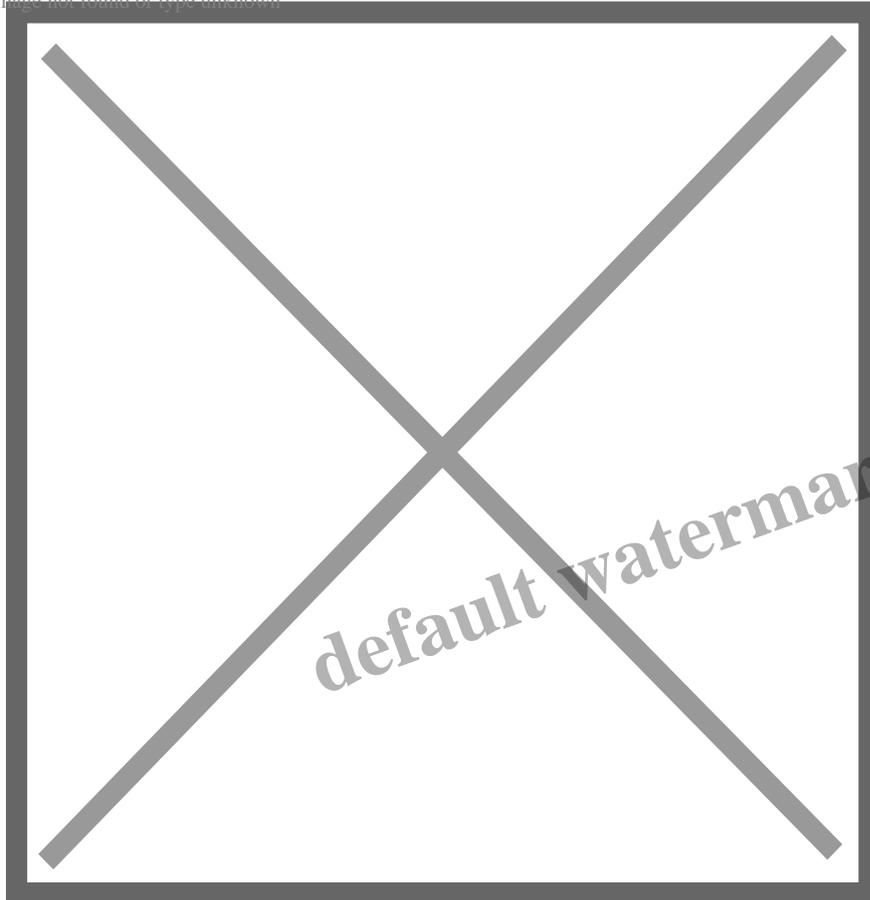


## The house of a thousand guitars: on being obsessed

### Description

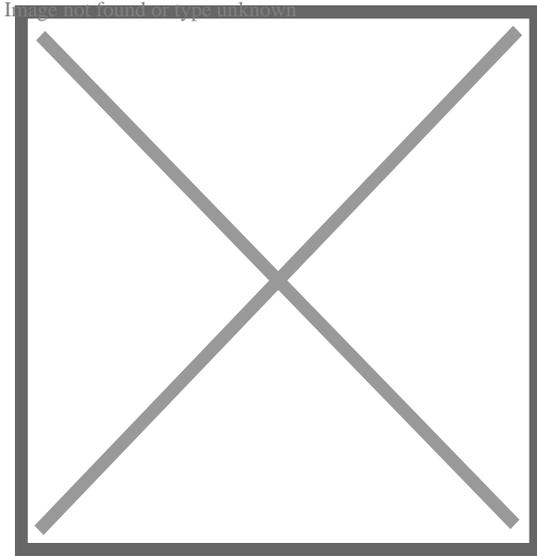
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[Bruce Springsteen and his guitar collection](#)

*Guitars come in all shapes and forms, and enthusiastic obsession happens. This can be fun but can also result in too many guitars.*

John Stubbins titled his beautifully crafted book about guitars "[The Devil is In It: Love, Obsession and the American Acoustic Guitar](#)". In this post, I want to focus on the "obsession" bit.



As a biologist, I've been surrounded by friends and colleagues that are all passionate about their interest in the natural world, with that passion often verging on mild obsession. Bird watchers will go to extraordinary lengths to set eyes (or rather binoculars) on particular birds. Plant people will spend ages searching for particular plants or peering down microscopes trying to identify tiny mosses. Naturalists of all kinds will go out in all weathers and all times of day or night to observe wildlife large and small.

*The Big Year (2011) – a movie about obsessive bird watching*

So it's fun for me as a (still) relative newbie in the guitar world to find equal degrees of passion bordering on obsession for all things to do with guitars.

