

Learning the Notes on the Fretboard

In my teaching practice I find a problem common to many guitarists is that they lack a good command of what the notes are under their fingers. This really is elementary stuff that every guitar player should know and is the main reason why musical progress and abilities can be quickly stifled.

Most students think that learning all the notes on the neck is difficult, but it is all very simple if you follow this procedure. Sure, it will still take some daily practice for at least a few weeks to digest so you can use it, but really it is not difficult.

The musical alphabet contains the notes A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and then returns to A again. Once you know that, the next thing to learn is the Chromatic Scale which contains all the notes there are in music. It goes like this – A, A# (also can be called Bb), B, C, C# (or Db), D, D# (or Eb), E, F, F# (or Gb), G, G# (or Ab), then finish on the note A one octave higher. There are only 12 notes in the chromatic scale. Five notes have two names and they are the ones in brackets, for example A# and Bb are the same note and called enharmonic by theorists meaning they have two names but sound the same. For the purpose of this exercise we normally say sharps going up and flats coming down. Notice that the notes follow the alphabet A, B, C, D, E, F, G, with no sharp or flat between B and C or E and F.

Now I want you to say this chromatic scale out loud to yourself and memorise it like this; A, A sharp, B, C, C sharp, D, D sharp, E, F, F sharp, G, G sharp, A, then descending A, A flat, G, Gb, F, E, Eb, D, Db, C, B, Bb, A. Write it out on a separate bit of paper and carry it with you so when you have a few spare minutes you can recite it. Allow yourself a few days to memorise this sequence. What you have just done is learn every note on the fifth string up to the 12th fret as in Ex 2. Because the chromatic scale just goes around in circles repeating itself, all the notes past the 12th fret just repeat themselves again so the 13th fret would be A#, 14th would be B and so on.

Next you need to memorise the open strings of your guitar; 6th string (thickest string) is E, 5th is A, 4th is D, 3rd is G, 2nd, is B, 1st (thinnest string) is E again. You can memorise this by the little saying “Emus And Donkeys Go Before Elephants”.

Now if you look at Ex 1 you can see that the notes along that string are just a chromatic scale starting on E, and Ex 3 which is along the 4th string is just a chromatic scale starting on the note D, while the 3rd string starts on the note G, and the notes all repeat past the 12th fret.

Ex 1

E F F# G G# A A# B C C# D D# E F F# G

Your mission now is to work out what the notes are on the 2nd and 1st strings by yourself. Once that is completed it would be a good idea to play the notes on each string of your guitar and say them out loud, while playing very, very, slowly so you can memorise them. If you want a diagram of a guitar fretboard that you can fill all the notes in for reference then visit

<http://www.guitar.co.nz/downloads.php3>

3 Ex 2

A A# B C C# D D# E F F# G G# A A# B C

T
A
B 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15

5 Ex 3

D D# E F F# G G# A A# B C C# D D# E F

T
A
B 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15

7 Ex 4

G G# A A# B C C# D D# E F F# G G# A A#

T
A
B 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15

Now that you have got this far a great test of your new abilities is this; close your eyes and put a finger on any string at any fret, then open your eyes and name that note taking your time to work it out and remember it. For more experienced players pick a note and then play it on each string from the 1st string to the 6th in order and back again in the quickest time possible.

Knowing what the notes are under your fingers will definitely help your musicianship and increase your ability to pursue music at higher levels.

Happy Practising
Kevin.

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