

# THE WELL ROUNDED COWBOY

OR

## HOW TO GET BETTER AT GUITAR

The purpose of this short booklet is to give aspiring guitarists direction. Our modern problem is not one of lacking content or information, but it's a problem of not knowing which course to take faced with *overwhelming* content and information. Hopefully spending 10 minutes reading this booklet will save you countless hours of meandering, pondering, and arguing with yourself over what videos to watch, what content to learn, and what to practice.

In the future I plan to create an entire Matrix of Guitar Goodness on my website that will provide videos, pdfs, info, worksheets etc for each of the 12 categories in this booklet.

A quick note: I'll post this PDF and keep the most updated version on my website on the [Membership Page](#). I encourage y'all to watch my videos, but I don't have enough time in the day to make videos on every topic, especially when dudes have already made videos that would be twice as good as my attempt. I learned without youtube, therefore I don't know many other channels. I will reference the ones I do know, and if anyone out there knows of a great video or resource on said topic, please hit me up on my [Discord](#) server or email me and I'll include the link in future updates. Let's help each other to become the best players we can be!

I will include affiliate links. But it's frickin' Amazon, and I get pennies. So feel free to purchase locally or elsewhere.

The following categories are NOT in any specific order. My second interactive ebook FINGER LICKIN', COWBOY PICKIN' should be out Summer of 2024, and my first eBook [STRUM IT LIKE A COWBOY](#) is now available!

### 1. Notation Basics

All guitarists should learn the basics of notation. And by "basics" I mean basics. We don't need to get fancy. This is a book I've used to teach kids as young as 6 years old. Come on now, you can do this.

Hal Leonard Guitar Method Book 1 <https://amzn.to/3oPNWXH>

Learning some notation sets up a mental framework for understanding rhythm, pitch, and the layout of the guitar. More importantly, this book will teach you where the notes on the guitar are in "first position" (all 6 strings frets 1-4, which is what your hand can grasp without changing "position). This is crucial.

Even if you don't care to learn theory, even if you'll always use tab and never read notes...you should still complete this book! Giving it a mere 5-10 minutes 3 to 5 days a week will have you through this book in less than 6 months.

If you have an actual desire to learn how to sight read you can get the 3 volumes bundled:

<https://amzn.to/42uuzkz>

Or grab the Berklee Method which is quite a bit more comprehensive, but requires quite a bit more focus and work.

Volume 1 <https://amzn.to/3NiMLtf>

All 3 bundled: <https://amzn.to/45USXP8>

But honestly, that first link is plenty for 95% of you who don't care to specifically learn sight reading.

## 2. Calisthenics and Weight Training...for your fingers!

Dexterity and Form! I don't tell students to spend a ton of time here, but I introduce it early because it's easy and very beneficial. As budding guitarists we need to get our fingers in shape and our central nervous system firing. As we become better players and have more complicated songs under our belts, then practicing songs alone can accomplish most of this work. But as a beginner or intermediate player it's important to get those fingers moving!

Here is just one example that I call "guitar push ups"

### Guitar Push Ups

♩ = 80

"GUITAR PUSH UPS"

Acoustic Guitar

Move one fret higher

5

Play the frets 1 2 3 4 on all 6th strings, make sure 1 is always pointer, 2 is always middle, 3 ring, and 4 pinky. After playing the first 4 frets across all strings we move our pointer finger to the second fret and continue. Work your way all the way to the 12th fret!

Spend a few days with this routine, then move on to the next permutation for several days eventually working through all combos:

1234 1243 1324 1342 1423 1432  
2134 2143 2314 2341 2413 2431  
3124 3142 3214 3241 3412 3421  
4123 4132 4213 4231 4312 4321

[Here's a video on it](#) (Who is that young guy!?)

This or ANY finger warm up you can find will suffice IF

- you're using proper form: thumb on back of the neck NOT palm
- nice curved fingers with all knuckle joints bent
- finger TIPS only pressing the strings
- left hand wrist straight and not bent
- squeeze only one finger at a time
- the fingers that aren't playing should not be flailing about but remain as close to the fretboard as possible
- practice slow without mistakes
- don't tense any part of your body unnecessarily (on very difficult passages I'll catch myself clenching my foot. Not joking!)

