



# GUITAR

## Grabbed by the Guitar A Journey from Curiosity to Joy

by Theo Rightmire

To me the guitar has always been a mystical instrument, one with the ability to woo friends and family. And yet, despite my curiosity about the guitar, I was not one of those magical people. I played the piano, a great instrument without doubt and with incredible scope, yet distinctly known for its lack of mobility. Luckily for me, however, the magic key was found one day, leaning in a dusty corner of my parents' basement.

This was it, my big chance to become one of "those" people. The magic didn't come as quickly as I had hoped. After several disastrous attempts to string my new prize (one should never break more strings than the six the instrument requires) and an even more horrific attempt at tuning I admitted my defeat and decided to regroup.

In reviewing my resources, I found that my father's method book from the late sixties was not going to cut it, and far more than that my complete ignorance was certainly inhibiting me, though it wasn't from lack of trying. Playing competitive and casual piano for ten years, however, had (and has) given me a sense of what to do. I spent those ten years in private lessons, competing in both annual National Federation of Music Festivals (earning nine consecutive superior ratings) and American College of Musicians Guild Piano Auditions. Along with these there were the various personal and group recitals that all my instructors have required.

After those ten years I found that the piano was not holding my interest and I had let it slip. Though in picking up the guitar, despite my ignorance, the basics of music had indeed stuck with me and so I had no fear diving in. After finally getting strings to stay wound and getting the poor thing reasonably tuned, I began to pluck away. After a summer spent in vain, I decided to enroll for lessons as an elective in the

coming semester.

The transition from piano to guitar has been an interesting one. As I said, the basics of music stuck. Musical theory crosses over all instruments, and despite its importance, the theory was the least of my worries. I could sight-read, count, recognize symbols and terms, knew chords, etc. The difficulty came in the physical aspects of the guitar. Coordination between the two hands was at first incredibly difficult. As my father says, the piano, despite its range and versatility, is relatively simple (though not at all easy) to play. One pushes a specific key to get a specific note. When faced with only six strings and endless variations therein, it was a safe assumption that I was frustrated and lost.

The process of switching to the guitar was laborious at first. As with any instrument, training the fingers to work with the mind, even in the most basic patterns, is trying. Thankfully I had a piano instructor who was a stickler for proper hand form and placement (thanks, Mrs. Vitale!). My fingers were used to stretching and were dexterous, as well as strong, and I was able to adapt wrist structure and finger positions easily enough. Additionally, the strength helped a great deal when learning chords, holding down strings at odd-feeling angles. Reading music was not difficult once I got used to the single staff, and being able to simply pick up and practice was a definite plus.

The teaching and practice methods were the same as well. Focus was set largely on sight-reading, finger speed, and accuracy, with attention paid to continued theory and especially form. However personal practice took on a much different form. My last year of piano was in my senior year of high school. The difference between lessons in high school and lessons as an elective during college is immense. Beyond the fact that as

an elective I was graded for lessons, there was a full load of classes, extracurricular activities, work, and having a social life. Time for lessons, even thirty minutes, and time for practice was tight at best. Practice came in spare moments between classes, or risking the wrath of my R.A. late at night in the dorms. There were times when practicing won out over lunch or (tsk tsk) even homework (don't worry, I'm still a good student). Oftentimes I'd carry my guitar with me all morning, going from class to lesson to class. Really though, these are small sacrifices.

Personally, the guitar has many advantages over the piano. The portability is possibly first in my mind, and the popularity is something I won't bother to deny. But I find that much of the music I enjoy (classical as well as popular) is music that I can learn, even with my limited ability, and play well. I can finally pull out my guitar and grab those fifteen minutes instead of being in the back of the crowd. Is this a bit selfish and self-centered? Absolutely. But it is also an incredible amount of fun.

Despite all the challenges of transitioning from piano, I've adapted to the guitar's differences and now find that I'm more comfortable at the guitar after only a year. And even despite the hectic schedule of a college student I have come a long way. So far in fact that I'm taking longer lessons coming in the fall, and my time begins to flow around practice and lessons, rather than having to "fit them in" whenever I can. Guitar has grabbed hold of me, and it is a joy to play, practice, and learn.

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