

HOW PROS PRACTICE

Practice Habits of 20 Professional Guitarists

Insights from jazz, blues, and jam guitarists on
routines, mindset, and how they keep their playing sharp

*Vivid
Guitar*

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★ **Key Themes & Takeaways** — What pros agree on

About This Guide

What makes a great guitarist practice differently from an average one? That question drove every interview published in the Vivid Guitar newsletter. This guide compiles practice insights from 20 working professional guitarists — spanning jazz, blues, funk, Americana, and improvised music — into one concentrated resource.

These aren't generic tips from textbooks. They come from players who have toured internationally, recorded with legends, taught at Berklee, performed at the Village Vanguard, appeared on Saturday Night Live, and earned Grammy nominations. The insights reflect real-world, hard-won wisdom about what actually works.

You'll notice recurring themes — the power of transcription, the danger of mindless scale-running, the importance of feel over theory, and the surprising role that restraint and listening play in elite practice. You'll also find approaches that contradict each other, which is the point: there is no single path, but there are principles that keep showing up.

Read it straight through, or dip in for the players who interest you most. Either way, you'll walk away with concrete ideas you can bring to your next practice session.

01 Brad Barr

The Barr Brothers / The Slip

PRACTICE APPROACH

Brad starts every session with a drone app (Dhwani Tanpura), singing simple pentatonic lines before picking up the guitar. This breath-first approach connects his voice to his hands and centres his focus. From there he moves into chromatic exercises, varying note groupings, and what he calls 'cells' — three-note structures built from two intervals that he moves through inversions and chromatic shifts. He also practises over bebop changes regularly.

★ KEY IDEA: Sing before you play

Starting with the voice before touching the guitar connects breath to the instrument and grounds the session in musicality rather than mechanics. Brad also swears by transcribing Hank Mobley solos as a way to build vocabulary that lives in the ear first.

“Remembering to breathe, being in love with my tone, and transcribing Hank Mobley solos.”

02 Adam Brisbin

NYC Session Guitarist — Buck Meek, Cassandra Jenkins

PRACTICE APPROACH

Adam's current practice centers on lightness — specifically, an exercise where he barely presses down with the fretting hand, almost just touching the strings while keeping the metronome running. The goal is to discover how much tone and clarity can be achieved with minimal effort. He finds that lighter touch produces better tone and leaves mental bandwidth free to think ahead and construct more coherent improvisations.

★ KEY IDEA: Less pressure = more music

Most guitarists grip and press too hard. Adam's exercise of barely fretting notes exposes how much tension is wasted and how much tone is being choked. He also uses song-a-day accountability groups to generate creative output without overthinking, turning finished pieces into fodder for later use.

“I'm trying to see how much I can do with as little effort as possible.”

03 Tim Watson

Brooklyn Jazz / Village Vanguard / Free Improvisation

PRACTICE APPROACH

Tim freely admits he struggles with consistent routines. The thread that holds his practice together is sound design — using synthesis, sampling, and effects to craft unique sounds and textures — something he says comes naturally and always energizes him. Currently he's working on rhythm guitar, an area he neglected for years, using slow strumming with a metronome and playing along to Prince and Sly and the Family Stone. He's also studying free improvisation by ripping off Derek Bailey, and working on mixed-meter forms inspired by Christian Lillenger.

★ KEY IDEA: Alternate between weakness and strength

Tim's framework is explicit: identify your weaknesses, work on them, then swing back to intensifying your strengths. His advice to his younger self? Give the music theory a rest and play along to amazing records. Rhythm, feel, and bebop fundamentals degrade without daily attention — even for advanced players.

"I have to deal with rhythm every day or else my feel degrades rapidly."

04 Chris Parker

Guru Complex / SNL / Tonight Show Sideman

PRACTICE APPROACH

Chris rebuilt his practice philosophy after years of anxiety-driven scale running left him unprepared for gigs. Now everything centres on repertoire. He learns the music he actually needs to play, because any piece of music will expose whatever needs work — not just 'Giant Steps.' He also does targeted warmups to address a specific weakness: strengthening his pinky after years of wearing a slide. Transcription is another constant: he treats it as the source of all answers about what notes to use.

★ KEY IDEA: Transpose everything

Chris's most emphatic advice: transpose. Take songs, licks, progressions — anything — and play them in other keys. It reveals where your gaps are and builds the tactile intelligence that scale-running never creates. His mantra for staying inspired across multiple musical roles is 'Bach, Bird, Blues.'

"That is the point of practicing: to maintain a sense of confidence on your instrument that you can take into any musical situation."