There are endless finger exercises for the guitar. Just pick a few and dedicate a small amount of warm up time on them. More are included in this booklet when discussing the major scale.

After you build up your speed with down picking look into ALTERNATE PICKING.

When I was a teenager and wanted to play wicked fast I used this book:

Troy Stetina's "Speed Mechanics for Lead Guitar"

<https://amzn.to/3ChEdMS>

It worked!

### **3. Learn to read TAB**

Watch some videos and then go and learn 50 riffs of your favorite classic rock songs. My time spent reading music is 99% tab and 1% notation. I hate Ultimate Guitar but they somehow have monopolized the market...

<https://www.ultimate-guitar.com/>

I'd tell you to download and use my tabs, but if you're a beginner you don't want to start with fingerpicking. The tab can be overwhelming. Learn some riffs first.

## 4. Cowboy Chords/Open Chords and Strumming

Learn your open chords, Cowboy! Find a decent tutorial or print out a basic chord chart and get to work. Get proficient at all the major and minor chords in the Keys of C, G, D, A and E

C: C Dm Em F G Am

G: G Am Bm C D Em

D: D Em F#m G A Bm

A: A Bm C#m D E F#m

E: E F#m G#m A B C#m

I so wish there was a comprehensive guide on how to strum these chords...that I decided to write one! The amazing interactive eBook is now available: [STRUM IT LIKE A COWBOY](#)

A few of the above chords aren't possible to play as open chords so learn....

## 5. Power Chords

I know us cowboys don't have much need for power chords, but they are literally the building blocks to barre chords. Don't skip this step. If you get awesome at power chords learning full barre chords will be that much easier.

Here is an E power chord, an F, and a G

E5 F5 G5 the 5 means it's a power chord. You're playing the root note and a 5th above it. Not a full triad.

-----  
-----  
-----  
-----

--2-----3-----5---- a power chord is the root and then 2 frets higher on the next string is the 5th.

--0-----1-----3---- the root is here on the E string.

I play the lower note with my pointer finger and the higher note with my ring. I then slightly lower my nice form to gently touch the higher strings so they don't sound open if I accidentally strum them, which happens *a lot*. These concepts are covered in juicy, gossipy detail in STRUM IT LIKE A COWBOY.

*Here's a super fun method for learning power chords AND all the notes on the E and A strings:*

First memorize the notes on the E string:

E string    0—1---3---5---7---8---10---12  
               E F G A B C D E

Memorize the letters. Once you have that simple framework of 7 items laid out, you automatically know the sharps and flats.

# sharp means one fret higher  
 b flat means one fret lower

Note that “B” and “E” don't have sharps. Your mnemonic device is “Don't BE sharp”.  
 Get it? Not sure I do either. But I thought I was a genius when I came up with it.

A A# B C C# D D# E F F# G G#  
 Or  
 A Bb B C Db D Eb E F Gb G Ab

Note that ‘b’ and ‘e’ not having sharps has nothing to do with the frequency or pitch of these notes or intervals. It's rather semantics and language that come from the piano. For ergonomic reasons there is no black key after ‘b’ nor ‘e’ on the piano.

Now go look up chords to a half dozen of your favorite songs and force yourself to play them as E string power chords! That's it. It won't be practical because you might be jumping all over the neck in big horizontal leaps, but that's fine. The point here is to memorize the notes and realize how quickly you can play along to **every** song containing chords...(well, the augmented and diminished chords will trip you up. Await a future ebook, DEMYSTIFYING MUSIC THEORY FOR THE DRUNKEN HOMESPUN SIMPLETON COWBOY (it's merely a working title, ok?).

Now that it's a few weeks later and you've got the E string memorized...

