

15 Electro-Collectives: Virtual Guitar Communities

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Introduction

Electricity has served the guitar in a number of ways. The invention of the electric guitar was a catalyst for the birth of new genres of music that would not have been possible without electricity. Electricity has also enabled more advanced modes of guitar construction, influencing the instrument's design. Progress in recording and communication technologies during the twentieth century also influenced the practice of guitarists. Historically, groups of people who share a common interest in the guitar have gathered together to share their music, knowledge, and ideas in local communities. However, the invention of the internet allowed for communication between guitarists, as well as other stakeholders in the worldwide guitar industry, such as retailers, guitar builders, and designers, to become much more rapid, more frequent, and more global. Twenty-first-century telecommunications advanced the notion of what a community is¹ and catalyzed the development of online guitar communities; groups of people sharing a common interest in the guitar that meet via the internet.

Electricity has, thereby, freed guitar communities from geographical boundaries. Online communities typically include people from diverse locations that would otherwise not interact. In a study on guitar in higher education, a guitar tutor observed the following: "There's this sort of an underground community that [may be] forum based. Online communities that are not necessarily taking the place, but extending the usual social networks."² In actuality, there are many virtual guitar communities as well as an overarching metacommunity that unites them. This chapter will present an auto-ethnographic immersive account of local, glocal, and global virtual guitar communities. It will explore the development of these communities, their activities, and their function. The discussion will address long-term cultural consequences of online communities, including the potential dominance of Western musics, along with the simultaneous paradox of the increased potential global exposure of lesser-known microcultures where the electric guitar is increasingly being adopted.

Pre-Internet Communities

For as long as guitar-like instruments have existed, they have been integral to the communities and cultures surrounding them. The broader, global music industry is often subdivided into various sub-sectors, including by genres or eras, or by communities or scenes. The notion of music scenes typically involves a location, albeit either geographical or virtual. Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson define music scenes as “clusters of producers, musicians and fans [who] collectively share their common musical tastes and collectively distinguish themselves from others.”³ However, they do not clearly define what a “cluster” is and acknowledge they can be local, trans-local, or virtual. This chapter will focus on the concept of communities as described by Etienne Wenger’s⁴ definition of *Communities of Practice*: “Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.”⁵ The defining difference between Wenger’s communities, when compared with Bennett and Peterson’s scenes, is the sense of purpose and passion behind learning how to do things better as members symbiotically interact, whereas scenes have a more commercial tendency.

What is generally considered to be the “modern” form of the classical and flamenco guitar was developed in nineteenth-century Spanish workshops. Subsequently, Spanish culture and the guitar have become inseparable and symbiotic. Within the numerous towns and villages in the Andalusian region, the guitar makers’ home workshops were the hub of local communities. Carrying their culture, Spanish explorers and pioneer settlers took the guitar with them to various locations around the world, birthing new local guitar-centered cultures. Thus, the guitar then became a popular instrument in the Americas in the early twentieth century, where the electric guitar was invented and developed.

With technological progress in the twentieth century, including faster and cheaper international travel and communication, the guitar further developed its global instrument status: “The instrument has gained a central place in, and has helped to define, musical genres worldwide.”⁶ As the twentieth century advanced, various guitar-centered subcultures evolved in numerous locations on every inhabited continent. These subcultures typically focused on genre but also included quite varied foci such as artists buying, selling, and collecting guitars, building and modifying guitars, and learning to play the guitar. With the help of electricity and the invention and growing popularity of the electric guitar, this phenomenon has developed exponentially, with diverse subcultures and subgenres evolving simultaneously. This has happened most prominently within

the United States of America, where the guitar has played a prominent role in the birth and development of blues, jazz, country, rock and roll, and all the associated subgenres and genre fusions.

For example, the raw palette and accompanying timbres of southern blues have a distinctly different flavor to other American guitar-centered genres, including urban funk, Seattle grunge, or Tennessean rockabilly, to name just a few. However, there is something much more profound than what a disassociated listener could hear from recordings. There is an accompanying culture deeply integrated with each genre. The culture involves the community of music makers and music consumers, and influences lifestyle choices as diverse as clothing, hairstyles, lingo, food and alcohol consumption, and even the choice of car they drive. These are all indicators of community.

The genres of music dominated by the electric guitar were generated, and evolved, through a blend of self-pedagogy from recordings, magazines, books, and oral traditions in communities. Jeff Schwartz, a musician and scholar from Los Angeles, describes this process by reflecting on his own journey:

Many popular musicians, such as myself, learned from books and by imitation of records . . . I learned basic chord forms and the names of the notes on the guitar from the legendary *Mel Bay Modern Guitar Method* . . . Once armed with this basic knowledge, I began trying to figure out songs listening to records. More importantly, I entered a community of guitar players at my Junior High. Some of these musicians took lessons and some knew more skilled players who informally shared their knowledge. We showed off the songs we could play, worked together to figure others out, and created a competitive environment, making each one of us work harder at home with his record collection to learn something no one else had.⁷

This function of guitar communities fits Wenger's definition of a community of practice. Since the inception of the electric guitar, communities similar to the one described by Schwartz have existed across the globe where guitarists have gathered to share and compare knowledge and spur each other on. With developments in communication technologies, particularly since the birth of the internet, these communities have gravitated toward virtual spaces. Furthermore, new communities, and new types of communities, have evolved, existing only in the virtual world.