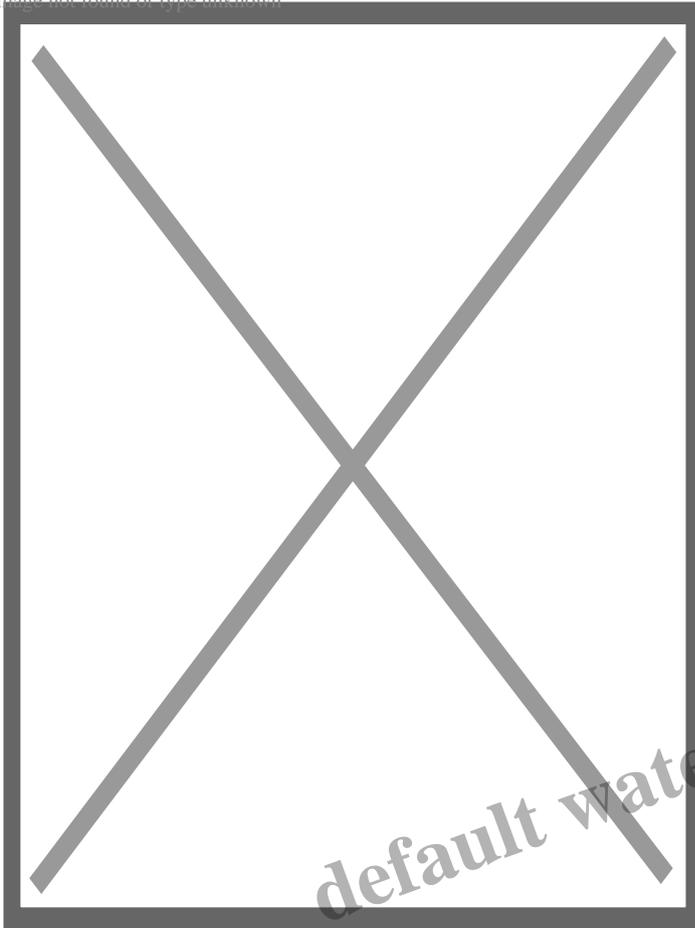
And there is so much to potentially obsess about! I'm used to thinking about biodiversity – the diversity of living things, and all the weird, wonderful, beautiful and amazing plants and creatures that we share the planet with.

Hence, I'm pre-adapted to thinking about all the various shapes, forms and types of guitar that have been made, from the earliest forms of the instrument through to the present-day crop. A quick look at any music shop or a website like Reverb provides a glimpse into the dazzling diversity of guitars available. Few instruments match the guitar in the sheer amount of variation in just about every aspect of its characteristics.

Steel string, nylon string, classical, flamenco, Gypsy jazz, solid body electrics, hollow body electrics, electric-acoustics, resonators, different types of resonator, archtops, flattops, dreadnaughts, concert, orchestra, parlor, 6-string, 12-string, just about any number of strings actually, 12 fret, 14 fret, cutaway, non-cutaway, lap-steels, Weissenborns, harp guitars, cigar box guitars, metal, carbon fiber, solid wood, laminate, almost infinitely variable wood combinations, new, old, vintage, factory-built, hand-made, made in the USA, made just about anywhere else.

And that's even before you get to brands. And amplifiers, effects pedals, pickups etc. Or other stringed instruments such as banjos, mandolins or ukuleles.

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## Obsession

There are many ways to become immersed in this world, from reading anything and everything to do with guitars, becoming fascinated with the history of guitars in general and particular brands or types in particular, hanging out in music stores and trying out different guitars, getting into guitar repair or even learning how to make guitars yourself.

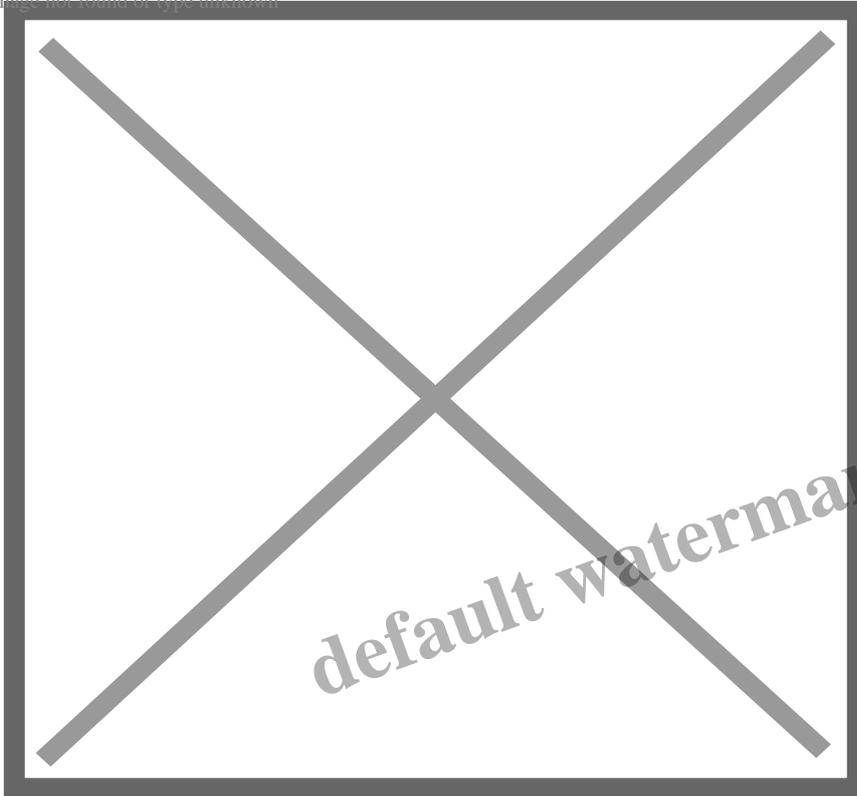
But of course, the main way of interacting with any musical instrument is to actually play it – and generally this means buying a guitar of your own and practicing to improve your playing abilities. Deciding what to buy can be a daunting task, but often relates simply to the amount of money you have available and how that relates to what you think you want or need in a guitar.

