapter

- ▶ Finding the beat
- ▶ Playing quarter notes, half notes, and whole notes
- ▶ Getting to know time signatures
- ▶ Access the audio tracks and video clips at www.dummies.com/go/guitarrhythmtechnique

In this chapter, you take your first baby steps toward reading and playing rhythms. You get to know the music staff and some of its basic components. You begin playing quarter notes, half notes, whole notes, dots, and ties, and work with time signatures and metronomes. All this information is elementary-level stuff and, honestly, not very exciting, but you need to know it in order to play the much cooler strum patterns and rhythmic ideas in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

Keeping Your Finger on the Pulse

Before you even take a look at rhythms on a staff, you get to know how time works in music. Every song is guided by a steady pulse. The pulse itself is not always present in the music — that is, it's not normally assigned to an instrument to play — but everything in the music follows it and it holds everything together. Musicians are seen internalizing this pulse by tapping their feet, nodding their heads, or rocking and swaying their bodies.

Players are introduced to the pulse during a *count-in* or *count-off*, when a band leader calls out numbers prior to the start of a song. This counting serves three purposes:

- ✓ It establishes the *tempo* of a song (how fast or slow the music moves along).
- ✓ It indicates the *time signature* (how the music is segmented and counted).
- ✓ It cues the players to all start together (preventing train wrecks).

When a pulse is established, the band members keep it silently in their heads and use it as a guide while playing their parts.

Although pulses are usually internalized, musicians often use mechanical and electronic devices to keep a steady pulse for their reference. A *metronome* is any device that produces a regular, metrical sound. The sound is a tick, click, beep, or any other, usually percussive, sound that is clearly audible during performance and distinguishable from the instrumentation. Whatever sound is used, musicians commonly refer to it as the *click*.



When a click track is in use during a live performance or recording session, it's piped to musicians via headphones so that it isn't heard by the listeners and doesn't interfere with the actual music. In this day and age, aside from keeping the time steady, click tracks are often necessary to sync live performances to additional audio, video, lights, lasers, heck, even explosions! Because drummers are the timekeepers of the bands, and other instrumentalists follow their lead, click tracks are often added only to the drummers' headphone mixes.

In the old days, a metronome consisted of an adjustable weight on the end of an inverted pendulum rod. You may have seen one of these pyramid-shaped mechanical devices sitting on top of a piano. The pendulum swings back and forth at a specified rate, while a mechanism inside the metronome produces a clicking sound with each oscillation. Nowadays, metronomes keep time and produce sounds electronically. Stand-alone, electronic metronomes are similar in size and appearance to electronic guitar tuners. Metronomes also come built into keyboards, drum machines, and music-recording software programs. Even some guitar amps, particularly the digital variety, offer a metronome feature. You can download metronome apps and use them on your smartphone or tablet. Prerecorded metronome clicks, called *click tracks*, are available on CD or as MP3 and WAV downloads at various tempos.



You can hear a sample metronome sound in Audio Track 2.

You work with metronome click tracks throughout all of *Guitar Rhythm & Technique For Dummies* — some provided for you in the audio and video examples, and others that you need to generate with your own device. If you don't have a metronome, buy or borrow one now!



When figures in this book don't include tempo markings, that means the tempos aren't important and you can play at any rate that's comfortable for you.

Drawn and Quartered

The pulse I mention in the previous section is commonly thought of and counted in groups of four. This is why a count-in is called out as “One, two, three, four.” In music, each pulse is called a *beat* and each group of four is called a *measure* or a *bar*. Each of the four beats in a measure takes up one-quarter of it, just as four quarters make a dollar. In written music, these *quarter notes* (formally referred to as *crotchets*) are symbolized with a filled-in oval note head and a straight, flagless stem. Figure 2-1 shows an example of four bars of quarter notes.

Figure 2-1:
Quarter notes.



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Click tracks often feature a unique sound on the first of every four clicks. This reminds players that the music is in a 4/4 time signature and helps them keep track of beat one, the first beat of each new measure.

In the following sections, you get to know the components of a music staff, begin to read basic rhythms, and deal with ways in which written music is simplified for guitarists.



If you would like to make your own guitar tablature and notation, get the program GuitarPro (www.guitar-pro.com) or Sibelius (www.sibelius.com).