05 Luca Benedetti

Jazz, Blues & Americana / Ron Carter / Jim Campilongo

PRACTICE APPROACH

Luca's practice has evolved from structured hours of Segovia scales and full transcriptions to a more focused approach shaped by real deadlines — upcoming gigs, recordings, and new compositions. He still runs warm-up exercises including Segovia scale fingerings and arpeggio ideas from Adam Rogers. For creativity, he uses constraint exercises: playing with one finger only, restricting himself to a single string, limiting himself to a four-fret range, or removing a note from a scale and improvising with what remains.

★ KEY IDEA: Use limitations to break patterns

Luca's creativity exercises force him off familiar fretboard habits. Removing one note from a scale, restricting range to four frets, or improvising on a single string all produce new melodic ideas that unconstrained practice never surfaces. He also transcribes short phrases and runs them in multiple keys rather than learning full solos verbatim.

“The feeling of progress is always so rewarding. The goal is to break out of familiar patterns.”

06 Scott Metzger

Joe Russo's Almost Dead / LaMP / WOLF!

PRACTICE APPROACH

Scott is deliberately anti-routine. He puts in the hours but approaches each session by zooming into something specific — a progression of arpeggios, a phrase, or a rhythmic pattern — and then attacking it from every angle he can think of: very slow, fast, very fast, quiet, loud, backwards, different time signatures, different positions, different octaves. The goal is to keep it fresh enough that he's practising music, not just a lick. He knows he's cracked something when he's fully internalised it — then he moves on.

★ KEY IDEA: Sound is the most important thing

Scott's core philosophy: sound comes from the most fundamental elements — loud, quiet, high, low. Always being aware of dynamics while playing keeps things interesting and produces music rather than technique demonstration. For JRAD, he learns tunes inside out using arpeggios forward and backward before trusting his instincts onstage.

“I'll know I cracked the code on that specific thing and I've got it. Then it's time to move on.”

07

Tim Lerch

Jazz / Pearl Django / TrueFire Educator

PRACTICE APPROACH

Tim frames learning jazz around three things most players get wrong: they don't listen enough, they want a quick fix, and they don't play with other people soon enough. His own practice is shaped by going deep into the music he loves — jazz, blues, soul, gospel, classic country — without worrying about keeping styles separate. He describes his musical identity as a big gumbo, always on his mind, always in his heart.

★ KEY IDEA: No shortcuts — go deep and play with people

Tim's bluntest advice: there are no shortcuts. Anyone telling you otherwise deserves a second opinion. Jazz (and really any demanding style) requires long study, love for the music, and playing with other people as soon and as often as possible. Taking your lumps in real musical situations teaches things that no amount of solo practice can replicate.

“You need to go deep into the style of music that you want to play. There are no shortcuts.”

08

Adam Levy

Norah Jones / Tracy Chapman / Jazz & Americana

PRACTICE APPROACH

Adam's most recommended practice concept is writing original tunes. Even simple ones — a singable melody, a couple of chords, an A part and B part. Writing forces decisions: Is it this note or that one? This chord or that one? Those choices, made over and over, develop musicality more reliably than exercises alone. He also recommends recording yourself at gigs, jams, or practice sessions and listening back to identify what's unique in your playing versus what's borrowed or aimless.

★ KEY IDEA: Write tunes to develop musicality

The act of composing — even simple instrumental sketches — forces you to make musical choices and develop taste. Adam's other key habit: listening deeply to how you sound on recordings and doing more of what's genuinely yours, less of what's borrowed. He studied under Ted Greene and continues that tradition of focused, taste-driven musicianship.

“Choosing, over and over, helps you develop your musicality.”

09 Daniel DeLorenzo

Jazz Composer & Recording Engineer, NC

PRACTICE APPROACH

Daniel's practice is flexible and changes with performance needs. Currently he focuses on repertoire, writing tunes, and rhythmic study. His best advice against practice slumps: have a concrete musical goal. Making a record, preparing for a specific tune, writing new music — a real goal tells you exactly what to practice. Without one, you revisit familiar material and stagnate. He deliberately avoids over-judging his playing so creativity can flow, while staying critical enough to keep his standards high.

★ KEY IDEA: A goal tells you what to practice

Daniel's framework is goal-first: decide what you're building toward, and the practice content becomes obvious. He also advises getting uncomfortable — sitting in on music outside your comfort zone is a catalyst for growth that familiar material never triggers.

“If you have a musical goal, it will inform what you need to practice to achieve those goals.”