Acquiring your first guitar sets you off on a journey that can lead many different places. Sometimes, that first guitar stays with you forever and is all you really need. Sometimes, the first guitar you own is not especially good (usually because that was all you could afford at the time, and/or didn't know much about guitars). So, you move on to another guitar that better suits your needs, and perhaps you can afford a step up in quality. Sometimes, you decide that you need to complement the existing guitar with another one that does different things – for instance adding an electric to an acoustic. And sometimes, that process continues until you start to accumulate a small stable of guitars.

At that stage, another form of obsession may become apparent – an obsession that's been given a

name and that can get out of hand if it's allowed to. It's called "Guitar Acquisition Syndrome", recognised as a particular form of the more general "Gear Acquisition Syndrome". The general form is one of ["buying stuff you don't need in hopes it will make you better at something"](#). There's been a [book](#) written about Guitar Acquisition Syndrome, and it pops up now and again on guitar websites and discussion groups.

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### [Mediocre Guitar Player Magazine](#)

Walter Becker of Steely Dan wrote a piece in Guitar Player in 1994 that exposed the phenomenon. He wrote about a visit to a musician friend's house:

*"The gent in question is a devoted husband and a doting father, but right now there is no family in the family room; There's no room for the family in the family room. All horizontal surfaces are covered by guitars – acoustics, electrics, lap steels, old ones, new ones, weird little ukulele like things with no proper names.*

...

*It's called GAS – Guitar Acquisition Syndrome. You undoubtedly know someone who has it. Reading this rag, you probably have it yourself. Or will have it someday soon or would like to have it."*

["The Dreaded GAS"](#), in: *Guitar Player* April 1994, p. 15.

## How it all starts..

If you've read any of the other posts on this site, you'll have noticed that many of them focus on particular guitars. And there are many more in the pipeline that focus on other guitars. This therefore indicates that I have, or maybe had, a case of guitar acquisition syndrome and need to talk about it.

*"Hello, my name is Richard, and I haven't bought a new guitar for over a year.*

*I did buy a used one a couple of months ago though...."*

But then again, it's clear that I'm not alone. And my case is nowhere near as bad as the guy Walter Becker wrote about or many others I've heard or read about. Mine arises from a fatal combination of a love of guitars and the research training I've talked about that makes me want to systematically look at all the different makes and types, what they are made of, when and where they were built, and what makes them sound good (or bad).

As with many things, things start relatively innocently. [When I turned 60, I decided to get myself a decent guitar and actually learn to play properly](#) (unlike in my youth when I had a crap guitar and learned to play badly). So, I bought my cherry red Fender Stratocaster. Why? Because I knew the name, and Strats were played by many of my guitar heroes. And a new one wasn't horribly expensive. Man, it was a lovely guitar – and the fact that it was set up properly, had a great action, and all the knobs actually worked meant that it was a dream to play.

## Another guitar for travel?

A while after that, we took an extended trip to the western United States, Canada and Alaska. Rather than take the guitar with me, my lovely wife suggested that I could look for a cheap second-hand guitar at the start of our trip in California to use for the few months we were in North America. This idea morphed in my brain into "How about I go look in a guitar shop and potentially get a nice guitar that I could then take home with me?"

