

As a kid, my Sunday mornings were spent annoying the neighbors with painful, but developmentally necessary renditions of “Purple Haze,” “Paranoid,” and the hammer-ons from “Eruption” on a cheap-but-electric--a Memphis--single humbucker guitar played through a remarkably loud Dean Markley amplifier. I’d turn the gain all the way up and the master volume...higher than it should have been for a Sunday morning...and stand--yes, stand--in my room and imagine being someplace on stage as far away from home as possible.

By the time I was 17, I was playing in a band with an unprintable name. We played local shows, made enough money for gas (and occasionally beer) and practiced on the weekends in our drummer’s garage. In retrospect, we were fairly awful, but I met my first girlfriend because I *played guitar in a band* (and because I am awesome). The only--and I mean *only*--time I felt cool in high school was when I had a guitar or a pen and paper in front of me.

We can’t guarantee you’ll find a significant other, but we can help you find a guitar that’ll help amplify your coolness.

There’s some who argue that everyone who wants to learn should learn on an acoustic guitar. My first guitar was a nylon string classical on which I learned to read music and the basics of fingerpicking. I wanted to be a rock star. At 11 or 12, I didn’t really see what the dozen or so Christmas songs I learned had anything to do with that. It wasn’t until I learned power chords--fifth chords--from a friend in a parking lot that I really became interested in practicing. So. Get a guitar meant for whatever style of music you want to play. If you want to play folk or classical, get a steel or nylon string acoustic. If you want to stand in your living room and annoy your neighbors, get an electric. Jazz players might prefer a semi-hollowbody. Your choice depends on the style you most want to play. There are limitations, but not hard limits. An electric isn’t going to stop you from being able to learn classical theory, but it may make classical picking difficult. An acoustic doesn’t make learning metal riffs impossible, but it will feel very different than it does on an electric. If you’re looking for a guitar for your son or daughter, ask them what *they* want. And then get both of you some [headphones](#) because there’s a bit of a learning curve with any instrument.

The hardware on both electric and acoustic guitars is basically the same: six (sometimes more) strings are stretched down a wooden neck, tuned to different tones and attached to a body where the strings are plucked, picked, and strummed to produce different notes which are achieved by pressing them against the neck at different intervals.

Before we go into the major difference--amplification--let’s talk a bit about how a guitar should feel. The frets should be well seated on the fretboard. If they’re too high, you’ll get “fret buzz:” an annoying buzzing sound that comes from the string striking the fret. Press a string down--you want your finger as close to the fret as possible--on a guitar in standard tuning (ask the clerk if you’re unsure) and pluck it. The tone should be clean, undampened, and clear, with no buzz or other unmusical sound. If there’s buzz, the

action--the height of the strings in relation to the fretboard--may be too low, the frets may be too high, or less likely, the neck may be warped or need adjusting. On an electric guitar, you can mechanically adjust the action. On an acoustic, you generally cannot: the neck would have to be adjusted or the bridge--where the strings end opposite the tuning pegs--would have to be sanded down. If you're pressing a note correctly and consistently get fret buzz on an acoustic guitar and the clerk can't get rid of it with a simple adjustment, you should look at a different one.

How does the guitar feel when you sit? When you stand? An unconventionally shaped guitar might be find when you're standing up with it on a strap, but radically uncomfortable if you sit with it. If that's a concern, think twice before you buy something because it looks cool. Likewise, some people may find that some acoustics are too full-bodied to comfortably stand up with. Find a guitar that works for your body shape and size.

An acoustic guitar generates sound via its hollow body and sound hole. As one might suspect, the top wood--the material used for the surface where the sound hole is located--plays an important role in the overall sound of the guitar. Different woods have different acoustic properties and some are more highly favored than others by players. These tonal qualities emerge due to the physical properties--its relative hardness and density--of the wood and its resonance. The best wood is going to be the one whose sound you most like. An exposition on top woods is really rather pointless. Here's why.

The problem we run into in trying to describe tonal quality is that words like "bright" and "rich" are purely subjective. Moreover, some playing styles are better displayed by certain woods. Finger pickers, for example, often favor cedar top woods, because it has a "warmer" sound than spruce, which is the most common top wood found in acoustic guitars. Cedar is softer than spruce and, as a result, scratches more easily. Other woods are prized as much for their visual aesthetic as for their tonality: koa and redwood's deep, variegated grains are found in both bodies and top woods, as are others, including mahogany and rosewood. I think of spruce as an "all purpose" wood: one that's fine to learn on and that won't hamper your style.

