

At On Track Music we share our LOVE for music by teaching students how to play guitar using an organized, friendly, and motivating approach that allows them to ENJOY their instrument for a lifetime.

Part of meeting that commitment is being sure that students and parents are properly informed about equipment needs for the guitarists at every level, from the entry level beginner to the student who strives to play professionally. Our staff is instructed to give honest, straight forward advise on what types of equipment will best suit your individual needs. They are not commissioned sales persons and will never try to sell you anything that you do not need. Certain staff members are more knowledgeable about equipment than others, that is one reason that I, Scott Graves, devised this buying guide to help students and parents in purchasing decisions. If you have specific questions about any kind of gear, please ask your teacher or the office person, if they are unsure how to answer your question, they may contact me or one of the other staff members who is knowledgeable in that specific area.

Here are some things that you should keep in mind about On Track Music and the buying process in general.

You should never pay the listed retail price for a guitar. All reputable music instrument dealers are prepared to offer a discount amount that is substantially lower than the list price on most guitars and amps that they sell. Discounted percentages vary from retailer to retailer but tend to be at least 20% below the listed retail price of the instrument.

When buying an instrument always compare List price to List Price. You know... apples to apples! Do not let someone mislead you by comparing 'brand X's' selling price with 'brand Y's' retail price (remember, you should never pay retail for a guitar!). The list price of an instrument is indicative of the quality and features that particular instrument possesses. In some cases the brand name of the instrument will account for a higher list price or lower discount.

7 Reasons why you should buy your musical instruments from On Track Music!

- 1: As a student of On Track Music you are entitled to phenomenal discounts on gear that we stock.** We are able to offer much lower pricing to our students because we do not rely on profits from instrument sales in order to meet our overhead. Check around and see. We will always have the best available pricing on the gear that we carry.
- 2: Teacher knowledge:** Our teachers know YOU personally and what you need in order to become a better musician.
- 3: Research:** We have already "done the digging" and found the best instruments available at the best prices.
- 4: Personal Service:** We will take care of your every need with personalized service. Our instruments are quality checked by our staff before you pay anything.
- 5: Easy Pay:** Simply add purchases to your personal account and be on your way!
- 6: We limit our relationship to a few select manufacturers:** There are a ton of brand names on the market. Because our focus is on music education, we have elected to establish excellent relationships with a few primary manufacturers of quality music equipment. When it comes to instrument sales, our primary focus is to help you find the best instrument for your needs that will not give you any problems. Other music stores focus on the immediate sale and getting the buyer out the door quickly so that they can deposit their check in the bank. We know that our students will be returning weekly for lessons. We will not sell you something that we are going to be embarrassed about every time that you show up for your lesson!
- 7: Support Our Team And Keep Prices Low:** When you purchase from On Track, you show our suppliers that we are worthy of the special discounts that they grant us for our students. Please help us so we can continue to help you!

If we do not have what you are looking for, we will direct you to the best place to get it.

Our staff has had years of experience dealing with various local and online retailers. If you are in the market for a brand that we do not carry we are happy to direct you to a retailer that we feel will treat you right. Just ask!

GUITAR BUYERS GUIDE

WHAT THE HECK DO I NEED ANYWAY?

Beginner - Child

We usually recommend that young beginners (6 - 10 years) start with a reduced sized nylon string guitar. Nylon strings are easier on the fingers and the reduced size can usually be played for a few years before having to move up. Electric guitars are also pretty easy on the fingers because of the lighter gauged strings. Keep in mind that electric guitars also require the added expense of a practice amp and guitar cable. I usually recommend that children start on anything you may already have available (as long as it is playable) just to be sure they really do show an interest in the instrument. You may want to consider renting for a month or two just to see how they take to it.

