Intro to Jazz Guitar

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1. Listen to Jazz
As a jazz guitarist, try to think of yourself as a jazz musician first, guitarist second. Throughout the history of jazz, players of every instrument have learned from each other, copied each other’s licks and ideas, and composed for each other. As you begin studying jazz guitar, the best thing you can do for yourself is to listen to jazz, everything you can get your ears on. Below are a few suggestions.

**The Greats**
- Louis Armstrong - trumpet, vocals
- Duke Ellington - piano, bandleader
- Charlie Parker - alto sax
- Miles Davis - trumpet
- John Coltrane - tenor, soprano sax

**Guitarists**
- Django Reinhardt
- Charlie Christian
- Wes Montgomery
- Jim Hall
- John Scofield
- Pat Metheny

**Albums**
- *Kind of Blue* - Miles Davis
- *Somethin’ Else* - Cannonball Adderley
- *Saxophone Colossus* - Sonny Rollins
- *Moanin’* - Art Blakey & the Jazz Messengers
- * Giant Steps* - John Coltrane
- * Brilliant Corners* - Thelonious Monk
- *Blue Train* - John Coltrane
- *The Savoy & Dial Studio Sessions* - Charlie Parker
- *Incredible Jazz Guitar* - Wes Montgomery
- *In a Silent Way* - Miles Davis
- *Idle Moments* - Grant Green
- *Bright Size Life* - Pat Metheny
- *Virtuoso* - Joe Pass

**Standards**
Jazz standards are really well-known tunes. Kind of like Christmas carols, if you get a group of jazz musicians together, they could probably perform a number of standards on the spot, without rehearsal. This is what happens at jazz jams. There are hundreds of jazz standards, and as you get to know them, in your head and your hands, you’ll be more aware of the jazz tradition and better able to play with others.

I keep track of which tunes get called at jam sessions I attend. Each of the following standards has been called at least four times.

- Corcovado (Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars)
- On Green Dolphin Street
- Wave
- Autumn Leaves
- Stella by Starlight
- How High the Moon
- Night and Day
- All the Things You Are
- Nardis
- Alone Together
- Body and Soul
- Insensatez (How Insensitive)
- Freddie Freeloader
- Straight No Chaser
- Solar
- Stolen Moments
- Blue Bossa
- A Night in Tunisia
- Blue Monk
- There Will Never Be Another You
- Caravan
- Manha de Carnaval (Black Orpheus)
- Summertime

**Resources**
Listening to the volume of music I’ve suggested above will probably take several years. Don’t worry. Focus on enjoying each new discovery. To find all this music without spending a fortune, I recommend the following listening and info resources.

- Free Music: YouTube, Grooveshark
- Subscription Music: Rhapsody, Spotify
- jazzstandards.com - the 1000 most popular standards
- jazz100.sffjazz.com - lists and reviews of jazz albums
2. The Essentials
I don’t like rules. These are not rules. These are my top pieces of advice for guitar students of all ages and skill levels. I use these strategies relentlessly in my own playing.

Use a Tuner
Keep your guitar as close to perfect tuning as you can. Practice tuning by ear once you know how, but it’s important to condition your ears to hearing yourself play properly in tune. Professionals with professional ears use tuners. Buy one and use it every time you play. The easiest way to sound bad is to play out of tune.

Use a Metronome
It keeps you honest. It helps you get faster. It helps you track your progress. It prepares you to play with other musicians. The second easiest way to sound bad is to play with poor timing.

Slow Down, Relax
This will cure all your frustrations. Any trouble mastering anything on this instrument can be overcome by reducing the tempo and/or releasing your tension.

Listen to Everything
Seek out new music, old music, obscure music, anything with which you are unfamiliar. Listen to a wider variety of music than what you can or aspire to play. Listen to your tone, listen to the sounds around you.

Play Every Day
At the very least, touch your guitar every single day. Set a bare minimum for yourself (10 minutes, 2 hours, anything) and stick to it.

Take Responsibility, Take Credit
Take your progress into your own hands. Most of your learning will be done with no teachers around. And where you take responsibility, you can also take credit, so be proud.

Play with Other Musicians
Musically connecting with other people is among the most satisfying payoffs for your practice efforts. Don’t wait until you think you’re good enough. At a minimum, find someone with whom you can make some noise.

3. Know Every Major Scale
Once you’re in the habit of listening to the great artists and albums of jazz, your next major task is to learn all twelve major scales. The major scale is so important because all of the music theory that has developed for centuries in the Western world revolves around it. Every scale, chord, arpeggio, etc. is defined by how it relates to the major scale. Not only is it useful for every bit of music theory you’ll ever do, but it helps you perform the music better. All the melodies from the standards listed above are somehow based on major scales. And you can improvise over 90% of their chord changes with only major scales.

Let’s start with C major. Repeat the following exercise until you can effortlessly recite every note in this position.
Notice how all the notes in the C major scale above can be played inside three frets plus the open strings. There are four other positions, which we’ll see shortly, like this one that allow you to keep your hand in one place while your fingers jump between the strings.

**Structure of the Major Scale**
Before jumping into all 12 major scales all over the fretboard, let’s inspect its structure. Sticking with the C major scale, as it has no sharps or flats, its notes are C D E F G A B C. These are all the white keys on a piano. (The black keys are all sharps and flats.) As it relates to guitar, there are two frets between every C and D. That is, there’s always one note between them, higher than C and lower than D, known as either C# (“C sharp”) or Db (“D flat”). This distance of two frets is called a *whole step*. In the C major scale, there are whole steps from C to D, D to E, F to G, and G to A. The remaining gaps, E to F and B to C, are *half steps*, a distance of one fret. Every E on the guitar has an F one fret above it, and every B has a C one fret above it.

