

Practice Techniques

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Article by Cathy Fink © 2002

Practice- Webster's Online Dictionary Definition

a : to perform or work at repeatedly so as to become proficient

<*practice* the act> **b** : to train by repeated exercises

Practice is a loaded word. To some it is a joyful experience, to others a chore. When it comes to guitar playing, you get what you pay for. Yes, talent helps, but no serious guitar player can avoid practice for improvement.

Many people lack the tools and organization to make practice really work for them. We procrastinate, we postpone, we goof off and we play the tunes we already know over and over again. My partner, Marcy Marxer, and I teach at several of the summer music camps for adults (Steve Kaufman's Guitar Kamp, Swannanoa Guitar Week, Puget Sound Guitar Workshop, etc.). I decided to offer a class in practice techniques at the Swannanoa Guitar Week, thinking that it was a good idea, but not sure if anyone would be interested. It's not a sexy class like Al Pettaway's DADGAD or Robin Bullock's hot licks. I actually thought I might have a free period. I was wrong. The class had a good turnout with people of all levels who are looking for ways to improve not only their playing, but the discipline behind their playing.

So, lets start with the tools for practice.

Tangible tools:

Listening device

Recording device

Half speed device- this might be your tape machine or a computer program, such as THE AMAZING SLOWDOWNER

Decent strings

Metronome

Electronic tuner

Intangible tools:

Good practice space- a place where you enjoy playing, get some peace and quiet and few interruptions from phone, fax, kids, etc.

Good practice time- You pick the time that works for you. Before work?

After work? Lunch break in the office?

Commitment to practice time

I am a firm believer in making commitments in writing. Think about your practice time and possible schedule. Think about how much time each day, every other day, or whenever, that you can commit. Then, write down a possible practice schedule. You can always adjust it in writing as you figure out what really works. The point is, if it's in writing, you are articulating that commitment in a more tangible way. You can always do more, but make a written commitment about your minimum.

Your practice schedule becomes even more useful if you outline your goals each week in practice. Perhaps you are working on a very challenging piece that you are learning a few bars at a time. It is easy and tempting to practice things you play well over and over again. Creating a schedule allows you to enjoy those pieces while pushing yourself to work on new material. Your practice schedule might look like this:

10 minutes- warm up with chord changes to metronome

10 minutes- scales with metronome

20 minutes- 3rd and 4th bars of new tune

10 minutes- try fitting those bars into the whole tune

10 minutes- free play time

Total: 60 minutes

Remember, this is a sample. You can create the schedule and length of schedule you want. It's a good idea to create warm up time, time to work on new music, and timed to enjoy what you already play.

One valuable practice skill is the art of critical listening. That is, critical listening to yourself. Let's not assume the word critical is negative. Think of this as a positive process of listening to your playing on tape, mini disk, etc. and being specific about what you like about it and what needs improvement. Try to isolate the things that need improvement so they can become the focus of your practice. Later, you can re-record those things and listen back and see if they are sounding the way you want them to. Some of the things to

listen for are:

Tone

Intonation

Timing

There is no better way to improve your timing than to practice with a metronome. It's challenging. In the studio, our mantra is "Think of the click as your friend". Like a mirror, the metronome does not tell lies. Recording your playing with a metronome reflects an accurate image of your ability to play in time. Even seasoned players find this challenging, but face it, if your timing is not solid, your music is not solid. I often simply play chord changes and basic fiddle tunes to the metronome as my warm up. Besides practicing timing, it increases my sense of focus on the activity of concentrating on my playing and listening at the same time.

Speed is something guitar players often strive for. If you can't play in time at slow or medium tempos, it's unlikely that you'll play in time at faster tempos. Again, the metronome can help you increase your speed incrementally. Take a piece you are working on, or a scale, or a set of rhythm changes and start at a tempo that feels easy for you. When you are locked into the click and you are comfortable, bump the click up a number or two and see how you do. Over the course of days, or weeks, continue that process. When you move up to a tempo that you can't stay solid on, bump back again. When you try this again the next day, start a few numbers slower than your last number the day before, and gradually increase. Over the course of days or weeks, you will improve both your timing and ability to play clean at a faster speed.

Suppose you listen back to your practice tape and you are not getting the sound you are looking for? You might be able to analyze why and work on new techniques. If not, you may want to find a teacher who specializes in the style you are working on and get an outsider's help in creating the sound you want.

It is important to practice manageable sections of music at a time. Several of my students stumbled through 3-4 minute pieces of music, stopping and starting, flowing through the easier parts and stumbling through the harder ones. I advised them not to feel obligated to play the whole piece. Play the piece until you hit a stumbling block. Then, focus on that stumbling block-take the measure or two before it, that section, then a measure afterwards

and create a drill for yourself where you are simply drilling that isolated section. Repeat, repeat, repeat, until it starts coming easily. Eventually, you should work towards fitting it into the whole piece of music without stumbling.

You are going to have an easier time learning a new piece if you have listened to that piece enough times to know it. If you read music, this is less important. I play completely by ear and rarely sit down to learn a song or tune without having committed it to memory. I listen to it over and over again until I can sing it-whether it is an instrumental or vocal piece. Then, when I begin working on the guitar arrangement, I have already learned the tune. My fingers know what they are looking for and I can hear if I have found the right guitar notes/chords by singing the tune and hearing if I am on the right track.

Many beginners are in a hurry,.They want to play the fast, flashy tune ASAP. Teaching banjo, I have suffered through many a student who wanted to play Foggy Mountain Breakdown fast, before they had the left and right hand chops to pull it off. Take your time. It ain't music if the tuning, timing and technique aren't there. At guitar camps, I often lead slow jams, giving new students a chance to practice in a group, take a few chances without being heard, and get in the groove of playing with other folks. You might even be able to start your own slow jam. Talk with a local friendly music store that has a teacher you like. Perhaps you and a bunch of friends can offer to pay that teacher to lead a slow jam. You pick the songs. They lead the jam at a slow tempo, call out the chords and help keep the fun going. Some of these slow jams happen in restaurants or bars, with a nice back room, make it both a social event and a fun practice event.

Let's face it. No one can make you practice. It's up to you. But if you can make the commitment and organize your time, you may find that progress comes more easily, leading to more enjoyment playing the guitar.

Other resources:My students recommenced these books

Zen Guitar by Philip Toshio Sudo, published by Fireside

Beginning Guitarists Handbook- Jeffrey Pepper Rogers, published by Stringletter

[http://www.cathymarcy.com/NewsArchives Techniques.html](http://www.cathymarcy.com/NewsArchives_Techniques.html)

Cathy Fink is a 40 year veteran of the folk scene. She has produced over 50 recordings and with her partner, Marcy Marxer, has earned five GRAMMY nominations. Her most recent CD is “Dancin’ in the Kitchen”, on the Community Music, Inc. label. www.cathymarcy.com