Virtual Guitar Communities

Online communities of guitarists exist primarily to serve the same fundamental function as geolocated communities, that is, to share knowledge

and resources, and to encourage each other (often via competitive banter). The earliest of these communities were internet forums, newsgroups, and chat rooms. Howard Rheingold described his involvement in an early online conferencing system, WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), as an "authentic community" involved in the "self-design of a new kind of culture."⁸

These services were soon followed by peer-to-peer (P2P) file-sharing websites where users could upload transcriptions of guitar performances. These could include riffs, solos, chord structures, and whole songs. There was little control, and little understanding, of global copyright legalities in the earliest communities. Napster, an early audio-streaming P2P service, encountered legal issues and was forced to cease operating after two years of high popularity. Most of the guitar-centered P2P websites focused on sharing files of tablature (tabs). Tablature is a form of written music that indicates the physical placement of notes on the instrument rather than indications of pitch and duration, as with standard notation. As a form of storing music for guitar, it existed for at least half a millennium before being appropriated and modified by the online guitar community. Various unwritten protocols evolved within the online community regarding the choice of font and role of particular symbols, etc. Users also generated a variety of modes of notating chord structures. However, there was little universality, which often caused confusion within the community. Figure 15.1 shows examples of how community members could generate

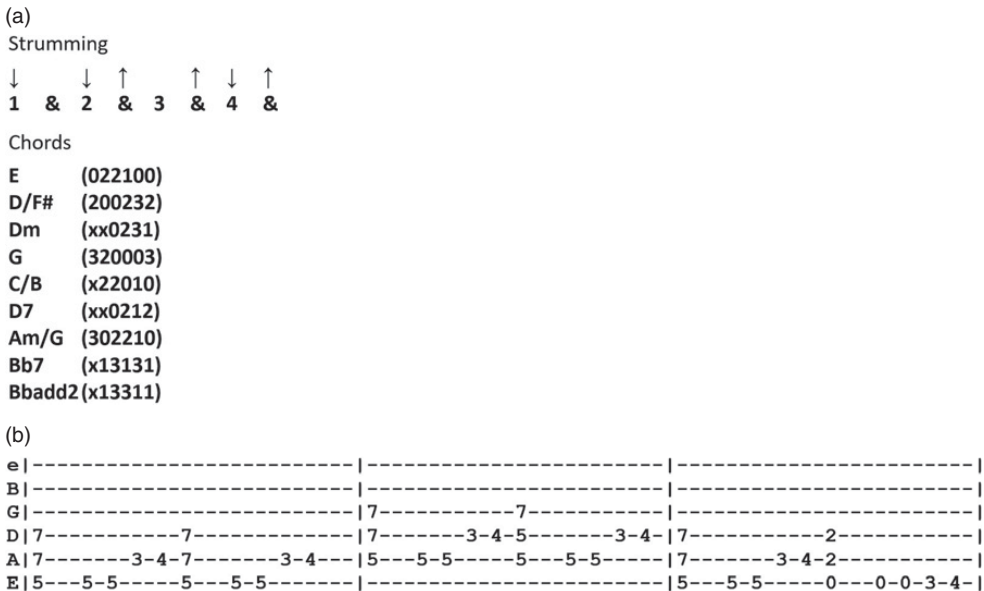


Figure 15.1 Examples of online guitar community communication typeface

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      Q  E E Q  Q      Q  E E Q  Q      Q  E E Q  Q      Q  E E Q  Q  3x
e|-----|-----|-----|-----|
B|-----|-----|-----|-----|
G|-----|-----1--3--|-----3--5--|-----1--3--|
D|-----1--3--|-----|-----|-----|
A|-3--3--3--|-3--3--3--|-5--5--5--|-3--3--3--|
E|-----|-----|-----|-----|
*****
Duration Legend
W - whole; H - half; Q - quarter; E - 8th; S - 16th; a - acciaccatura;
+ - note tied to previous; . - note dotted;
Duration letters will always appear directly above the note/fret number it represents the
duration for. Duration letters with no fret number below them represent rests.
Uncapitalized letters represent notes that are staccato (1/2 duration).
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Figure 15.2 Online tablature with duration legend

content using simple word processor characters to indicate strumming patterns and chord voicings, and tablature.

A problem with tablature is the lack of a universal mode of indicating note duration. Attempts have been made by members of the online community to overcome this. Figure 15.2 illustrates an example.

One of the earliest P2P guitar websites was OLGA (the Online Guitar Archive), which began in June 1992.⁹ OLGA was an interactive site where users could share tablatures and lessons. It was founded by James Bender and originally hosted by the University of Nevada in Las Vegas,¹⁰ later morphing into Harmony Central. By the time it was shut down in 2006, it had hosted over 30,000 files of guitar tablature. There now exist tablature-sharing websites operating under licenses with publishers, artists, and agencies. The largest of these is Ultimate-Guitar.com (UG), which hosts over 1.1 million files and has over 10 million registered users. As well as a P2P file-sharing site, UG also hosts forums, lessons, and articles. They describe themselves as “easily the most badass and fastest growing guitarist community in the world that creates, learns and shares tabs.”¹¹

With the advent of social media, online communities became easier to engage with and subsequently grew in popularity. Today, online guitar communities exist in a wide range of virtual spaces, including Facebook, YouTube, X (formerly known as Twitter), Pinterest, LiveJournal, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok. They also continue to exist in news-groups and chatrooms, as well as informal email communities.

