

Choosing Your First Guitar:

A Guide To Painless Purchasing

by James Martin

Okay, so you've decided to take the plunge and pick up the instrument that has entranced three generations. You've peeked at your bank balance, listen to the words of wisdom your mates have plied you with, probably checked out a few likely models on the Internet. But there's still the moment of truth when you enter your local instrument shop on a crowded Saturday afternoon, feeling your inexperience hanging heavy about you like an albatross round your neck, and try to figure out which of the shiny, enticing curvaceous beauties adorning the instrument racks is worthy of your hard earned moolah....

Right, well, first off, as Brian Cohen said "You're all different. You're all individual!". And you are. There's no point me telling you to buy X rather than Y, as every player wants something different from his or her guitar- hence the plethora of models adorning the racks. But there are definitely a few guidelines which can help you to find the instrument you will gain most pleasure from..

1) How Much Should I Spend?

The numbers will vary depending on whether you fancy acoustic or electric, but the rule remains the same – BUY THE BEST INSTRUMENT YOU CAN AFFORD. Buying the cheapest going "to see of he/ she likes it", will ensure that a) he/ she probably won't, because it will feel like playing a log strung with cheesewire, and b) if he/ she does, you'll have to flog that for a pittance and buy something at least semi-decent, thus spending more money medium- or long- term. Buying something decent will ensure a) he/ she is inspired to try and get their money's worth out of the instrument, and will not have the option of attributing a poor sound to a dodgy guitar , and (b) the instrument will hold a decent resale value.

The good news here is that this doesn't entail immense expenditure. Depending on whether you go acoustic or electric, you're looking no more than £100- £250 realistically.

Let's delve further.

2) Acoustic Or Electric?

Right, well. Boils down to one question- how much noise do you want to make? Or do you want the recipient of the guitar to make?

If you want a quiet life, go electric. If you want to be able to play after the oil runs out, go acoustic.

This does, I admit, sound slightly counter-intuitive (or stupid, if you'd like a less PC term), but think about it- yes, you can turn an electric guitar up to Berlin Wall- shattering volumes, but you can also turn them down. Or indeed, off completely.

Acoustic guitars, however, are LOUD. Lovely sounding things, but loud. This will inevitably limit your practice time, both the amount of time you can spend before your parents/ flatmates (delete as appropriate) will allow before killing

you, and the problem of when. Late night is right out, so bang goes having a whiz on it before bed after you've got back from the pub. Ditto early morning pre-work strumming. Electro-acoustics have the same problem, although at least you're "future-proofed" if you want to take your guitar out to play in a band or at an open mic night.

Acoustic guitars are cheap, though, and you don't need an amp. The problem with an electric guitar is that it's only half the equation, you need an amp to go with it. And don't even think about Dad's Bang & Olufsen speakers, you need a dedicated guitar amp. These start from about £40, but you get what you pay for and these things don't sound great. Expect to pay around £80 for a good one – Marshall, Fender, Peavey, Laney, Carlsbro, Line 6 and VOX all make good examples. However, if you're going to skimp on anything, skimp on the amp- even the best practice amp will need upgrading before you go out and wow the punters down the Dog & Duck, but a good guitar will stay with you forever.

3) Things to Look Out For On An Acoustic Guitar

-Look for a decent action. This means that there isn't too great a distance between string and fretboard. The strings shouldn't buzz when played open (ie, no fingers) and there should be no more than about 5mm clearance between string and 'board at the 12th fret (the one with the double dots). You may see bearded knowledgeable looking types sighting down the neck and hmm-ing, too- these guys are looking for (or pretending to look for) a bowed neck. Don't worry too much about this, it takes an experienced eye to know how much concavity should be there, so get the shop guy to do it. Any music shop worth their salt will check the instrument over before you take it away (this, by the way, is one of the many reasons you should buy from a guitar shop, not Argos)..

