GUITAR PHOTOGRAPHY SIMPLIFIED
(A short Introduction)

What is a guitar, photographically?

In terms of “shape,” it’s a complicated object, but that’s not unusual for photos. (Humans are complicated shapes, too, but we shoot pictures of them without a problem!)

But Guitars? They are (often) highly reflective. That’s the thing. So, unlike when shooting pictures of humans (which reflect light, but differently), we have to (ta da)

Manage the reflections!

It’s simple ... not at all difficult.

This document will show you how to do it.

Who Am I, To Presume To Teach This Subject?

• Guitar Builder
• Guitar Player
• 15 years as a Commercial Photographer
• Specialty: Metals and shiny things
• Professional writer by trade (now)

The High Cost Of This Document

At $5.00 US ... less than a Starbucks foofoo coffee drink. These days, we all have to price our wares for the market and try to create more products to benefit people .... So, Thank You for skipping that calorie-rich foofoo coffee in favor of this educational document!

Here we go ...
What's The Purpose of the Photos?

Selling the guitar? On eBay? Selling in a Classified section of a guitar forum, like the Acoustic Guitar Forum or the Acoustic Guitar Magazine Trading Post?

For all of these, you will get a better price and more response if you show pro-level photographs of the guitar. They are not difficult to do. All it takes is a little practice.

If you’re willing to learn how to use your camera, and then take the time necessary to get the shots, you can do professional-quality photos. Think about it: The techniques are not difficult to learn, the subject isn’t all that complicated, and unlike a pro commercial photographer, you don’t have to solve a new problem every time a new client walks in: It’s just you and your guitar(s).

Just want to show it off? Shoot it about the same way.

What Do You Shoot?

The more info the better, and since a photo is worth a thousand words, you can provide a lot of information with just photos. Shooting every part of the guitar might not be necessary, but it doesn’t hurt.

Shoot the headstock, front and back

The neck, head on, front and back, and down the frets to show there is not warp in the neck.

The sides, at several angles.

The top and back, close-ups and not so close.

Is it glossy? Shoot something reflected in the gloss, but also shoot the gloss so that it doesn’t reflect anything at all so the beauty of the wood will be visible.

Shoot it indoors with a little “studio” like the one I show on the next few pages. Shoot it outdoors on a cloudy day, under a shade tree, etc. Set it up to make it look desirable, like they do new cars.

One bit of advice: DON'T SHOOT THE GUITAR WITH YOUR FLASH ON.

If your camera won’t let you turn off the flash, beg, borrow or steal another camera, or shoot outside only, where the flash won’t be such a problem.
WHAT DO YOU NEED?

For the “studio”

1. A digital camera that lets you make some adjustments. If yours is the “totally automatic” kind of digital, you need to get a different one, anyway. You want one that will give you a “manual” shooting mode, where you can adjust the exposure based on what you see in the little LCD preview. “Manual Focus” would be nice, too.

2. A tripod. Doesn’t need to be fancy. The one I use is lightweight and cost about twenty bucks. It just needs to hold the camera still and be able to go up to about head height and down to a couple of feet, plus other regular tripod-type movements.

3. A backdrop. I like to use a black backdrop for the most part. It eliminates reflections except those I want. The one I use these days (and in this document) is a 5x12-foot piece I got at a yardage store for $2.95 a yard. It cost under $14. You’ll be surprised when you see how I mount it. (Très simple!) In some photos, I don’t use it, but find something else (like a sleeping bag draped over a couch). To hold the backdrop cloth, whatever color you decide you want to use, you’ll need a few little plastic clamps or clips to clip it up. (You can safely tell your wife there will be no holes in the walls.)

4. Lights. (“Oh, no,” you’re thinking, “lights?”) Don’t worry, the lights I use are the overhead light in the bedroom, one of those “torchiere” lights that bounces a big round light off the ceiling, and one small clip-on lamp with a white Kleenex® taped to it to soften its light. That’s it. I actually darken the room when I’m shooting this way so that these will be the only lights I work with.