Prior to the World Wide Web, Usenet newsgroups were popular virtual spaces for a large assortment of various online communities, including guitar communities. In February 2001, Google acquired Deja News Research Service, an online archive of Usenet discussion group messages. This led to the development of Google Groups. There are currently nearly 5,000 guitar-related groups on Google Groups, with archived messages dating back to 1981. Guitar-related Google Groups include a diverse range

of interests, including music theory, buying and selling guitars, learning to play, guitar repairs, and more esoteric interests such as guitar decals, guitar tools, and specific band fan discussion groups. Within the virtual space of Google Groups, there also exist geolocation specific groups, including, for example, “Guitarists of Louisville,” “NYC Guitarists,” and less specific groups, including “Guitarists USA.” Many guitar-related Google Groups now see very little activity, with some groups having no new posts for over ten years. This is largely due to the shift of virtual guitar communities to big-media social media sites, including Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and X. However, there are still a few active online message boards within the virtual guitar community. For example, a group hosted by FeedSpot that focuses on the Fender Stratocaster, Strat Talk Forum,¹² averages more than thirty posts per day, and The Gear Page, from the same hosts, which describe themselves as “the leading online community and marketplace for guitars, amps, pedals, effects and associated gear,”¹³ averages eighteen posts per day.

Facebook

Social media site Facebook began operations in 2004. Within the virtual space created by Facebook, there are now countless guitar-related communities. These groups defy categorization, as there seems to be an endless array of purposes and foci for them. There are groups with no specific focus, which cater to all things related to guitar, and other groups with a very narrow catchment, and everything in between. There are genre-specific groups, groups for fans of particular artists or manufacturers, groups for discussion of equipment, and groups specifically for trading gear.

Some of the guitar communities on Facebook are extremely large, having memberships in the hundreds of thousands. For example, “Top Guitar Players – Community,” which began in 2009, now has over 335,000 members and averages over 100 posts each day. Table 15.1 lists some of the other significant Facebook guitar communities, including their membership numbers and their descriptor.

Guitar communities also exist in virtual spaces for geolocated people groups. For example, there are Facebook groups for guitarists in particular nations, states, and counties, and groups focusing on individual cities. Table 15.2 lists a few geospecific Facebook guitar communities, further demonstrating the wide variety of communities that exist within the Facebook platform.

Table 15.1 *Significant Facebook guitar communities*

Community	Members	Description
Everything Guitar	>156k	If you love the guitar and you play, tinker, build, collect or admire guitars, this is the group for you.
Guitar Addicts	>123k	A group of guitar enthusiasts
Guitar and Music Theory	>288k	A place to discuss and share musical ideas! Specializing in Scales/Modes and Jazz based extended chords. Bring your playing to the next level. Not by becoming a better player but by understanding music and how it works.
Guitar Licks and Tricks	>192k	The purpose of this group is to allow blues and rock guitarists worldwide and of all levels to trade licks, ideas, and wisdom on anything guitar related.
Fingerstyle Acoustic Guitar	>118k	We are a community of guitarists hoping to spread the different styles of playing Acoustic Fingerstyle Guitar. By means of exchanging and sharing information we hope to bring to light undiscovered talents from all around to everyone involved in the project.
Guitar Lessons for Beginners	>110k	Guitar Lessons for Beginners
Fender Play® Community	>63k	This community is designed to bring the members of Fender Play™ together to share their journey as they learn guitar, bass, and ukulele.

Note: These quotes are taken from the individual Facebook guitar communities.

Table 15.2 *Geospecific Facebook guitar communities*

Community	Members	Description
New York Jazz Guitar Society	1.3k	Jazz guitar special interest group
Guitars Amps Pedals For Sale UK	10.9k	Guitars and Amps for sale
Affordable Guitar Sales Australia	4.6k	Buy and sell guitars and guitar gear for \$2000.00 or less.
Guitarists in Africa	3.4k	Welcome to the group where you'll find guitar music across all genres of the African community and the world at large. Memes, Guitar pictures, and many more.
EU Guitar Gear Marketplace	3.5k	Place where you can trade your guitar gear within Europe.
Indian Guitarists Network	12k	Hello friends. This group is for guitarist [<i>sic</i>]. So feel free to join this group, share your videos, tabs, chords and all. :-) M glad that this group has guitarists like Manit dani, Pawan jalan and members of famous bands.
European Marketplace for Vintage Guitars and Amplifiers	5.4k	This group is for all European people looking to sell or buy guitars and amplifiers made during the years 1920 to 1975 and all accessories and memorabilities that go with it.
Guitar Market Philippines	22k	Group created for selling/swapping Guitars/FX/Gadgets/Equipments [<i>sic</i>]

Note: These quotes are taken from the individual Facebook guitar communities.