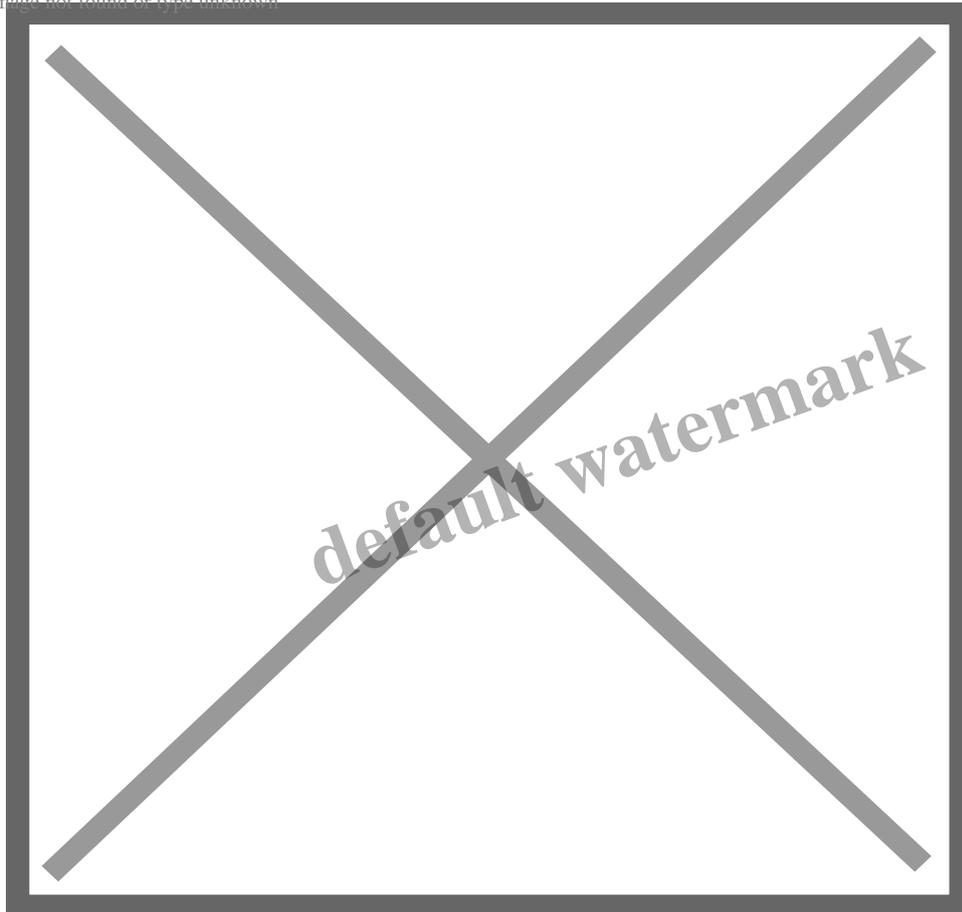
A visit to a Guitar Center store south of San Francisco had me trying out Gibson Les Pauls – the Les Paul is as iconic as the Fender Strat, and again is played by many wonderful guitarists. I'd never even seen one close up before and getting to play some was a real treat. I couldn't believe how solid and heavy they were! One of the models on sale was called the [Gibson Les Paul Less+](#).

The Less+ referred to the fact that the fact that the body was about half as thick as a regular Les Paul, and therefore considerably lighter. Given that this was to be a "travel" guitar to be carted around western North America, this was a distinct selling point. It sounded and played pretty good too. So, the cherry sunburst Les Paul became my companion all around California, Oregon, Washington, BC and Alaska – and yes, it came home to Australia with me. (Subsequent quality issues with the pickups and increasing frustration with the robotic tuning system that Gibson briefly experimented with are topics for [another post](#)).

## Need an acoustic?

After a while, I realised that, although I loved the electric sound and all the effects, I actually often really liked playing in mostly acoustic mode. It became obvious that playing an electric guitar as an acoustic has limitations – so the obvious step was to buy an acoustic to complement the Strat and Les Paul. A trip to the local music store revealed a mind-boggling variety of different brands, sizes and styles of acoustic guitar. The crap guitar from my youth had been an acoustic, but I can't remember what brand it was nor much about it except for how hard it was to play because of the absurdly high action.

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### [Choosing a guitar](#)

I decided I needed to focus my attention a bit, and so I looked at the range of Martins on display. I knew that Martin is a well-respected brand with a long history, and there were quite a few options in the store. With the help of a store guy, I got to try out most of them, and was amazed at how differently the various models played and sounded. I didn't know it at the time, but this was an early entrée into the rabbit hole of guitar decisions.

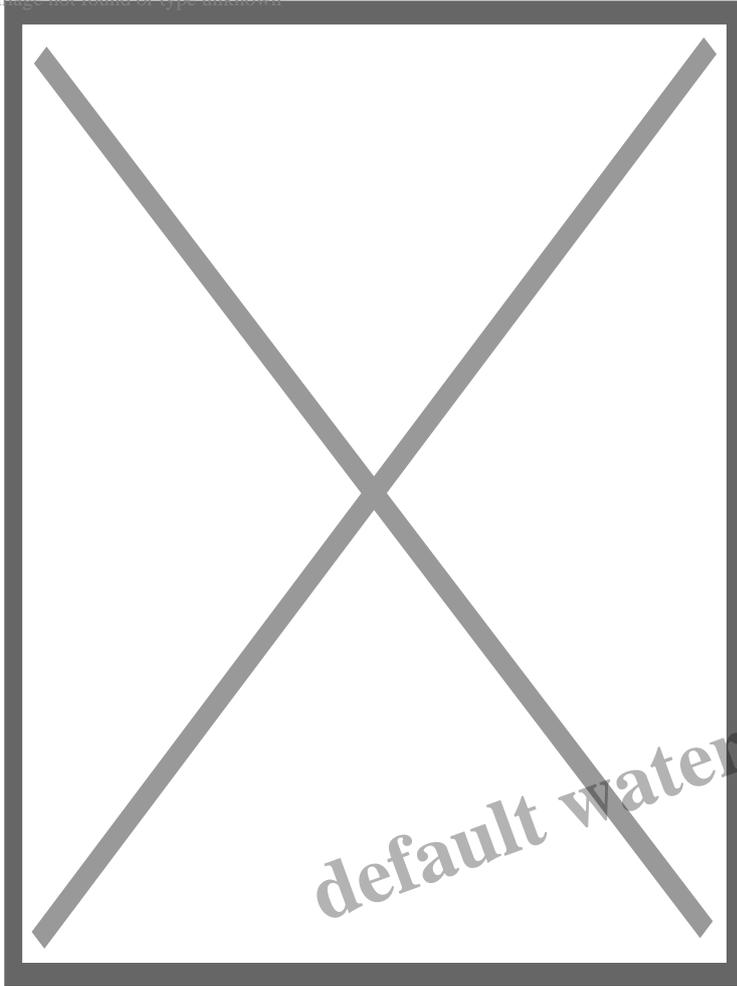
I tried all-solid-wood models versus models with high pressure laminate (HPL) back and sides. I tried models with different wood combinations. I tried dreadnought versus 000 models. And I tried guitars made in Martin's Nazareth factory in Pennsylvania versus models made in their Navojoa factory in Mexico. (I later found that all of these alternatives, and many more, were subject to ongoing and often quite partisan debate among guitar players – for instance, [is a Martin made in Mexico going to be of a similar quality to a Martin made in Pennsylvania?](#) More on this and other questions in future posts.)

