



Music Degrees and Rock Guitarists, Part I

Many guitar players learn music theory and consider a degree in music, but wonder what they will gain from a traditional four-year degree and whether it's worth it. The answer isn't the same for everyone, but here's what I can tell you about prerequisites, what you'll learn, what the experience is good for as a rock player, classical player, and composer, and what you can do with the degree and knowledge after.

Since I did not attend schools like the Guitar Institute of Technology (GIT) or Berkeley, no comparison is being made here, but this does not reflect a bias.

My Background

My pre-college experience with rock guitar was typical in that I generally ignored theory. Even when taught to me, I had little use for it and quickly forgot it. Then I took some courses at the local junior college and found it interesting, but as a budding classical musician, not a rocker. It still seemed largely useless except modes and progressions.

After two years of classes, I finally succeeded in merging classical theory into my rock playing. This means embedding progressions, structural elements and key changes, theme and variation, and two and three-part writing (on a single guitar). It also made it much easier to write melodies and solos, and to achieve what I wanted. I was suddenly a much better guitarist and composer. Two years later I graduated with a Bachelors of Music in classical guitar, Magna Cum Laude.

Colleges: Junior Vs. Full

Junior (or two-year) colleges are a good alternative to full four-year universities, for several reasons. They cost less, for one, but such schools are full of people who aren't sure if the path they are pursuing is right for them. This makes it easier to change your mind and major. You can change specialties within the music curriculum or drop music altogether with less red tape. You don't even have to follow the curriculum in order and can pick and choose courses, such as pursuing music theory but not ear training. Of course, if you become serious later, you will have some making up to do, but at least you can explore without committing. At some schools, you can even take music courses without being a music major. An audition may not be required, either.

At a four-year university, music teachers generally assume you are preparing for a future as a professional musician. There is more pressure and strict adherence to requirements. The caliber of musicians around you will be higher, but don't assume the other students know so much more than you. Many know little about chord theory, modes, key changes, musical form, counterpoint, music history, and orchestration. Sure, there's always that "violinist since age three guy", but many started as teenagers and are as casual about it as you. This won't be true at Juilliard, but the average school has average musicians, too. Don't be intimidated. Remember, the whole point is to get educated. If they already know so much, why would they be there?

Prerequisites for Admission to Music College

This changes depending on the college, but four-year schools generally require an audition on your instrument regardless of what your major is (guitar, composition, music education, etc.) because they still want to know how good a musician you are. This is a stumbling block for rock guitarists, since a frequent requirement is to play three classical guitar pieces, one from each of the romantic, classical, and modern eras. You can't go in there and play "Eruption". One way around this is to start at a junior college, where an audition is often not required.

There is no prerequisite for reading music, so you can still be admitted if you can't read at all. You'll learn to read fluently during the constant music theory exercises and classes such as chorus, ear training, and your private guitar lessons, which provide no escape from the treble and bass clefs. With time, your ability to manipulate pitches will soar astronomically as a result.

During guitar lessons, you may have to memorize the music phrase by phrase. I did this for a long time and only used sheet music as a reminder of where I was in the piece. Your teacher will not expect you to simply start playing music put in front of you, even after 4 years. It's just not realistic for most, though you will get faster. Guitar music is more challenging because the same notes can be played in different places, so you generally have to figure out what chord you're going to be holding at every moment (the music does not have chord charts on it), which is one reason your instructor exists. Remember, you are there to learn, not to pretend you already know.

No knowledge of music theory or even the genre is assumed, and schools generally teach you from the ground up, from what a major chord is to who Beethoven was and where he fits in history.

Typical Curriculums

It can be safely said that the music curriculum neatly divides itself into the first two years and the last two years. One reason for this is that there are typically two years (four semesters) of music theory and ear training, which are basic courses along with class piano. You also have your private lesson (guitar) and large ensemble (chorus). The last two years are the more interesting and complicated courses: counterpoint, musical form, conducting, music history, and orchestration (guitar and chorus continuing). These are not the same everywhere, so check with the school.