There are many guitar communities on Facebook specifically for manufacturers of guitars, or even specific models of guitars. Some of these communities are maintained by the manufacturing company; however, many are unofficial and maintained by fans. Table 15.3 lists some of these communities. It is safe to assume that the “official” sites are part of the

Table 15.3 *Manufacturer-specific Facebook guitar communities*

Community	Members	Description
Gibson Guitar Owners	41.7k	You need to own a Gibson Guitar, be very desperate to own one or love one of the Guitars owned to join this group. So upload your Guitar pics and Lets Rock!
Gibson Les Paul	111.1k	Welcome to The Gibson Les Paul group . . . This is a group for those who love Gibson Les Pauls that also welcomes Epiphone Les Pauls.
Fender Guitar and Amp Society	117k	This is not an official Fender group, it is a consumer group ran by Fender consumers and users of all vintage and current Fender guitar bass and amps. This is a group to celebrate Fender gear and share ideas and information with each other.
Stratocaster Group	71.9k	Heck!! Whazzad!??? . . . Right!!! You happend [<i>sic</i>] to step into "Stratocaster Group." Not exactly a church choir but quite some fun. Please leave all guns outside the saloon.
Gretsch Guitar Fans	11.8k	Welcome to the group Gretsch Guitar Fans! Please feel free to post any thing about Gretsch guitars (pics, links, etc) :D Enjoy!!
Hofner Guitars Group	12.5k	The official Hofner Guitars group. Share your Hofner pictures and videos. Ask your questions. Be a part of the Hofner family. Lets have some fun!
Ibanez Guitar Owners	30k	For Owners and lovers of Ibanez Guitars. A place to share Pics ask questions and discuss everything Ibanez.
Suhr Guitars	12.6k	For all lovers, owners and general fans of the amazing work by John Suhr, and of course the artists who play Suhr guitars.

Note: These quotes are taken from the individual Facebook guitar communities.

brands' marketing, as hosting communities helps develop and perpetuate brand allegiance. This is a testament to the value, and the potential, of online guitar communities.

Some examples of Facebook guitar communities with two defining criteria, one geographical and one manufacturer specific, are "Taylor Guitar Owners Group USA," which has over 15,000 members, and "Telecaster Guitars Australia," with just under 3,000 members. The group "Singapore Two-Handed Tapping (Touchstyle) Guitar," a relatively small online community with 579 members, is a geospecific community focusing on an individual guitar playing technique. There are gender-specific guitar communities, including "Female Guitarists who Rock," with 1,354 members, and "Female Guitar Players Worldwide," with 817 members. The small sizes of these communities potentially suggests an observed gender bias¹⁴ that has historically permeated the guitar industry and may have potentially transferred to online spaces. YouTuber Guitar Goddess¹⁵ acknowledges there is still a presence of sexism and discrimination in both offline and online communities.

Among the multitude of guitar communities on Facebook, there are some very specific and obscure communities. Table 15.4 lists a few examples of the more bizarre and obscure.

Virtual guitar communities allow guitarists from all over the globe to interact in real time with other guitarists located anywhere and everywhere

Table 15.4 *Bizarre and obscure guitar communities on Facebook*

Community	Members	Description
Guitarists Who Say Gibson Should Reissue Classic Epiphone Archtops	366	Classic, American Made Epiphone archtop guitars such as the Emperor, Deluxe, Broadway, Triumph, Zephyr Deluxe, and Zephyr Emperor Regent of the period 1932 through to 1970 were some of the best guitars money could buy, and today they remain valuable as both tools and collectors items to musicians over the world. Join if you think Gibson/Epiphone should reissue them once more!
Electric Guitar Builders Template Group	8.2k	This group is intended to help guitar builders access templates. Buy, Sell, Swap or Trade at your own risk.
Guitar Pedal Lunatics	52.3k	n/a
Weird and Strange Guitars	816	n/a
Bizarre Guitars	34	Please feel free to share guitars that go off on a tangent from the norm.
Oddball American Guitars	259	Fun guitar geek Page dedicated to all those vintage American guitars that WEREN'T Gibsons, Fenders, Epiphones, Gretsches, Guilds or Rickenbackers.
Cool and Old Guitars	57k	This group is for people to share pics and info about guitars they own. Really don't want any buying or selling except by personal messages.
Air Guitar Australia	536	Our mission is to create a community of Aussie Air Guitar nutcases.

Note: These quotes are taken from the individual Facebook guitar communities.

around the world. Activities typical of Facebook guitar communities include: asking for advice on equipment or for learning to play, uploading videos and recordings (often for feedback), showing off guitars, sharing links to other web pages, and sharing tablature or sheet music (often of transcriptions of guitar solos).

There is considerable overlap between communities in different host virtual spaces. For example, guitarists on Facebook groups often link content to YouTube channels. Demonstrating the presence of this cross-platforming within the online guitar community is the Facebook community entitled “YouTube Guitar Players Group,”¹⁶ with over 7,600 members and an average of over 1,000 posts each month. The group is administered by a member in Brazil, and their statement (translated from Portuguese) is as follows:

This group is focused on videos, whether from YouTube or even Facebook. You will be able to post anything guitar-related, as well as photos of guitars, guitarists, stories, announcements, effects, ideas, and events and the dissemination of original songs, bands or covers . . . In other words, everything related to guitar!