In electrics, the tonewood used in the body is arguably less important. I say "arguably," because I anticipate disagreement, as evidenced by the scores of mind-numbing posts on forums indicating an abundance of time that would probably be better spent practicing. I digress. The gist of the argument revolves around tonality and sustain. Maple/mahogany laminates are extremely popular across the board. Ash and alder are common woods, first popularized by Fender in the 50's and 80's, respectively. Gibson uses mahogany in the Les Paul Jr and the SG. Lower-end models are often made of some type of plywood or poplar with the tone usually being described as bland. An adjective laden discussion of these woods isn't going to do you much good. Playing and listening to a few is going to do you far more good than reading about wood. Don't let a clerk tell you what you "should" be hearing. Trust your ear.

An acoustic guitar neck is going to have 12 or 14 frets: the number refers to those that clear the body. An electric guitar, in comparison, ranges from about 22 to 24 frets, depending on the maker and model. ESP makes an electric with 27 frets and Washburn has made 29 and 36 fret models with deep cutaways on the body to accommodate them. Don't get sucked into the more-is-better game: you're not going to be limited by an acoustic with 14 frets any more than you're going to be limited by a guitar with "only" 24 frets. The choice of material for the neck is again...a choice that's entirely up to you. The majority of guitar necks are going to be mahogany or maple, with fretboards in maple, ebony, or rosewood. I liked rosewood fretboards until I tried maple, which I thought felt much faster and smoother. My point is that there's no objectively "best" wood.

When it comes to electrics, there are other factors that *do* have an effect on performance and sound. The amplification is provided through pickups: magnets that "pick up" the disturbance created by vibrating metal strings in their field and transmit them as sound. Single coil pickups will also pick up other forms of electromagnetic radiation around them: and everything from computer terminals to overhead lights to the household wiring around us transmits this kind of field. This results in pickup "hum:" a low-level buzz that comes through. Single coil pickups have a discernibly different sound than two-coil pickups (called humbuckers because they were designed to "buck" the hum of their single coil predecessors). They have a crisp, clean sound. Humbuckers, by comparison, have a much fatter (here we go with the adjectives), crunchier sound: great for playing metal or any genre that requires a thicker sound. Active humbuckers sound even meatier. Actually, that's an understatement: they sound *ferocious*. Powered by batteries, with pre-amps built in, they have a particularly warm quality to them. Many guitars will feature both humbuckers and single coil pickups, allowing you to switch between the two. Others have humbuckers that can have one coil switched off for a lighter sound. It's really a question of what kind of music you want to play. Still, a Fender Stratocaster's 3 single coil pickups are not going to stop you from playing death metal, nor is an ESP with two active humbuckers going to prevent you from playing blues if you want. However, the blues player and death metal guitar player might want to trade guitars.

The bridge on an acoustic guitar is fixed. On an electric, it's more dynamic and is usually attached to a tremolo (alternately vibrato or "whammy") bar/arm that is used to deeply bend notes. When you bend a note with a whammy bar, it can very quickly detune the guitar. There are a couple of ways to mitigate this. The first way is to pull the bar up slightly afterwards. That's not a great method. The other way is by having a Floyd Rose Tremolo, which locks the strings into staying tuned and allows them to be fine tuned at the bridge rather than at the head. It allows for deep bends and the ability to raise a tone by pulling up on the bar. I think genres like metal really benefit from Floyd Rose Tremolo systems. I like the ability to fine tune at the bridge and the versatility it lends in playing leads. One of the problems with it is that if a string breaks, it can throw the whole system out of tune. "Half-floating" versions, which only allow notes to bend, don't have this problem. Despite the "advanced" look of a Floyd Rose system, they're remarkably easy to use.

A final thought--for now--on guitars. It can be really intimidating to walk into a guitar store and talk to a clerk, but that's what they're there for. Find someone who's less interested in *selling* you a guitar than someone who wants to help you as a fellow player. Find a guitar that feels and sounds good to *you*.