

# Jonathan Barker Guitar Lessons

*WorkshopLive interview (2006)*



**When did you start to play?** I started playing guitar when I was about 14. And it was a funny thing; really had no interest in it until this one specific moment. My Dad has been playing since he was 13 so he was always asking me if I wanted to start playing. And the response was always, "No, I'm gonna go skate." Or, "No, I want to play video games." At that same time I had started to really get into Guns N Roses. It was the first band where I felt like this was my band. My own thing. So my Dad and I were driving down the highway. I had my headphones on listening to Appetite For Destruction and he asked if I wanted to go to the guitar store. Of course not, why would I? Then came the defining moment... He said, "You know, they have these books in there that will show you how to play the songs on that album." What!?! You mean there's a way I can do the same thing these guys are doing? And from that point on I was totally hooked. I started taking lessons with Wayne Riker a few weeks later and never looked back.

**When did you start to notice that your playing was different from everyone else's? When did you find your voice as a player?** I guess the trick for me was finding a balance of working on my own stuff while still studying the greats. Everyone has his or her own unique voice. You can hear things that no one has heard yet and then combine that with a way of playing the guitar that is all your own. It's your own unique fingerprint. Trouble is it can be hard to know when it's time to stop leaving somebody else's fingerprint and start using your own. I was about 20. Still working at it too at 28.

**How do you keep your playing fresh?** Listen to a lot of music. A lot. And in all different styles. Pick a style that's new to you and get to know it really well. Read up on it, find interviews with the top players, see it performed live by some great players, learn the tunes, understand the harmony. If you live in a small town that doesn't have much live music coming through get on Netflix.com and rent the concert DVDs. You'll start to hear all these ideas naturally creep into your playing. Where you once would of played a stock pentatonic line you're now throwing in an altered dominant phrase. You have to make a conscious effort to practice these things but when its time to play/be creative you'll hear these ideas pop up on their own. It'll be an unconscious thing. After doing all that research, that is.

**What do you do when you get stuck?** Here's what equate "getting stuck" with... In high school I hated chemistry homework. Hated it. I did chemistry homework for 3 reasons. 1) I didn't want my parents mad at me. 2) I didn't want my teacher mad at me. 3) I didn't want to fail the class. My whole goal was to get to the last problem and be done with that homework.

Guitar is an incredible thing. When I work on something that I'm unable to play and then get it down, nothing feels better. Everyone loves that sense of achievement and that feeling of pride. When I find myself getting stuck/not wanting to practice it's because I've let guitar turn into chemistry homework. I'm watching the clock and just want to get to the bottom of the page.

That approach won't work for music. There has to be love in what you play. Without it the sense of achievement and pride will be gone. And you're right back to square one. Chemistry homework. Instead, sit down with your guitar and pick one thing to work on (nothing too overwhelming). Pick a slow tempo, start working on it and don't get up until it's as good as you can get it. You'll start to see your progress, You'll feel yourself getting better at it. And hey, look at that. An hour of practicing went by and you didn't even look at the clock!

**What do you still find hard to do?** The thing I struggle with the most is rhythm. Getting it as accurate as I can. Not getting thrown when the syncopation gets too heavy. Just really locking into the pulse as strongly as possible. Gotta love that metronome! Recording has been the biggest helper and eye opener for what I need to work on as well as seeing my own progress.

**Is there a piece of gear you just can't live without?** Pro Tools. Recording has been my biggest creative outlet since I started playing the guitar. The technology is at a level where you can do so much at your own house and at very high quality. There's something tangible about having that finished disc in hand that feels so good.

**Are there one or two core ideas that are central to your teaching that you make sure every student learns?**

1. Rhythm and harmony are equals. You can't just have the right pitch and blow the rhythm. You wouldn't be satisfied playing the wrong notes, would you? Try playing a basic G C and D using open chords with the rhythm really locked in but all of the chords one fret too high... Sounds awful! Rhythm and harmony, they both have to be strong.
2. Complexity/difficulty is not the litmus test for how good music is. If that's the case then go on and throw out all your Ramones albums. Think back to before you played an instrument. You didn't know if something was easy or difficult to play, you just knew it sounded great. That's the only test.

**Do you find yourself returning to listen to the artists who inspired you when you first started to play? Who are they?** Oh sure. I'll still throw on Appetite For Destruction every once in a while. It still sounds fresh to me. Great album. And I'll argue to the end that the Beatles are the best band of all time.

Does your playing change when you switch instruments? I'm a one trick pony.

How often, when you're playing, do you find those moments of pure music, when your head is clear, your fingers are working, there are no distractions, and it's just you and the music? If I'm practiced up and can get my head in a clear spot then it's usually not too much of a problem. The trick is to filter out the hot girl in the third row, the guy walking by with a pizza when you didn't even eat lunch and it's 11:00... As silly as it sounds those are the things that get in my way. That and a bad drummer with a bass player who plays too much. Hah!

What are you listening to these days? Do you search out music that's new and unfamiliar to you? Lately I've been into Gillian Welch, Wilco, The Strokes, Phantom Planet, Dominic Castillo and the Rock Savants, The Beach Boys, Elliot Smith, Bob Dylan, Elvis Costello... I've been doing a lot of the iPod on random too.

Do you have a musical wish list - other instruments to learn, people to play with, artists or styles to explore? I'd love to pick up a mandolin. A few years ago I got into Nickel Creek and was blown away by their mandolin play, Chris Thile. It can be such a beautiful sounding instrument and with the tuning it would really be something new for me. But it's fretted and I'd still be picking so it seems approachable.

Have you ever had a really great teacher? What made him/her so good? I've had a few good teachers. But the best was Wayne Riker. He never gave up on me. That first nine months of playing I was terrible! Like really bad, just didn't get it. But he stuck with me and after that initial nine months I started getting good quick. I loved it. It became the only thing I really loved to do. He introduced me to all different styles of music. Turned me on to Jimi Hendrix, Duke Ellington, Joe Pass, and guys like Joe Satriani and Steve Vai. He didn't lose his cool with me when I couldn't understand modes. He really helped to point me in the right direction. We had stayed in touch after lessons and he helped me get my gig with the National Guitar Workshop as well as Workshop Live. Lesson learned: Be cool with your teachers, you never know how they'll show up to help to out next.

How do you learn best? I work on something as slowly as I need to get it down. I like to see myself progress so I take my time with it and really absorb the concept as well as I possibly can. Get to know it inside and out.

Do you have any practice tips we can share with our subscribers? Loop small sections. Don't play the whole song/exercise over and over again, focus on the areas that give you trouble. Don't practice the same mistakes over and over again. Practice as slowly as you need to play it perfectly and then notch it up a click on your metronome. I try to have a patient urgency with guitar. I work hard at things to improve, but I also realize it takes time and I'm cool with that.