



Guitar Talk

with Ken Rightnow

Practice Makes Perfect, or does it?

From a young age, most of us have heard the expression “practice makes perfect”. Whether it is music, sports, or learning a new skill, we are constantly reminded that “practice makes perfect”. But, is it really true?

In theory, practicing should lead to perfection, but it is not necessarily so if your playing is full of mistakes and bad habits. Unfortunately, whatever you practice is what you will remember. Success relies on do something correctly. This is why even the most experienced sports stars have coaches and personal trainers.

Many of us have heard stories of kids being ‘made’ to practice an instrument for an hour a day. These stories always sound like they were chained to their instruments and tortured. But practice doesn’t need to be hard or boring. It should be fun because it is nothing more than playing and wanting to play is the reason you are learning guitar.

Everyone asks me ‘how long should I practice?’ Some people may disagree with this, but in my opinion there is no set time for the ‘perfect’ practice session. The most important thing for a beginner is not how long you practice but how often. Beginners will benefit more from a short session every day than they will from a marathon workout once a week.

I had a student who is an orthopedic surgeon explain it as ‘muscle memory’. In other words, repeated movements will make your muscles remember a particular action. As I sit here typing this article the muscles in my fingers ‘remember’ where the letters are because I learned to touch type by repeatedly typing the same words and phrases. The same principle applies to playing the guitar.

Don’t worry about how long you think you ‘should’ practice. As you get better you will want to play more. All great guitarists have spent a lot of time perfecting their skills. Steve Vai, who is regarded as one of the most amazing guitarists of our time, has an “11 Hour Workout”. While I can’t say whether or not he practices 11 hours every day, I can tell you that he is a phenomenal guitarist who has spent years perfecting his

techniques and continues to push himself even further. Eddie Van Halen is another rock legend who says he stayed in his room and practiced up to 10 hours a day as a teenager. While I don’t advocate wagging school, as he did, you can see my point, the more you practice the better you will become.

Unfortunately, most of us don’t have 10 or 11 hours a day to play guitar. But, as I said earlier, practicing correctly is the key to “practice makes perfect”. It isn’t that difficult but you must be strict with yourself in order to do it. To practice ‘correctly’ I recommend that you do the following things:

- If possible set aside a specific time each day.
- Start out with a warm up exercise if you have one.
- Whatever you want to practice for the day, repeat, repeat, repeat. For example, changing chords can be hard for some beginners. Although millions of people play guitar and it looks easy, it is not a natural thing for your hands to do. By practicing changing just two chords back and forth you will improve faster than by playing through an entire song. You can not just play something once or twice and think that will be enough if you want to get better.
- You would not eat a sandwich in one bite and the same applies to playing a piece of music. Whether it is a song, scales or a solo, you will improve faster if you concentrate on small sections rather than trying to learn a whole piece at once.
- Don’t accept second best. If you make a mistake don’t go on until you get it right.
- Always practice slowly and don’t speed up until you can play something perfectly. I’ve had a few ‘shredders’ tell me that they can play something fast but they can not play it slowly. If you record them and slow it down they can hear that they are covering bad technique and poor playing with a speedy blur of notes.
- If you get hurt, tired or frustrated, give it a break. When you come back next time you will be fresh and enjoy it more.
- Finish by playing something fun, like a song you are good at, or an exercise you really like.