Beginner - Older children to Young Adults

With older children and young adults the nylon string issue is not as critical. The size issue should also be looked at a little differently. An eleven year old may want to go ahead with a guitar that seems just a touch big at the moment because you know that she'll grow into it in the next year or two. Teenagers get excited about electric guitars. It really doesn't matter whether you go acoustic or electric but remember: electrics require amplification. Sometime it's good to capitalize on the excitement that an electric guitar generates. Other times an electric guitar can be a great motivator for practice or incentive for a well mowed lawn. Truthfully, if the student takes to the guitar, he will probably eventually wind up playing both. Students hear all sorts of really cool music being played at On Track. We've had many rockers end up learning fingerstyle acoustic because they see and hear someone else playing it at the studio. Whether acoustic or electric, I usually recommend a quality entry level instrument for this age group. There are plenty of guitars that sell for under \$200.00 that are great instruments and could last you a lifetime. If the student decided to make the next step to a more serious playing level, she will most certainly have a much better knowledge of the instrument and the types of styles she will be playing. These factors will help her with her decision in purchasing a more professional level instrument.

Beginner - Adults

Adults tend to have a pretty good understanding of what they want to play and what they want to spend. The style that you're interested in should dictate the type of guitar that you purchase (acoustic or electric). Many females opt for the concert size guitar when considering an acoustic, it's not as bulky as a full size dreadnaught guitar. If you are looking for a reasonably priced instrument that will provide nice tone and great playability you should probably consider a quality entry level instrument in the acoustic or electric category. If you are reasonably certain that this is going to be a life-long endeavor, and are willing to invest a little more, you should consider a guitar with a retail list price around \$350.00 or more (which you should be able to purchase for substantially less). A solid top acoustic guitar will improve in tonal quality as it ages but requires a bit more care than a laminated top guitar. Electric guitars also improve in tonal quality and overall craftsmanship as the retail price increases.

ANYTHING ELSE?

Yes. No matter what you buy you will want something to carry it in - **a guitar bag or a hard case.** Padded guitar bags are a great way to carry your guitar to and from lessons. They will protect it from light encounters with door jams, table tops, etc. They also have pouches for carrying music, tuners, cables, and other accessories. If you plan on traveling with your guitar, especially on the airlines, a hard case provides far more protection than a padded bag. Most hard cases can also be locked to prevent unwanted tampering.

If you purchase an electric guitar you will need an amplifier if you want to actually hear yourself. **A small practice amplifier** is a great way to go for first timers. You can make a surprising amount of noise with a practice amp and they are great for playing along to the stereo. Most practice amps also include a headphone input so you can inflict little to no pain on the ears of parents, siblings or roommates. You will also need a **guitar cable** to plug your electric guitar into the amplifier.

Additional accessory items include: **Guitar picks** (at .25 cents each picks are a must for beginners). **A guitar tuner is an optional accessory** that makes the learning process easier. **Guitar straps are optional** at first but sooner or later you'll need one if you want to play standing up. **A guitar humidifier is highly recommended for any type of solid wood guitar.** **Another nice option is a guitar stand or guitar wall hanger** for keeping your guitar out of the way but 'at the ready'. All of these optional accessories fall in the \$5.00 to \$20.00 price range.

GUITAR BUYERS GUIDE

WHAT ABOUT THE NEXT STEP?

Once you have established that you truly are a guitar player and you want to make it a more serious endeavor or a life-long hobby, your choices concerning instrument purchases are not as obvious as those of a beginner. Your decisions should more or less be based on what you intend to do with the instrument and what your budget allows. If you are an electric player who simply wants to dabble in acoustic, or vis versa, I would probably follow the guidelines previously suggested for beginners and purchase a quality entry level instrument in your new area of interest. However, if you are wanting to upgrade to the next level and purchase a more professional piece of equipment, here are some things to consider...