10 Molly Miller

Jason Mraz / Molly Miller Trio / LACM Chair of Guitar

PRACTICE APPROACH

Molly's practice starts with connection — picking up the guitar and playing without any purpose other than to be present, which might last 3 minutes or 3 hours. From there: some technical exercises to connect with the instrument, sight-reading Bach, playing tunes without judgment, then diving into learning, writing, and arranging songs. Thanks to her mentor Bruce Forman, she never thinks of it as 'practice' — she's always just playing. She also records herself and listens back as a key part of her process.

★ KEY IDEA: Connection before technique

The first minutes of Molly's session have no agenda except presence. This reframes the entire relationship with the instrument. Her broader advice on learning jazz (or any style): listen, soak it up, try to speak it, work on it alone, and play with other people. All three steps are vital and no single one substitutes for the others.

“The time I have with my guitar is sacred to me. I am always playing.”

11 Charlie Ballantine

Jazz & Americana / All About Jazz Top 200 Guitarist

PRACTICE APPROACH

Charlie used to run a rigid warmup but always felt he had to get through it before doing anything creative. Now he starts with something creative every time — improvising on a standard, composing, exploring a key center randomly, or just seeing what comes out naturally. He doesn't do separate technique work; instead he builds technique through metronome work and learning more music. An important breakthrough: inventing his own exercises by combining and alternating intervals (thirds, fourths, fifths) in different directions and meters.

★ KEY IDEA: Start creative, build technique through music

Inverting the usual warmup-then-music structure freed Charlie's practice. By starting with something creative, the technical work happens in service of real musical ideas. His key lesson: the things he viewed as weaknesses were actually what set him apart and gave him his own sound. What you think holds you back may be your signature.

"I started realizing that the things I viewed as my weaknesses were really what set me apart."

12 Joshua Achiron

Chicago Jazz / Berklee Global Jazz Institute Fellow

PRACTICE APPROACH

Joshua's sessions have three stages: fundamentals and ear training first, then a transcription, then the songs he needs to know for upcoming gigs. His fundamentals are specific: drop-two voicings, scales practised multiple ways (three notes per string, four notes per string, with dyads, triads, and seventh chords diatonically), both in position and out of position. The game-changer that levelled him up most was economy picking — specifically applying it in a jazz context using three notes per string.

★ KEY IDEA: Fundamentals every single day

Joshua's structured approach — fundamentals, transcription, repertoire — provides a reliable container for growth. His physical priority: staying relaxed. His demanding performance schedule has caused tendinitis, and learning to stay loose while playing and practising is now one of his most important ongoing challenges.

"Work on fundamentals every day — play through all your drop-two voicings and practice your scales in multiple ways."

13 Rick Stickney

Funk, R&B; & Soul / Tasty Guitar / TrueFire

PRACTICE APPROACH

Rick's most emphatic practice advice comes from a direct experience: he heard a recording of himself at a gig and was shocked at how often he was rushing. From that moment on, the metronome became non-negotiable. He encounters players constantly who have great chops and technical ability but aren't locked in the groove because of flawed timing. The metronome, he says, will sort out any timing issues if you use it consistently.

★ KEY IDEA: Train your ears relentlessly

Rick's second core piece of advice: use your ears. Don't be reliant on TAB. Learn as much as you can by ear, using modern tools to slow things down and loop. If you aren't training your ears, he asks, how will you ever develop them? Ear training and metronome work are his two non-negotiables.

“Become best friends with the metronome and you will sort out any timing issues you may have.”

14 Ariel Posen

Solo Artist / TrueFire / Rolling Stone 'Modern-Day Guitar Hero'

PRACTICE APPROACH

Ariel's practice advice is unusually specific about how to improve: instead of trying to get 'better' in general, list five to ten small, concrete things you want to master. Work through them one at a time. Each item checked off is a win, and wins compound. This prevents the paralysis of trying to improve everything at once without knowing what improvement looks like.

★ KEY IDEA: Don't compare — define what 'better' means

Ariel's biggest challenge as a musician has been self-doubt fuelled by social media comparison. His counter: stop comparing and define your own targets. Lean into your strengths while ensuring you have all the bases covered. His approach to creativity and solos: think of it like telling a story with an arc. It's not about which notes, but how, when, and where.

“Rather than trying to get 'better', list at least 5–10 small things you want to master. Knock them off one at a time.”

