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Award-winning guitarist, author

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Guitar For Dummies®, 4th Edition

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Introduction

So you wanna play guitar, huh? And why wouldn't you?

You may as well face it: In the music world, guitars set the standard for *cool* (and we're not *just* being biased here). Since the 1950s, many of the greatest stars in rock 'n' roll, blues, and country have played the guitar. Think of Chuck Berry doing his one-legged hop (the "duck walk") across the stage while belting out "Johnny B. Goode"; Jimi Hendrix wailing on his upside-down, right-handed (and sometimes flaming) Stratocaster; Bonnie Raitt slinkily playing her slide guitar; Garth Brooks with his acoustic guitar and Western shirts; B.B. King's authoritative bending and expressive vibrato on his guitar "Lucille"; or Jim Hall's mellow jazz guitar stylings. (Even Elvis Presley, whose guitar prowess may not have exceeded five chords, still used the guitar effectively onstage as a prop.) The list goes on.

Playing electric guitar can put you out in front of a band, where you're free to roam, sing, and connect with your adoring fans. Playing acoustic guitar can make you the star of the vacation campfire sing-along. And playing any kind of guitar can bring out the music in your soul and become a cherished lifetime hobby.

About This Book

Guitar For Dummies, 4th Edition, delivers everything the beginning to intermediate guitarist needs: From buying a guitar to tuning the guitar to playing the guitar to caring for the guitar — this book has it all!

Believe it or not, many would-be guitarists never really get into playing because they have the wrong guitar. Or maybe the strings are too difficult to press down (causing a great deal of pain). *Guitar For Dummies*, 4th Edition, unlike *some* other books we could mention, doesn't assume that you already have the right guitar — or even any guitar at all, for that matter. In this book, you find everything you need to know (from a buyer's guide to buying strategies, to guitars and accessories for particular styles) to match yourself with the guitar and equipment that fit your needs and budget.

Most guitar books want you to practice the guitar in the same way that you practice the piano. First, you learn where the notes fall on the staff; then you learn about the length of time that you're supposed to hold the notes; then you move on to practicing scales; and the big payoff is to practice song after unrecognizable song that you probably don't care about playing anyway. If you're looking for this kind of ho-hum guitar book, you've definitely come to the wrong place. But don't worry, you'll find no shortage of that kind of book.

The truth is that many great guitarists don't know how to read music, and many who *can* read music learned to do so after they learned to play the guitar. Repeat after us: *You don't need to read music to play the guitar.* Chant this mantra until you believe it, because this principle is central to the design of *Guitar For Dummies*, 4th Edition.

One of the coolest things about the guitar is that, even though you can devote your lifetime to perfecting your skills, you can start faking it rather quickly. We assume that, instead of concentrating on what the 3/4 time signature means, you want to play music — real music (or at least recognizable music). We want you to play music, too, because that's what keeps you motivated and practicing.

So how does *Guitar For Dummies*, 4th Edition, deliver? Glad you asked. The following list tells you how this book starts you playing and developing real guitar skills quickly:

- » **Look at the photos.** Fingerings you need to know appear in photos in the book. Just form your hands the way we show you in the photos. Simple.
- » **Read guitar tablature.** Guitar *tablature* is a guitar-specific shorthand for reading music that actually shows you what strings to strike and what frets to hold down on the guitar to create the sound that's called for. *Tab* (as it's known to its friends and admirers) goes a long way toward enabling you to *play* music without *reading* music. Don't try this stuff on the piano!
- » **View videos and listen to audio tracks.** More than 80 short videos enable you to see how key selected techniques are executed. You can also listen to all the songs and exercises in the book performed on nearly 100 audio tracks. Doing so is important for a couple of reasons: You can figure out the rhythm of the song as well as how long to hold notes by listening instead of reading. We could tell you all sorts of really cool things about the audio tracks, such as how they have the featured guitar on one channel and the accompaniment on the other (so you can switch back and forth by using the balance control on your stereo), but, aw shucks, we don't want to brag on ourselves too much.
- » **Look at the music staff as you improve.** To those who would charge that *Guitar For Dummies*, 4th Edition, rejects the idea of reading music, we respond: "Not so, Fret Breath!" The music for all the exercises and songs appears above

the tab. So you get the best of both worlds: You can associate the music notation with the sound you're making after you already know how to make the sound. Pretty cool, huh?

