

# Tony's 10 STEPS TO CHOOSING YOUR NEXT ACOUSTIC GUITAR

Don't buy a guitar without first considering each of these ten essential match making guidelines!

**Who am I?** I'm Tony Polecastro and I've had the pleasure of reviewing over 500 acoustic guitars for The Acoustic Letter YouTube channel. (*Now over 18 million views*).

During my time reviewing acoustic guitars, I cherry picked eleven of the best ones to add to my own collection. In the process, I refined my method for selecting guitars to purchase.

So why don't I have a list of the best acoustic guitars? It's simple: using this 10 step process produces different results for each person. It's highly individualized so you find YOUR best fit, not my best fit! However, I'll give you guitar suggestions at the end of this guide to get you started in your search.

If you're wondering what I'm up to now that I've stopped doing guitar reviews for the Acoustic Letter, I invite you to learn about ***Tony's Acoustic Challenge***, an entirely different approach to learning new things on guitar and enjoying your guitars much more. The core of this amazing concept is ***"Perfect Practice"***, a daily 10 minute guitar challenge that rotates between 4 essential areas of skill improvement. If you'd like me to make you a custom guitar Practice Plan every single month visit **Tony's Acoustic Challenge** to learn more. You just might be a little upset that you didn't find this sooner!

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# **10 THINGS YOU MUST KNOW BEFORE CHOOSING YOUR PERFECT GUITAR...**

When starting to look for an acoustic guitar the options and the opinions of everyone can often leave you dizzy with thought and paralyzed by indecision due to too much information. Below are 10... actually 11 steps you can take to be sure that you are evaluating your guitar purchase with the knowledge that will help you get the correct one, so you can be confident in your choice and enjoy your guitar for years and years to come. Make sure to go slow when shopping and ask many many questions. You will learn a lot and end up being a fountain of acoustic guitar knowledge. Here we go...

## **1. PLAY EVERYTHING**

You can call this the scouting stage. It quite literally is a stage in which you go to your local shop and play everything you possibly can. This sounds like quite the open ended step (and indeed it is), but it is so absolutely necessary. You must try and get first hand knowledge of small guitars, medium sized guitars, large guitars, expensive guitars, inexpensive guitars, weird guitars standard guitars, iconic guitars, and the list goes on and on. The crucial part of this step is you try your best to go in with an open mind, and even more important, open ears. This part of your guitar journey is all about information gathering and narrowing down what you like and what you don't like. This piece of the puzzle helps refine what exactly is the perfect guitar for you.

## 2. SIZE DOES IN FACT MATTER

After playing every guitar you can get your hands on, try and narrow down what body size you like. Granted there are quite a few to pick from, but with body size there are two basic considerations: **Comfort and Sound**. Comfort is the obvious one here, you want the guitar to be as comfortable as possible... generally the smaller the guitar the more comfortable it is, but it really depends on the player. Often times a bigger person will favor a bigger guitar simply because it fills their frame better; the converse is true for smaller guitars.

The other consideration with body size is tone... the smaller the guitar the more focused its projection will be and it will emphasize the mid-range much more. The larger bodied guitars (dreadnoughts and jumbos) will offer a much more robust bass response and a less focused, more room filling projection of sound.

## 3. HOW TO CHOOSE YOUR TOP WOOD

The top of the guitar is where the majority of the sound is generated so therefore it is extremely important. One crucial thing you need to ask when discussing a guitar's top is whether or not it is solid. If a guitar's top is solid it means that it's more resonant and will produce better sound and tone. If it's a laminate top it will be more reserved since multiple pieces don't transmit sound as cleanly. Laminate tops aren't necessarily bad since they are durable and inexpensive, but the trade off here is tone. If you are indeed looking at a solid topped guitar there are a couple more considerations to factor in.

You will no doubt encounter many different varieties of wood. Here are some common varieties and their tonal attributes:

**Sitka Spruce** - The most common variety of spruce on guitars. It yields a wonderful tone with ample headroom as well as strong clarity

**Adirondack Spruce** - Similar in basic characteristics to Sitka, BUT Adirondack has much more headroom meaning you can really play it hard and it will keep producing volume and tone without ever giving in.

**Engelmann Spruce** - A very pale colored top wood, great for a player with a lighter touch due to it's responsive nature and crisp tonal qualities.

**High Altitude Swiss Spruce** - Very similar to Engelmann in tonal properties, also very pale in color with subtle rose shades.

