

Chapter 1

Rhythm and Technique in a Nutshell

In This Chapter

- ▶ Getting an overview of rhythm and technique
- ▶ Access the audio tracks and video clips at www.dummies.com/go/guitarrrhythmtechnique

In this chapter, I explain why it's beneficial for you to develop your sense of rhythm and sharpen your technique. I also give you an overview of the different topics you explore as you work through this book. When you have an idea of what the whole program is about, you have a clearer picture of the road that lies ahead.

Recognizing the Importance of Rhythm and Technique

Every aspect of guitar playing requires some level of skill. As much as you might like to jump straight to playing familiar songs by your favorite bands and improvising like your favorite guitarists, the truth is that you need to work on developing your technique before you can achieve success on your instrument. Sure, you can pick up on things here and there as you go, but if you're serious about getting good, why not take a more purposeful approach, one that produces better results in a shorter amount of time? The progress of many guitarists is hindered not because they lack the ability to play well, but because they don't follow the steps necessary to progress. How can you sound as good as the next person when the next person has learned tips and tricks that you haven't yet been introduced to?



All guitarists, regardless of style, make use of the same basic techniques. How much you use a particular technique, or how far you take it, is a matter of preference and part of what defines your sound and style.



You can get a taste of what rhythm and technique is all about by watching Video Clip 1 and listening to Audio Track 1.

Reading and Playing Basic Rhythms

Your journey to improving your guitar playing starts with a look at rhythms. *Rhythm* is the time in which you sound notes. It affects the feel and groove of everything you play. Developing your rhythm doesn't require you to read music like a concert violinist, but it's helpful to get to know the basic components of a staff and how music is rhythmically notated, which is precisely what Chapter 2 focuses on. This information will not only help you to improve your strumming, but also prepare you to read the slash notation commonly used in performance charts.

Developing Your Strumming Technique

In this book, you work with some aspects of standard notation strictly as a means to improve your guitar playing. Seeing how measures of music are subdivided, counted, and strummed will take the guesswork out of your rhythm playing and help you get your pick-strokes in order.

Aside from dissecting the strum patterns used in popular music, you work with developing essential rhythm guitar skills such as floating, resting, damping, scratching, and accenting. These techniques contribute to the feel and sound of a rhythm part and help you to develop a strong groove whether you're playing folky acoustic guitar songs, electric rock rhythms, or funky chord comps. Various rhythms, strum patterns, and strumming techniques are covered in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

Honing Your Fretting-Hand Techniques

There is far more to the left hand (or the right hand if you're a lefty) than simply fretting notes on the fretboard. Guitarists use fretting-hand fingers to hammer into notes as well as pull off, slide, and bend. These techniques, called *articulations*, help you execute passages, produce unique sounds, and be more expressive. In order to advance as a player and be successful as a musician, you need to develop these performance skills and know how they're notated in a guitar score. You work with articulations at length in Chapter 7.

In addition to developing technique, you also need to know how to play to your strengths. Perhaps some of your struggles are caused by a belief that there are "proper" and "correct" ways that things should be played on guitar. The truth is, your hands don't work in exactly the same way as someone else's hands, and sometimes you need to explore unconventional ways to fret and finger chord shapes and scale patterns in order to find what best suits you. You get started with this process in Chapter 6.

Honing Your Picking-Hand Techniques

There is far more to the right hand (or the left hand if you're a lefty) than simply brushing the strings. To reach any level of proficiency with guitar, you need to develop the techniques of picking with a flatpick (also known as a plectrum) and plucking with the fingers.

Skilled players alternate their picks, synchronize their hands, cleanly sound notes, and mute idle strings — all at the same time. When you break down the mechanics of picking alone, you see that various means of picking exist — including alternate, sweep, economy, inside, outside, cross, and hybrid (all techniques covered in Chapter 10).

Popular music features guitar parts that are played using both a pick and fingers. All guitarists put down the pick from time to time and opt to pluck strings using fingers. Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven," one of the most famous guitar compositions ever, opens with a fingerpicked acoustic guitar. Many folk-inspired songs, like "Dust in the Wind" by Kansas, are propelled by rhythmic patterns that are fingerpicked, not strummed.

Using fingers also lends well to styles where chords and melodies are played together. In some cases, a flatpick is held and used together with fingers for a hybrid of the two methods. In other cases, the picking hand is used to slap the strings and produce percussive sounds. All these techniques are explored in Chapter 11.

Using Whammy Bars

Playing guitar isn't always about manipulating the strings with your hands. Sometimes a piece of hardware is involved, like a tremolo system, which is a spring-loaded bridge that is used to add vibrato, as well as dive away from and scoop into notes. It's what Stevie Ray Vaughan used to add mellow vibrato on his song "Lenny," and what Jimi Hendrix used to conjure up the sounds of bombs and ambulance sirens in his Woodstock performance of "The Star-Spangled Banner." Also called a *whammy bar*, the arm that extends from a tremolo system can be pushed and pulled to create faux-slide guitar sounds with notes that slide up and down, into and out of pitch. All these techniques are laid out for you in Chapter 12.

Playing Slide Guitar and Using Open Tunings

Sometimes guitarists don't fret notes in the normal manner of pressing the strings down to the fretboard using their fingertips; instead, they use a glass or metal object to slide along the tops of the strings. Think of the signature guitar riff at the beginning of Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Free Bird" or anything by Bonnie Raitt. These objects, called *slides*, are usually worn over a fretting-hand finger, and their use is commonplace in popular music.

One of the things that helps to facilitate the use of a slide is an *alternate tuning* (anything that differs from standard tuning). Slide players usually opt to tune the strings so that the open strings produce a chord like E major or G major. These tunings can be used with or without a slide. You get to know them in Chapter 9.

Getting Your Practice In

Any good book on rhythm and technique provides exercises useful for getting the most out of your practice time. Throughout this book, you come across countless figures to rehearse and use for developing your newfound skills. Chapter 13 is geared toward reviewing and running down your rhythms, and it does so in a manner that will make you feel more confident the next time you're called to perform a part by reading it off a rhythm chart. In Chapter 14, melodic patterns are introduced. Sometimes called *scale sequences* or *picking patterns*, these patterns not only provide melodic ideas that are useful when improvising and composing, but also serve as some of the best exercises to sharpen your picking, fretting, and hand synchronization.