A serious guitar is a serious investment, and, as with any other serious investment, you need to maintain it. *Guitar For Dummies*, 4th Edition, provides the information you need to correctly store, maintain, and care for your six-string, including how to change strings and what little extras to keep stashed away in your guitar case.

Foolish Assumptions

We really don't make many assumptions about you. We don't assume that you already own a guitar. We don't assume that you have a particular preference for acoustic or electric guitars or that you favor a particular style. Gee, this is a pretty equal-opportunity book!

Okay, we do assume some things. We assume that you want to play a *guitar*, not a banjo, Dobro, or mandolin, and we concentrate on the six-string variety. We assume you're relatively new to the guitar world. And we assume that you want to start playing the guitar quickly, without a lot of messing around with reading notes, clefs, and time signatures. You can find all that music-reading stuff in the book, but that's not our main focus. Our main focus is helping you make cool, sweet music on your six-string.

Icons Used in This Book

In the margins of this book, you find several helpful little icons that can make your journey a little easier:



TIP

Expert advice that can hasten your journey to guitar excellence.



PLAY THIS

Skip to a real song for some instant guitar gratification. Go to www.dummies.com/go/guitar for videos and audio clips.



REMEMBER

Something to write down on a cocktail napkin and store in your guitar case.



WARNING

Watch out, or you could cause damage to your guitar or someone's ears.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

The whys and wherefores behind what you play. The theoretical and, perhaps at times, obscure stuff that you can skip at the time, if you so desire, but that you may return to at a later time for a deeper understanding of these concepts and techniques.

Beyond the Book

Guitar For Dummies, 4th Edition, provides text, photos, and diagrams to help you get your head around — and your hands on — the guitar. But membership in the *Guitar For Dummies* club also gets you something else of great value: access to the online assets that help you stay connected even when your eyes aren't focused somewhere between the book's covers.

To begin with, we have an electronic version of a Cheat Sheet that gives you quick, at-a-glance guidance to several aspects of the guitar that help your playing. The eCheat Sheet is divided into four sections, dealing with such diverse topics as notation explanations, common chords for various music styles, and recommended tools and accessories to have on hand for your guitar playing sessions. To view this book's Cheat Sheet, simply go to www.dummies.com and search for "Guitar For Dummies Cheat Sheet" in the Search box.

You can find several free pieces of information online at www.dummies.com/extras/guitar.

You also can find online video and audio files at www.dummies.com/go/guitar that demonstrate exactly what the exercises and songs sound like and how they should be played. As a bonus, we include two printable documents (in the form of PDFs): a page of blank chord diagrams that you can fill in with the chord forms of your choice and a page of blank music paper, containing a treble clef staff and a tab staff. We encourage you to print these documents and fill them with song excerpts or exercises that you're focusing on. Be sure to check out Appendix C for a full explanation of and guide to the online files.

Where to Go from Here

Guitar For Dummies, 4th Edition, has been carefully crafted so you can find what you want or need to know about the guitar and no more. Because each chapter is self-contained, you can skip information that you've already mastered and not feel lost. Yet, at the same time, you can also follow along from front to back and practice the guitar in a way that builds step by step on your previous knowledge.

To find the information you need, you can simply look through the table of contents to find the area that you're interested in, or you can look for particular information in the index at the back of the book.

If you're a beginner and are ready to start playing right away, you can skip Chapter 1 and go straight to Chapter 2, where you get your guitar in tune. Then browse through Chapter 3 on developing the skills you need to play and dive straight in to Chapter 4. Although you can skip around somewhat in the playing chapters, if you're a beginner, we urge you to take the chapters in order, one at a time. Moreover, you should stick to Chapter 4 until you start to form calluses on your fingers, which really help you to make the chords sound right without buzzing.

If you don't yet have a guitar, you should start in Part 5, the shopper's guide, and look for what you need in a basic practice guitar. After you buy your ax, you can get on with playing, which is the real fun after all, right?

Above all, remember that a hallmark of any *For Dummies* book is that it's nonlinear. You can start reading from the beginning of any chapter in any Part of the book, and the text will make sense to you. We encourage you to skip around among the introduction chapters, the instruction chapters, the style chapters, and the shopping and maintenance chapters. And don't forget to top off a reading session with a Part of Tens chapter or two. Those chapters give you plenty of info to impress even the most jaded guest at a cocktail party. And if you do decide to read the book straight through, in a linear fashion, even though you don't have to, well, we think that's just fine, too.