As well as these questions, a major consideration was, as always, the \$\$ involved. There was a big jump in price from the Mexican-made guitars to the Nazareth-made instruments. There was also a less sizeable but still appreciable difference between the solid wood and HPL guitars. Did the price differences equate to differences in sound and playability? With all the various factors involved, and being a relative newbie in trying to figure out what makes a good guitar, it was actually quite difficult to tell. I definitely thought I detected a difference in sound between HPL and solid wood. Size seemed to matter too – but maybe not as much as I'd expected. After that, everything else was a bit less obvious – either the differences were small, or my untrained ear was no good at picking them up. But on the other hand, some just felt nicer to play, in some nebulous intangible way. (I've since realised that, yes, it is true that some guitars simply speak to you more directly than others, regardless of cost and other characteristics).

I came away with a Road Series DRSGT, a dreadnaught with a spruce top and solid [sapele](#) back and sides (I'd never heard of sapele until then – it's somewhat related to mahogany). It was about at the top of the range of price that I dared consider at that point, made in the Martin Mexico factory, played nicely, and sounded really great as far as I was concerned.

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## What about a resonator...?

I could carry on with the details of subsequent decisions that led to another guitar finding its way home with me, and then another. But you probably already get the idea of how easy it can be to slide into the mindset of "Maybe just another one..".

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*Humour abounds when it comes to the subject of buying new guitars (Various sources)*

So, yes, the temptation is great to dabble in a bit of guitar acquisition. Various commentaries have pointed out that there are several reasons that serial guitar acquisition can happen. The most straightforward is simply that a musician actually needs a range of different guitars for different purposes. You rarely see a guitarist in a band of any sort performing with only one guitar. Those Dire Straits songs I love sound the way they do in large part because of [Mark Knopfler's choice of guitar](#).

Following on from that, wannabe guitarists like me can develop a mindset that maybe we can sound like Mark Knopfler too if we have the same sorts of guitars that he plays. This is of course highly unlikely unless we actually practice and develop skills that even come close to Knopfler's – and herein lies one of the traps inherent in focusing on buying guitars rather than actually playing them. For some, the acquisition process takes over from the playing process.