Acoustic Guitars

The biggest upgrade that you can make in the area of tone is to purchase an instrument with a solid top. The tonal quality of solid top guitars tends to improve with age. Guitars with laminated tops have fewer problems with weathering (warping and cracking) than solid top guitars but they can never seem to match the rich warm tones that a quality solid top can render. The most expensive acoustics consist of mostly solid wood construction. Some guitars have solid tops, some have solid tops and backs, and some have solid tops, backs and sides. The more solid wood, the better the tone, the higher the price. Solid top guitars can be protected from climatic damage with consistent use of a humidifier. Other items that can affect the pricing of an acoustic guitar are ornamental features like mother of pearl fret inlays and abalone binding or rosettes. The quality of the tuning machines is another item to consider when making your purchase. If you are buying an acoustic guitar as a family heirloom or as an investment, buy one of the high end models of Martin guitars. Martin guitars have been around since the 1800's and, overtime, tend to really increase in value. I had a student come into my studio and ask me to trade him a \$200 acoustic for what he thought was a beat up old guitar that his grandfather had given him. When I saw that the guitar was an older model Martin (probably about 50 years old), I told him that he should have it appraised. It turned out to be worth about \$6000.00. It is not uncommon to see pre WW II Martins going for 30K to 40K! Martins are a great investment but you will probably spend at least \$2000.00 for your instrument.

Electric Guitars

Now you're really talking choices! There are a myriad of preferences when it comes to electric guitars and a huge range of prices to pay.

Humbuckers vs. Single Coils: The two most common sounds produced by electric guitars are the classic sounds of a Gibson Les Paul, which uses 'humbucker' pick-ups, and a Fender Stratocaster, which uses single coil pick-ups. Pretty much every make and model of guitar on the market employes the use of one or both of these style pick-ups. Humbuckers produce a full 'fat' tone that is rampant in Jazz, Rock, and Blues. Single coils produce a tight, brittle tone that has also been a staple of Rock and Blues but is considered the defining guitar tone in Country music. When you think of Humbuckers imagine Led Zeppelin, Carlos Santana, or B.B. King. When you think of single coils imagine Lynard Skynard, The Eagles, or Eric Clapton.

Fixed Bridge vs. Floating Tremolo: Another big factor in your decision will be the choice of a 'fixed bridge' or a 'floating tremolo' system. A good **tremolo system** (also known as a whammy bar) allows the guitarist to do Eighties style 'dive bomb' effects and produce heavy vibratos with the use of the tremolo bar. If you're into Eighties style heavy metal, a tremolo system is a must but you have to get one with a 'Locking Nut'. The locking nut allows you to go crazy on the whammy bar without loosening the strings at the tuning pegs which causes the guitar to go severely out of tune. The only draw back to a tremolo system is that the guitar goes way out of tune when you change the tension on the neck. If you break a string in the middle of a performance you will have to switch to another guitar or you will sound horribly out of tune. It's also tough to do alternate tunings with a tremolo system. Changing your tuning throws the whole system out of whack and can take a long time to correct. A **fixed bridge** does not allow the guitarist to do all of the whammy tricks heard in many types of music, especially Eighties Metal. However a fixed bridge is very easy to use when changing to an alternate tuning. Fixed bridge guitars are common in Classic Rock and have come back into fashion since the Nineties with the advent of all of the alternate tunings that artists are using today. If you break a string on a fixed bridge guitar it should stay reasonably tuned until you finish your song (then you can change your string while your singer tells a joke).

Most electric guitars with a list price in the \$500 range should pretty much be a professional quality instrument. As with acoustics, the higher the list price... the better the over all quality. As an investment, a Gibson Les Paul makes a lot of sense. They tend to hold their value. A new one will cost you a couple of grand. After an initial hit on depreciation (10-20 years) it should come back to sell for more than what you paid for it. If you're lucky enough to find one that is late 1950's or so, it may sell in the \$100,000.00 range! But if you don't already have one, that may be what you have to pay to get it.