1

Getting Started with Guitar

IN THIS PART . . .

Know how to identify the different parts of acoustic and electric guitars and what makes them unique.

Understand how the guitar works to appreciate how it can produce sweet sounds.

Discover how to tune your guitar so you can make in-tune music and prevent the local dogs from howling.

Grasp how to position your body and hands correctly before you play.

Comprehend how to read guitar notation to increase the ways you can absorb guitar music.

Play a chord step-by-step to get your fingers in place for making real music.

Identifying the different parts of the guitar

Understanding how the guitar works

Access the audio tracks and video clips at <http://www.dummies.com/go/guitar>

Chapter 1

Guitar Basics: The Parts of a Guitar and How It Makes Music

All guitars — whether painted purple with airbrushed skulls and lightning bolts or finished in a natural-wood pattern with a fine French lacquer — share certain physical characteristics that make them behave like guitars and not violins or tubas. If you're confused about the difference between a headstock and a pickup or you're wondering which end of the guitar to hold under your chin, this chapter is for you.

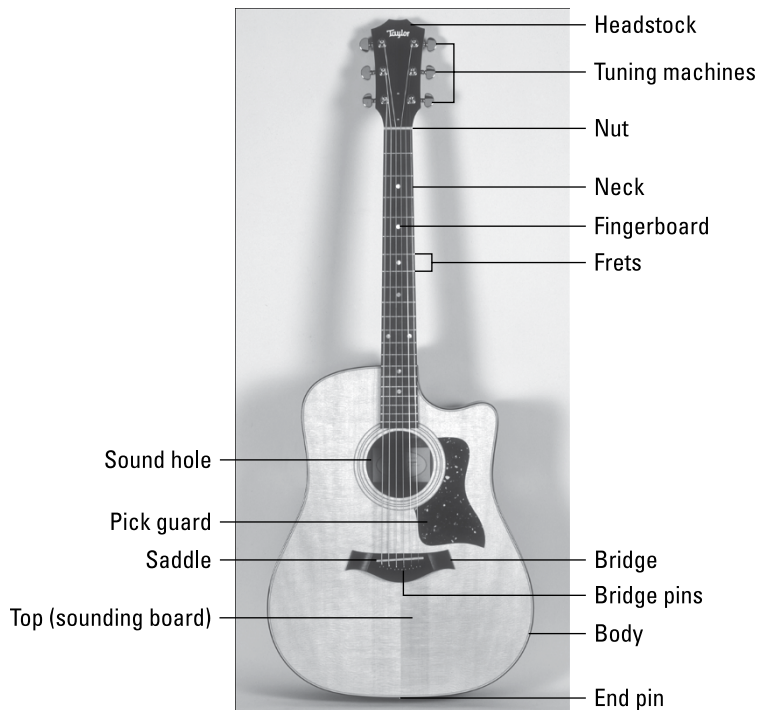
We describe the differences among the various parts of the guitar and tell you what those parts do. We also tell you how to hold the instrument and *why* the guitar sounds the way it does. And, in case you took us seriously, you *don't* hold the guitar under your chin — unless, of course, you're Jimi Hendrix.

The Parts and Workings of a Guitar



REMEMBER

Guitars come in two basic flavors: *acoustic* and *electric*. From a hardware standpoint, electric guitars have more components and doohickeys than acoustic guitars. Guitar makers generally agree, however, that making an acoustic guitar is harder than making an electric guitar. That's why, pound for pound, acoustic guitars cost just as much or more than their electric counterparts. (When you're ready to go guitar or guitar accessory shopping, you can check out Chapter 16 or 17, respectively.) But both types follow the same basic approach to such principles as neck construction and string tension. That's why both acoustic and electric guitars have similar shapes and features, despite a sometimes radical difference in tone production (unless, of course, you think that Segovia and Metallica are indistinguishable). Figures 1-1 and 1-2 show the various parts of acoustic and electric guitars.



Photograph courtesy of Taylor Guitars

FIGURE 1-1: Typical acoustic guitar with its major parts labeled.



REMEMBER

The following list tells you the functions of the various parts of a guitar:

- » **Back (acoustic only):** The part of the body that holds the sides in place; made of two or three pieces of wood.