Do all of the above for the “A” string

A string        0---2---3---5---7---8---10---12  
                   A B C D E F G A

A5    B5    C5  
 -----  
 -----  
 -----  
 -2-----4-----5-----  
 --0-----2-----3----- the root is here on the A string now  
 -----

As a budding guitarist I learned all my notes on the E and A string by playing power chords along with [Misfits songs](#), “Do you think we are robot clean!? Does this face look almost mean!? Is it time to be an android not a man!?”

And because power chords only get a Cowboy so far, now go and learn...

## 4. Barre Chords

Learn the major, minor, and dominant shapes of the E string barre chords. The three are basically the same with only single finger changes.

Again, learn 6 or so songs *only using these shapes*. The good news is the power chords should have already solidified these notes into your mostly empty noggin.

Repeat the same process for the A string.

This should be a bit easier because of your power chord work, but it will still be very hard! It'll be buzzy and difficult. Don't sweat it. Let some strings buzz and fart out. You'll get better over time. Use proper posture and please break every 20 minutes. Pinched nerves and carpal tunnel are total day wreckers!

Note that a guitar with terrible action can completely RUIN a guitar player's journey. If your guitar is set up (or not set up) so that your strings are too high off the fretboard this will make learning barre chords a nightmare. Talk to a friend who plays or bring it into the shop if you're having serious trouble.

If you like books this one is fantastic for learning chord basics and a bit beyond.  
Jazz Chords for Rock Guitarists: <https://amzn.to/43rBBYL>

## 6. Learn your fretboard - Octaves before CAGED

Check out my playlist “How to Get Better at Guitar”  
[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLim\\_0PRqdn-AKnUu2dsIFqARSWQs8nnBj](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLim_0PRqdn-AKnUu2dsIFqARSWQs8nnBj)

I need to find more time to continue this video series. So if you get to the end, harass me for more!

There are tons of videos out there on the CAGED system. Some are helpful, some are confusing, some can be both. The problem with these videos is that yall are at such different skill levels and knowledge bases, that no guitar teacher can make the perfect “CAGED” video for everyone.

“CAGED” is a mnemonic device to memorize the chords (and thus scale positions) up and down the neck. But there are many ways to do this. In the “How to Get Better at Guitar” playlist I use the simple concept of finding octaves on the guitar. This builds a blueprint for grasping the guitar neck. Within these octave “shapes” or “positions” we can then begin to build chords in increasing complexity: major, minor, diminished, sus, 7ths, extensions, etc... We can also associate each one of these “shapes/positions” with a scale: major, minor, or any of the various modes...

It’s not a simple recipe as there are endless ways to approach it. And they all depend on your interest and skill level. But learn your octaves *before* you learn CAGED.

This booklet ain't the place for more detail, so again, check out the [playlist](#) I just linked above, especially the first video in the series. And patiently wait for future MMM releases on said material.

## 7. Memorize the key of C and your Roman Numerals

Triads and chords are essential for songwriting and music theory. Don’t let the word ‘theory’ overwhelm you. You know a C chord sounds great played after a G chord, right? Ah ha! Caught ya! You *do* know theory. You may not know the *how* or the *why*. But you still know and use theory. So just give in and accept that it’s valuable.

As songwriters and guitarists we can think of everything being relative to our starting note and chord. And as guitarists we can use a capo if need be to transpose a song and use the exact same shapes and patterns. So I give you permission to completely ignore sharps and flats! Yup. I said it. Just learn the Key of C major super well, and ignore every other key for a while.

C major scale: CDEFGABC

The chords in this key are C Dm Em F G Am Bdim

Everytime you play a song in C start to grasp them in terms of Roman Numerals

I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii*
C	Dm	Em	F	G	Am	Bdim

The I (one) IV (four) and V (five) chords are major.

The ii (two) iii (three) and vi (six) are minor.

The vii\* (7) is diminished (ignore it for now).

This roman numeral system is so valuable not only because it's an awesome shorthand, but these numbers are ALWAYS the same for every Major Key.

And no, I didn't expect you to grasp this on your first run through so...