The vast majority of the material is amateur guitarists sharing homemade content in the form of videos of themselves performing on their guitars. Other popular content includes backing tracks and gear reviews. Members

of this Facebook group can be found commenting on each other's YouTube videos, demonstrating the kind of regular interaction expected in a community of practice as defined by Wenger. The interaction between these communities blurs the boundaries between them to the point that we should not really consider them boundaries at all but pathways. There exists a complex, seemingly almost infinite, series of conduits between communities, virtual hosts, and individual members.

YouTube

YouTube was launched in 2005 and purchased by Google in 2006. Within the virtual space created by YouTube, there are typically two main types of people: content creators (often labeled YouTubers) and content consumers. However, there is no precise distinction between these two, as most content creators are also consumers, and many consumers are also creators. There are also two types of content creators: some are using the space to purposefully generate income through royalties, referrals, advertising, and selling educational content; others, whose involvement is simply because they just want to share their content with a wider audience. Therefore, it is best to think of types of activity rather than types of user. Also, there is no clear distinction between activities of users regarding their role(s) in the virtual guitar community, as there is clear evidence of content creators participating in a community among other content creators, as well as acting as a community between themselves and their subscribers. Evidence also exists of a sense of community between subscribers of different guitar content YouTube creators; however, this is less manifest, as it occurs across different web pages and is not necessarily intended as a community activity.

On Sunday, March 21, 2021, a member of the Facebook community "Everything Guitar" posted the question: "What's everyone's favorite youtube guitarist?" Within the responses, 112 different guitarists were listed. Surprisingly the guitarists listed were not former mainstream performing or recording artists but were known only or primarily for their activity on YouTube. This supports Kevin Dawe's¹⁷ assertion that the guitar is both a driver of, and subject to, rapid sociological change from its roots in cottage industries to its preeminence in cyberspace. Figure 15.3 shows the YouTubers with more than three votes.

On March 24, 2017, a member of another guitar-based group on Facebook, "Top Guitar Players – Community," posted a similar question: "Who is your favorite YouTube Guitarist???" There were 117 different

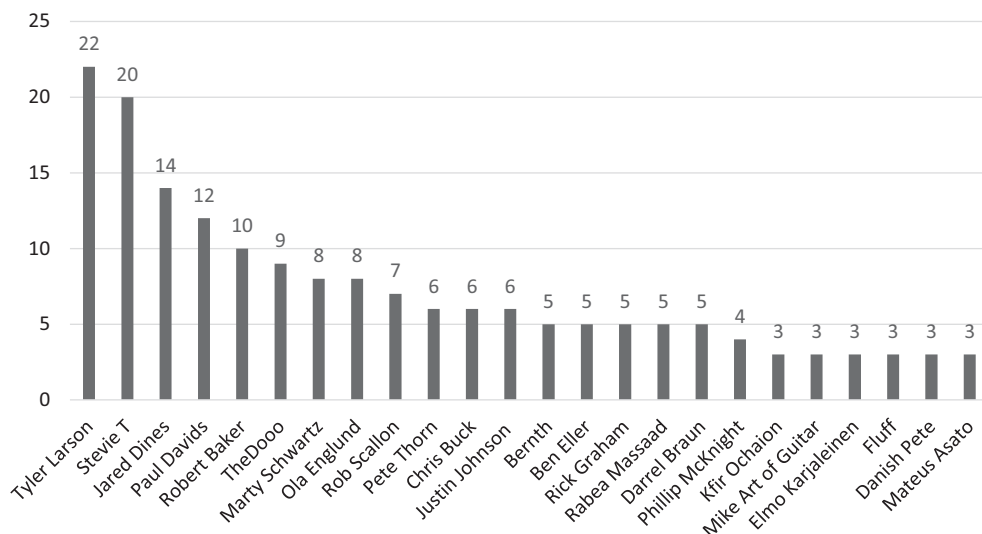


Figure 15.3 Favorite YouTube guitarists – Everything Guitar Facebook community

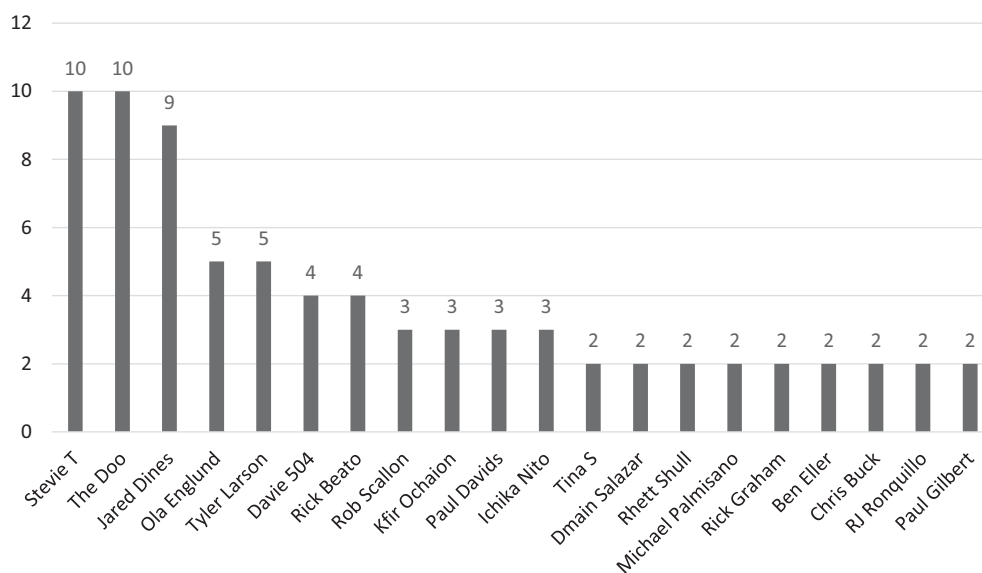


Figure 15.4 Favorite YouTube guitarists – Top Guitar Players Facebook community

YouTube guitarists listed in the results. Figure 15.4 shows the guitarists with two or more votes.

