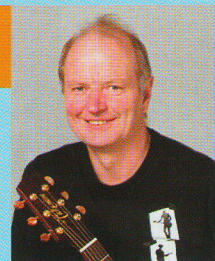


with Kevin Downing



## Are You A Multi-Skilled Guitar Player?

**M**any guitar players think that just playing the instrument is all that matters, but that is an idea that's seriously wrong. Physically playing the guitar is only about one fifth of what you really need to know. The other 80% is what I call the 'head stuff'.

The head stuff includes things like music theory, technique, repertoire, sight-reading, ear training, general knowledge, live sound, arranging, composition, and recording skills. Music business skills could also be one of them if you want a professional career in music. They are just some of the areas that good guitar players know a lot about as well. What is your knowledge like of those areas?

Most top players are multi-skilled, they are not just guitar players as such. The more you can up skill yourself in those other areas, then the better you will do in music, and the more your phone will ring. Now I am not saying you need to be well skilled in all those aspects mentioned, indeed there are some that you might want to avoid. If you are in a covers band and not playing original music then a knowledge of arranging or composition will probably not interest you, though it could be an advantage later on.

Let's have a look at the different areas mentioned above individually.

**Music Theory** – Lets you understand how other instruments work, and how they work together, understanding song forms, how different keys and key signatures work, what scales to play in your solos, and there is a lot more to learn within this subject. The more you know about music theory the better.

**Technique** – Without sufficient technique of your instrument you will

always be found wanting, inevitably when you don't want to be. Many times I've asked guitarists to play a certain thing and they can't physically do it, or even know about it. Not a good situation if you want to impress others with your playing.

Some things to work on could be fingerstyle, alternate picking, sweep picking, playing along one string, playing diagonally across the neck, etc. There are many others to explore that I haven't mentioned. If you are an experienced player, you could also work on improving your technique.

**Repertoire** – It is surprising how many guitar players only have a limited range of songs they can play well from start to finish. Having a well-rounded knowledge of different genres of music will help you like no other, especially if you want to get more gigs. The more songs you know the better, and it's also a good idea to learn all the guitar parts to the songs if you can.

**Sight-reading** – I have written about this well-worn topic many times before, but having a good ability to sight-read will definitely help you get more gigs and help you learn new things a lot quicker than what you can if you can't read. Learning to sight-read is not difficult if you learn it the correct way.

**Ear training** – Commonly known as ear straining, or fear training in music schools, though it needn't be. It's not that scary at all. In fact this is the most important skill you need as a musician. After all, what is the use of being a guitar player if your ears can't keep up with your playing?

If you find it difficult to work out riffs, licks, and chord progressions quickly and accurately, then you need to get some ear training right away. I find this is the biggest problem many students have when beginning lessons with me.

**General knowledge** – This includes things like how to re-string your guitar, different types of guitars and how they sound, some of the many different tunings used, knowing the history of your favourite players and that of different musical forms, etc. Having a well-rounded general knowledge of music and other related areas will help you greatly as a performing musician.

**Live sound** – Basic knowledge of how PA systems work, how effect pedals work, what order to have them in, how your amplifier works, how to mic up your amplifier for the PA system, etc. Just understanding the language and equipment will enhance your communication skills.

**Arranging** – The ability to take a song, yours or someone else's, and re-arrange it to make it more interesting and saleable. People with such skills are scarce, but if you learn a bit about it, it can help you stand out from the crowd.

**Composition** – The fundamental ability to create original songs that you can later record, hone at open mic nights or jam with your friends. Having great composition skills can really propel you into the big time, Lorde and Neil Finn are classic examples.

**Recording skills** – If you have composed some great songs then you will want to at least make a demo recording of them at home before venturing into that big studio to get a quality production done. It's easy to begin increasing your recording skills by having a small set up at home and recording yourself frequently. You need to learn about things like mic technique, the use of EQs, compressors/limiters, delays, reverbs, and other toys that are used in the studio, among many other things.

So hopefully you can now see that being a guitar player (having the 20%) is one thing, but being a complete musician (having the other 80% as well) is another. There are many other skills that you will really need to know too of course, however, the number one skill we need as guitar players is the one that is most commonly missing – ear skills.

Now you don't need to think all this is overwhelming. If you just pick one or two of the skills mentioned above, and get to work on them for a few minutes a day, you will quickly begin to see results that will really surprise you.

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