

The Left Arm

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TRANSCRIBED AND EDITED FROM A DIGITIZED VIDEOTAPE
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Editor's Introduction

This monologue is part of a series from about 1991 in which Patrick O'Brien began to videorecord his insights into various aspects of plucked-string technique. He distributed copies to a few students. Only this lecture on the left arm and one on the left hand are in the hands of this editor (Douglas Alton Smith), though others may still exist in private collections.

The Left Arm

This is an experiment in describing some simple concepts of guitar technique. These apply to all forms of fretted instruments and to all forms of guitar playing, although certain things about them are relative. Certain instruments require more weight, more leverage, simply because they are instruments which have a higher or harder action.

The simplest way to describe how the left hand should function is to begin from the statement that what presses down the strings is not the force of the fingers against the thumb but rather the weight of the arm. One has to organize the position of the instrument such that the relaxed arm is brought up and slightly forward to the instrument, such that the arm wants to fall back into the strings to some extent back and down.

In customary classic guitar position it looks like this [Figure 1]:



Figure 1. Classic hand and arm position. Screen capture by Douglas Alton Smith.

If you were playing an acoustic guitar with very heavy action, a Martin Dreadnought, you would want the instrument up very high on your body to create the opportunity to use a lot of weight of your arm.

If you were playing an instrument with very low action, an electric guitar, you could keep it low on your body because you don't need as much weight. The concept is relative.

Also, the amount of displacement of the guitar back to front depends a bit on the leverage you need on the guitar and the tuning and the kind of action you need to press down.

The higher or harder the action, the more the instrument wants to be out in front of you. The lower the action, the easier it is for it to be very far back. But if it comes too far back, it's obvious that the relaxed arm puts your hand very far ahead of the neck, which you must strain some muscles in your back to get to the neck in the first place.

So, I view it as a window of opportunity here, where the guitar is not too low, nor too far back. There's a little space out here where the neck can go, for my body. Depending on how hard the action of the instrument is, it will go up or down, or front or back, but there's a natural location in which I can relax the weight of my arm on the neck, like this [Figure 2], where I'm hanging the weight of my arm here.

In general I'd like to keep the weight of my arm below the neck at all times. I'd like to play such that the weight of my arm is always below



Figure 2. Left arm relaxed below the neck. Screen capture by Douglas Alton Smith.

my finger position. That means I'd like to avoid lifting my upper arm from the shoulder like this [Figure 3] and playing with all my weight held up by muscles up here in the shoulder. I'd like to let that weight hang down below the instrument to some extent.



Figure 3. Improper left arm position. Screen capture by Douglas Alton Smith.

Again, it's all relative. How much weight you need hanging down depends on the difficulty of the chords you play.

Invariably, when someone is asked to play barré chords or more difficult chords of a certain kind, he will come down to a position where his arm is below the neck, and his weight is below the neck. That is in general the position in which I'd like to play any other even very simple chord or in which I'd like to play any scale position. For many players it is true that they become most efficient when they must play a difficult chord. But as soon as they go to play a simple combination of notes, they lift their arm like this, elbow outward. They therefore only use the weight of their arm when they feel they need it.

But I feel that if you use the weight of your arm to maximum advantage at all times, you can play everything with the least effort possible, even if you happen to be playing only one note at a time.

The angle of the knuckles of the left hand to the underside of the neck is a typical way for guitar teachers to describe the manner in which you should arrange your technique. Most beginners unfortunately begin rather like this, with the elbow outward [Figure 4]. The 19th-century methods for guitar often ask you to play the first few notes E, F, and G with your first and fourth fingers; and also B, C, and D. Whereas in most beginners' lessons today they begin with 1 and 3. And since [beginners] can't quite get that third finger up far enough, they twist the hand this way, elbow outward and with ring and little finger extended, using very poor leverage with the third finger and getting into the habit of lifting their arm, also often buzzing on that note [G] because they don't have very good leverage.



Figure 4. Improper arm position often used by beginners. Screen capture by Douglas Alton Smith.

In addition, one could consider that when one plays an elementary guitar piece, you usually use the fourth finger for that note in the treble string as we play a C or a G chord. That leaves the student with a choice. All too often having been trained to play in this position (elbow out)—1 and 3 in the treble—playing a chord like this and turning this way, elbow outward, [the student] uses this third finger in the treble, and then [turns] back (elbow down) to the chord, when it would be sensible to keep the weight of the arm down here and just use [the] fourth finger there.

There's a whole complex idea in terms of teaching reading in the first position that causes people to try and teach one finger per fret, which I think is a grave mistake in the open position in the very elementary lessons. It leads to all kinds of problems in the left hand later on, also clearly the left shoulder, and so on.

The possibilities for describing the position of the hand, then, with regard to the knuckles and their orientation to the neck, are these: one normally (but faultily) begins somewhat pronated with the hand, that is, turned out this way somewhat, elbow outward, the knuckles at an angle to the neck (these knuckles at the base of the fingers).

Someone will at some point ask the players to keep the knuckles parallel to the underside of the fingerboard, which is better than being turned out. In this turned-out position, the fourth finger has a very great disadvantage in playing scales, since it has to reach flat with almost no leverage on the neck. Turning this way, knuckles parallel to the fingerboard, brings more of the MCP [metacarpophalangeal] joints' force to bear on the neck.

I feel that one should not go merely down to this point where the knuckles are parallel to the underside of the neck, but one should in fact supinate the forearm and relax the shoulder, to the point that the knuckles are parallel to the floor or the horizon. Therefore, they are at this reverse angle to the neck. That enables you to take advantage of the natural structure of the hand. The knuckles of the shorter fingers are closer to any given string than are the knuckles of the longer fingers. You can say simply that we invent instruments like the guitar as a species because our bodies are structured this way.

If I relax my arm and shoulder and put my hand out this way [supinated; Figure 5], I have very good circulation in my forearm, the bones in my forearm are parallel to one another and not crossed over one another [as they would be if the forearm were rotated]. My shoulder is very relaxed. The weight of my arm can bear upon the neck. And then I can simply relax my fingers and see that I create an angle like that with



Figure 5. Supination. Screen capture by Douglas Alton Smith.

my relaxed fingertips, as I merely try to poise the guitar in such a way that I can find a way of putting that relaxed angle of these three fingers especially [2, 3, and 4] onto a string. Many people estimate the angle [at] which their hand should be oriented to the neck by looking at these two fingers [index and middle] and placing them this way [elbow extended]. Whereas for several hundred years in guitar technique it has been commonly observed that one should in fact observe this angle [Figure 6] and



Figure 6. Historical orientation of hand to fingerboard. Screen capture by Douglas Alton Smith.

orient the hand that way. This is typical for the methods of Fernando Sor and many 19th-century guitarists. In the 20th century this is not taught very well, and I think that is the most important underlying concept in left-hand technique.

Now I'll stop and try to continue to build a library in short segments, each of which deals with one basic concept.