

Personalized, Song-Based Guitar Instruction

Teaching Approach · Mike Northcutt

Music is difficult *and* rewarding. I believe early reinforcement and results drive engagement and sustainable practice habits. The approach below is a hybrid of formal and practical methods, drawing from established practices in curriculum design and music instruction settings. What differs here is a personalized, song-based approach: exercises and curricula are derived directly from student-selected, instructor-approved material tailored to players' abilities and interests. This makes practice feel relevant, helping them fall in love with the instrument and putting them on the most direct path to playing music that moves them.

Overview

Who: beginners to intermediate, all ages; acoustic and electric

Styles: funk, rock, blues, Americana, pop, 90s alternative, folk, and country

Students will learn:

- Technique, fundamentals, and theory applied to their favorite songs
- Effective and enjoyable practice habits
- Practical ear training and critical listening skills
- Improved performance, groove, and songwriting skills
- Repeatable processes for dissecting songs and designing exercises

Aside from the initial assessment, the areas below overlap and recur. Students rarely move through them in any fixed order.

1. Assessment & Goals

The first session or two are part observation, part conversation. I work with the student to assess their current level and fundamentals (knowledge of chords and scales, theory, song form, ear, timing, technique, posture, and repertoire). We also discuss their preferred genres, inspiring artists, personal goals, and any outside factors that might impact their ability to practice, such as work, school, family, and creative space. Current level, interests, and life factors are all considered when developing their personalized lessons and learning plan.

2. From Song to Curriculum

In this program, "the song" or genre determines lesson plans. A student suggests 3–5 songs they love, and I help them choose one or two with the right foundations to suit their level and interests. From there I review the song's sections and elements, and generate targeted exercises and lessons—sharing my process as we go. Each area offers specific learning opportunities, for example:

Song structure → form and function of sections (intro, verse, chorus, bridge)

Chord progressions → chord vocabulary, left-hand exercises, shapes, and inversions

Key center → practical harmony and theory, modes, and scales

Rhythm and groove → strumming patterns, right-hand technique, syncopation, and locking with the rhythm section

Single-line passages and solos → scales, picking, position shifts, finger patterns, string bending and vibrato, and improvisation

Builds, transitions, and song arc → dynamics, performance, and delivery

Song adaptation can further shape lesson planning: simplifying and trimming material to a player's ability to make challenging songs more playable. This can make things more fun and accelerate time to stage.

3. Practical Harmony and Theory

Harmony and theory are explored in relation to the student-selected piece, with varying degrees of depth depending on the student's level of interest or need. For example, the guitar intro to Pink Floyd's "Wish You Were Here" is built on the G major pentatonic scale—so as we work out the riff, this allows us to discuss the underlying major scale, the intervals that shape it, its relative minor, and so on. The single riff becomes an entry point to a whole layer of contextual theory in a way that feels relevant to the student. The same applies for the song structure itself: chord progressions surface the key center, chords by scale degree and by number (e.g., I–IV–V, ii–V–I), and additional chord types (e.g., extended/altered chords, triads).

Ear training is practical and applied—recognizing intervals, chord types and basslines, isolating instruments within the audio, and listening to tracks like a producer. My goal is to give students the ability to learn material by ear with full comprehension, work with melodies in their heads, and build their own learning plans as a lifelong skill. I also encourage students to practice ear training while listening to birds, trains, and everyday sounds all around us.

4. Rhythm and Groove

Rhythm, dynamics, and timing are essential to playing with others and engaging an audience—the right note on the wrong beat is the wrong note. Here we learn to lock in with the rhythm section and practice playing in the pocket, assertively. Work covers meter and accent placement, syncopation, and the rhythmic nuances inside a part: what makes it sit and breathe. Rhythmic notation on staff paper may be used for discussion, for visualizing the math and meter, or as an introduction to sight reading (sans melodic notation).

5. Effective Practice Habits

Practicing effectively is a skill in its own right. These valuable concepts are drawn from personal experience and tips from other players and instructors through the years:

- **Recall as reinforcement:** returning to material multiple times in short sessions beats infrequent marathon practice sessions
- **Asymmetrical practice:** working on the hardest parts first
- **Micro exercises with a metronome and timer:** practicing with a click, in short blocks
- **Tempo adjustments:** practicing slowly enough to play it cleanly, or speeding things up to identify problem areas
- **Free form learning:** balancing structured practice with open jam time for fun and feel
- **Negative reinforcement awareness:** understanding how repeated poor habits become ingrained into muscle memory—unintentionally perfecting "slop"
- **Visualization:** rehearsing away from the instrument

6. Performance Coaching

This is where we put it all together and the music and showmanship come alive. It's not enough to technically play the parts and get through the song. Performance coaching can help take rehearsal-level playing to performance level. These are shared from personal experience from over 2000 live performances.

- **Singing while playing (optional):** improving separation between voice and guitar
- **Emotional connection:** staying connected to the purpose and meaning of the song
- **Exaggerated dynamics and energy:** playing with a dynamic range of "2 - 11"
- **Stage presence and confidence work:** eye contact, crowd engagement, posture and presence, internal focus amid the chaos, and selling it when you're not feeling it
- **Venue visualization tips:** imagining the room, stage, and audience when rehearsing
- **Set list development:** Having Plan A and Plan B, and being willing to trash them both

7. Songwriting Coaching

Ideas are a dime a dozen, finished product is rare, I've often said. For students who write, want to, or have songs in progress, we can cover both the craft of writing and the concrete steps of taking an idea to performance-ready or production-ready level, with safe, constructive feedback and mentorship:

- **Material selection:** finding the gems in the wash of ideas worth developing further
- **Finding inspiration:** getting started, overcoming writer's block, finding a creative space
- **Lyrical development:** identifying the underlying story, killer openers and bridges, when to rhyme, POV, personal narrative, style and tone
- **Melody and harmony:** working from a melody in your head, finding the right chords, and using tension and release
- **Arranging:** groove and bassline development, instrumentation, vocal range and key selection, and adaptation for genre and band lineup

8. Gear Considerations

Most often the skill is the bottleneck, not the gear. That said, sometimes the right instrument or setup can inspire someone to play or write more, or to become instantly more stage-ready. I help students understand how to get different tones and select instruments, amps, and effects that fit their level, age, playing style, interests, and goals, and provide practical buying advice.

Scope & Referrals

By design, I don't teach melodic sight reading (pitch notation on the staff) or guitar tablature, though I do use rhythmic notation and simple chord charts where helpful. I do not teach any of the following styles: jazz, classical, advanced fingerstyle, slide, and metal. What I do cover thoroughly is the full pop and rock spectrum and related techniques, theory, and vocabulary for funk, rock, blues, Americana, pop, 90s alternative, folk, and country. If I believe a student would be better served by another instructor, for style or level, I'll say so and help find a referral.

Teaching Background

I've both taken and given lessons privately, on and off over the years. The approach above is a synthesis of instruction I've received from formal training and private lessons, and my own adaptations—methods that have enabled me to learn songs efficiently and perform professionally. That said, my formal teaching experience is modest compared to my professional music experience. This approach has been assembled through the lens of instructional design, shaped by 15+ years in graduate education, guided by a deep understanding of how people learn, develop, and reinforce new skills.