

LESSON 6

CHANGING STRINGS & THE EFFECTS OF TEMPERATURE AND HUMIDITY

MAINTENANCE

Most of today's guitars come with a hard finish. This gives good protection to the timber from scratches and abrasions. It needs little to keep it clean apart from wiping it down with a damp (not wet) soft cloth and then dry it off.

Try and keep the inside of the guitar free of dust and dirt etc. Avoid having spiders and other insects taking up residence inside also. Any build up inside the guitar will absorb moisture and hold it there. This will lead to a gradual breakdown of the timber and a shortening of the guitars life. The inside of a guitar is not finished with a sealer of any type (better for the guitar to make sweet sounds.) This means the timber inside the guitar can and will absorb moisture.

When strings are being changed is the best time to clean the hard to get to places.

Wipe dust from in front of the bridge (underneath the strings).

Wipe dust from around the head and machine heads. If your guitar has exposed gears on the machine heads then one drop of very light oil (sewing machine oil is best) on each head is good to prevent the gears from wearing. Some closed gear machine heads can have the cover removed and if so you can oil them. If the covers cannot be removed then they are a sealed unit with lubrication inside so you needn't bother.

If you play guitar with dirty hands you will notice a build up of grime on the fretboard (fingerboard) mainly around the frets. This should be removed.

A cloth dampened with mineral turpentine, or if you don't have any turps then warm soapy water will do to rub the grime away. Most fretboards do not have a finish on them as it would soon be worn away from constant playing. There is a lot of debate about whether or not to rub anything into a fretboard. The best thing to do is to keep an eye on it and if it starts to dry out then you can rub in a quality furniture polish, something which is oil based. Do not use a spray can of polish which is mainly for cleaning and therefore solvent based. If you do rub in a polish make sure all the excess is removed so the fretboard is left dry. Any remaining polish will end up on the new strings you have just put on and this will help them lose their tone quickly.

Finally wipe the strings down after playing as this removes any grime which will settle in the windings of the strings. Wiping the strings will also help remove any salts left from perspiration that will lead to the strings oxidising (rusting).

Keeping a guitar clean is mainly commonsense. Do it and your guitar will give good service and enjoyment for many years.

STRINGS

Most of this is straight forward so there will be only a few things to mention.

Change strings as often as you find necessary. This can be every week if you are playing professionally and you want the best sound at all times. Otherwise you can hear when strings start to lose their resonance and clarity. When strings become ancient then they are hard to tune as they develop flat spots along their length and they sound like a tensioned rubber bands. This is definitely the time to change.

Release the tension progressively on each string and release the strings at each end.

To fit the strings on an acoustic guitar secure the ball end with the bridge pins, there's no need to press them in too hard particularly if they are plastic pins as they tend to bind in the timber saddle. A bit of candle wax or even soap rubbed onto the pins will reduce the binding. On an electric guitar fit the ball end the same ways the string was removed.

Take a number of turns around the machine head especially with plain strings as this will reduce any slipping. On a 6 string guitar the top 2 strings should be wound around about 6-8 times and the number of turns get progressively less as the strings thicken. Bass guitars need only a few turns. Strings are always wound from the inside of the machine head post and then outward. Or if it is a guitar with the machine heads in a line then start from the underside and wind around. Try to keep tension on the strings as you wind as this will result in less slipping and look neater.

Always cut off the excess string length, leave about 1-1.5 centimetres. It's not cool to leave the ends hanging as they make a very effective eye gouger.

Keep strings clean and they will last longer.

Which brand and gauge of string you use is up to you and depends on your style of playing and what your ear tells you sounds good.

TEMPERATURE AND HUMIDITY CHANGES

The temperature and humidity levels around your guitar can affect your guitar more than you may realise. This applies more to acoustic instruments than electric. You may have noticed how a guitar will go out of pitch when the weather changes from hot to cold or dry to damp. Do not expose your guitar to hot temperatures or direct sunlight. It is easy to forget about a guitar that is locked inside a car that is in the sun, this in particular can cause severe damage to an instrument. Taking a guitar from a hot environment to a cold one can also cause damage.

A guitar being made of wood reacts to the temperature and humidity around it, that is to say that it will expand and contract. So if it goes from a cold environment such as an air conditioned room to a hot humid day outside this will cause the instrument to expand or contract quickly. This can cause the timber to crack and the glues to weaken. A gradual change of environment is alright. Just avoid extremes of hot, cold and sudden changes.