Take a look at the entire scale again, whole steps indicated between notes:

Now you can apply this little formula, W W H W W W H, to any root note. We just did C. If you were to use E as the root, the second note would have to be F#, because you need a whole step, and E to F is only a half step. (This gets really easy if you’ve taken some time to memorize every note on the fretboard.)

**All 12 Major Scales**
No need to memorize all of these just yet, but here are all 12 major scales for reference:
Five C Major Scale Shapes
Returning to C major, we’ll look at the five different shapes for playing the scale all over the fretboard. Roots are circled.

Work these shapes under your fingers. Run up and down each one until they flow out naturally. Don’t worry if it takes a while; it’s supposed to. Keep track of the roots.

The next step is to branch out to other major scales. Find these same five shapes for Db. Each one will be one fret higher. (You can also move the last shape down to the first fret.) Match up your root notes, Db in this case, with the circled notes in the scale shapes above. Then move to D, then move to Eb, etc., until you’ve found all 12 major scales, each one in five different positions.

Once you know how to find all these scale shapes, it’s time to learn them like the back of your hand. Drill yourself with different roots and different areas of the fretboard. (Try out the flash card tool on my website: deftdigits.com/flash-cards.)
4. The Easiest Intro to Music Theory
The major scale is the root of all music theory. Know it well, and the rest of music theory will become easier than you thought possible. Everything else relates back to the major scale, so it’s crucial to be familiar with its structure and scale degrees in order to unravel the rest of this voodoo.

Scale Degrees
The important thing to memorize is the structure of the major scale. Say it again! “Whole, whole, half, whole, whole, whole, half!” Now for the fun part.

Let’s take the F major and assign numbers to each of the notes:

These are called scale degrees. When F is the root, G is the 2, A is the 3, and so on. (The 8 is usually left out, as it’s just the root repeated. But now you can guess why it’s called an octave.) Applying the W W H W W H framework to scale degrees, we see that 3 to 4 and 7 to 8 are half steps while all the others are whole steps.

Let’s not forget those in-between notes. Just as you can apply sharps and flats to note names to nudge them up or down by a half step, so too can you manipulate scale degrees. As with notes on a musical staff, the sharp or flat occurs before the scale degree. Ab is the b3 of F. B is the #4 of F.

Here are all twelve chromatic notes, using F as the root:

Give this treatment to any root note, maintaining the same structure, and you can relate all eleven other notes to the root through scale degrees. Remember, it all relates back to the major scale, because that defines the unaltered scale degrees 1 2 3 4 5 6 7.

Making Sense
From this starting point, you can now make a bit of sense of everything else in music theory. Have a few curveballs:

- major chords use scale degrees 1 3 5
- minor chord: 1 b3 5
- dominant 7th chord: 1 3 5 b7
- minor scale: 1 2 b3 4 5 b6 b7
- Super Locrian scale: 1 b2 b3 3 b5 b6 b7
Even if you don’t know any of the above terms (“Super Locrian???”), you can put the pieces together by applying the given scale degrees to any root note. If you’re after C Super Locrian, start with the C major scale, and apply the formula:

![Scale Degrees Diagram]

Start with the major scale, and you can always figure out what the notes are in any chord, scale, or melody when given the scale degrees.

**Building Chords from Scale Degrees**
The next step is to build chords from these scale degrees. We use Arabic numerals (normal numbers) for individual notes like scale degrees, but we use Roman numerals for chords. For once, the music theory gods made it easy for us: a chord is built on the scale degree number represented by its Roman numeral. I is a chord built on scale degree 1. IV is a chord built on scale degree 4.

Uppercase is a major chord, while lowercase is a minor chord. ii is a minor chord built on scale degree 2. V is a major chord built on scale degree 5.

You can alter chords the same way you alter scale degrees. bIII is a major chord built on b3. bvii is a minor chord built on b7.

If C is the root, and you want to play a chord progression that goes i bVI bIII bVII, you’d play Cm Ab Eb Bb. (This particular progression is used all over the place: Sarah McLachlan’s “Building a Mystery”, Smashing Pumpkins’ “Bullet with Butterfly Wings”, Bruno Mars’s “Grenade”, Bravery’s “Honest Mistake”, Arcade Fire’s “Rebellion (Lies)”, The Offspring’s “Self Esteem”.)

**Apply It!**
Now you’re off to the races. If you can handle the little bit of theory above, you can handle just about everything. It doesn’t get any more complicated than this until you dive into jazz theory or classical analysis. You can now play hundreds of songs just by knowing the Roman numerals for the chords. And you can translate a melody or scale from any root note to any other root note by simply using scale degrees.

Just remember, the only things you need to know are:

1. Where’s the 1? What’s the root of the scale, or the tonic of the key? If a song is in the key of D major or D minor, use D as 1.
2. What’s the structure? W W H W W H will always give you scale degrees 1 2 3 4 5 6 7. Extract the ones you need and tweak them as necessary. The more you use this method, the easier it gets. It might take a bit of sleuthing at first, putting all the major scale intervals together, but it will become second nature if you continue using it.