We can garner some ideas of the favorite YouTube guitarists among the virtual guitar community by combining the results. Table 15.5 shows the six YouTube guitarists found in the top ten of both lists, their total number of votes, and the number of subscribers to their YouTube channels.

Table 15.5 *Favorite YouTube guitarists—combined Facebook communities*

YouTuber	Number of votes	Channel subscribers
Stevie T	30	2.46m
Tyler Larson (Music is Win)	27	1.32m
Jared Dines	23	2.93m
TheDooo	19	4.86m
Paul Davids	15	2.26m
Ola Englund	13	625k
Rob Scallon	10	2.16m

Evidence of YouTube guitarists acting as a global interactive community of practice can be found in examples where they collaborate: Marty Schwartz's channel includes interviews with Rick Beato, and Paul Davids' channel features videos with input from fellow YouTuber guitarists Helen Ibe and Mary Spender. Tyler Larson's channel features many videos with input from other YouTubers, including Paul Davids and Tomo Fujita, as well as other famous musicians, including Tommy Emmanuel and St. Vincent.

The Covid-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for greater levels of online collaboration than had been occurring previously. Many YouTuber guitarists created videos with other members of the community during lockdown periods when live music was all but shut down around the globe. For example, Dutch YouTuber guitarist Paul Davids released a video¹⁸ of a collaborative production with ten other guitarists from Europe, the USA, and the UK. The video featured each collaborator overdubbing an improvised guitar solo over the same backing track. The collaborators each also featured various similar collaborative projects on their own YouTube channels, strengthening and broadening the sense of community. UK-based YouTuber guitarist Chris Buck stated he was enjoying the collaborative spirit that arose in response to the lockdowns.¹⁹ The sense of community has further strengthened ever since, with many YouTuber guitarists now traveling to collaborate in person.

A UK-based YouTube channel, JTC Guitar, developed a series of videos titled *JTC collab series*, which features videos of five different electric guitarists recording a lead solo over a pregenerated backing track. This series was launched in November 2019,²⁰ just before the Covid lockdowns. The nature of an online collaboration meant the restrictions did not impede this project, and it continued unabated throughout the pandemic. In 2020, French YouTuber Florian Merindol produced a playlist of videos he called *Covid Guitar Battles*. Each video featured a collaboration between

himself and other guitarists trading riffs, licks, and lead solos. He stated, “Covid 19 give [*sic*] us time to have fun with our friends (only on internet!! Lol!)”²¹ and invited the community of watchers to leave comments on which performances they preferred.

Before the pandemic, YouTuber Jared Dines began a series of videos he called *the biggest shred collab song in the world*. The first video²² was released in December 2017 and featured twenty-three other YouTube guitarists. Affirming the communal atmosphere of the YouTube guitar community, he opened the first video with this monologue:

I wanted to give something to you as a gift from me and from all the other YouTube guitarists out there. I think that I speak for everyone in this video when I say we couldn't do this without you, and we're so thankful for each and every one of you who click on our videos, who share our videos. (0:08–0:24)

The subsequent collaborations in this series continued through the pandemic, with each video featuring over twenty YouTube guitarists and including links to each of their channels in the descriptions. The fifth video,²³ published in December 2022, featured seventy YouTube guitarists' submissions, all mixed into a single musical montage lasting almost 37 minutes. These few examples demonstrate the collaborative spirit, passion, and regular interaction that exist between members of the online guitar community.

The videos produced by the members of the YouTube guitar community, both professional and amateur, are predominantly educational and instructional. Most of them focus on learning a particular song or musical concept. Other topics include advice on purchasing gear (including guitars, amplifiers, and effects pedals), how-to videos on guitar maintenance, historical perspectives on the guitar and its role in various musical genres, interviews with other guitarists and associated industry persons, and performances of guitar-based music. Some of the more obscure videos include discussion on who is the most overrated guitarist, tours of guitar stores, unboxing videos of guitar-related equipment, and discussion on why Taylor Swift is, or is not, the new Eddie Van Halen. Many of the activities are designed to invoke discussion and community activity, or are responses to or discussions about various happenings with the virtual guitar community.