#### RESOURCES:

I did a live stream on theory 101, I got great feedback despite it being under-viewed, for some reason my live streams don't get much traction in the youtube algos

<https://www.youtube.com/live/zS8SoRICzPs?feature=share&t=324>

Rick Beato has an awesome video on Theory found here:

<https://www.youtube.com/live/De97zQi5rzc?feature=share>

A lot of the info will probably go over your head, but digest what you can and rewatch it quarterly. I learned theory from textbooks in a few college classes so I don't have any solid books to recommend, but I'd probably check out some theory books geared toward guitarists. As I said, I'll be writing my own in the future, MUSIC THEORY FOR THE ARROGANT MULE (wasn't that the name?).

Here's just a few random ones I found on Amazon, again, I don't know if they're any good.

Music Theory for Guitarists: Everything You Ever Wanted to Know But Were Afraid to Ask by Hal Leonard Publishing

<https://amzn.to/3J1nKA9>

The Guitarist's Music Theory Book: The Most Useful Guitar Music Theory Book by Peter Vogl

<https://amzn.to/3WVnMzu>

The Practical Guide to Modern Music Theory for Guitarists: The complete guide to music theory from a guitarist's point of view

<https://amzn.to/3CfyqqZ>

Videos are good, but by nature they're passive. Theory will require work. This is one of these places where I really recommend a book. Apologies for not having a specific go to

for yall. At least not yet. And if anyone out there works through one of the above books, hit me up and let us all know how it went!

## 8. Memorize and learn some triads

I've had multiple students of mine over the years express that learning about triads, and how learning to build them in different places on the guitar neck was their Eureka moment. When it clicked for one student they said it felt like they crossed through a veil to the other side. They were now at a place that they didn't think they'd ever get to as a guitarist! Now I'm not guaranteeing the same will happen to you. But it really is *that* valuable.

A triad is a 3 note chord that can be major, minor, diminished or augmented. All folk, pop, country, and most rock songs contain chords. Not only that, but in most cases they're just a constant landscape of shifting chords with melodies over them. In other words: at any time, in any song, there is a triad/chord you can play on your guitar that will sound great.

Let's take the chords in C major that you've learned above. All triads are a Root, a 3rd and a 5th.

C major is CEG

C is the root. E is the 3rd (the 2nd/D is absent) and G is the 5th (the 4th/F is absent)

D minor is DFA

E minor is EGB

F major is FAC

Memorize these! It's only 7 things. Make flashcards if you have to.

G major is GBD

A minor is ACE

B diminished is BDF

Every other chord can be learned easily with a few simple formulas and alterations.

For example if you memorized C major is CEG then C# major is C# E# G#. Everything goes sharp with it.

If you know C major is CEG and if you learn that a minor chord is a major chord with a "Flat 3rd" then C minor is C Eb G. The letters/"chord spelling" is always the same.

For resources on this stuff refer to the links at the bottom of section 6, I also began to cover it in my "[How to get better at guitar](#)" playlist. I will be exhausting this concept with some videos shortly.

## 9. Learn to Sing and use your ear

This is the most overlooked aspect of musicianship, especially for budding guitarists like yourself. You came here to play guitar, not sing, but I don't care, start singing! At least start humming. Your inner ear won't only help you as a player, but it will even help you enjoy music in new ways as a passive listener.

Start singing or even just humming to basic vocal warm ups and exercises. There are hundreds. Here's just the first link I found:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ck1pzgy07ZU&t=8s>

I'm linking to this one because it's direct, but there are a host of awesome teachers on youtube.

The only rule is don't go so high that you strain and it hurts. And remember, you can always just hum! It's not as loud so you can do it in more places and without shame, and it's infinitely less likely to strain your untrained voice. I promise that spending 5 to 10 minutes a day humming along with some simple scales will vastly improve your ear and ability to generate melodies.

If you don't like the vocal warm up I linked to then find others or simply start humming along to *everything* you're playing on the guitar.

Two practices completely transformed my ability to sing and my musical ear.