No warping on the body- the top should be flat, and the bridge (the dark piece of wood the strings go through) should be securely attached to the body, no lifting away, as this indicates a damaged instrument. Look out as well for good quality, heavy duty tuning pegs, or "machine heads" as they are sometimes called.

You may hear the term "Solid Top" bandied about- this means that the soundboard of the guitar (the bit with the hole in it) is made from one solid piece of wood (usually spruce or cedar) instead of a laminated piece. Although some will swear by a solid top, it's really a matter of taste. The advantages of solid are better tone and resonance as the guitar ages, and a more natural quality feel. However, laminated woods are sturdier and more damage resistant, and tone and resonance growth is all very well if you're buying a guitar for what it will sound like in ten years' time, but if you like the sound of a laminated wood instrument, don't let the sales patter or acoustic snobs change your mind. A further point to consider is that laminated guitars are generally more resistant to feedback when amplified, something to consider if you want to take your acoustic out for live work.

Thanks to the Chinese having mastered their quality control issues over the last couple of years, you can now get a really good guitar for around the £150 mark. Brands to check out include Brunswick, Crafter, Yamaha (although their entry level F310 stacks up pretty poorly against the more modern competition), Lorenzo and Tanglewood.

Similar advice also applies to electro-acoustics, although I'd advise taking £150 as a minimum figure- spend too little and you get a guitar that will suffer noticeably from having been built down to a price and will perform neither task well. If you're really on a budget and want electro-acoustic capability, get a decent acoustic and stick a pickup on it later.

Whatever you buy, the odds are it'll be strung with medium heavy strings (0.12"- 0.56" in most cases), so see if you can get a spare set of 0.10"s with it. Although thicker strings give better tone, they're harder to play, and the fine points of tonal quality are secondary to actually getting the notes.

4) Things To Look For On An Electric Guitar

Similar advice applies, except that the action should be lower, 3-4mm at the twelfth fret. Strange though it might sound,

looks make a difference here. Electric guitars have a great deal more freedom in their design than acoustics, so there is a much wider choice. From Les Paul clones, to Strat-a-likes and Telecaster copies, there's something to emulate your hero.

There's also a great deal of waffle concerning these, so let's cut through the jargon and look at the important terms.

Pickups- these are like microphones that convert string vibrations into sound at the amp end, and have a major bearing on a guitar's tone. There are two main types – single coil (a la Fender) and humbuckers (commonly associated with Gibson guitars). Single coils give a thinner, twangier, more percussive sound better suited to blues, country, funk etc, while humbuckers have a fatter, thicker sound better suited to more distortion-heavy styles like rock & metal. Think Mark Knopfler, Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix for single coils, Guns & Roses, Oasis, Metallica for humbuckers.

Whammy bar, tremolo arm, Floyd Rose, fixed bridge- these are all terms for the way a guitar is strung. Unless you really need all the acrobatics that a Floyd Rose system lets you achieve (and the odds are you don't), spare yourself the heartache and frustration of trying to tune it up when it goes out, let alone restringing it. Tremolo arms are used to bend the pitch of a note, giving you more options but also negatively affecting tuning stability, and plenty of players like Clapton, Page, Slash etc. have gone their whole careers without using one.

My advice, unless you have your heart set on a particular model, go for a Strat style guitar with a mix of single coil and humbucking pickups, a vintage trem system which you can choose either to use or not (and I'd avoid it to start with). Brands to look out for include Ibanez' G10 series, Yamaha's Pacifica 112 (which has recently been revamped and is now and even more ferociously good instrument), Fender, Dean, and Squier's Standard series (the Affinity series are pretty cheap & nasty- beware big name brands budget lines, as they have a tendency to ride on their brand names rather than intrinsic quality).

Whatever happens, make sure it's the right guitar for YOU, not the guy selling it to you, not your mate or even your parents. Be motivated by your instrument and you'll get all the enjoyment and satisfaction that playing an instrument should bring..

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