

How to Attach a Guitar Strap, and Repair Small Dents and Scratches in a Guitar

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It is surprising to me how many “hits” I get on my web site that are directed to it by search engines responding to queries about how to attach a guitar strap to an acoustic guitar, and how to fix small dents or scratches in a guitar. Now, I am not a guitar repairman by profession or training, but I will tell you what I do. If there is an expert out there on the Web who believes that the advice that I am giving is not good, or who has better advice, please let me know, and I will pass it along.

Now why would you want to fix a guitar strap or a dent or scratch by yourself? Why not take the guitar to a local guitar shop and have a guitar professional tend to the job? Well, I don't know your reasons, but I have my own. First, I have spent much of the last ten years overseas (i.e., outside of the US), in countries where there are not even guitars for sale, much less guitar shops or guitar repairmen (Malawi, Botswana, Zambia, Ghana, Bangladesh, and Egypt, with stints in Toronto, Canada, Charlotte, North Carolina, and Clearwater, Florida (my present home in the US)). If I want to buy a guitar or supplies (strings, picks, straps, tuners, music books), I have to fly to Johannesburg, South Africa. If I have a dent in my guitar and I want it fixed, I have to do it myself.

My second reason for repairing my guitar myself is that I take satisfaction in doing things by myself.

By the way, I should add that you can get some excellent buys on guitars overseas. Worldwide, you can buy a perfectly good guitar nowadays for about USD300. But overseas, you can get fabulous quality for a fraction of the prices in US stores. In 1978, I had a contract in the Philippines. I discovered a small guitar store on E de los Santos Avenue. The shop where they made the guitars was in the back of the store. It was called Guitarmasters. I have not been back to the Philippines since 1981, and so I have not idea whether the company still exists. I bought three guitars from them, on three different trips, for USD100. Now at that time, you could buy a Yamaha guitar in the US for about the same price at that time. But the sound (tone, volume, duration) of the Guitarmasters guitar was incredible! It did not have a truss rod running through the neck (as did my Yamaha FG-75, which was a steel-string guitar), and I worried about whether it might warp, but none of the three that I bought did (I eventually gave two of them away, and have only the third one today).

Now, the point that I was making was about getting good buys on guitars overseas. While last at my home in Clearwater, in 2001, I visited a local guitar manufacturer. The price of his guitars was in the USD3,000 range! Now, the price of a Guitarmasters guitar today is probably more than USD100, which was the price in 1981, but I can assure you that it is not USD3000!

When I arrived on my current assignment in Lusaka, Zambia, in February, 2002, I purposely did not bring a guitar with me, and planned to purchase one in Johannesburg since I knew that we would be visiting friends there. I actually ended up buying two – both Spanish guitars. They have beautiful sounds. I spent USD300 for one. That is all I

really planned to buy, but I fell in love with another, which cost USD1,000. Now, I just don't spend that kind of money on a guitar. For some reason, however, my wife insisted that I buy it, so I did. It is fabulous, and I play it almost every day.

Oh, well, on to the topics of this article.

How to Attach a Guitar Strap

First, I assume that you have already purchased a guitar strap, and that it has a "buttonhole" in each end. If your guitar has two knobs on it, one at the bottom end of the guitar body, and the other at the neck end, or fretboard end, of the body, you simply slip the buttonholes over these knobs and you are ready to go. Now, a five-year-old could figure that out, so I assume that the reason you have a problem and are looking for advice is that there are no knobs on your guitar for a strap, or maybe just one knob. If there is just one knob, it would be at the bottom end of the body, not at the neck end.

Now, there are several cases to consider, and a couple of different approaches, and I will mention each of them. Perhaps the simplest method is the method used by Willie Nelson. He takes a soft, rather narrow strap, which is tied into a loop, and has a metal hook on one end. He places the other end of the strap around his neck, pulls the strap down his chest and behind and under the guitar and up around to the front side, and he then hooks the hook into the bottom of the sound hole. The advantage of this method is that the strap is smaller – it can fit in your pocket. The disadvantage is that the hook tends to pull out on the face of the guitar. This is a little disconcerting. If you have ever tried to play an Ovation-style guitar, with a round back, you will be reminded of the feeling, but in reverse. (The round-back guitar tends to slip away from you. This is particularly annoying if you are seated, with the guitar in your lap.) Another possible drawback of the hook-in-the-sound-hole is damage to the guitar. The hook is placing a lot of stress on a small, unbraced part of the instrument – the edge of the sound hole. This may cause damage, particularly if there is inlay work around the sound hole (ivory, mother of pearl, different color woods). It may even affect the sound to have the strap connected to the sound hole, since this would slightly deaden the sound-board front of the guitar.