The first is slowly and meticulously learning things by ear. I did a video on this concept here, "How to Learn Songs by Ear (and Beck's Uneventful Days)"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A4sBN9K2-9I&t=24s>

The second practice is not just learning the chords and riffs to songs, but actually learning the vocal melody *on the guitar!* This had a profound impact on my ear, my improvising, and my songwriting. Even learning a bunch of catchy melodies without any understanding of theory will still give you a great intuition and feel for improvising, writing, and soling. Start this practice with classic folk melodies like Twinkle Twinkle Little Star, Yankee Doodle, Happy Birthday etc... For many of you this will seem nearly

impossible. But go slow and take your time. Doing some of the things I mentioned above (and will mention below) will help immensely. Trust the process and keep at it! I do this in my "[Folkin' Melodies](#)" series.

Another approach is using this flippin awesome app that's free  
Functional Ear Trainer:

<https://www.miles.be/software/ear-training-on-your-iphone-ipad-and-android>

For some reason, traditional ear training tries to cram intervals into your head unassociated with a musical key/tonal center. My brain does not process this! This app, thankfully, trains your ear against a tonal center, which is how we engage with and listen to music ALL the time. Intervals are never in isolation, they're in songs! Those academic bastards want to purposelessly torture you! Learn to *feel* intervals and cadences, not "hear" them.

[This dude](#) has a great video on ear training. His channel in general on music production is great.

If you really wanna get into it, get a book from your library on learning basic "Sight Singing". Unfortunately, I don't know of a book that can be used without guidance or some prior knowledge of sight reading on an instrument. If anybody does, help us out!

## **10. Learn one major scale and one pentatonic scale**

I say one because too many players rush to learn all 5 shapes. This is almost pointless. A shape without understanding is nearly useless. It gives you a very shallow understanding and won't make you a better soloist or songwriter. Learn to put the little you have into excellent use before moving on. I say this with some wisdom because I probably wasted a decade in my teens of just playing scales up and down, really really fast. It was a pointless endeavor. Songs almost never (Yngiwe Malmsteen excluded) play scales straight up and straight down really really fast.

Don't just learn the shape, but learn where the roots are, learn the scale in one octave, then two, then both together, then you learn to play it as a sequence of 3s, then 4s, then you learn to skip in 3rds, then you stack a 3rd on a 3rd, then the triads, then the chords in this position, then you stack yet another third and learn the 7th chord arpeggios, then the 7th chords. Blamo! Now you've grasped the handle and can cook some potatoes!

“How!?” You ask. Like this: ;)

<https://flat.io/score/60510181fe6a0c4d9e076dd8-e-position-major-scale-in-g-sequences-of-3-and-4-3rds-and-stacked-3rds-triads>

Print this puppy out. Spend 1 month to 30 years getting better at everything in this PDF. Once someone out there really aces this PDF shoot me an email and I'll get you the 2nd of the 5 positions in detail just like this one. Or patiently wait for my upcoming book on theory and the guitar fretboard called, “Shapes and Crepes, A Fretboard Cookbook” (I have like 10 books planned and little time, so exercise extreme patience. Or better yet! Toss me some coin and buy me some time!)

As for the pentatonic scale, I'll have to get to making a comprehensive PDF like I did for the major scale. In the meantime there are tons of youtube videos and resources out there (help me with some good links here!)

## 11. Create and keep a Songbook

As you learn songs, save them and print them! It is easy to forget songs. It's also incredibly valuable to keep improving on songs you already know. A songbook also focuses our practice time and prevents us from meandering, wasting time noodling, and never finishing goals. The songbook might be tabs, it might be chords and lyrics...it's whatever your specific goals are. This is beneficial in too many ways to name. We get better at the song, you play along with the song slowly, then fast, then you play it alone, then you record yourself playing the song, maybe add a second guitar, a harmony etc...And that's still only part of it. The bigger picture is everytime you learn a new concept (scale, arpeggio, picking pattern, muting, alternate picking) you jump to your songbook and *apply* the learned concept!

