

Total Beginner Guitar

Adult students find it takes pluck to learn something new | BY KIM COOPER FINDLING

We meet once a week, this group of 15 adults who no doubt are intelligent and fully functioning contributors to society all of the rest of the time. But these Tuesday nights we morph into small children—not just in terms of ability, but also demeanor. ■

We giggle a lot. We giggle because we are really, really bad at this. And, honestly, it is amazingly silly how our grown-up fingers won't cooperate with our brains, and how our brains can

barely understand the information on the stands in front of us. It's so silly, in fact, that we kind of like it. It's been a long time since we allowed ourselves to be this goofy or this clumsy. So once a week, we revel in ineptitude, navigating the world of Total Beginner Guitar.

Just before my 32nd birthday, I picked up a guitar for the first time. When my family laughed out loud at my birthday wish for a guitar and lessons, I borrowed an old guitar from my friend Jennifer and signed up for a group class. Total Beginner sounded like the right place to start.

The first session introduced us to the chords "C" and "G." The instructor handed out pages of diagrams that were to indicate finger placement. As I struggled to will my mind to unscramble the lines and letters (representing strings) and numbers (representing fingers), the whole alphabet soup started to blur and dance on the page. I stared down at what I'd previously considered "my" hands and struggled to stretch my fingers to the proper strings, which I realized weren't the proper strings when the gentleman next to me reached over and gently placed my fingertips one by one on completely different strings.

But by the clamor of competing sounds around our little circle, it seemed many of my classmates weren't absolutely certain about the chord of "G," either. One redheaded guy in the corner had his guitar upside down over his head, shaking it to release the pick he'd lost inside. The instructor strummed on loudly, calling out chords and compassionately ignoring those of us who were in particularly bad straits.

I went home and practiced. My husband got to ducking and leaving the room when he saw me holding a pick. "Honey, I don't think anyone's playing *Row Your Boat* on the Top 40 right now," he'd say with a wicked smirk. "There could really be an opportunity for you to make it big." With a haughty stare I'd break into a robust version of *You Are My Sunshine*, with only brief hesitation before each chord change.

I became a little bit obsessed. Lying awake in the middle of the night, I'd think of scales, "G" to "F" and back down. "A" key" chords, "G" key" chords in different combinations—that tricky B7. Driving long distances, I'd do mental run-throughs. Patterns were sticking; I was learning.

Then came the class when we learned to read music and play simple melodies on two strings. I hadn't worked my brain so hard in ages. It became simply a big scrunched-up muscle in my skull. I realized at that moment that Total Beginner Guitar was the first time I had learned anything new, really totally new, in years. Sure, like most of us, I regularly concentrate, study, focus and organize.

But those are familiar skills, long-ago-mastered competencies. I recognized suddenly that if it weren't for Total Beginner Guitar, I might have let my whole life slip by without the honest struggle of brand-new learning.

And struggle is exactly what I am doing as my mind clenches desperately, trying to remember which note that dot on line three of the musical bar is, and if it's a "C," then where do my fingers go and on which string? I miss half of the notes in the melody. But that bass-strum thing we try next, I am OK at that. And even though, mostly, I feel like a marginally talented 3-year-old, I leave class elated. This Total Beginner Guitar is good work in the classic sense: difficult and challenging, but deeply satisfying. My brain feels good; I want more.

When I get home I whip out the guitar, mumbling, "Third finger on the third fret of the 'B' string. ..." My husband heads for the basement. "You're really going to miss me when I go on tour," I call after him.



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