An examination of the comments sections on various YouTube guitar videos confirms that there is a real sense of community. Many YouTubers maintain ongoing online conversations with their viewers, and viewers “chat” among each other in the comments sections. There is considerable overlap between YouTube channels, with many of the same viewers leaving comments on multiple guitar-themed YouTube channels. The sense of community is often explicitly acknowledged by the YouTuber guitarists. One sign of a healthy community is internal critique. This is also evident in

the online guitar community, particularly on YouTube. In response to her video addressing the topic of sexism in the community,²⁴ guitarist and YouTuber using the pseudonym “Guitar Goddess” received unanimously positive remarks in the video’s comments section. YouTuber guitarist Stay Metal Ray ran a live stream video on YouTube discussing hate speech within the community, and he also received overwhelmingly positive responses, including: “I think this is a great video, man.”²⁵

The existence of a community, as per Wenger’s definition, existing across platforms is also evident. A particular example of this is YouTuber Dogshark’s investigation of the idea of purchasing a guitar made by the American manufacturer PRS (Paul Reed Smith). He decided the best way to learn about them was to join a Facebook group.²⁶ During his video discussing his experience, he refers to both the Facebook and YouTube communities saying, “I’m here to learn,” and describing other members as “kindred spirits” within the community. There are comments on his YouTube video from people in the Facebook community, and he finishes his video by saying, “I’d just like to thank the whole PRS community for helping me out there.” The cross-platform community spirit also exists between YouTube and Instagram, with many YouTuber guitarists posting videos critiquing each other’s Instagram guitar videos.

Instagram and X (formerly Twitter)

Instagram was launched in 2010. The Instagram platform favors short videos of less than 60 seconds in duration. As a result of this, guitar community videos on Instagram typically feature excerpts of performances and often more quirky content. Instagram also uses the same chat facility hosted by Facebook. The guitar community on Instagram includes many of the same people as on YouTube, with many YouTube content creators using Instagram to post news, updates, and messages to their fanbase and short versions or excerpts of their YouTube videos. Instagrammer and YouTuber Rick Beato typically starts his Instagram videos with the caption “Quick lesson,” followed by a short example of a single musical idea. These videos are often linked to longer explanations on his YouTube channel.

The nature of the Instagram platform does not allow for the same sense of community as Facebook and YouTube. However, the community is still evident and highly active. The community interaction is mostly via comments and “likes” on members’ posts. Well-known community members can be seen commenting on each other’s posts, and they attract similar lists of followers and comments.

Table 15.6 *Instagram and X followers vs YouTube subscribers of popular guitar content creators*

Content creator	YouTube subscribers	Instagram followers	X followers
Paul Davids	2.83m	330k	15.1k
Rick Beato	3.03m	545k	55.6k
Ola Englund	742k	332k	14.3k
Mary Spender	568m	109k	13.3k
Helen Ibe	243k	53.5k	6.4k
Rob Scallon	2.36m	466k	73.8k
Samurai Guitarist	1.03m	77.4k	12.7k
Kfir Ochaion	1.79m	642k	2.9k
Rhett Shull	481k	67.2k	4.7k

Twitter began operation in 2006 and described itself as offering a “microblogging” service (rebranded as X in 2023). Posts on X are limited to 280 characters, and videos are limited to 2 minutes and 20 seconds in duration. In a similar fashion to the other platforms, the best-known guitar content creators have formed a community on Twitter/X by following each other and sharing countless common followers. A good example of interaction within the X guitar community can be seen in a post by a follower of four well-known content creators asking about guitar tablature for left-handed players. This was reposted and started a conversation that spread across the other users’ pages. A notable difference in activity in the guitar community on X compared to other platforms is that the content is typically more personal about the content creator’s daily life activities and what projects they are currently working on or developing.

A common theme among the Instagram and X guitar communities is that members use these platforms to create links to their YouTube channels. X and Instagram guitarists, who also maintain YouTube channels, typically have fewer followers on X and Instagram than subscribers on YouTube. Table 15.6 shows a comparison of a selection of popular content creators on all three platforms.

The most notable advantage of twenty-first-century communications having provided platforms for these communities to develop is the breakdown of geographical boundaries for membership of such communities. Guitarists from any location in the world can join a community of kindred spirits to share and learn instantaneously across the globe. It allows people who might never meet but share common, maybe quite esoteric interests, to collaborate. This has created enormous communities, as well as small communities across enormous distances, and challenges the traditional definition of community.

Cultural Consequences of Online Guitar Communities

There are numerous potential economic, aesthetic, and cultural consequences of the development of virtual guitar communities and the shift from geolocation to online spaces. Big record companies and labels now have less influence on the listening practices of today's music consumers.²⁷ How people now access, store, and categorize music is different and constantly changing. The ability to personalize one's own playlists and influence the algorithms delivering new music is rapidly evolving.²⁸

It is also now easier, and faster, than ever for an artist to produce quality music at home and disseminate it to the world. This process offers the potential to bypass the talent scouts and other middlemen of the previous music industry model. This has major repercussions for the economics and aesthetics of the entire music industry. It offers an end-user-driven meritocracy rather than one controlled by a few people in privileged industry positions. Communities of fans assemble virtually and in a kind of organic fashion around artists using their social media platforms as portals to the community.

