

Chapter 1

Reviewing Guitar Fundamentals

In This Chapter

- ▶ Holding the guitar and sitting and standing with the guitar
- ▶ Understanding tablature
- ▶ Reading chord diagrams, neck diagrams, and rhythm slashes

We know you're anxious to get started, but before you lock and load, bear down, and start drilling away on the hundreds of exercises that await you in this book, take just a moment to first ensure that you're properly set up to do the job. In this chapter, we offer a few gentle reminders regarding some guitar basics. We also provide a refresher on guitar notation. Even if you play guitar often and understand notation, you should check out the "Brushing Up on Guitar Notation" section so you understand how the written music examples in this book work.

Perfecting Your Practice Posture

You probably think we're going to tell you that you *must* practice guitar sitting on the edge of a sturdy (or, in other words, hard) chair with your back straight and your feet flat on the floor. While this posture *is* proper, the truth is that you can practice guitar in whatever position feels natural to you. After you've figured out your favorite posture, you next have to focus on holding the guitar and the pick properly. We give you pointers in this section.

Truth be told, you won't find any benefit to either sitting or standing when you practice. But it usually is more comfortable to sit if you plan to spend a long time practicing. (Most people can sit for longer periods of time than they can stand.) However, you usually stand when you perform, so it's a good idea to practice while standing some of the time.



You should hold the guitar slightly differently depending on whether you're sitting or standing. Here are the general guidelines:

- ✓ **Sitting with the guitar:** Most guitarists, when sitting, prop the guitar on their right leg and hold it in place with their right upper arm, which dangles over the side and allows the right hand to sweep the strings roughly in front of the soundhole (or the pickups if you're playing an electric guitar). You should pull the guitar against your body so that it's snug but not uncomfortably constricting. Make sure your right arm can swing freely from the elbow. If you place your guitar on your left leg, as many classical guitarists do, you may want to elevate your left leg 4 to 6 inches on a small stand, foot stool, or your hard guitar case so you can bring the neck of the guitar even closer to the center of your body. (Another approach is to use a device called a *support*, which lifts the guitar up while allowing you to keep both feet flat on the floor.)
- ✓ **Standing with the guitar:** To play the guitar in a standing position, you use an adjustable strap that positions the guitar to your body size and taste of playing. Some people like to have the guitar up high (above the belt), because this position makes playing easier. But it looks less cool. So many players like to lower the guitar to a position that doesn't seem quite so geeky. In some styles, such as

bluegrass, it's okay to have the guitar up high. But rock 'n' rollers like it way down low. Of course, you should always base your guitar-positioning strategy on what feels most comfortable to you, not what's fashionable. After all, when has fashion ever involved your personal comfort?

Whether you practice while sitting or standing — or do both in equal measure — the key is to be consistent in the way you hold the guitar in each position. If you want a more thorough explanation of holding the guitar and sitting and standing with the guitar (including photographs), check out *Guitar For Dummies*, 2nd Edition.

Brushing Up On Guitar Notation

In this book, we use several notation methods for presenting the music examples and exercises. Keep in mind that you don't have to read music well to get some guidance from the notation. In fact, you don't really have to be able to read music at all if you just use your ears and listen to the CD that accompanies this book. You can get pretty far this way, but you could do better by having at least a passing familiarity with the notation conventions we use. The following sections cover all the notation systems you encounter in this book.

Decoding tablature



Tablature, or just *tab* for short, is a notation system that graphically represents the frets and strings of the guitar. For all the musical examples in this book that have a standard music notation staff (the one with the treble clef), you see a tab staff just beneath it. The tab staff aligns with and reflects exactly what's going on in the regular musical staff above it, but it's in guitar language. Tab is guitar specific, and it tells you what string and fret to play. Use the tab if you're ever unsure as to which fret or string a note falls on.

