

INSTRUMENT CARE

By Steve Glickstein

While there are many books, tapes, recordings and videos you can buy to assist you in learning to play and master your particular instrument, there are few, if any, resources available to teach you the peripheral, related matters concerning the care and upkeep of your instrument, such as: How do you keep it clean? What precautions should be taken to keep it intact and playable? How do you change the strings? This article is intended as a helpful guide to some of those matters. Since the guitar is, by far, the most popular stringed instrument amongst folk musicians, references in this article will be mainly to it. However, most of the advice applies to other stringed instruments constructed of wood as well.

You've spent a considerable sum of your hard earned money on an instrument so, if you haven't already done so, buy a sturdy hard shell case for it and use it! When you're not playing the instrument, keep it in its case with at least one of the latches closed. When it is not practical to replace it in its case, lay it down flat and out of harm's way. An instrument leaning upright against something is unstable and likely to fall or be knocked over. Murphy's Law dictates that it will inevitably fall on something hard. There's a lot of tension placed on the peg head of a stringed instrument from the pull of the strings and the point where the neck of the instrument meets the peg head is the thinnest and most vulnerable part of the instrument. Should the instrument fall over and strike a surface which does not absorb the shock, the neck will most likely snap at the point where it meets the peg head. So be prudent and replace it in its case when you are not playing it.

Wood bodied instruments are sensitive to changes in both temperature and humidity. Avoid exposing them to extremes of cold or heat. Never leave it in an enclosed car in the heat of the day, especially here in Florida. The glue used to hold an instrument together is both heat and water soluble. The heat which builds up in the confines of a car's interior or trunk is more than enough to soften the glue and allow movement of the glued joints of the instrument. Needless to say, the movement which occurs will not result in an improvement of the instrument's playability. Those movements of the instrument's parts in relation to each other may make it hard to play or impossible to correctly tune. Also, many of the lower and moderately priced instruments on the market today are constructed from laminated, not solid wood. The heat can cause separation of the laminations or warping of the layers of wood.

At the other extreme, cold can also damage your guitar. The damage from extremes of cold comes when you take the instrument into a warm environment from the cold. When an instrument is exposed to drastic changes in temperature, either going from cold to warm or vice versa, a condition called "checking" can occur. This is where the lacquer finish applied to the instrument to protect the wood gets tiny cracks in it because the wood expands and contracts at a different rate than the finish does. This can occur when you check your instrument for storage in an airplane cargo hold on a flight or even when you take it into an air-conditioned room from one that is not air conditioned.

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You should be aware that air conditioning is very tough on wood bodied instruments. Air conditioners cool by extracting moisture from the air. This drying effect has a tendency to dry out the wood and cause it to become brittle and crack as it shrinks due to loss of moisture. Never keep your instrument under an air conditioning vent.

Here's how to minimize the risk of damage to the instrument when moving it from one extreme of temperature to another. Do not immediately open the case when you come into the new environment. Allow it to acclimate slowly inside the case. Open the case after 15 to 30 minutes, depending upon how radical the change in temperature is between the two environments. Allow it to sit a bit longer after opening the case before you tune it up. The temperature fluctuation will affect the instrument and tuning may be difficult until it adjusts to the change. Also, strings are more likely to break when in transition to a new temperature.

When flying with an instrument, always try to get the instrument on board with you in the cabin. There the temperature and pressure are more controlled and the instrument will not be exposed to harmful temperature and pressure fluctuation. It also removes the chance that you will arrive at your destination sans instrument as has happened to me. There's nothing like flying somewhere to play a gig and not having your instrument get there with you. If you must check the instrument, loosen all the strings before committing it to the custody of the baggage handlers. You should also declare excess value for the instrument when you do check it so you can recover its actual cost if it is damaged, lost or destroyed.

How often you change your strings is something of an individual decision based partly on taste and partly on finances. Some people like the bright sound of new strings while others prefer the mellower tone of strings after they've been on the instrument for a couple of days. Whichever you prefer, there comes a time when the strings have reached the limit of their useful life, begin to sound dull, and can no longer be easily tuned. In my experience this typically occurs after the strings have been on for about 3 or 4 weeks. If you can afford to change your strings frequently, it should be done at least monthly. There are exceptions such as the new strings which have a plastic coating on them. They tend to last much longer but are about 3 times more expensive than conventional strings. Your ears will tell you when it's time to change strings. If you can't keep the instrument in tune, the strings are the first place to look for a problem.

Keep your instrument clean! Oil and dirt which accumulates on the surface of the instrument can mar the finish. Clean it when you change your strings. Clean and polish the instrument with a soft, lint-free cloth. Several instrument manufacturers market a polish cloth which is compatible with the varnish or lacquer used on instruments. I have found that Dri-Finish Lemon oil furniture polish is a good and economical alternative which is fine for cleaning and polishing lacquered instruments. Apply the polish with the cloth. Buff the excess polish off with another soft, clean, lint-free cloth. Where the instrument has not been kept clean and there is a build-up of dirt, first use a damp (not wet) cloth to break up the accumulation of dirt and then wipe the instrument thoroughly dry before polishing.

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Eventually dirt will build up on the fingerboard against the frets. I use the lemon oil on a thin cloth to clean the frets and use a toothpick or a fingernail behind the cloth to loosen the dirt by rubbing it parallel to each fret on both sides of it. Then I polish the entire length of the fingerboard with another clean, oiled cloth. Finally, I polish the frets themselves by using the oil on very fine steel wool. I run the steel wool very lightly over the frets along the length of the fingerboard, perpendicular to the frets. Extreme care and a very light touch is essential here to avoid scratching or gouging the wood between the frets with the steel wool. I'll be glad to demonstrate this technique for anyone who is interested. If you have any doubts or questions about this technique, ask before trying it.

Finally, if you absolutely must stow the instrument in a car for any length of time, use common sense. Don't leave it visible and don't put it in your trunk after you've arrived at your destination. Thieves are always alert for opportunities. Instead, stop a few blocks away from your destination and stow it then. If your car does not have a trunk, don't leave it in the car! We'd hate for you to lose that valuable instrument.

Keep Practicing!