LEARN FROM A PRO, PLAY LIKE ONE

I can't tell you how many people I've met who wish they had learned to play the guitar. I've often watched guitar heroes like Eric Clapton, Keith Richards, and Jeff Beck play and kicked myself for not at least learning how to play rhythm or bass, acknowledging that I had no ear for anything else. Most days, I have difficulty playing my Ipod, never mind a musical instrument. But Dennis Sobin's book, *Easy Guitar Method Used at Petersburg Federal Correctional Institution*, and teaching style had me looking for a guitar so I could follow his painless instructions.

Dennis makes it easy, even for a no-talent like me, to understand finger placement and chords, and he includes helpful diagrams as illustrations. But the key to his method is open tuning. I had heard the term before in discussions between guitar players but never understood its meaning -- or its importance in learning the fundamentals. Dennis brings everything together in a neat package so the student can begin playing within days. That's right: days. Sure, he describes other methods of tuning, and the book is replete with practical suggestions on everything from practicing to performing, but for the novice, open tuning is definitely the way to go. An appendix for guitar terms is also included just in case you need a reference.

Once you've read this manual, if you're serious about learning to play the guitar, you won't find a better guide. Dennis even includes songs you'll be able to play with just a little practice. And to put things in perspective, he has a series on *YouTube* that will show you how successful his method is. That is, he not only teaches, he performs, and once you've seen and heard him play, you'll be off to the latest music shop, in a hurry to put your fingers on the strings exactly where Dennis says they should go. We've needed this book for a long time. All of us aspiring to greatness won't make it to Carnegie Hall, but it won't be the fault of Dennis Sobin. (musicvv)

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WHO'S BEEN NAUGHTY OR NICE?

Have you ever thought that all the Christmas stories have gotten a little stale over the years? If so, take a look at *Santa Claus Is Coming to the Hood* by Rameses Williams. This little drama has Santa landing in the 'hood on Christmas night, only to find an unorthodox crew waiting for him. As a result, Santa decides to leave his sleigh loaded with toys on a rooftop and attend a little party down the block. When he gets back to continue his rounds, he discovers someone has boosted his sack. With the help of some local characters, he tracks down the fence and recovers the goods. The play is funny and filled with unforgettable characters, many of whom will be easily recognized by anyone who has been around the block, and you'll enjoy the songs--composed by Williams--that complete the choreography.
Williams is a poet as well as a dramatist, and he includes a selection of six poems that are also relevant to the
play's theme. These poems concern life in the 'hood, the challenges and the seductive nature of a life that always
promises more but rarely delivers anything but disappointment and pain. They are a reminder that the guys who stole
Santa's toys aren't exactly the role models young people need. (dramavv)

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MOMS INSIDE, KIDS OUTSIDE

_Mothers Missing_ is Jordyn Cahill's play about
what it means to be a mother in prison and therefore
missing from their children's lives. In this case, the five
missing mothers are poignant depictions of prison
demographics: a street-smart woman doing life, along
with her son, for a drug deal gone bad, a young,
pregnant woman with a bad heroin habit, a youthful
offender doing life, a young mother in a wheelchair
serving time for the DUI manslaughter of her young
son, and finally an articulate mother of a twelve-year-
old with seven years in on her sentence. In a masterful
stage direction each character is presented along with
her alter ego, the younger woman she was before she
went to prison, who explains the circumstances that got
her behind the walls.

Cahill also provides an appropriate musical introduction for each woman, each song chosen to represent the
particular offense. The stage setting is stark, but it needs to be to emphasize each character and not diminish the
dramatic narrative. This play is now being considered for a performance at the Kennedy Center by the Prisons
Foundation, and I urge readers to go see it if produced. Drama is meant to be seen, and although Cahill's characters
and dialogue are impressive on the page, they will be even more so up close and personal. (dramavv)

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IF YOU CAN'T BE GOOD, BE GOOD AT IT

Aaron Hullett is back with two intriguing works of fiction.
The first, _Hollywood Bad Boys_, is a brutal, bruising battle
between Excellsor and Macavellie, the current Hollywood star
who has captured America's heart and the producer and power
broker who was responsible for his rise. Excellsor is a natural on
the screen, beautiful in face and body, the complete package.
Macavellie can't stand it, and his intense jealousy, coupled with
an unquenchable racism (E is black, M is white) mean this story
if full of action, treachery, sexual maneuvering, and a plot to
dominate the civilized world. Everything turns on Macavellie's
desire to be acclaimed Hollywood's number one Bad Boy, an
honor that eludes him as long as Excellsor remains alive. The book has it all in the way of action novels, moving from
one breathtaking sequence to another with heart-pumping speed. If you're into physical confrontations driven by greed
and payback, take a look at this one.