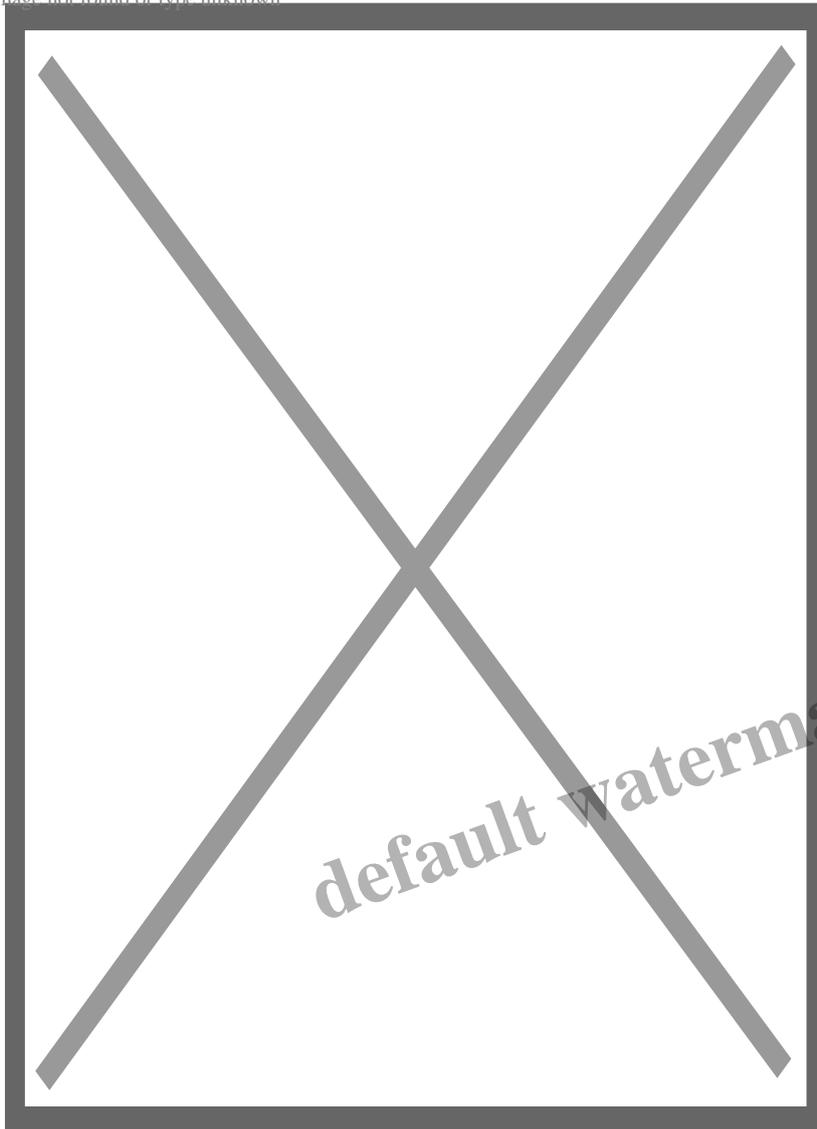
## Collector's items

That in itself may not be a bad thing. Guitars are beautiful objects and some people love to collect them. Collections can run into the hundreds of guitars and into the millions in terms of value, although most are much more modest – limited by funds and space, usually, plus limited tolerance of family members. Guitar geeks can focus their attention on any number of things – particular brands, particular eras, guitars made in their birth year, or any of the many types listed earlier. Have a look at the selection of Facebook groups listed in the [Resources page](#) for a flavour of the range of interests.

For instance, some folks like to focus on Martin and Gibson acoustic guitars from the ["Golden Era"](#) of the 1920s-40s, considered to be when the quality of these instruments was at its peak. This kind of focus can get expensive very quickly, with good-condition guitars commanding eye-watering prices.

A less costly but not necessarily less rewarding focus is on the mass-produced guitars produced around the same time (and later) by Harmony, Kay and others for selling via the [big department stores and in their catalogues](#). These guitars were much cheaper than the Martins and Gibsons and were usually not as well made (although there were many notable exceptions). A result of the poorer quality is that not many remain in reasonable condition, but there are still plenty of examples out there, and plenty more that can be taken on as restoration projects. A big part of the attraction of these cheaper historical instruments is that they were more often than not the first guitar that folks owned – and were often the guitar that well-known musicians started out using too. More on this in [another post](#).

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[Sears Silvertone catalogue 1938](#)

For some, the attraction lies less in possessing more guitars and more in the “thrill of the chase” – the process of seeking out particular models or dates of manufacture and/or the possibility of finding something cool or unusual in a yard sale, charity shop or wherever. This process demands a high level of guitar geekiness and the ability to do detective work on serial numbers and other identifying features. It is possible to luck out when doing this – my best find was a dusty, neglected and mostly stringless Martin guitar in the back of a charity shop which I paid \$100 for. It turned out to be a 1954 Martin D28 that brushed up really nicely with replacement tuners being the only non-original parts.

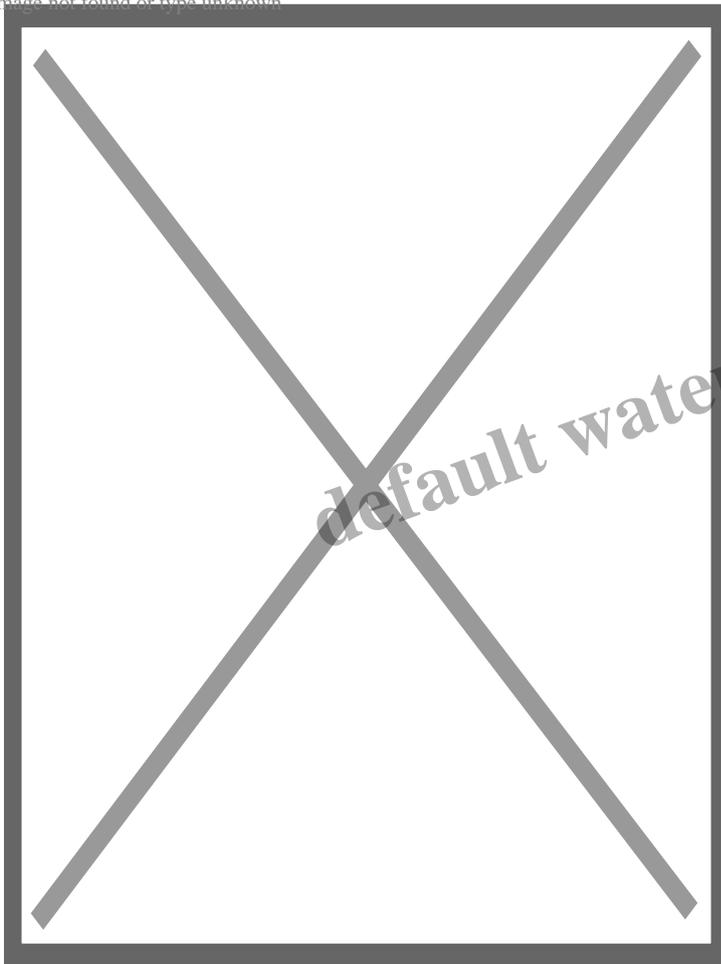
## Collect or play?