Figure 1-1 shows a tab staff and some sample notes and a chord. Here are a few points to keep in mind when reading tab:

- ✓ The lines of the tab staff represent guitar strings, from the 1st string on top (high E) to the 6th string on bottom (low E).
- ✓ A numeral appearing on any given line tells you to press, or *fret*, that string at that numbered fret. For example, if you see the numeral 2 on the second line from the top, you need to press down the 2nd string at the 2nd fret (actually, the space between the 1st and 2nd fret, closer to the 2nd metal fret wire).
- ✓ A 0 on a line means that you play the *open string* — that is, unfretted, with no left-hand finger touching the string.
- ✓ When you see stacked notes, as in bar 3 of Figure 1-1, that notation tells you to play the fretted strings all at the same time, which produces a chord. The fretted strings in the figure form a D major chord.

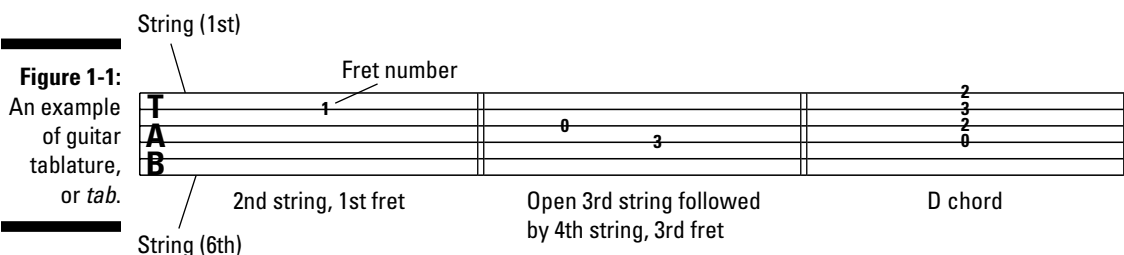


Figure 1-1:
An example
of guitar
tablature,
or *tab*.

Comprehending chord diagrams

A *chord diagram* is a graphic representation of the guitar neck that shows you exactly where to put your left-hand fingers. Figure 1-2 shows the anatomy of a chord diagram. The following list defines each of the different parts:

- ✔ The capital letter above the diagram indicates the name of the chord. Additional letters or numbers that follow define the chord's quality (minor, seventh, and so on).
- ✔ The grid of vertical and horizontal lines represents the fretboard, as if you held the guitar upright and faced the headstock.
- ✔ The six vertical lines represent the guitar strings, with the leftmost line as the 6th (low E) string. The five horizontal lines represent the frets. The thick horizontal line at the top is the nut, so the 1st fret (where you can place your finger) is actually between the nut and the next horizontal line.
- ✔ Dots on vertical lines between horizontal fret lines show you which notes to fret.
- ✔ An *X* above a string means that you don't play it. An *O* above a string means that you play it open (unfretted by a left-hand finger).
- ✔ The numbers below the diagram indicate the left-hand fingering.



Chords appearing on frets above the first four have the starting fret indicated to the right of the diagram. For example, if a chord's starting note is at the 5th fret, you see *5fr:* next to the diagram, indicating the 5th fret.

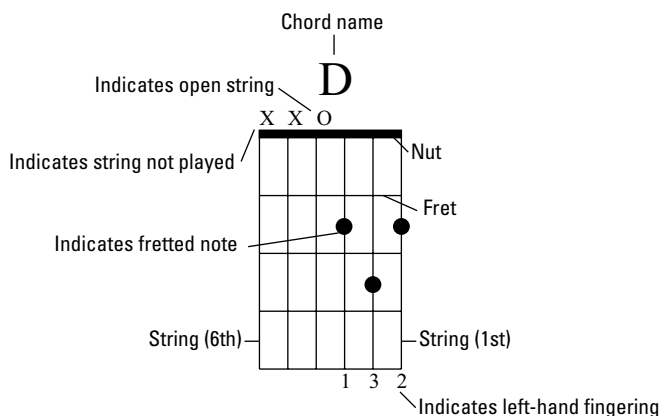


Figure 1-2:
The anatomy of a chord diagram.

