

Secrets to Learning the Guitar Fretboard

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Here is a collection of ideas that can help to sharpen your knowledge of the guitar fretboard. You can do this with guitar in hand, or even while commuting or doing other activities that allow you time to think. Use these ideas to improve this aspect of your guitar knowledge. Remember, the more you repeat the process of “finding” notes on the fretboard in your mind, the more your sub-conscious will become programmed. With practice you will simply “know” where notes are.

The Methods

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The title suggests that there are some secrets to learning the fretboard. The secret is really to find time to practice locating all of the notes on your guitar fretboard through relationships, or associations. For example, if you know the note “C” on the E string at the 8th fret, you can easily figure out that B is one fret below at fret 7, and D is two frets higher at fret 10. Read on and you will find a number of methods to locate notes. If you can simply memorize all of the notes of every fret without understanding these relationships, then great! However, using the methods presented here can help you to plant your fretboard knowledge in firm ground by building on what you already know.

The first five frets

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You should know all of the notes of the first 5 frets on each string. This is the foundation to building upper fret knowledge. A good way to test and improve your lower fretboard knowledge, is to think of a note at random, or use flash cards with each of the notes, then locate that note on every string where it can be found. Better still, if you read, or are learning to read standard notation, draw the note on a stave. Strive for accuracy first (get it right first time), then speed (how fast you can locate the note). This is also good for the upper frets too. Use both flatted and sharpened notes so that you get to know notes and locations by both names. From here on it is assumed that you know the first five frets.

Foundation knowledge

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Let us summarize what we currently know and build upon it. Realize first, that we already know the names of the strings and already know the notes at the twelfth fret because it is an octave of the strings. We also know the fifth fret of each string because (with one exception) we use this fret to tune to the string above. For example, pressing the 5th fret of the bottom E-string produces an A like the string above it. So, perhaps even without realizing, we know the notes of the fifth fret. The exception just mentioned

is the 3rd (G) string that we stop at the 4th fret to tune to the 2nd (B) string above it. Since the 4th fret of the 3rd string is B, then the fifth fret is C. This is useful to remember.

The DoG Cat FAD at the Tenth Fret

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Along with the 5th and the 12th fret, the 10th fret is the only other one (below the 12th) that has no sharps or flats on any string. This makes it a good "stepping stone" to learn other notes. Once you know this fret, it is easy to step back from it and find other notes.

Memorize the notes of the tenth fret - they will serve you well.

D G C F A D

You may wish to make up your own acronym for the letters. The one I use is as follows. Think of pet owners who buy animals but later find out that they wish they had not. This is called the:

DoG Cat FAD.

Big Cats Eat Fat

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This title is the acronym that I use to remind myself that there are half note intervals between the notes BC and EF. Remembering those intervals makes it easier to use the relationships to find notes at other frets. All of the other notes have a whole note, or two half note intervals.

The String by String Method

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Get to know that E string

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I have commuted by car for a number of years between New Jersey and Long Island, New York. When I first started to do this I took one route all the time and sometimes sat for 2 or even 3 hours in traffic until I started looking for alternative routes. Now my commute is usually between 1 to 1-1/2 hours. That's because I have taken the time to find alternative routes. I can now quickly change route if I see that traffic is looking bad on a certain route. Applying this approach to guitar playing, if we first get to know a certain route, we can then find other routes relative to the first one. I suggest that if you don't already know the notes of the E-string up to the 12th fret, get to know it right away. By doing this, you will already know two strings. That leaves only four more.

Many guitars, even some classical guitars, have markers at the 3rd, 5th and 7th frets. On the E string, those frets produce the notes G, A, and B. Then, right above the B, is C at the eighth fret. Since we already memorized DGC FAD at the 10th fret, we know that the

tenth fret is D, leaving only E at the 12th fret. The rest are either sharps or flats. That's all there is to it.

The Other Strings

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Just like we have done with the E string, take each of the other strings and get to know where all of the notes are on that string. If you could just memorize one string each day, you will know the whole fretboard in less than a week!

The Hunting Notes Method

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Here is different approach. Don't worry if at first you have no idea how to locate notes mentally. Just read on and you will get some ideas how this is possible. Take the name of one note at a time and find it's location on every string. If you are trying this with a guitar in hand try not to "hunt" for notes by simply playing different frets until you match the sound with a note in the first position. Use relationships to locate the notes in your mind first. Read on to learn more.

Finding E

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E is the easiest note to find on the guitar. Two of the strings are called E and the 5th fret of the 2nd string is used to tune to the top E string. We also know that the 2nd fret of the 4th string D, is E. That takes care of four strings. E on the 5th string can be found by realizing that we tune the 4th string D with the 5th string fretted at the 5th fret. Move up two frets to the 7th fret and this is our E. Lastly, the 3rd string. Think backwards from our F that we learned at the 10th fret. From E to F is one fret interval. Fret 9 is E on the 3rd string.

Finding A

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Again, four strings are easy. We press the 6th string (E) at the 5th fret to tune with the 5th string (A). Fretting the 1st string (E) at the 5th fret also gives an A. We should also know the 2nd fret of the 3rd string is A too. That leaves two strings, 4th and 2nd. Since we fret the 4th string at the 5th fret to tune with the G string, just move up two frets to the 7th fret on the 4th string for A. Since the second string is B, move back 2 frets from the 12th fret to find A at the 10th fret (that we already learned).

Finding D

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The 4th string is D. Fretting the 5th string at the 5th fret gives us D. D is also found at the 3rd fret on the 2nd string. D is also the note before E. Therefore, move back two frets from fret 12 to fret 10 on either the 1st or 6th string to find D. On the 3rd string, we know that C is found at the 5th fret. Just move up two frets to the 7th fret to find our D.

Finding G

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G is at the 3rd fret of both the 1st and 6th strings. Also, we use the 5th fret of the 4th string to tune the 3rd G string. That leaves two strings, 2nd and 5th. Since G is the note before A, move back 2 frets from fret 12 on the 5th string to fret 10 to find G. Also, the 10th fret is one that we already know with our DoGCatFAD acronym. On the 2nd string, G is somewhere between the 5th and 12th fret. Since the 5th fret is E, think E to F to G being one and two frets respectively. So, a total of three frets up from the 5th fret to the 8th fret gives us our G. Another way to think of this is from G to A to B at the 12th fret being two 2-fret intervals. So, moving back four frets from fret 12 to the 8th fret gives us our G.

Chords and Root Notes

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When you play a chord using a full bar, realize that if you are playing an E shape chord, that the root note is on the first, fourth and sixth string. If you are playing an A shape, the root is on the fifth and the third string. If you play a C shape, the root is on the fifth and the second string. You may already have learned chords and their positions, so by realizing where the root notes are located can help to locate notes through chords.

Finding BEADs

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If you look at a map of the fretboard that has the note names written on it, you will notice that there is one place where the word BEAD is spelled by the bottom four strings. This is at the 7th fret. At the 9th fret you have the word BE spelled by the 4th & 3rd strings and Ab & Db on the 2nd & 1st strings.

Learn the C Scale Method

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A method that I found on a web site, is to learn the C scale all over the fretboard and make a conscious effort to call out each note name as you play it.

This article is a work in progress and may be refined as time permits. At some point I would like to add some graphics. Check www.guitar-lessons.us for the latest updated article.