Enter Shareamore an undercover FBI operative whose skill set makes 007's look like a kid's game of stickball
by comparison. _Buyer of Beauty_ is Hullett's story of her covert assignment to locate and kill Uslan, a South American
bad guy with as much social conscience as a cobra. But that's only the start. Shareamore uses her talents to travel the

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world, and confront, and destroy targets she decides have surrendered any right to exist. A lethal combination of sex and barely restrained violence, she storms her way through 400 pages of mayhem, using a variety of weapons--including her body--until, well, I don't want to spoil the ending for you. (fictvv)

Broken by Michael Savard is a cautionary reminder that things aren't always what they seem. In this brief but powerful drama, a man wakes in the middle of the night and recounts a disturbing dream of betrayal and violence, played out in an otherwise "normal" middleclass home. The resulting trauma does not spare even the children of the household, and at the end of the piece, the audience is left to speculate on who survived the denouement. Savard graphically shows that stereotypical judgments should be withheld, because although the family next door might appear to be functioning well, unseen seismic forces can often be at work to render the normal abnormal. (dramavv)

A DISH BETTER SERVED COLD

I had just seen Django when I sat down to read No Holds Barred by Samuel Barlow, and the striking combination of erudition and emotion resonated in precisely the same way as the film. Through a series of chapters with titles such as "The Untold Story" and "Resurrection," Barlow's narrative takes the reader on a historical journey to discover not only the roots of slavery but also its pernicious lasting effects. His adaption of Mary Shelley's classic, Frankenstein, symbolizes white society's reaction to the introduction of Africans, resulting in the death, not the emancipation, of the intruders. Barlow supports his thesis of oppression and murder by a cogent examination of the historical record, focusing on the Age of Discovery, including the church's role in the tragedy.

At the same time, Barlow is unsparing about African Americans' role in perpetuating their status as pawns in a socioeconomic game of which they are largely unaware, specifically black-on-black crime and the self-hatred initiated and promulgated by a white-dominated culture. The author's solution is a resurrection of sorts, the death of the old cultural norms and the rise, Phoenixlike, of a new identity, based on the education model articulated by Elijah Muhammad.

Throughout this work, Barlow equates American prisons with death camps (e.g. Treblinka and Dachau) and includes segments of his autobiography to illustrate his claim that African Americans are sent to prison, many for life, as part of an ethnic cleansing to remove the more recalcitrant members of society. He indicts the juvenile criminal justice system as an example of class warfare with a masterful tour through the Bill of Rights and the 14th Amendment.

Barlow occasionally overreaches, however, such as with his Lamarckian statement that certain acquired behaviors can be transmitted genetically or that American colleges weren't integrated until 1974. Lamarck's theories have long been put to rest, and this reviewer attended college with African American students in the Sixties. Still, as Barlow puts it in his brief introduction, the work presents "Some inside thoughts on what forty-five years of incarceration will do for (to) you in spite of yourself." He has indeed succeeded in that particular enterprise, and his book will be a salutary read for anyone interested in the racial history of this country. (nonfictvv)

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Carron Hammonds is an artist, and his medium is pen and ink. In his recent self-titled collection, he brings a stark contrast, juxtaposing religious symbolism with provocative displays of female sexuality. Included are drawings with a sports motif and a moving tribute to a cancer survivor. Hammonds even gives us Hugo Chavez, followed closely by a homeboy with a Glock tucked into his waistband. The artist is flexible and never boring. This collection will have people talking, one way or the other. Check out *The Art of Carron Hammonds* for a jaunt down various thematic highways and byways that will surprise and probably startle you. (artvv)

DeAndre Williams went to trial in 1997 as a result of a six-count indictment. He was acquitted on all six counts. Normally, any defendant acquitted on every count of an indictment would walk out of the courtroom a free man. Not Williams. He was sentenced to 25 to life and remains in prison in New York. How this could happen in a functioning democracy governed by the rule of law is the subject of *Looking Back*, a documented account of Williams's trial and subsequent imprisonment.