**Cedar** - A very dark tone wood, both in color and in tone. Cedar is very soft and porous. It exudes a deep, dark, almost smoky bass tone. Not known for it's durability, as it is prone to dents, dings, and scratches (due to it's softness), but a truly fine tone wood on the right instrument.

**Mahogany** - Also a dark porous tone wood, rich chocolatey brown in color, and also very common on backs and sides of guitars. Mahogany gives a nice warm tone, it is not bold, but it is deep in it's characteristics. This is a wonderful top wood for a finger style instrument.

**Koa** - Beautiful in it's figuring and color variation, Koa lies between spruce and mahogany on the tonal spectrum. It offers up the clarity of spruce and the warmth of mahogany.

One of the key factors with Koa is that it takes a fair amount of time to tonally mature... this means that right out of the box Koa may not be as jaw dropping tonally as it is visually... as it gets older that will certainly change.

## **4. HOW TO SELECT YOUR BACK & SIDE WOOD**

I will equate the back and side wood of a guitar to adding a bay leaf to a stew for flavoring... you won't eat it, but it helps flavor your food a ton... the back and sides have a very similar job, and no, you won't be eating them.

The back and sides are not the major tone producers of the guitar, but they flavor the tone oh so well, so they need to be considered when looking at guitars.

Depending on what the back and sides are made of, the guitar will take on different characteristics. A couple of general rules before I get into the nitty gritty... Generally speaking, the color of a tone wood will give you an idea of what the sound is like (i.e. rosewood is dark therefore it will yield a darker tone). The second rule is the the hardness of a wood generally gives you an idea of it's tonal contribution (i.e. mahogany is porous and soft yielding a softer warmer tone). Here are some common back and side woods along with their tonal contribution:

**Mahogany** - Warm, woody, and mellow. Mahogany also has an element of soft spoken crispness. It is uniform in it's look and it is quite predictable in terms of what tonal flavors it imparts on a guitar.

**Rosewood** - Dark, articulate, and boomy. Rosewood comes in many varieties (Madagascar, East Indian, and Brazilian... among

others) but it generally will elicit a mid-range scoop with articulate highs and very boomy lows. This is a great choice if you want a louder, more bass heavy guitar.

**Maple** - Bright, Brilliant, and expressive. Maple is a hardwood that readily reflects vibration, making it offer a very crisp, treble focused tone. Maple has many figuring patterns such as flamed, quilted, and birdseye. I often find that a flame maple guitar will be much more high end focused than a guitar made of quilted maple (which offers a bit more in the mid range and low end). None the less, maple is a great tone wood if you are searching out a guitar with great string to string separation.

**Koa** - Bell-like, mellow, and warm. Koa is beautiful to look at and it sounds darn good as well. It has great sustain and does a great job maturing and developing over time. As it opens it becomes quite responsive as well as develops a depth of tone that is second to none.

There are many types of tone woods out there. The best thing to do is try them so you can see what you like. Some others you may encounter are: Macassar Ebony, Sassafrass, Sapele, Cypress, Cocobolo, Cherry, Ovangkol, Walnut, Ziricote... along with many others...

**TIP:** To quickly get started with figuring out tonewoods, do your best to describe the tone in your own words. This will help you develop a spectrum of tone unique to you and what you tend to like.

## 5. SELECT BRACING (WHAT'S UNDER THE HOOD)

The last item on the guitar that greatly impacts its tone and volume is the bracing pattern that is used on the top.

Most often you will be looking at X-braced guitars so I will give you some common configurations of that bracing pattern along with what you may expect tone wise.

One quick rule on bracing... the lighter the bracing the more responsive the top, the heavier the bracing the more restrictive it is. The caveat to this rule is that you can generally play a heavier braced guitar harder and get more volume than you can from a lighter braced guitar... so if you are a heavy handed player make sure to check out a guitar with thicker bracing, conversely if you have a lighter touch, a lighter braced guitar may be for you. Also, one more thing before I get into patterns, you will no doubt run into the term “**scalloping**” when discussing bracing. Scalloping means that some of the material from the braces has been removed, therefore making it lighter bracing... which plays into rule #1 of bracing... the lighter the bracing the more responsive the top. Here are some common patterns:

**Standard bracing** - Unscalloped and rigid. This bracing pattern allows for a heavier handed player to continue to dig in and generate volume and tone. This is a very common pattern and one you will surely run into.