(Update 27 December 2008. A lot of people must have gotten guitars for Christmas – this article always gets a few "hits" a day, but starting a few days ago, it is now getting about 100 hits a day, which is a lot for an article on my website. I want to point out that the guitar strap that I refer to above as "Willie Nelson's" type is in fact properly referred to either as a "classical guitar strap" or an "acoustic guitar strap." Such straps are commercially available over the Internet (e.g., at Amazon), but I have never found one in a music store. The standard (less expensive) ones have the single hook at the bottom of the sound hole (viewed from the front in play position, which would actually be the right-hand side of the guitar if in upright position viewed from the front), as I described above, and there is also a model that has two hooks, opposing each other (i.e., one at the bottom and one at the top). The hooks are nylon, which will not scratch the guitar. You can also order "strap buttons" to place at the top of the neck, just below the heads.)

For the second case, let's assume that you have a knob on the bottom of your guitar, but not at the neck end. In this case, you will simply place the buttonhole in the strap around the knob at the bottom end of the guitar. Then, what do you do with the other end – where do you attach it, and how? I shall assume that there is a cord through the other

buttonhole of the strap – if not, I will tell you how to attach a cord in the paragraph that follows. You simply loop the cord around the neck of the guitar, just above the “nut” and just below the heads. If the cord tends to slip over the nut, covering part of fretboard above the first fret, then loop the cord around the first head.

If your strap has just buttonholes in each end, and no cord on one end, then here is how to attach one. Take a shoelace or piece of rawhide, fold the ends together, and tie a knot near the ends. Push this shoelace or rawhide loop (the end away from the knot) through one of the buttonholes, and then through the loop itself on the other side of the buttonhole. Pull it tight, so that the knot is at the very end, away from the buttonhole.

The last case to consider is where there are no strap-knobs at all on your guitar. As I mentioned, I recently purchased two nice guitars that were made in Spain, and they have no knobs. That is because a Spanish guitar is typically played sitting down, and you need a strap for playing while standing up. Well, what do you do? First, you can buy knobs in any guitar store. They come with a hole in them and a screw. To attach a knob to your guitar, you simply drill a small hole in the end of the body of the guitar (in the center, where a cello or viola or bass would have a post), and screw in the knob (the hole that you drill should be somewhat smaller than the screw, but not a lot smaller). You can add some epoxy glue under the knob, for added strength. The other end of the strap you attach to the neck with the cord. It is important that the screw go into a wood brace, however, and not just in the thin wall of the guitar. If the guitar had been manufactured with a knob, this is the way that it would be made. If you cannot see inside the guitar body (flashlight, mirror) to determine whether there is a brace into which the screw will go, I would be reluctant to drill a hole in your guitar. So what do you do in this case? You could just go to a guitar shop and let the repairman figure it out, but since you are surfing the web to find an answer, this evidently does not appeal to you. I have put a knob on one guitar by drilling a hole into the end, and it worked fine. But on the two nice Spanish guitars that I bought not too long ago, I just couldn't bring myself to drill a hole in them. They are not just musical instruments, but works of art – they are beautiful, and I really don't want to drill holes in them. So, what to do?