According to his account, the trouble began in 1993 when Williams filed a complaint against a police officer who was subsequently arrested and convicted. Two years later, he refused a demand by authorities to perjure himself in a murder case, and two years after that he was arrested. The grandson of scholar and author Dr. Chancellor Williams, DeAndre has endured eight years of solitary confinement, constant assaults on his body and dignity, and serial denials of his legal and human rights. What makes this book so arresting is the quantity and quality of the documented evidence Williams offers in support of his claims, including the jury's ballot that clearly indicates "Not Guilty" on all six counts. Those unfamiliar with the criminal justice system will shake their heads in wonder, mystified by how such an obvious miscarriage of justice could occur in the US of A. Those of us with more experience inside the system will nod slowly as Michel Foucault's dictum echoes: "Freedom of conscience entails more dangers than authority and despotism." (nonfictvv)

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**POETS' CORNER**

John Bradin is a poet and songwriter of consummate power, and his *Truth: SAT Unshakable Being* demonstrates both his strength and versatility in both domains. Rarely does one encounter a poet who can simultaneously capture the inner world of meditation and the rough and tumble external struggle for existence. In "Lady Cocaine," for example, Bradin's poetic voice clearly speaks as someone who is no stranger to chasing that particular lady, and in "Inner View" we hear Roger Waters of Pink Floyd poignantly describe metaphysical questions that have no answers. The same thematic confluence occurs in "Dark Eyes" in which the poem's speaker tries to console a frustrated and disappointed young rock star, reminding her that "There's nothing anyone can do" and that "There's only one of you."

Bradin does not shy away from more polemical offerings as well. "Black Wall" describes the waste of young lives that was Vietnam, while "Pretending to Be" is a powerful description of having to assume a specific identity to survive: "Pretending that it matters/pretenting that I care." And prison looms large in these poems. Who in prison hasn't met the holidays feeling the emptiness captured by "Daddy Won't Be Coming Home for Christmas"?

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Perhaps Bradin's closing poem says it best: "Waitin'." After all, we're all waiting for something. But don't wait for this book or you'll miss an opportunity to learn—and perhaps heal in the process—from this book. (poemvv)


Imagine That by Dushaan Gillum is, in the poet's words, "an imaginative voyage to a world of ideas and enlightenment." As such an exploration portends, the poems are self-reflective and admonitory, often reminding the reader that "life is what we make it." Certainly circumstances dictate the necessity for choices, and Gillum acknowledges that by challenging the reader to bring about a spiritual transformation but without losing one's identity. Throughout this collection, the poet's warning concerns the destructive nature of anger and the basic tendency to be "cautious in love/[r]eckless in hate." Trying to avoid such traps in an age of arrant political hypocrisy isn't easy, as "Pick Your Poison" tells us.

Gillum's collection, written from prison in Texas, is a testament to the strength of the human spirit, and poems such as "Unobstructed" reinforce the theme of spiritual freedom, even within the confines of physical captivity. This striving for openness drives his creative energy and makes these poems familiar to all of us who have had similar experiences. (poemvv)

Dan Mitchell's muse assists him in his personal struggles, as he tells us in his brief book's foreword. He also assures us that reading the book will "unify your mind, body and soul," not an insignificant goal. Titled Poetic Poeticism, this collection primarily treats the tenuous nature of personal relationships, the strain put on them by the prison experience, and the reactions of both the prisoner and his beloved. They question each other's loyalty and even confess to infidelity, yet throughout runs the thread of hope that they are forever. Often communicating only by unorthodox means, Mitchell's refrain is reminiscent of Lovelace's observation in 1649 that he could not love his beloved half as much had he not loved honor more. (poemvv)

London Ferguson is back with Dragon Tears, a collection of poems that give surreal a brand new meaning. The imagery and language reminded me of Coleridge's famous opium-induced dream, after which he produced a fragment of "Kubla Khan." Ferguson's work is Tolkien on acid, the "Lord of the Rings" on a six-day meth run. If you're looking for poetry that defies convention, this is the selection for you. (poemvv)

Likewise for Around the Lantern, an admixture of biblical references, Egyptian mythology, geopolitics, and an occasional allusion to Eastern religions, all wrapped in a linguistic excursion that makes DisneyWorld seem boring by comparison. Ferguson's forte is the unconventional, and he makes the most of it in these 81 poems. (poemvv)

Expression of Love by Dereck Cooper is exactly what the title indicates, an extended love letter in verse to a very special someone. Cooper knows no limits when it comes to telling his beloved how he feels about her and ponders such essential questions as "What Is Life Without A Mate?" She is clearly his joy, his reason for living, and his fluid descriptions of her external and internal beauty help bring her to life for the reader. One poem is entitled "What You Mean to Me," but this entire selection could just as well bear the same title, each poem building on the others to describe the importance of that one special woman. For those who long to find appropriate means to convey their feelings in a similar situation, take a look at what Dereck Cooper has to offer. (poemvv)

Nothing can be more abhorrent to democracy than to imprison a person or keep him in prison because he is unpopular. This is really the test of civilization.

Winston Churchill

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