**Scalloped bracing** - Responsive and articulate. Since this pattern is the same as the one above (with the exception that it is scalloped) it will yield similar results but with a lighter touch.

**Forward shifted bracing pattern** - Since shifting the pattern forward opens up the lower bout of the guitar (meaning it is less restricted). This pattern will yield more bass and body from the guitar. Common terms associated with this pattern are bassy, boomy, rich, and loud.

**Rear shifted bracing pattern** - This pattern is the opposite of forward shifted. This pattern restricts the lower bout which decreases the bass production, but adds some focused projection along with the ability to continue giving more and more even with a heavy hand. This pattern is likely the last one you will find, but knowing of it is essential when shopping.

## 6. PLAYABILITY

Playability is a huge factor in connecting with a guitar. It's important to note that there are things that can be done to make a guitar more playable if it feels odd for some reason.

I will get to those in a second though. The first thing we should discuss are the two things that cannot be changed, or rather it is major surgery to change these things so with these two items you get what you get. The first is **nut width**. You will likely encounter two very common nut widths when shopping: The first is 1-11/16" and the second is 1-3/4". These are so close in width you may think, "what is the big deal?" Well, even though it is only one sixteenth of an inch it makes a pretty big difference. Generally speaking the 1-11/16" nut width is great for players with smaller hands as well as players who favor flatpicking. Conversely the wider nut width (1-3/4") is a great fit for fingerstyle due to the more complicated chord voicings and the extra room needed. Also, the size is a great match for a player with bigger hands.



When it comes to nut width, just do your best to try the two and stick with the one you favor.

Another factor in playability is **neck profile**, this is the shape of the neck and how it fits in your hand. Some common profiles you will find are: slim carve, standard carve, C profile, Modified V profile, Vintage profile among others. I would recommend trying all different profiles and slimming them down to two categories: thick and thin profiles. You will likely strongly lean one way or the other. The slimmer profiles offer comfort for a smaller hand as well as an ease and fluidity with which the player can move up and down the neck. The thicker profiles generally offer a bit more leverage for fretting and fit a bigger hand fairly well. Often times players can be intimidated by a thicker neck, I would suggest giving it a shot. You may be surprised in what you favor.

The last and most tweakable aspect of playability is the **setup**. When evaluating a guitar for playability make sure to dial in neck profile and nut width first, once you have those know that most of the other factors of playability can be changed (neck relief, saddle height, nut slot depth). This is great news. In fact, most shops offer a setup with purchase (something you should definitely ask for when buying a guitar). So the moral of the story here is once you find what you like, if it is not playing comfortably, have it setup so that playing it is as comfy as possible.

## **7. SHE'S GOT THE LOOK**

Ok I know this seems like a superficial reason to buy a guitar, but I would be lying if I said it doesn't make a difference. I put aesthetics on this list because it does make a difference, and your guitar should make you want to play it. This doesn't mean it has to be gaudy or covered with pearl and abalone (although that can be kind of cool sometimes).

What it boils down to is that your guitar should catch your attention and make you want to play it... so when shopping, make sure it grabs your attention visually as well. It should beg you to play it whether it has intricate inlay or traditional herringbone. Really whatever floats your boat.

## **8. MONEY MONEY MONEY**

You should have an idea of a price range that you would feel comfortable with and give yourself some cushion on either side (mostly on the upper end) I say this only half joking!

You don't want to be in the position of finding something that is just a touch out of your range and not be able to get it, especially if it is "the" one.

I strongly encourage you to try something in all price brackets, but do so for the sake of experience and experiment. You can learn a lot by playing guitars across the price spectrum and often you will find a happy medium that bridges the gap between value and tone... that is the sweet spot right there.

Oh and one quick thing: Don't chase a deal... you are then just looking at the price and not the guitar. I love a deal as I am sure everyone does, but make sure the guitar is close to what you like and what you are after.

## 10. WHAT'S YOUR STYLE?

If you've read through this so far and still don't know where to start, try and at least recognize what style you prefer. Ask yourself the questions: what do I like to listen to? What do some of my favorite players play? What style do I think I want to learn?

This will help you at least have a starting point so you can begin trying guitars. Below I have broken down two very common styles and listed some guitar sizes and specs that go along with them (remember this is very broad band, you can try whatever you like for whatever style you wish to play)

**Flatpicking** - Generally flat pickers prefer large bodied guitars. Dreadnoughts are the most popular with this style and flat pickers generally favor a traditional spec combination of sitka or adirondack spruce, paired with mahogany or rosewood. This style leans on tradition quite hard so it's all about herringbone purfling and minimal appointments. Also, one quick note: flat pickers often prefer a slightly longer scale length (distance from nut to saddle would measure to 25.4") this usually allows pickers to get more volume out of the guitar, but by no means is it a requirement for flat picking. Shorter scale, 24.5", nut to saddle works just fine as well. It just feels a bit different.