- » **Bar (electric only):** On some models, a metal rod attached to the bridge that varies the string tension by tilting the bridge back and forth. Also called the tremolo bar, whammy bar, vibrato bar, and wang bar.
- » **Body:** The box that provides an anchor for the neck and bridge and creates the playing surface for the right hand. On an acoustic, the body includes the amplifying sound chamber that produces the guitar's tone. On an electric, it consists of the housing for the bridge assembly and electronics (pickups as well as volume and tone controls).
- » **Bridge:** The metal (electric) or wooden (acoustic) plate that anchors the strings to the body.
- » **Bridge pins (acoustic only):** Plastic or wooden dowels that insert through bridge holes and hold the strings securely to the bridge.
- » **End pin:** A post where the rear end of the strap connects. On *acoustic-electrics* (acoustic guitars with built-in pickups and electronics), the pin often doubles as the *output jack* where you plug in.
- » **Fingerboard:** A flat, planklike piece of wood that sits atop the neck, where you place your left-hand fingers to produce notes and chords. The fingerboard is also known as the *fretboard*, because the frets are embedded in it.

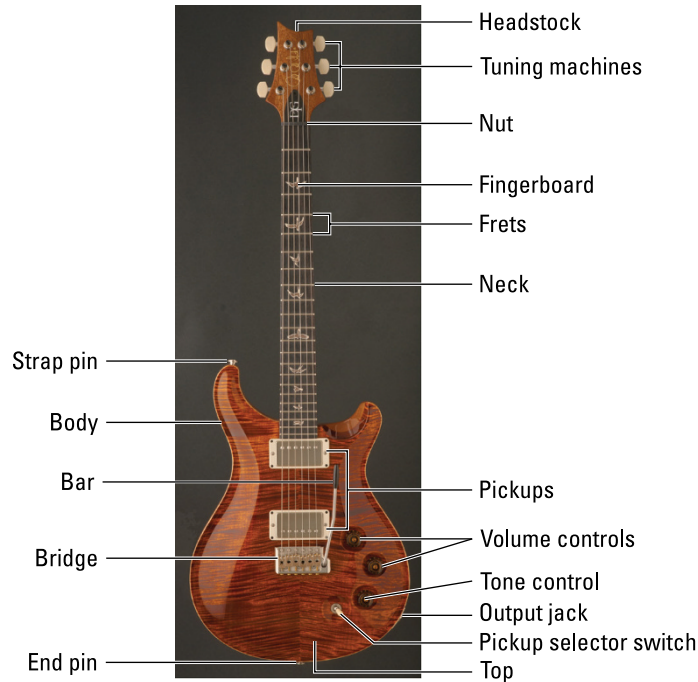


FIGURE 1-2: Typical electric guitar with its major parts labeled.

Photograph courtesy of PRS Guitars

- » **Frets:** (1) Thin metal wires or bars running perpendicular to the strings that shorten the effective vibrating length of a string, enabling it to produce different pitches. (2) A verb describing worry, as in “He frets about how many little parts are on his guitar.”
- » **Headstock:** The section that holds the tuning machines (hardware assembly) and provides a place for the manufacturer to display its logo. Not to be confused with “Woodstock,” the section of New York that provided a place for the ‘60s generation to display its music.
- » **Neck:** The long, clublike wooden piece that connects the headstock to the body.
- » **Nut:** A grooved sliver of stiff nylon or other synthetic substance that stops the strings from vibrating beyond the neck. The strings pass through the grooves on their way to the tuning machines in the headstock. The nut is one of the two points at which the vibrating area of the string ends. (The other is the bridge.)
- » **Output jack (electric only):** The insertion point for the cord that connects the guitar to an amplifier or other electronic device.
- » **Pickup selector (electric only):** A switch that determines which pickups are currently active.
- » **Pickups (electric only):** Barlike magnets that create the electrical current, which the amplifier converts into musical sound.
- » **Saddle:** For acoustic, a thin plastic strip that sits inside a slot in the bridge; for electric, separate metal pieces that provide the contact point for the strings and the bridge.
- » **Sides (acoustic only):** Separate curved wooden pieces on the body that join the top to the back.
- » **Strap pin:** Metal post where the front, or top, end of the strap connects. (**Note:** Not all acoustics have a strap pin. If the guitar is missing one, tie the top of the strap around the headstock.)
- » **Strings:** The six metal (for electric and steel-string acoustic guitars) or nylon (for classical guitars) wires that, drawn taut, produce the notes of the guitar. Although not strictly part of the actual guitar (you attach and remove them at will on top of the guitar), strings are an integral part of the whole system, and a guitar’s entire design and structure revolves around making the strings ring out with a joyful noise. (See Chapter 18 for info on changing strings.)
- » **Top:** The face of the guitar. On an acoustic, this piece is also the *sounding board*, which produces almost all the guitar’s acoustic qualities. On an electric, the top is merely a cosmetic or decorative cap that overlays the rest of the body material.
- » **Tuning machines:** Geared mechanisms that raise and lower the tension of the strings, drawing them to different pitches. The string wraps tightly around a post that sticks out through the top, or face, of the headstock. The post

passes through to the back of the headstock, where gears connect it to a tuning key. Also known as tuners, tuning pegs, tuning keys, and tuning gears.

