



# JERRY SILVERMAN

# EASY GUITAR

## Teach Guitar And Make A Living

**H**OW TO TEACH guitar and still make an honest living is a question that has been of some concern to me for all of my adult life. Having spent years both as an employee of music schools and as a self-employed teacher, I feel duly qualified to express my thoughts on this issue. For those of you who may be considering a career as a guitar teacher, the pearls of wisdom I am about to cast your way may, at some future date, spare you some difficulty, embarrassment, and (God forbid!) loss of income.

It should be self-evident that music schools offer the teacher a certain amount of security that freelancing lacks. Most music schools require that the student pay in advance for an entire term or course of lessons. In some cases this may mean a commitment of a rather considerable sum of money, since a school may choose to consider the standard academic year (September-June) as its term. Other schools may divide the course into two semesters. Likewise, payments can sometimes be broken up into two or three installments—with the final payment due well before the final lesson.

The net result of this pay-in-advance policy is that the incentive for the student to show up for lessons is rather high. Missed lessons are paid for, and, according to school policy, make-up sessions may or may not be scheduled. In cases of serious illness, legitimate schools do offer some relief to the unfortunate student. The teacher gets paid for every lesson whether the student shows up or not, except, of course, in this latter instance of serious, prolonged illness. The conditions and terms of payment are generally spelled out in detail in the music school's catalog or brochure.

It is up to the private teacher to set his or her own standards and rules regarding payment and attendance. Private teachers rarely have catalogs, brochures, and registrars for their students. As a result, many private teachers find themselves at the mercy of delinquent students in terms of financial responsibility. The informal atmosphere of most guitar lessons as far as student-teacher relationships are concerned often carries over into the monetary relationship—to the detriment of the teacher. If the teacher allows the student to pay for each lesson as taken, it will certainly be assumed by the student that he will *not* pay for each lesson not taken. This can only lead to chaos and financial disaster for the teacher.

In all the years I've been teaching—since 1949—there has never been a week when all

of my students have shown up. You name it, I've heard it: exams, sprained thumbs, bad weather, didn't practice. All of these are legitimate excuses (except "didn't practice"), but the net effect is that the teacher is penalized unless he or she sets up a sensible pay-in-advance plan, just like a "real" music school. I'm not talking about a September-June commitment; that would be unrealistic. In the case of private lessons, monthly advance payments seem to be the most logical. You should request the courtesy of being notified in advance when a student will not be coming for a lesson. You should definitely offer the courtesy of a make-up lesson, preferably the week of the missed lesson or as soon thereafter as possible. Most students will understand the reasonableness of this policy. Some may object for a variety of reasons. You have to decide how firmly you want to adhere to your principles. Remember, it's your living.

If a student just cannot afford to lay out a month's tuition in advance, you should have a fall-back policy available. Bi-monthly payments are an alternative, or, as a last result, weekly payments with the strict understanding that this is exceptional treatment and that missed lessons must still be paid for and made up.

In the case of group or class lessons, the question of payment becomes capital. You will not be able to conduct a class in any sensible, continuous manner if absences and missed payments occur often. It would be better to offer a 10-, 12-, or 16-week course with full payment required at the outset (or, perhaps, in two installments). Because of the lower cost-per-student of group lessons over private ones, this should not pose too great a hardship on anyone interested enough to contact you in the first place. Missed group lessons cannot as a rule be made up, unless you have more than one group of the same level on different days. However, one of the advantages of group instruction is the fact that classmates can get together during the week for practice sessions. They should be encouraged to do so in any case, but a student who misses a lesson should be particularly urged to contact other classmates.

If these bits of financial wisdom sound a bit rigorous and unfolksy, just remember that you are a professional in the exercise of a highly specialized profession. Once an understanding has been reached between you and your students, everyone can relax and get down to the real business at hand: learning the guitar in a friendly, informal atmosphere. □