## 12. Learn to Practice

The most important and overlooked aspect of learning anything in life is realizing that we probably practice wrong. Or at least partially wrong. So learn to practice! Spend a few minutes and research the concept of “Deliberate practice”. I think it was Malcolm Gladwell who popularized the idea of it taking 10,000 hours of practice to be an expert at something. That was a fair and fine generalization. But I'd bet money it's just as true that 40,000 hours of unfocused noodling won't make you an expert, while 5,000 hours of hyper focused deliberate practice might.

One thing I've always done intuitively, but later learned in greater depth through parenting books, is the power and role of *play* in human development. This is true of us as kids *and adults*. When we can keep things playful we're more likely to enter flow and have fun. This means better retention and longer attention.

This is a rough guide but no more than 30% of your practice time should be spent on CONCEPTS and 70% of your time should be spent *inside* of SONGS.

CONCEPTS might be theory, scales, arpeggios, chords, technique, etc... Whereas the SONGS aspect of your practice is actually making and playing music, which after all, is the end result and goal! But what I don't mean here is merely playing your songs, because this might not actually make you better! What you should be doing is incorporating the CONCEPTS into the SONGS. And doing it in a *playful* way with a deliberate, hyper focused magnifying glass (as a kid I always thought it was "magnifine" glass. Alright I lied. Not just as a kid, but until I was like 25).

For example, if I'm working on a Townes' song I'll take a one measure passage that I keep tripping on. I'll *deliberately* slow down the video and use my *magnifine* glass to slow down Townes to .5 playback speed and *hyperfocus* on his rhythm, dynamic, and general feel and tone. I'll spend several minutes looping this and playing it on my own. I'll unpack the CONCEPT of the picking pattern and maybe make my own study piece of it, *deliberately* playing the same pattern over different chords and on different string sets. This keeps it *playful* and creative and also has the huge perk of getting you into a flow state. After I obsess on the pattern, only then do I return back to the song and try to put it into context.

Role play. Listen to Townes play it on 0.5 playback speed. Can you close your eyes and pretend you're a drunken and mentally deranged songwriter? Try to emulate him as closely as possible and nail that guitar part! Embody Townes. Imagine a moment, or a stage, or the scene from Heartworn Highways. I know you're laughing at me or rolling your eyes. But role playing can have a powerful effect on your state of focus and your level of physical tension or ease. Dim the lights and get to work. But then, for the love of God, please return back to your normal self and don't continue the role play in your motor vehicle or when operating heavy machinery.

Reflect and Ponder. When great musicians practice they have many moments of silence. Stop, think, consider. Practice smart (smartly?!). Set specific goals, keep a practice journal, mark progress and reassess goals and plans.

IMAGINE. I very often don't play, but just imagine playing. This is serious stuff. I challenge you next session that everytime you play through 3 repetitions of a hard passage, sit down and imagine yourself one time playing the passage perfectly and *with ease and fluidity*. I know this shouldn't work, but it does! You can literally practice without tiring out your hand. This is also super valuable when it comes to memorizing songs. We don't have endless time on our instruments. So next time you're on a walk or bus or driving somewhere imagine yourself walking through all the chord changes of a song. Try to imagine as much as you can the tactile sensation of the instrument, the sound of the chords...get the aural imagination going as much as you can.

## **D.C. al fine!**

That's it. This was plenty to wet your whistle. Please supply thoughts, comments, links and resources to help us out. I have serious ambitions to do several interactive eBooks beyond STRUM IT LIKE A COWBOY. So please give feedback about what content you'd like to see me output. This will help rein in my ideas! Thanks yall.

Be well. Do Good. And may God bestow you with His gracious and plentiful Blessings,  
Mike

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### **WEEKLY ZOOM MEETING**

I also always invite my Patrons to our weekly Zoom meeting. Anyone is welcome to jump on weekly at 8pm eastern on Thursdays. No point. Just for fun. Maybe to talk shop, maybe a QandA:

<https://us04web.zoom.us/j/76192103742?pwd=M1FJS250NIIDYVpIZVJsSWJSMmhjUT09>

Meeting ID: 761 9210 3742

Passcode: Townes