Well, what I do is to use clear silicone cement (the kind you put around sinks and bathtubs) and attach a plastic hook. I do not attach a small knob, because it doesn't hold well – the base of a small knob (the size that would fit the strap buttonhole) is small and so there is not much cement holding it in place; the strap is somewhat away (displaced) from the side of the guitar and so it creates torque (sideways, twisting force) on the knob and eventually pulls it off. Instead, I use the silicone cement to glue a small hook on the end of the guitar. The kind of hooks that I use are plastic (nylon preferred, for its strength) kitchen towel or “hotpad” hooks – they usually come in a package of three, and are available (as is the clear silicone cement) in any hardware or supermarket, in the kitchen accessories aisle. They usually have sticky backs, and a short, angular hook. The backs are big (much larger than the base of a small knob), so there is much surface to cement. Now you might ask, since the hooks already have sticky backs, why don't you just stick the hook on the guitar? Well, there are two reasons. First, the bottom of the guitar is slightly rounded, so that the contact of the back of the hook to the guitar is not perfect. Second, you don't know just how strong the sticky stuff is. You know how strong silicone cement is – very strong! And the nice thing about it is that if you screw up, and put the hook in the wrong place, you can peel it off and do it again without damaging the guitar. If you use contact cement or some other permanent glue, you cannot take the hook off without damaging the finish of your guitar.

I attached a kitchen towel hook to one of my guitars several years ago, and to another about a year ago, and neither has come off. But I do not play much standing up, so perhaps my experience is not the best guide concerning the permanence of this method.

Another thing I have tried is to purchase small soft-plastic (vinyl or nylon) nametag holders, which have a metal ring in one end. This did not work very well. The ring comes out of the tag perpendicular to the surface of the guitar, so you have to glue the nametag holder on with the ring end slightly raised. And then there is the problem of attaching the cord – you have to tie and untie the cord through the metal ring, each time you want to use the strap.

By the way, I have attached straps at the neck end of the body of the guitar, and also at the head. I prefer attaching the strap the head, but there does not appear to be a lot of difference. One problem that arises is that there is usually not a flat place to glue a hook to, so you are probably going to have to drill a hole. Perhaps it causes less stress on the guitar to attach it to the body at the neck end of the body, rather than on the head, since this manner of connection causes a sideways torque on the neck where it connects to the body. The advantage of using the head, if there is no knob at the neck end of the body, is that you do not have to attach a knob. I have never had a neck come loose from the body, so the issue of sideways torque may be a non-issue. You may have noticed that solid body (electric) guitars always have the knob attached on the body below the neck. Well, solid-body guitars are generally played while standing up, and so they always have knobs. If your guitar does not have strap knobs, it is surely an acoustic guitar – and probably a “classical” (“folk,” nylon-string, Spanish) guitar, rather than a “Western-style” (steel-string) guitar. In my case, I like to play country and western songs, but on a classical (nylon-string) guitar. And if I am invited to play for a group, I often stand up. So I need to have a strap on my guitar, even though it is a classical style.

I wondered prior to trying this approach whether the silicone cement would hold, but it appears to hold quite well. I thought that I might have to roughen (sand) the surface of the guitar slightly where I glued the hook, but that was not necessary. The silicone cement sticks quite well even to the shiny surface of the guitar.

How to Repair Small Dents and Scratches in a Guitar

No matter how careful you are with your guitar, it seems that it eventually gets nicked. In most cases, all that happens is that the finish is marred, but once in a while there is a small dent. How do you fix it? Well, you don't need to put in some wood filler, such as “Plastic Wood.” What I do is to place a small drop of water on the dent. The water is absorbed by the wood, and the wood swells back to its original shape. The method works best if the wood is not torn, but just dented. The water drop has to remain on the dent for some time, sometimes just a few minutes, but usually longer for the dent to come fully out. It depends on how hard the wood is. The method works quite well.

If you have a bad scratch, what do you do? Well, maybe I've been lucky, but I have not had to deal with that problem on a guitar, but I have addressed it on pieces of furniture. I would not sand the scratch. If you do, you risk making the problem far worse than it was. You can either leave it as it is, or paint it with some shellac. Note well that I said *shellac*, and not *varnish*. Shellac stays pretty much on the surface of the wood, whereas varnish is absorbed deeper into it. Also, varnish generally contains stain, and you don't

want to end up by simply emphasizing the scratch rather than minimizing it. If you don't have any shellac, and don't want to buy a whole pint for a small scratch, you may use clear nail polish. If you have purchased an older guitar that is somewhat scratched up, and decide to refinish it, remember to use shellac, not varnish. Since the varnish is absorbed more into the wood, it can change the tone more than the shellac.

Before I paint over a scratch, I place water along it, and let it absorb and draw the wood back to its original shape, just as I do for a small dent.

Good luck!

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