15 Ari Teitel

Dumpstaphunk / The Rumble / Grammy-Nominated

PRACTICE APPROACH

Ari warms up by playing along to records — often gospel quartet records — rather than exercises. This keeps him connected to feel and groove from the very first notes of the session. When he has specific performance requirements, he works on those songs. Otherwise: transcription, improvisation work, or targeting a specific aspect of his feel he wants to improve. He also follows Ella Feingold's Instagram and Patreon videos and works on whatever she's doing.

★ KEY IDEA: Take things very slow

Ari's most direct advice to other players: don't be afraid to practise very slowly, and be patient with yourself. His level-up concepts are transcription and meditation. For creativity and improvisation, his framework is simple: listen to the musicians around you. If the keyboard player plays something cool, start your solo with what they just played and let that guide what follows.

“If I can let go of preconceived notions and live in the moment, I play better.”

16 Cecil Alexander

Boston Jazz / Berklee Faculty / Pickup Music

PRACTICE APPROACH

Cecil used to practise by transcribing a lot of solos, finding it improved technique, ears, time feel, and theory all at once. Now he focuses on a small collection of tunes — not learning as many as possible, but going deep on a few. Within that repertoire, he introduces specific vocabulary he wants to develop, practises in different tempos and time signatures, and looks for internal challenges. This approach began as a way to break free from needing to play tunes in specific styles, keys, and tempos.

★ KEY IDEA: Sing and audiate before you play

Cecil's game-changing habit: singing and audiating lines before playing them on the instrument. It gives ownership of what you're playing and allows more spontaneous creation. His listening advice is equally strong: prioritise listening as part of practice, including deep immersion in a single record or player for hours on end. Don't compare your development to others' — breakthroughs come when you're ready for them.

“Singing and trying to audiate lines before playing them — it gives you more ownership of what you're playing.”

17 Danny Mayer

Funk & Psychedelic Blues / Alan Evans Trio / On The Spot Trio

PRACTICE APPROACH

Danny's practice is intentionally minimal on mechanics: when a gig is coming, he learns and practises the songs. Otherwise, he runs some scales and chromatic exercises with alternate picking to keep his hands fluid. The rest he leaves to life. His core belief is that playing comes from life experiences — a beautiful sunset, a painful accident — and as long as his hands are fluid enough to express those experiences, they contribute more to his playing than any routine.

★ KEY IDEA: Get out of your own way

Danny's approach to creativity is to disappear — to stop thinking and let it happen. His advice to other players: don't be derivative. Find your own voice, refine it, make it deeply genuine. That resonates with people more than technique. His level-up concept: listen to non-guitar instruments and singers and let them influence how you play (Coltrane's chromaticism, Clyde Stubblefield's ghost notes, Bob Marley's vibrato).

“My playing comes from my life experiences. Those contribute to my playing more than any practice routine.”

18 Thor Jensen

Jazz, Blues & Americana / Postmodern Jukebox / Stéphane Wrembel

PRACTICE APPROACH

Thor starts each session as close to sunrise as possible — coffee in hand — then plays freely before deciding what to work on. If the hands won't land anywhere musical, he turns to the Segovia Scales, which he's been playing for over a decade: they let him concentrate on how he's playing rather than what he's playing, with particular attention to right-hand quality and time feel. When he joined Stéphane Wrembel's gypsy-jazz band, the immersive pressure of learning Django Reinhardt's vocabulary and technique forced him to treat practice like a job — and gave him an entirely new perspective on the instrument. He also plays changes every day: country songs, jazz tunes, solo explorations. Sometimes it's fleeting improvisation; sometimes it leads to harmonic discoveries or a new tune.

★ KEY IDEA: The right hand is where phrasing lives

Thor's central focus has shifted toward the right hand — what he describes as the 'grammar and punctuation' of music. How something is said matters as much as what is said. For navigating chord changes, he keeps it basic: arpeggios and triads (major, minor, dominant), with voice leading always in mind. Practicing tunes unaccompanied — playing the changes, then soloing as if the harmony is still audible underneath — is his most effective exercise. It gets easier, but never easy.

“The right hand is all about grammar and punctuation to me. I've been thinking a lot about how I want to say things.”

19 Jack Handyside

Jazz, Classical & Folk / Birmingham, UK / The Counterpoint Guitar Method

PRACTICE APPROACH

Jack's current practice is intentionally lean — he no longer has the hours he once had and has made peace with that. When he does find time, he learns a jazz standard from the ground up: melody first, chords separately, then transposing into multiple keys. The more thoroughly you know tunes, the easier improvisation and reinterpretation become. A practice journal has been a constant throughout his career: writing honestly about what he's working on, where his discomforts lie, and what he actually wants to express. The biggest shift was a 'mental reset' after music school — replacing the relentless self-criticism of 'you're never quite good enough' with purposeful questions like 'Do I enjoy what I'm practicing?' and 'Where could this appear in my playing?'