Interpreting neck diagrams

In addition to presenting written music examples on a standard music staff and a tab staff, throughout this book we also sometimes show you a pattern on a neck diagram. A *neck diagram* shows several frets of the neck with the low E string appearing at the bottom. It's as if you took a chord diagram and rotated it one quarter turn (90 degrees) counterclockwise, stretched it out sideways, and then added a few more frets. The horizontal lines represent the strings, and the vertical lines represent the frets. But unlike tab, a neck diagram doesn't represent music played over time. Instead, it shows you all the notes at once.

In a neck diagram, dots on the horizontal lines tell you where to place your fingers, and the numbers inside those circles indicate which finger to use. If a dot appears in black with a white numeral, it signifies that the note is either the root (the letter name) of the chord or arpeggio, or the tonic (the note that gives the name) of the scale. Knowing the root and tonic notes enables you to identify the names of the scales, arpeggios, and chords as you move them around the neck to different starting notes. If you aren't sure of the note names on the neck, check the 12-fret neck diagram on the Cheat Sheet. All neck diagrams are accompanied by standard music and tab staves showing the same information (and with the note names below the tab staff and roots circled), but many people find a neck diagram more useful than a staff for learning scales, arpeggios, and chords.

Figure 1-3 shows a neck diagram with the notes of a two-octave major scale pattern in 4th position (meaning that your 1st finger is located at the 4th fret). Note that the roots appear in black circles and are found on the 6th, 4th, and 1st strings. To play the scale from Figure 1-3 in its ascending form, start with the lowest-sounding note (6th string, 5th fret) and proceed note by note to the highest (1st string, 5th fret).

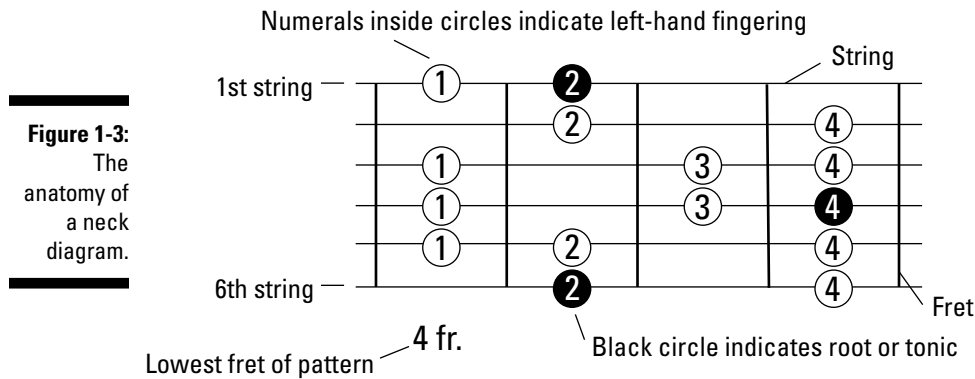


Figure 1-3:
The anatomy of a neck diagram.

Recognizing rhythm slashes

Rhythm slashes (/) make up a shorthand system that tells musicians what chords to play and how long to play them. However, rhythm slashes don't indicate specifically what to play the way notes on a staff do. Say, for example, you see the staff shown in Figure 1-4. The chord symbol tells you to finger a D chord with your left hand. The four slashes tell you to play four strums, four quarter notes, or four beats in the style of the music that you're playing. You don't literally have to stick to four strums, one per beat, just because you see four slashes, however. You just have to be sure to play four beats' worth of music in the appropriate style. But when in doubt, four strums will be fine.

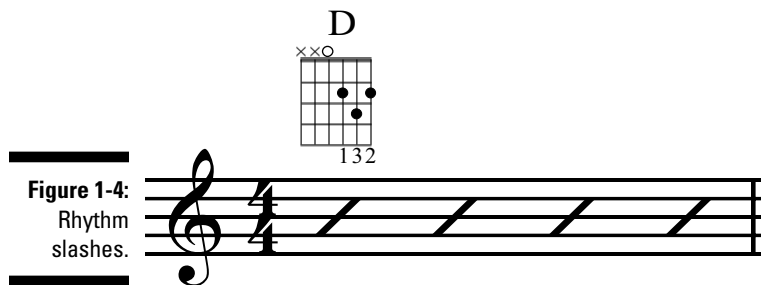


Figure 1-4:
Rhythm slashes.