Motivations for collecting guitars (well for collecting anything really) vary greatly. Some collectors only want guitars in the best condition possible. Their preference would be for a 100 year old guitar that had never been out of its case over one that had seen a lot of life and was not in good condition. As discussed in an [earlier post](#) on restoration, original and authentic are important characteristics – a

guitar with all-original components is more highly regarded than one that has been modified a lot over its life. On the other hand, other folks see the signs of use that often characterise old guitars as part of their attraction. “Player grade” guitars may have imperfections, but they can still be great guitars – especially if the idea is to play rather than just have them.

While it’s probably a good thing that some guitars are kept in a pristine condition, I also think it’s kind of sad to see a guitar that’s simply a display item. Sure, it may be great to look at, but it was designed to be played – hard to do if it’s in a glass display cabinet or kept permanently in a case. There’s music in there that will never get out.

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[Greg Smallman guitar in the Western Australian Museum Boola Bardip](#)

Another motivation for chasing old guitars may be an interest in repairing them and returning them to functional playability. If you spend enough time with guitars, you inevitably have to start servicing and repairing them, even if it’s just changing the strings. For some, the next step is to develop an interest in how the guitars are made and if/how you can do minor repairs yourself. That, of course, leads on to a whole new universe of tools and gear required for particular tasks. And so it goes.

## Not just guitars

An obsession with accumulating gear can occur in almost any activity or hobby. Just look at outdoor

gear, anything to do with bicycles, boats, travel, cooking, even raising a baby. They all have a minimum amount of gear that's required, but then there's always new innovations to be aware of and endless add-ons and alternatives.

“Guitar players aren't the only ones who suffer from GAS. Photographers are another notable group who can never seem to collect enough stuff. Two other groups that come to mind are cyclists and golfers. I think the latter presents the best cautionary tale for guitar players.

If you've ever played golf with people who take it seriously, you might have noticed some of them have more of an interest in equipment than they do in their own skills. The newest club made out of some cutting-edge material will help them hit the ball twenty yards further. Better shoes will help their swing. A better putter will cut a few strokes off their short game.

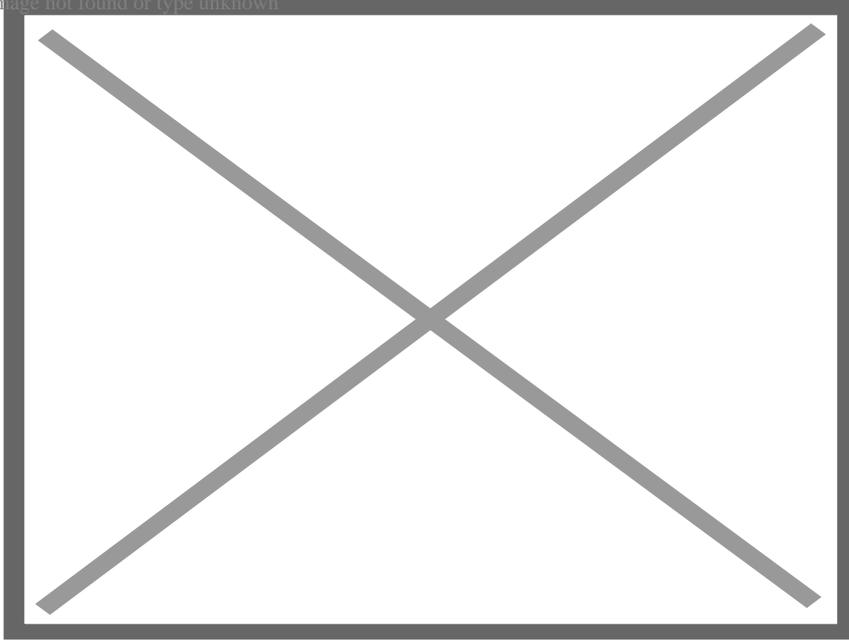
But if they don't work on what matters – that is, their own skills – all that fancy new driver will do is help them hit the ball twenty yards further into the woods.”

[Spinditty: Got GAS? Gear Acquisition Syndrome and Guitar Players](#)

I don't play golf, but I have been an avid photographer for a long time. From my schoolboy box Brownie camera through an ongoing progression of better quality cameras – as good as the budget of the time would allow – I've enjoyed using the technology to strive for excellent artistic results. Cameras, like guitars, can be considered a means to an end – the guitar to make music and the camera to make images.

But photography can be a massive gear trip as well. To some extent, the same arguments apply to cameras as to guitars. You need the gear that fits the purpose. Sure, you can take great photos on a smartphone these days, and a basic camera can do a lot of things. But if, for instance, you want to do wildlife photography, you need a telephoto lens, and preferably a zoom. The better the lens, the better the results in most cases. Alternatively, if you want to do close-up photography of say plants or insects, then you need a macro lens and probably some clever lighting attachments. Trying to photograph elephants in the Serengeti with a macro will be just as unsuccessful as trying to photograph an ant using a 600mm zoom lens.