5. Reflectors. Remember, I said I used to shoot shiny stuff. When you’re shooting shiny objects, you have to manage and place the reflections on the surface. It’s as true of cars and small sculptures as it is of guitars. So, along with the lights, my main reflectors are 20”x30” cardboard sheets (from the baking department of a hobby store). They’re white on one side and standard cardboard on the other. By placing these in certain ways, I get exactly the reflections I want. It is not difficult at all, since you can see the effect through your digital camera LCD.

6. Guitar. Not just any guitar, but a cleaned, polished guitar. You are going to be showing all the details in sharp, beautiful photography, so you want the guitar(s) you shoot to look their best.

7. Props. The only other things you might need will be a roll of duct tape, a roll of bathroom tissue, a box of Kleenex®, etc. What are these for? They are used to hold the guitar where you want it. You might also want a stool, a few books, etc., and maybe a stool. A guitar stand might come in handy.

That’s about it in the “needs” department. One more thing: You might want to get a high-capacity memory card for your camera. One of my major recommendations is to take lots and lots of pictures!

For Outside or an Open Room

Camera, tripod, reflectors, guitar and possibly a guitar stand.

Techniques are different, but equipment and its use is about the same. If you have a room, like the one shown, where you have a large window where the sun strikes, you’ve got a ready-made “studio.” Broad lighting sources are what are used for shooting those beautiful models on Madison Avenue. Why? The broad light source softens shadows. (This is also why I use a “torchiere” lamp in the bedroom studio; it creates a broad light source by shining on the ceiling of the room.)

Why softer shadows? It fills the pores in the models’ skin, and it improves the overall image of just about any subject, like a guitar. The broad light source provides “open” lighting for the whole subject.

Then, once you’ve got it lit broadly, you can just place white cards or additional lights (if you have them) to create the reflections you want.

See how simple?

The only hard part is deciding exactly where you want the reflections. (And this is where the digital camera is wonderful: You can shoot twenty shots of the same basic setup and throw away 19 of them, and it costs not a penny more!)

It all just depends on what you want to show and your own creativity. (Another reason for shooting lots of pics.)
PREPARE THE INSTRUMENT

A clean guitar photographs lots better than a dirty one. (Of course.)

It’s a no brainer to clean up the guitar before photography, and during the session, too.

Cleaning can be done easily with a damp town or paper towel on most finishes; if you want to enhance the gloss, a polish or something like the Fender guitar cleaner below might help. A wax like Renaissance Wax can be real good too. (Renaissance has no silicon; always avoid silicon!)

Avoid “Pledge™” and other oily furniture polishes. (I probably didn’t need to put that warning in, but you never know ...)

Blue shop towels like shown here are perfect. They are lint free, non-abrasive, and cheap. Always use a new one. You don’t want to introduce scratches!

The clear bottle is “Bore Oil,” for clarinets, etc. It will season the wood of the unfinished fretboard with a light application and wipe-off once every six months or a year. You don’t want to over-oil the fretboard.

Pretty obvious in the top photo ... dust! Aargh!

The bottom photo, not so obvious! It was shot mid-session after I had been laying the guitar on its back on the black cloth. The body had been thoroughly cleaned before the session, but picked up all that lint and needed to be cleaned again before continuing. Always look for details up close when shooting, because the people who look at your pictures certainly will! (I lightened the shot so the lint would be more visible here.)
THE BASIC STUDIO SETUP: Cheap & Easy

Not At All Challenging

At right are two photos of the “studio” setup I will use through much of this document to illustrate the “studio photo” approach. It’s simple, but advanced techniques are its basis.

The setup shows everything but the camera. The overhead light with two 100-watt bulbs, the “torchiere lamp” with one 50/100/200-watt bulb, the clip-on light with a tissue taped over it, reflecting cards, the backdrop clipped to boxes on the dresser, and the tripod.

This constitutes a complete “studio,” which is, after all, just a place where you can control light. “But,” you might say, “I don’t know exactly what to do to control it.” (Don’t worry, it’s really, really easy!)

That’s the beauty if being able to use the digital camera LCD. You don’t need to know much of anything about controlling light. You just need to look into the LCD and see what happens when you turn this off, move that, change the reflector position, etc., etc. If you want, you can shoot every single little change and choose later: it costs no more to do it that way!

