

All-State: Teaching Classroom Guitar

presented by Jason Vanselow — reported by Brenda Radloff

This session was focused on teaching classroom guitar. Jason Vanselow started by talking about some of the challenges that you could be faced with. Some students have tried guitar, and have developed some bad habits—this can be hard for the student. Another challenge is when the student has been taking private lessons, and knows much more about the guitar than you do! His advice here is to harness their ability. Those “expert” students can help others, give demonstrations, etc.

The next topic covered was how to present the guitar. There are the two obvious choices—electric and acoustic. If you choose acoustic, then you need to decide if you want to use nylon or steel strings. This can be tough, because sometimes your school will already have some acoustic guitars, but might have some of both kinds. The question was asked—how do you tell them apart if the strings are missing? On a nylon string guitar, the neck is wider. On a steel string guitar, there is a pick guard by the opening in the middle. You won't see that on a nylon guitar, because you pluck the nylon strings with your fingers. It is important that you don't mix nylon and steel strings on a guitar, because the tension is different and you will damage the instrument. I would think that it would also be a good idea to make sure that you have all of your guitars the same—either all of them with steel, or all of them with nylon. Jason recommends using nylon for beginners, because it is easier to play.

When using a pick, you will want to hold the pick between the thumb and first finger. He had us practice picking down (towards the floor) and up (toward the ceiling). We just did down, up, down, up, etc. I would think that as you get more advanced, you would do other pick strokes like down, up, up / down, up, up, etc.

If you are not using a pick, it is impor-

tant to know your string order for your fingers. The high E is called the first string. This was very confusing to me. Jason had us practice the free stroke. For this, you pull the string with your index finger. You finger will land on the next string. You then pluck the next note with your middle finger. He had us practice going between those two fingers. He told us to shape our hand as if we were holding a tennis ball.

When you sit while playing, there are two ways to do this. One way is to put the guitar on your right leg. The other way requires you to put your left foot on a little stool, or the Minneapolis phone book. Then you put the guitar on the left leg. I am not sure how you decide which way is better. The guitar should always be at 45-degree angle.



The left hand has a few rules. The thumb should be flat on the back of the neck. If you have steel strings, it is okay to let the thumb come around. When placing the fingers on the fingerboard, the thumb should land in between these two fingers. Put the first finger on the first fret, second finger on the second fret, and so on. He had us play 4 notes on each fret on the first string. He had us alternate between first and second finger on the right hand. Then he had us shift, and do it again.

Jason encouraged us to talk a lot about whole steps and half steps. He makes his students write the notes out, rather than give them a handout. He draws a diagram on the board, and has the students draw it too. I wrote it in my notes. Not sure how to draw it on this document, so I will explain. Draw six lines horizontally. Make three columns vertically. Now you have a picture of three frets. Mark the horizontal lines on the left. Start on the bottom—call this E6, then A5, D4, G3, B2, E1. This shows the name of the string, as well as the number. Then, start with the bottom left line, call

this F. Next is F#, then G. Go up a line (so you are on A5). The first letter you write is Bb, then B, then C. The next line (D4) is Eb, E, F. Continue the entire map. The only thing that had me confused is why he only draws the first three frets. If you put the 4th fret, that would show one more half step. For instance, on the 6th string (low E) first finger is F, second finger is F#, third finger is G. The map does not show fourth finger, which would be G#. I think you could add this in, so that it makes more sense to the students.

E1	F	F#	G
B2	C	C#	D
G3	G#	A	Bb
D4	Eb	E	F
A5	Bb	B	C
E6	F	F#	G

After they have learned note names, and which string is which, he has the students learn scales. He always has them say the note names. Later in the semester he has them shift. He said a good thing to quiz them on is intervals and note names.

Since Led Zepplin and Deep Purple like to use the A Pentatonic scale, he likes to use this scale first. For this scale, you start on the fifth fret. The notes are: 1-4, 1-3, 1-3, 1-3, 1-4. The pattern is the same, no matter where you are on the guitar.

Jason briefly talked about using the twelve bar blues, but he didn't really give any suggestions on how to teach this.

When looking at which chords to start with, he recommends starting with E minor and A7 first. The reason for this is because they use the same two fingers, thus making it easy to go between the two. He showed us a diagram. The strings with an X mean that you don't strum that string.

This session was great. Hopefully, I will never be required to teach classroom guitar. If I ever do get called on to do this, I will certainly refer back to my notes so that I can be successful.

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