



GUITAR

Building Muscle with Barre Chords

by Jason Vanselow

One of the hardest concepts for the beginning guitarist is barre chords. They can be physically difficult and while any chord can be played as a barre chord, some chords can only be played as a barre chord. In this column, I'd like to talk a little about these chords and how to get a handle on them.

The basic shapes that make up barre chords derive from the basic open chord shapes. In fact, there's an entire system called the CAGED system that deals with the relationships between basic open chords and the barre chords that can be created from them. Here, I'm going to focus on the E and the A of CAGED, but after this brief introduction the concept should make sense.

There are two parts to a barre chord, the barre itself and the shapes that the other fingers make. Let's look at the barre first. All that a barre is, is a fretboard hand finger holding down more than one string at a time. Most of the time, and especially with the chords that we will be looking at, the first finger will be performing the barre.

The hard part about the barre is that it takes some energy and some strength to press the strings down hard enough to make the strings sound. Part of the work is done by gravity pulling down on your fretboard arm, but a significant part must be done by the thumb. This means for the beginner, barres are going to ache a little while the hand builds up the muscle to perform the barre consistently and for long periods of time.

One way to exercise this is to simply play barres by themselves. This can be developed into a good classroom activity that can practice not only the barre but fretboard geography as well. For example, have your students lay their first finger across all of the strings on the first fret. Make sure that, like any note you play with the fretboard hand, the barre finger is as close to the fret as you can be without actually touching the fret. This will get the best tone from the guitar.

Also, make sure that the "thumb print" part of the fretboard hand thumb is parallel to the frets and between the first and second fingers.

After students have strummed it and heard what it sounds and feels like, have them move it to a different fret. You can have them identify the fret they are moving to either by the fret number or the name of the note on the sixth string that they are moving to.

When they are moving the barre make sure that the finger slides across the frets always touching the strings. It's okay to get fretboard noise for this exercise. Keeping their finger on the strings will help the student to keep their fingers as close to the strings as possible while they change chords rather than having their fingers spring up into the air above the fretboard and then need to get repositioned for the next chord. The other thing is to make sure that students only use the first finger rather than having the first finger on the strings and the second and even the third finger piled on top of the first finger for support. Once they start playing the whole chord shape, they won't be able to use those other support fingers.

For some students, after placing the barre, getting their fingers to make the rest of the chord shape is next to impossible so in addition to working on the barre, I'll also work the chord shape without focusing on the barre. What I will do is have students play an E major chord (Fig 1a) and switch the fingering around from the standard fingering to the fingering required for the barre chord (Fig 1b):

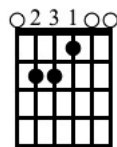


Fig 1a

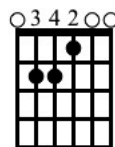


Fig 1b

After that I explain that even without

the open strings, these three notes constitute a major chord. Then I have them move the whole shape one fret higher and play the resulting chord (Fig 1c). It's a very cool sound, but no longer a simple major chord because the open strings no longer match up with the fretted notes. But once we place a barre on the first fret with first finger (Fig 1d), we have effectively recreated the open strings by using the barre.

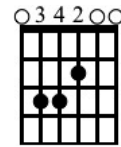


Fig 1c

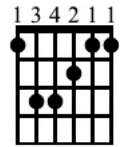


Fig 1d

In this context, the barre itself is not important, only the note that is played on the sixth string. The first and second strings at the beginning will most likely not make much sound at all but the other strings will make up for this and the student will have a slightly muddy sounding but useable E shape barre chord.

At this point you can practice moving the chord around to different frets. Again, make sure that when the student is moving the shape—they keep the shape with their fingers more or less in the chord shape and don't lift up their fingers. Like in the exercise with the barre alone, this can be an opportunity to get to know the notes on the sixth string better. It also helps in getting to understand that in this shape, the sixth string note in the shape is the root of the chord and will tell you what chord that you're playing.

You can do this same exercise using an A shape chord. I usually use an A minor chord because the barre chord version is easier to make than the A major shape and the minor shape is the same as the E major shape that they've already done.

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