On the next page are one full-length guitar photo and three more. The full length shot was done from exactly the same position and with the same lighting and reflector cards as the setup shot on the right. I just zoomed in with the camera. (On the tripod, of course: Don’t go to the studio without it!)

This process is not complicated at all, and it is basically all you do. Whether you are shooting a glossy instrument or a satin finish, like the one shown, you simply set up your main lighting (in this case, the ceiling light and torchiere lamp) and then move your reflecting cards around to get the effects you want. You also can add any light you feel will help, like the small clamp on the desk. The cards become “light sources,” as you’ll see on the next page. We’ll cover some more techniques farther on in this document, but they are basically more of doing what was done above: Manipulating light and reflections is the whole game, whether in the studio, in a naturally lit room, outside, etc. (And they are all covered later on in this document.) See the 4 shots on the next page.

The main shot and other three were all shot from the same camera

Okay, okay ...

I know, this is not a “shiny” guitar, but it helps show some basics.

Later on in the document I will be photographing a beautiful Goodall RCJ guitar with a flawless glossy finish -- in exactly this same setup.
position. The other three shots are where I moved in closer, framed what I wanted, and moved the reflector card.

**Shot (A),** I removed the reflecting card. Note the difference between the black John Pearse Armrest® and the backdrop. (The black backdrop appears lighter than the armrest.)

**Shot (B),** I picked up the cardboard reflector card in one hand and held it to reflect on the face of the guitar. The armrest and guitar top are “lit” by the reflector card. (Notice that the armrest now appears lighter and casts its own shadow on the guitar top; also the entire top is somewhat lighter, while the backdrop is now darker than the armrest.)

**Shot (C),** the card has been moved just slightly to the left so that its edge is reflected in the shiny plastic pick guard; to me, this is the best shot of the three since it shows all the properties of all the elements on the guitar’s top.

For shots (B) and (C), the reflector card was simply held with my left hand while I watched the effect of moving it in the camera LCD, and clicked the button with my right hand when it looked “right.”

It’s all about how it looks to **you**, and what you want to see.

Notice that in shot A, the black Pearse Armrest is lost against the black background, so I held the white card to reflect on the front of the guitar, to lighten the armrest and not the background. Though both are solid black, you can “lighten” or “darken” the black (or any color) by adding or subtracting light.

The effect can be easily seen in Shot B, where the black armrest stands out from the black background, and in Shot C. Note the pick guard change from shot B to C, from moving the reflector card a few inches to the left to reflect its edge, showing that the pick guard is actually shiny.

You can’t see “shine” without creating contrasting reflections.
More Examples in the Studio: A High Gloss Guitar

You don’t always have to show the gloss, but it sure is pretty!

Glossy guitars in the studio are even easier to shoot than satin or flat finished guitars, simply because you can see the reflections easily. They’re like when you use a mirror: You are either at the right angle, or you’re not. Also like shooting pool: Either the angle is right, or it isn’t. Doesn’t take long to find out! (Remember, in high school photography class, or somewhere, someone told you, “The angle of reflectance equals the angle of incidence.”...? Well, that’s the rule here.) Look at your camera’s LCD, shoot the picture (just in case you find later that you actually like it), and then try to improve it.

Again, the only thing that you have to do is decide what you want, try to get it, and shoot a lot of pictures.

I recently sold a real nice Goodall Rosewood Concert Jumbo. Naturally, I wanted to get my asking price for it, and I knew that excellent pictures would lure those who could be lured. On the next couple of pages are the photos I used. I got my price, while other fine guitars for sale in the same venue (it wasn’t ‘eBaY’) went unsold for days or even weeks.

Again, the “studio” setup was as shown on this page -- exactly the same as for the satin-finish guitar on the previous page. On the next two pages are the photos I used to sell the guitar.

In the photo above, notice that the white card is blurred. That’s because it was moving when I shot the photo -- on purpose. During a long (1/4 second or more) you can move the reflector to blur the edge of the reflection on the guitar... but you gotta use a tripod!