There are also a number of possible cultural consequences of guitarists engaging with online guitar communities. None of these are inherently good or bad, but they do indicate a shift in the global music industry and aesthetics of music as a whole. One possibility is a loss (or reduction) of geolocated local cultural idiosyncratic expressions. As the current generation of guitarists engage and interact with guitarists in global communities, their aesthetic expressions may become homogenized. This has been observed to be occurring in many non-Western countries, causing concern for local governmental bodies who predict a loss of local cultural expression as their younger generations engage with global cultural identities. In many countries, this is being deliberately combated by an increase in local traditional content in music education programs.²⁹

The second possibility is greater exposure to previously unknown geospecific cultural expressions. For example, the vast majority of subscribers to Nigerian guitarist Helen Ibe's YouTube channel are from outside Nigeria, and indeed outside Africa. Her listeners will be exposed to music they would not have otherwise encountered. This may, in turn, influence their own performance practices, either by deliberate imitation of Ibe's aesthetics or via a form of subliminal osmosis simply by being exposed to her music. The online platforms have allowed for a much more rapid transfer of cultural content as well as a reciprocal symbiotic sharing between cultures that did not previously exist.

Just as guitar-based blues migrated up the Mississippi and then across the Atlantic to heavily influence the popular music of the late 1950s and

early 1960s, there is a similar cultural migration occurring in the twenty-first century. However, this time the migration is eclectic and undefined, occurring across virtual spaces to then, in turn, influence numerous and various geolocated cultures. After the blues had influenced the British music scene, there was a cultural exchange with British pop, in turn influencing American popular music. This kind of circular influence is now happening on microscales simultaneously across the globe along countless pathways and locations.

This phenomenon leads to the third potential, which is the creation of entirely new blends of cultural expressions that would not have been possible without global telecommunications. It is now possible to virtually visit the musical culture of any place in the world in an instant, at almost no cost and without leaving your own home. Musicians actively seeking influence from other parts of the world have never had such freedom of opportunity. In fact, the opportunity is so free and easily accessible that it is now difficult to avoid. Musical influence from other cultures can seep into one's newsfeed or social media stream without being actively sought. Musicians may then choose to deliberately explore these exotic musical styles in the interest of incorporating the aesthetics into their own performance styles. Online music distribution networks have allowed the "impossible to spread music" to spread, while also making music transfer more efficient and convenient as time and location are no longer a significant part of the equation.³⁰ Contact can easily be made, and instruction sought and found, from artists in previously unreachable geolocations. The potential cultural collaborations are seemingly endless. What effect this may have in the long term on a global cultural expression of the virtual guitar community as a whole is unpredictable. It is possible that a simultaneous paradox of homogeneity and heterogeneity may evolve. Just exactly what this will look like will be largely driven by the virtual guitar community itself as a single living and evolving entity with many sub-entities all contributing, probably often without their cognitive awareness of the part they are playing.

The transmission of cultural aesthetic influences and the tendency of Western "genrefication"³¹ is taking a toll on global music markets and potentially costing the music creators. The necessity to commodify genre in what is a capitalist global market intensifies during periods of flux.³² Dawe claims the guitar transcends culture, describing it as "an instrument of global performance"³³ that is capable of surviving global change. The guitar is a common denominator connecting musical styles and cultures, individuals, and communities, as well as social concerns, including politics and economics. The guitar as a phenomenon has not only survived but moved across changes in culture and time. This is clearly demonstrated, for example, by the existence of highly active Facebook communities for the Fender Telecaster,³⁴ an early

solid body electric guitar still produced to this day with very little changes in design. These groups are truly global, with members from all around the world and content reflecting diverse cultural and genre expressions.

Another repercussion of the meritocracy that is afforded by the current global guitar virtual communities is the potential abolition, or disassembly, of previous industry biases. The public cast their votes with their numbers of downloads, views, and “likes.” Artists do not need the previous trappings typically enforced by the industry, including physical aesthetics, fashion, or some sort of “X factor,” for the public to connect via social media. Community members listen to the music they enjoy listening to and encounter new music via algorithms fed, at least in part, by their own personal choices. Furthermore, language barriers are not an issue, as listeners from other countries and cultures can still explore whatever music they seek. Another potential consequence is the breakdown of previous industry-led gender bias, allowing a greater percentage of female guitarists to gain a global fanbase. There is an increasing number of female YouTuber guitarists and female online guitar tutors in the community.³⁵

Conclusion

Electricity has served the guitar in a number of ways. One such way is by acting as a conduit for migration through the various communities existing in virtual spaces which link geolocated guitarists across the globe.

Throughout the history of the guitar’s existence, its players have formed collectives in the form of artist networks, with practitioners participating in ongoing interaction for the purposes of sharing their art, infotainment, support, critical feedback, idea development, and to foster a competitive environment. The domains for guitar communities have migrated from the traditional local music scenes, performance venues, guitar shops, schools, and jam sessions to new forms of virtual communities in online spaces through a series of networks virtually located on sites as diverse as Google Groups, Ultimate Guitar, and social media giants YouTube and Facebook. The long-term cultural aesthetic consequences of virtual guitar communities are yet to be fully realized, as this phenomenon is still in its infancy. They include a potential cultural homogenization comprising a single dominant culture. However, online communities also offer greater global exposure to hitherto unknown microcultures and previously inaccessible geolocated musical expressions where the electric guitar is now being ubiquitously adopted.

Commentators on the twenty-first-century popular music industry see a potential consequence of global telecommunications to be an increasing dominance of the Western cultural paradigm. Although Westernization and

its accompanying musical expression through popular music are spreading through non-Western locales, we also see the opposite occurring. Communities of guitarists are no longer geospecific and cultural and aesthetic expressions, particularly in the form of guitar performance practices, are freely transmitted globally and instantaneously via virtual networks.

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