Music Theory is a general term that lumps together many subjects but is all the nuts and bolts of notes. It explains and demonstrates key signatures, time signatures, scales (and alternate versions called modes), intervals, chords, keys, modulation (key changes), music notation, and how to write simple two, three, and four-part harmony. It starts simple and continuously builds on its own knowledge. It is typically four semesters long and the first one can feel the most difficult not just because you're starting, but because there's more memorization and less practical "hands-on" application. In my experience, the second, third, and fourth semesters were more similar to each other, with increasingly complicated chords and key changes.

Ear Training and Sight Singing is the most feared course ever invented and goes on for four semesters. Welcome to your own personal "American Idol" experience. This course goes in parallel to music theory partly because as you learn about something in theory, you are now trained to recognize what it sounds like. The teacher will perform things on the piano, such as a scale, mode, interval, chord, melody, rhythm, or phrase of chords, and you're expected to write down what it was accurately (after hearing it maybe three times). That's the easy part. What frightens everyone is that you have to demonstrate that you know what a melody on paper sounds like by singing it from your

desk while everyone listens. Don't worry, you normally get to practice as much as two-dozen melodies outside of class. The saving grace here is that everyone is as petrified as you, and this is how freshmen music students bond. Misery loves company. To practice, it is advisable to work with a piano, which is one reason you're taking class piano.

Class Piano is usually required because it's expected that all music professionals will have at least a passing familiarity with how to play a piano. It can be one or two years. You are generally in a room full of other players, each with your own electric piano that you can't hear unless you put on the headphones. You won't be expected to play great piano music, but if you think that's a relief, consider this: you'll probably end up playing stuff like "Mary Had a Little Lamb" harmonized with a couple chords. If you find this as horrible as I did, you may opt for private piano lessons, which while harder on the hands, is kinder on your soul. You'll need permission, however, and possibly an audition. You may also have to face a performance "jury" as described below.

Guitar is the heart of your degree, so you'll have an hour-long private lesson with your classical guitar teacher for four years. You'll learn technique, exercises, etudes, and representative pieces of the classical guitar repertoire from the 16th-century to today. It gets harder and more demanding as you progress. At the end of each semester, you'll face a "jury": three faculty members who have a list of what pieces and exercises you are prepared to play. For ten minutes, they can make you play anything off the list. There are other performance requirements, such as a solo junior recital (30 minutes), a solo senior recital (60 minutes), and a small ensemble performance (such as a four movements sonata with at least one other performer). One of the greatest advantages here is that you will learn the notes on the guitar neck, at least below the ninth fret, fluently.

Chorus (Large Ensemble): As a guitarist, for your large ensemble requirement, you will be thrown into the college chorus for four years because the orchestra doesn't have a place for you. The college chorus is made up of voice majors, theater majors, and "the others": people who either don't play an orchestral instrument well enough to be in the orchestra, or whose instrument won't be in the orchestra very often (such as a harpist or even piano majors). Through practice, it is relatively easy to sing even complicated music at the same time as a group. The voice teachers seldom single out "the others" to sing alone. They know who you are and have some mercy, but they do expect to see you trying and gradually succeeding.

Counterpoint is two or more independent melodies and is often two different semesters: vocal or 16th-century counterpoint, which is different from instrumental or 18th-century counterpoint. You may only have to take the latter, which is more relevant. The four-part writing you did in music theory helped prepare you for this. There are rules for how the "voices" can move, and it gets harder as you reach three and four-part counterpoint. You will likely have to write things like a canon, invention, or fugue, though they only have to be technically correct, not musically enjoyable. Of great importance here is learning to spot variations on the theme through analysis of written music. If you're a composer, seeing how the greats did this will greatly augment your ability to create more material out of your original idea. This is one of the most valuable things to gain from a music degree.