Above and in the other photos, notice how the cards are tilted, moved, twisted, and even turned backwards (photo directly below) to change the reflective properties of the card and how much reflection is shown on the guitar’s surface.

The only rule of guitar photography is: “Make it look good.”

So, you can do just about anything you want, as long as it looks like you did it on purpose!

Hold it any way you want, light it any way you want, etc.
The BACK of the white cardboard, just plain cardboard color, provides a less-light reflection on the glossy surface of the body.

After cleaning the body, the lint specks are all gone. It’s a ‘cleaner’ shot!

The variable reflections -- of the walls of the room, the white card, and the black floor -- provide contrast that shows off the guitar’s gloss.

Note the soft shadow of the fretboard on the top. The shadow is created by the small lamp at left with the tissue over it, and is “filled” (that is, ‘lightened’) by reflection from the white card in front of the guitar.

Overall lighting is provided by the top lights and the cards.
"Partial" shots provide detail and highlight certain parts of the instrument. Most of these were shot from the same camera position, zooming in and out with the camera lens.
Since the guitar has two attractive sides, be sure to shoot both. Doing corresponding shots of the top and back will show it off well.

Using the front and back of the reflector cards will provide different effects. At top right, the back of the guitar reflects the brown back of the cardboard. The guitar’s top (above left) reflects the white cardboard.

The shot to the right used no card: The light reflection “framing” the back is actually the door frame of the bedroom door. The highlight at the left side of that shot are provided by the small tissue-covered light clipped to the desk drawer.

The two shots at left differ only in the addition of the brown side of the cardboard reflecting in the top shot, and no reflection at all in the bottom shot.

Just depends on what you want to show and what you like.
Shooting Outside the “Studio” In an Open Room

In a room: Shown here are a few shots in the room. The only light source is a large window with off-white shades being struck by direct sunlight, and a white bed pillow for a few reflections. The blue background is a sleeping bag thrown over a chair. (Simple!)

The thing to note about this setup is that the window creates a broad open light source that casts soft shadows. The light color of the room (basically beige) helps with the open lighting.

Use any backdrop handy. I’ve found that the best backgrounds are of a single color. They don’t have to be smooth and featureless: The sleeping bag has lots of wrinkles: They don’t take away from the guitar and they come in handy in showing off the gloss.

The only reflector used was a regular bed pillow. On the next page are a few more, of the satin-finish guitar.

If you want to do just a regular picture, without a background, this is still the best kind of lighting to use: A wide light-shaded window struck by direct sunlight. If you don’t have a light window covering, use a white sheet.
Shooting Outside

I have photographed many guitars, and I know something about the subject of photography.

That being said, I do not have very many photos of guitars shot outside. I've asked a member of the Kit Guitar Forum for permission to use a photo he posted in the forum of his recently completed guitar. The photo is shown at right. (A few more on the next page.)

What is it about this photo that makes it work so well?

Obviously, the guitar is gorgeous, and Paul is understandably proud of it. Egad, who wouldn’t be?

But, he should be proud of the photograph as well. He’s said that photography is his newest interest, and he’s making a great start at it.

But, objectively speaking, what is it about this photo that makes it good, as a photograph of the guitar?

Answer: Many of the same things that work in the studio.

1) A wide, soft light source: Note that this was photographed under an overcast sky -- the widest soft light source we can find. The cloud canopy is just like reflecting a light off a large white card, trans-lighting using a white sheet or a light translucent window covering that is struck by the sun, or the sun’s reflection off a huge cumulonimbus cloud.

The wide soft source of light provides open, soft shadows, avoids hot reflection spots (specular highlights), and lights the background uniformly with the guitar. The only drawback is a slight lack of contrast. (I have very gently brightened the photo and increased its contrast here.)

2) Soft background: By shooting with a large aperture and (probably) a fast shutter speed, Paul has been able to isolate the guitar from the background: The guitar is sharp; the background is not. This is a major technique that all photographers should learn. If your camera has a manual setting, or an “aperture” or “shutter” setting, you can use them to select a large aperture and a fast shutter speed. It makes hand-holding (rather than tripod mounting) of the camera easier, too.