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*Photographing wildlife in Tanzania – a big lens is very useful*

Professional photographers will have cameras and lenses to cover different needs, just as professional guitarists have an array of guitars doing different things. But again, the trap is to get caught up in the gear and forget about the aim – it's easy to get more interested in finding better cameras and lenses and forget about actually focusing on the process of taking satisfying photographs. Personally, I've recently moved away from the big camera and backpack full of lenses to a simpler [bridge camera](#). Good gear certainly helps, but taking good photographs also depends on the person holding the camera. There are several great articles on [gear acquisition syndrome in photography](#), including [self-help ideas for overcoming it](#) that also resonate in the guitar world.

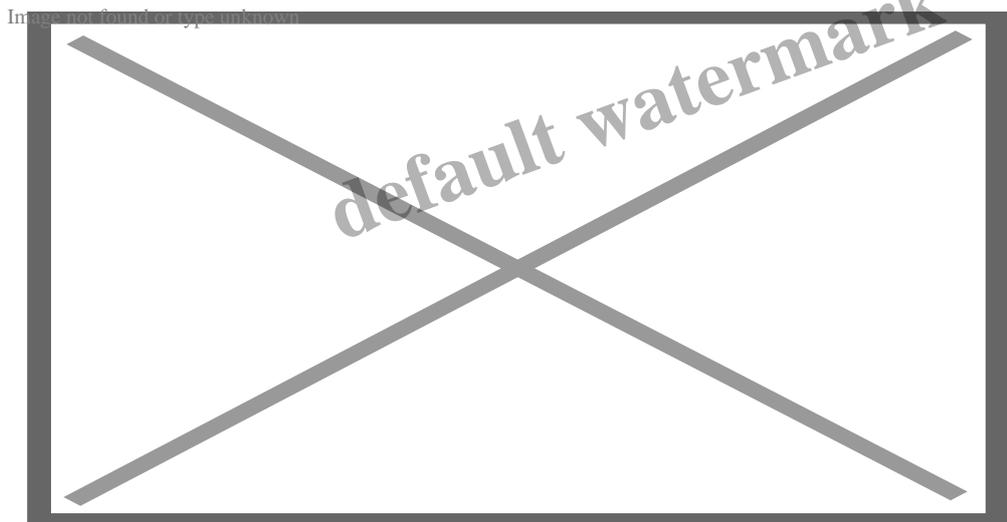
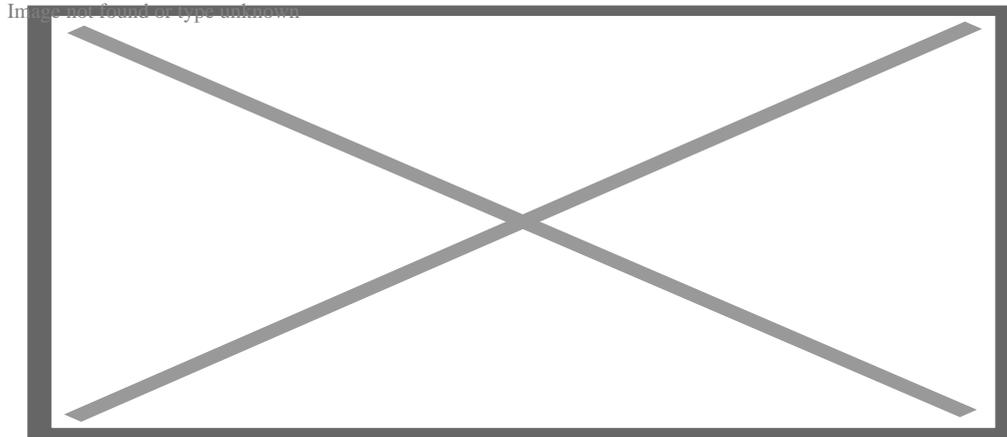
## Is there a problem?

I admit that I love and am a bit obsessed with guitars and may have acquired one or two on my journey into the world of guitars and what they are made of. First off, I recognise that I'm lucky and privileged to have the chance to do that – many people in the world have much more pressing things to think about and having even one guitar is not high on the priority list.

I've also been lucky that I've had the opportunity to travel to different parts of the world and experience the natural ecosystems there, as well as visit many guitar makers. And I'm lucky that I've found a way of meshing my training in ecology with my interest in music, via this website. I love the stories behind guitars, and it's those stories that appear in posts in the Nature of Music. I've actively sought out guitars with interesting stories – but really, every guitar has a story of some sort. Where and by whom it was made, where the materials come from, how the forests are being managed – and then what happens to the guitar during its life.

So, I may be mildly obsessed, but I can think of many other less pleasant and less innocuous ways of spending my time and money. As with all things, keeping the obsession under control is the key challenge – fortunately, this is helped by limited space and a loving wife who is extremely tolerant but sets limits. Guitars come and go, but the population size is kept in check. Parting with a loved guitar

can be hard, but it's good to realise that passing a guitar on to someone else allows it to continue to be played and loved. All three of the guitars I mentioned from the early days of my guitar journey have now moved on elsewhere. Eventually, I'll be back down to the small set of instruments that I really love to play. And one day I might be able to play them better too.



Sources: [Benjaminle](#) and [Brainyquote](#)

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