Musical Form explains the internal structure of all those things you've heard about: canon, fugue, sonata, symphony, and so on. These are larger scale structures that are made up of many smaller forms, all the way down to the phrase. Naturally, you start learning the simple ones and work your way up. These structures are defined by chord progressions, key changes, and variations. The elements of these structures can be used in rock music without the musical form itself, and can be extremely useful.

Conducting will give you an appreciation of the conductor's job in training an orchestra to perform to his interpretation, but won't help you much.

Music History is condensed into two semesters for an overview and frame of reference for everything you're learning. You'll listen to a lot of music so you understand what music of various periods sounds like. This is less technical, and on the level of personal enrichment, is possibly the most rewarding course. Now when you hear a snippet of classical music somewhere, you know it sounded like a Beethoven symphony, and what the significance of that music is, not to mention that if you wanted to hear the whole thing, you at least stand a prayer of finding a CD of it.

Orchestration will certainly challenge your reading ability. There are at least twelve staves and three clefs, plus transposing instruments (the note on the page might say C, but it's really a B flat). You'll learn the instrument ranges and how to orchestrate for each group (strings, woodwinds, brass) and combine them. This may not your rock music, except for seeing how material can be spread across multiple instruments, but will change the way you hear symphonies. You may have to orchestrate something and get to hear the school orchestra play it. You may even get to conduct it yourself.

A Better Rocker?

For a rock guitarist, there are so many benefits to a music degree that this section became a second article titled "Music Degrees and Rock Guitarists, Part 2". This is a second major focal point aside from the content of a typical music degree. These benefits in the next article include:

- Knowing how to write variations
- Effective use of keys
- Writing multiple parts, including dual leads and harmony more easily
- More sophisticated arranging of guitar parts
- Being able to create much more emotional, complicated, or sophisticated music
- Significantly easier writing of lead guitar that is more melodic and does what you want it to

After College

Some think that the only point of a degree is to later get a job, especially in that field. While this is true in the practical sense, you are an artist, too, and if you never hold a music related day job again, you can still benefit enormously from your training. How many other fields can claim that?

Still, possible jobs include composing, arranging (orchestration), performing paid gigs (such as weddings), and teaching private lessons. To teach at any formal institution such as high school or college, you'll need a music education degree instead of a classical guitar one. If you want to teach college level courses, you'll need a master's degree and probably a doctorate, but positions are rare due to the tenure of existing music professors. Many working musicians hold multiple jobs and have little job security, so if this isn't for you, what then?

That's where working in another field comes in, a prospect that leads many to snidely claim a music degree is useless, but this is nonsense. For starters, a degree is a degree. You've still proven to prospective employers that you're mature enough to see it through. Don't discount this. It's important. Do you think people go to college just to have specified knowledge? They don't. Many people change careers several times throughout their lives and don't have a degree in the field in which they are now

working. The fact that you've got a degree can be actually more important than what the degree is in, and if nothing else in college appeals to you, a music degree is far better than no degree at all.

Conclusion

People like to make fun of music degrees, but at the risk of being ridiculed, I'm very proud of my degree, my experience, my musical knowledge, my understanding of a truly specialized field that few understand (which makes me feel quite privileged and lucky), and most importantly, that I am able to do one of my most cherished things in my life so much better than before. I was always surprised when other music students complained about their music classes when I took more music courses than required. Maybe I'm just a geek (yes, I did do the extra credit stuff), but I thought the details of music were fascinating. I had always been an average student, but my love of music made me graduate with honors. And yes, it is an honor, one that I wear on my sleeve, thank you very much.

Be sure to read "Music Degrees and Rock Guitarists, Part 2", coming soon.

Biography

Randy Ellefson is an instrumental guitarist with a Bachelors of Music in Classical Guitar, Magna Cum Laude. His debut album was released in June 2004 on Guitarosity Records. The album's title, *The Firebard*, is a nod to his experience with tendinitis, which took away his playing for five years before he fully recovered it and rose from his ashes. For more details, mp3s, tabs, articles, videos and other cool stuff, visit the official site, www.randyellefson.com, or email Rand at mail@randyellefson.com.