The background is also non-distracting. Though it is attractive, it doesn’t grab your attention away from the subject.

3) Standard rule: Shoot a lot of pictures. The guitar isn’t going anywhere!
A Few More Of Paul's Shots

Note that the sun has come out. Not a problem with either of the shots here, since their subject is the primarily dark tones of the back/sides and of the headstock.

However, the shot at right, also done in direct sun, highlights the light bearclaw top, but loses some detail in the side because it is dark in comparison to the top. The shot features the top, so it's not a problem.

If your subject is either light or dark, direct sun can enhance it. However, if the subject has both light and dark areas, an overcast day (or shooting in open shadow and adjusting for the bluish skylight with a 81a or 85a filter or correcting it in Photoshop) is best, as in the photo on the previous page. The soft light allows for more detail at the extremes of light and shadow.

Great Work Paul -- guitar and photos!
PHOTOS FOR SELLING THE GUITAR

Good photos like those shown above will help you sell a guitar for more money and sell it faster. The photos shown above (not including Paul’s) were used to sell two of the guitars shown, and they sold fast, for what I wanted. But, you might not want to take the time to set all of it up.

Also, if there is damage to the guitar, you will want to show it clearly. The guitar shown here was purchased from me for the price I asked, even with the photos of the scratch.

Here are photos of this guitar, not beautiful photos, but clear and illustrative of the guitar's actual appearance. When you want to sell, the clear showing of the guitar -- along with any blemishes -- is necessary. This is how you maintain a 100% feedback on ebay.

In these kinds of photos, the background is not nearly as important as it is when doing “pretty” photos of your guitars. It is still necessary to avoid any trademarks or brand names in backgrounds, as showing them without permission can lead to problems.

The photo at left and on the other page were provided for the sale of the guitar, to show its condition before the scratch.

The four photos below were used to show how the scratch looks close up, and how it look at a couple of distances from the guitar.

The photos were provided for full disclosure of the guitar's condition.
That's About It ...

We've covered some of the major issues of guitar photography in this short document. It's not complicated, as you can see; it's just a matter of being attentive to some specific details.

1) Pay attention to reflections; they are what define the contours of any shiny subject. (Applies to photographing cars, anything made of chrome or shiny metal, shiny furniture, and body builders' muscles, too.)

2) Pay attention to shadows; they are what define the contours of non-shiny objects and of dark subjects.

3) Use broad, soft light sources when combining light and dark parts of the same subject.

4) To highlight detail, use more direct, non-soft light.

5) Shoot A LOT of pictures! Especially with digital, it's so easy and inexpensive.

6) If shooting for publication in print, or for printing on your own desktop printer, realize that your camera will provide a 72dpi (or ppi) resolution image that might be over 20 inches wide. DO NOT REDUCE IT BEFORE PRINTING. The 20-inch wide photo at 72 dpi resolution, when you increase the resolution to 300 dpi, can be reduced in width to 5 inches, and you will still have sharp, non-jagged edges on angled lines. (In a graphic program like Photoshop, using the "Image size" menu, reduce the size in inches by a factor of 4, and increase the PPI/DPI from 72 to 300.)

If you are shooting for the computer screen, the 72 dpi image can be reduced in size to whatever you need, and it will display just fine on the screen.

For more information on this, consult your photo application's documentation.

Have fun!

Bill Cory

BOOKS By Bill Cory

The fulfillment of building a guitar is something every guitar player should experience.

Many quality kits are available, including jumbo, dreadnought, 000, OM, and others. Support is available from sources such as the Kit Guitar Builder's Discussion Forum, (www.KitGuitarForum.com) and other sources.

My two books offer all the information you need if you are interested building a guitar from a kit.

The upper book at left is a complete overview of the kits available, tools needed, the process of building, and includes information and knowledge I gained from actually building the kits shown on the covers and inside the books.

The lower book is a detailed manual covering every step of building a Martin-style kit.

To find more information on these books, including free excerpts, go to my website: www.KitGuitarManuals.com.

A free bonus is included with every book purchased.

Thanks!