» **Volume and tone controls (electric only):** Knobs that vary the loudness of the guitar's sound and its bass and treble frequencies.

How Guitars Make Sound

After you can recognize the basic parts of the guitar (see the preceding section for help), you may also want to understand how those parts work together to make sound (in case you happen to choose the *Parts of a Guitar* category in *Jeopardy!* or get into a heavy argument with another guitarist about string vibration and string length). We present this information in the following sections just so you know why your guitar sounds the way it does, instead of like a kazoo or an accordion. The important thing to remember is that a guitar makes the sound, but you make the music.

Strings doing their thing

Any instrument must have some part of it moving in a regular, repeated motion to produce musical sound (a sustained tone, or pitch). In a guitar, this part is the vibrating string. A string that you bring to a certain tension and then set in motion (by a plucking action) produces a predictable sound — for example, the note A. If you tune a string of your guitar to different tensions, you get different tones. The greater the tension of a string, the higher the pitch.



REMEMBER

You couldn't do very much with a guitar, however, if the only way to change pitches was to frantically adjust the tension on the strings every time you pluck a string. So guitarists resort to the other way to change a string's pitch — by shortening its effective vibrating length. They do so by fretting — pacing back and forth and mumbling to themselves. (Just kidding; guitarists never do *that* kind of fretting unless they haven't held their guitars for a couple of days.) In guitar-speak, *fretting* refers to pushing the string against the fretboard so the string vibrates only between the fingered fret (metal wire) and the bridge. This way, by moving the left hand up and down the neck (toward the bridge and the nut, respectively), you can change pitches comfortably and easily.



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The fact that smaller instruments, such as mandolins and violins, are higher in pitch than are cellos and basses (and guitars, for that matter) is no accident. Their pitch is higher because their strings are shorter. The string tension of all these instruments may be closely related, making them feel somewhat consistent in response to the hands and fingers, but the drastic difference in string lengths is

what results in the wide differences of pitch among them. This principle holds true in animals, too. A Chihuahua has a higher-pitched bark than a St. Bernard because its strings — er, vocal cords — are much shorter.

Using left and right hands together

The guitar normally requires two hands working together to create music. If you want to play, say, middle C on the piano, all you do is take your index finger, position it above the appropriate white key under the piano's logo, and drop it down: *donnnng*. A preschooler can sound just like Elton John if playing only middle C, because just one finger of one hand, pressing one key, makes the sound.

The guitar is somewhat different. To play middle C on the guitar, you must take your left-hand index finger and fret the 2nd string (that is, press it down to the fingerboard) at the 1st fret. This action, however, doesn't itself produce a sound. You must then strike or pluck that 2nd string with your right hand to actually produce the note middle C audibly. *Music readers take note:* The guitar sounds an octave lower than its written notes. For example, playing a written, third-space C on the guitar actually produces a middle C.

Notes on the neck: Half steps and frets

The smallest *interval* (unit of musical distance in pitch) of the musical scale is the *half step*. On the piano, the alternating white and black keys represent this interval (as do the places where you find two adjacent white keys with no black key in between). To proceed by half steps on a keyboard instrument, you move your finger up or down to the next available key, white or black. On the guitar, *frets* — the horizontal metal wires (or bars) that you see embedded in the fretboard, running perpendicular to the strings — represent these half steps. To go up or down by half steps on a guitar means to move your left hand one fret at a time, higher or lower on the neck.

Comparing how acoustics and electrics generate sound

Vibrating strings produce the different tones on a guitar. But you must be able to *hear* those tones, or you face one of those if-a-tree-falls-in-a-forest questions. For an acoustic guitar, that's no problem, because an acoustic instrument provides its own amplifier in the form of the hollow sound chamber that boosts its sound . . . well, acoustically.