★ KEY IDEA: Know why you're practicing something

Jack's most important practice shift was developing a genuine connection to the material — understanding why a concept or technique matters before committing time to it. He also credits counterpoint study (drawn from Renaissance and Baroque keyboard methods) as a transformative framework: it changed his thinking about harmony, voice leading, independence, and composition simultaneously. His book, *The Counterpoint Guitar Method*, emerged from years of translating those ideas onto the guitar.

“Developing who I was as a person had a dramatic effect on the domineering self-talk and relentless practice schedule I was putting myself through.”

20 Danny Abel

Funk, Jazz & R&B; / Tank and the Bangas / New Orleans

PRACTICE APPROACH

Danny's practice starts with inspiration: finding music that's been on his mind away from the guitar — a chord change, a melody, a solo passage — and beginning there. He typically opens with melodies, plays through some chords, solos a little, then returns to the melody. When gigs demand attention, he listens to the music first and goes over it carefully before ever picking up the guitar. His guiding principle throughout: keep it musical at all times. Working on actual songs rather than technique exercises keeps musicality front and centre. In his experience, the technique follows naturally from that.

★ KEY IDEA: Start with the melody — and always come back to it

Danny's most consistent advice is to learn songs by ear first — find a few versions, absorb the chords and melody, then understand how they interact. This approach builds real musical understanding: you start hearing how your favourite players think. He also stresses relaxation as a key to levelling up — learning to recognise tension in the moment and finding ways to adapt. His collective GuitArmy (up to 10 guitarists sharing a stage) is built on the same idea: stay musical, and when in doubt, don't play.

“Try to maintain musicality in anything you practice. In my experience, the technique follows.”

Key Themes & Takeaways

Certain ideas come up again and again in guitarist interviews. These aren't coincidences — they're the overlapping insights of working professionals who've stress-tested these approaches over decades.

1. Transcription is universally valued

Almost every player — regardless of genre — cites transcribing by ear as foundational. Not just learning notes, but absorbing feel, phrasing, and time. Chris Parker: 'Transcribing gives you all the answers.' Cecil Alexander built his entire early practice around it.

2. Repertoire beats exercises

Multiple players independently concluded that practising repertoire — actual music you'll perform — is more effective than isolated exercises. Chris Parker rebuilt his entire approach around this. Charlie Ballantine dropped isolated technique work entirely.

3. Feel and timing decay without daily attention

Tim Watson and Rick Stickney both flag this explicitly: rhythm and feel degrade if not actively maintained. The metronome and playing along to records are the most common tools named for keeping this sharp.

4. Listening is a practice, not a reward

Many players treat listening to records as part of their practice time, not something separate from it. Cecil Alexander recommends deep immersion in a single record for hours. Tim Lerch says you can't learn jazz without loving it, and you can't love it without listening deeply.

5. Constraints unlock creativity

Luca Benedetti, Adam Brisbin, and others use deliberate limitations — one finger only, four-fret range, one string, removing a scale note — to break out of habitual patterns and find new musical ideas.

6. The voice (literal) is an underused tool

Brad Barr sings before he plays. Cecil Alexander audiates lines before playing them. Adam Levy recommends recording yourself and listening. The voice, ears, and musical imagination lead — the hands follow.

7. Self-comparison is the enemy of growth

Ariel Posen, Cecil Alexander, and Charlie Ballantine all name social-media-driven comparison as one of the biggest obstacles to development. Jack Handyside rebuilt his entire practice mindset around this. Every player's breakthrough happens on their own timeline.

8. Play with other people as soon and as often as possible

Tim Lerch is the most direct: take your lumps. Real musical situations teach things no amount of solo practice can. Molly Miller's trio format, Charlie Ballantine's accountability groups, and Ari Teitel's in-the-moment listening all point to the same truth.

9. Start with inspiration — let technique follow

Danny Abel, Charlie Ballantine, and Molly Miller all describe opening sessions not with exercises but with music that genuinely excites them. When practice starts from a place of curiosity rather than obligation, technical development follows naturally rather than feeling like a chore.

10. Know why you're practicing something

Jack Handyside and Daniel DeLorenzo both emphasise the importance of having a clear reason behind what you're working on. Without a connection to the material — whether a specific goal, a gig, or genuine musical curiosity — practice becomes aimless and progress stalls.

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