GUITAR BUYERS GUIDE

Acoustic/Electric Guitars

The biggest thing to keep in mind when you buy an acoustic/electric guitar is that **you are not buying an acoustic that also double as an electric** (no matter what Esteban says!). The reason you buy an acoustic/electric is to amplify the natural sound of an acoustic guitar so that you can play in a performance situation. Using a microphone on an acoustic guitar is passable if it's just you and your guitar. As soon as you include other band members, feedback and volume become such an issue that using a microphone simply becomes impractical and frustrating. The guidelines for buying an acoustic / electric are pretty much the same as those for a standard acoustic guitar. If the instrument is going to be used as your sole acoustic guitar, you may want to consider the tonal advantages of solid wood. If your main purpose is to play with a band, the solid top won't make as much of a difference when it's mixed with the drums, bass, electric guitars, etc. The quality of the onboard pick-up, E.Q., and volume controls will play a big roll in your tonal quality when you are on stage with a group.

Amplifiers

Amplifiers are as individual as the people who play them. When you are considering a professional level amplifier it is extremely important that you actually play it before you buy it, preferably with the same instrument that you intend to use it with. The discussion of amplifiers could go on for days so I'm going to lay down just the basics.

Tube amps: Most guitar guru's prefer the sound of tube based amplification. In the mid 20th century vacuum tubes were used in every kind of electronic device from televisions and radios to ancient computers. They were also the main electronic component in guitar amplifiers. Because much of modern music was defined in that era, the sound of tube amplification is what we associate with electric guitars. Although the rest of the modern world has moved on to transistors and microchips, guitarists just can't seem to give up their love for tube amplification (kind of like giving up your mullet). Tube amps are great but they are pricey. You can usually expect to pay at least several hundred dollars for a good tube amp (although there are a few models that go for less) and don't be shocked when you see them in the two thousand dollar range. If you are a professional level player who is ready to make a big investment a tube amp may be what you're looking for.

Solid State amps: Solid state technology is the 1970's answer to power transference and has worked its way into the realm of guitar amplification. Solid state amplifiers tend to be much less expensive than tube based amps and many people would have a difficult time hearing the difference in the tone. Decent solid state amps can start as low as the mid \$200's and offer players a lot of "loud" for their money. There are also 'hybrid' amps that combine one stage of *tube* amplification with another stage of *transistorized* amplification in an effort to render improved tone at a lower cost.

Digital Modeling amps: The latest craze in amplification is the advent of *digital modeling*. The new digital amplifiers claim to replicate the sound wave patterns produced by various types of vintage guitar amplifiers, allowing the guitarist to have a wide range of sound capabilities in just one unit. Actually they're pretty cool (some guitar buffs would shoot me for saying that - probably the same guys who refuse to cut their hair). As with most of the digital technology, you can get a lot of bang for the buck with a digital guitar amplifier. There are several excellent brands on the market that allow you a cost effective way to have access to some great sounds.

Is bigger better? That depends on how old you are. When I was young and buff I hoisted my \$3000.00 Marshall full stack (tube amp head plus two separate cabinets each with four - 12 inch speakers) from club to club and show to show. I probably scared more club owners than I impressed with my monster rig, although it was great for impressing the ladies. Now that I am older, I find that ladies are impressed with the fact that I can still walk in an upright position. Therefore I have opted for a smaller, lighter combo style amplifier that is much easier on my back. A **stack style** amplifier has an amplifier unit (all the controls and stuff) that is separate from the speaker cabinets. A **combo amp** combines the amplifier section with the speaker in one more compact design. If you are playing professionally your sound is probably going to be reinforced through a p.a. system. A sound man will mic one or two of your speakers and that's it. Sure a stack style system will produce a lot more sound but you only need enough sound to hear yourself on stage. The sound engineer wants control of your volume so he can mix you with the other instruments and make you sound great to the people in the audience. If you are practicing with your buddies in your basement, and you don't have a p.a. system, you will need something that is loud enough to keep up with the drums. Most good combo amps pack plenty of punch to get the job done, it's just a matter of positioning them where you can hear them well. Overall, there is no right or wrong when it comes to a stack system vs. a combo amp. It is largely a matter of preference and what you're willing to carry.