**Fingerpicking** - Usually fingerpickers opt for a smaller bodied guitar with a more responsive top (engelmann, cedar, or swiss spruce), due to the nature of the picking, and the back and sides could really run the gamut from standard mahogany to some of the more exotic woods like koa or even macassar ebony.

Finger style players generally prefer a shorter scale length for comfort and the way it feels when picking. The wider nut width is a big help here as well, due to the intricacy of the style.

Remember, these are loose guidelines meant to be a starting point. You can flatpick on a small guitar and fingerpick on a big guitar; there are no rules. The only real rule is that you must love it and want to play it always... and remember you can always have more than one guitar. That is completely ok!

## **11. IS YOUR GUITAR FUTURE PROOF?**

I have one last little bonus tip for you. Before you buy the guitar ask yourself this: “is this something I am going to hold on to for some years, or is it just a “so-so” guitar that is going to make me feel indifferent about playing?”

I say this having made the mistake of buying a guitar that was just “so-so” when I was first playing...and I am not referring to price here.

You should buy the best guitar you can afford in your price range. Just make sure it speaks to you, and it gives you that gut feeling of awesomeness every time you pick it up. When you love your guitar you can focus on playing, and not feeling like you have to keep shopping for another guitar that is better.

Again, it is very much ok to have more than one guitar... I have 11 and I love them all for different reasons. Every time I play each of them I feel as if it was made for me, and that is an amazing feeling.

I want to make sure when you shop for a guitar you are able to have that feeling the day you buy your guitar and years down the line when you play that guitar. You should always feel like your guitar is the best on the planet... period.

## **YOUR NEXT STEP...MODEL RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Before we started, I mentioned that I don't believe there is one list of "the best guitars". This is highly individualized based on your preferences for each of these eleven checkpoints.

But I also realize that you value my opinion since I've played over 500 guitars in the same room. So before you go, I want to give you some guitar recommendations as a starting point (*I've listed them by playing style on the next page*).

These are some of my favorite brands and you're likely to run into them while shopping. Remember, these are just a starting point. If you are curious of a model not seen here, please email me at [info@tonypolecastro.com](mailto:info@tonypolecastro.com) and I will be happy to help you answer any questions about it.

## MY RECOMMENDED FLAT PICKING GUITARS:

- ❖ **Martin** D18, HD28, HD35, D16GT
- ❖ **Taylor** 310, 410, 510, 710
- ❖ **Gibson** J29, Advanced Jumbo
- ❖ **Collings** D1A, CWA
- ❖ **Blue Ridge** BR40, BR60, BR140, BR160
- ❖ **Yamaha** FG700s
- ❖ **Eastman** E6D, E8D, E10D, E20D
- ❖ **Larrivee** D03R, D03, D60, SD-50

## MY RECOMMENDED FINGERPICKING GUITARS:

- ❖ **Martin** 000-18, OM18, OM21, 000-15, 00-15, 00-17, 00-18, OMEC
- ❖ **Taylor** 314, 324, 412, 612, 714
- ❖ **Gibson** LG-00, J200, J45, Southern Jumbo
- ❖ **Collings** 002H, OM1
- ❖ **Blue Ridge** BR43, BR63, BR143, BR163
- ❖ **Yamaha** FS720S, AC1M, AC3M
- ❖ **Eastman** E1000, E1000SS, E2000, E10P, E20P, E8OM, E10OM
- ❖ **Larrivee** L03, L03R, OM50, OM60, OM03, OM03R, P09, P03, P03R

# GUITAR BUYING CHECKLIST

- ☐ PLAY EVERYTHING
- ☐ DECIDE ON SIZE
- ☐ FAVORITE TOP WOOD?
- ☐ FAVORITE BACK & SIDE WOOD?
- ☐ FAVORITE BRACING?
- ☐ DETERMINE PLAYABILITY
- ☐ WHAT'S YOUR LOOK?
- ☐ WHAT'S YOUR BUDGET?
- ☐ WHAT'S YOUR PLAYING STYLE?
- ☐ IS YOUR GUITAR FUTURE PROOF?