BY MARTY WILLIAMS

I am a bad guitar player.
I admit this with no sense of false
modesty. I am not unreasonably
comparing myself to guitar greats; I
am not even comparing myself to guitar
competents. I am only comparing myself
to myself, and the inescapable conclu-
sion this leads me to is that 20 years after
picking up my first guitar I simply do not
have whatever it takes to play well. The
fight is over, the instrument has won, the
mystery is intact and the bride/groom
has been left at the altar. Jilted.

Like most kids who grew up in the
1960s, I wanted to play the guitar be-
cause of the Beatles. Maybe if L.A. Law
had been big in my formative years I
would be confessing that I am a bad law-
ner, but this is not the case: The Beatles
were the pinnacle of cool, and they were
everything life was worth living for. So,
like Bart Simpson’s spiritual ancestor
(which we all are), I began a systematic
and unrelenting campaign of terror, pest-
ering my parents to buy me a guitar.

I cut out ads featuring guitar sales
from the newspaper, I pointed out gui-
tars in the Eaton’s catalogue, I asked for
a guitar every birthday, every Christmas,
every chance I could. Finally, they re-
lected. They had had enough, and see-
ing my desire to be a rock star continue
undiminished they bought me a fine la-
bel instrument (Eaton) and arranged les-
sions with a guy whose specialty was the
accordion — prompting my parents to in-
quire whether I wouldn’t rather study the
polka, thinking that perhaps my slide
into the underbelly of society would be
slower without a whammy bar.

In retrospect, this might have been a
good idea: I would probably be making
major dough on the Oktoberfest circuit.
But of course no self-respecting Beatle
Wannabe would be caught dead even lis-
tening to accordion music. It had to be
the guitar. So the saga began.

Within a year I even had an electric
guitar. It was horrible and cheap, but it
looked good to me. It was a Decca Sun-
burst with strings about an inch above
the frets and the ability to stay in tune for
almost a minute at a time.

I was in heaven. And I was in heaven

each and every time a new guitar found
its way into my clay hands.

I practiced. And I practiced. I started a
band. We practiced. The band broke up.
I practiced. I started a band. We prac-
ticed. The band broke up. I practiced. I
started a band. We practiced. The band
broke up. And I stopped. And that took
20 years.

During this time I began to notice
something: I was a bad guitar player. In
all the bands I was in, I was the rhythm
guitar player, which is a technical mu-
sical term applied to a person who feels
silly being in a band and not doing any-
thing so he holds onto an instrument and
keeps the volume of his amp down low
and hopes nobody notices that he can’t
really play.

I began to notice, too, that sometimes
a person joined the band who couldn’t
play at all and within six months he was
playing better than I did after six years.
Clearly something was going wrong with
the dream.

Since the last band I have made it a
habit to never play the guitar. It has been
four years. Every time I make the mis-
take of forgetting the pain and suffering
of this unrequited love, the one-way de-
voion, and at a campfire or a cottage or
a party decide that I will once again see if
I can remember the old patterns, I feel
cheap and miserable. The great guitar
god that smiles on the undeserving, the
one that lets Keith Richards jam Satis-
faction while orbiting planet Zorgoan, still
has time to spit on my corn flakes.

I am forever in limbo, and no matter
how long I stay away I am doomed to
remember all my bad habits. I will never
be bad enough to start from scratch.

The world is full of people like me.
The world is also full of bad banjo play-
ers, bad trumpet players, bad sax players
and bad bass players. The world would
be full of bad drummers, but they either
die young or are named Ringo, so they
don’t count.

So what shall we do with ourselves,
now that we realize that fame, fortune
and a cornucopia of cheap, meaningless
sex will be ours only if we win the lotto?

Well, according to Cowboy Junkie side-
man Jeff Bird, a man whom I detest be-
cause he has talent and is not a bad any-
thing player, you should play poorly for
the sheer pleasure of it. Do it because it
makes us happy.

Right. Like that was ever the point.

But I guess that if the mood is right
and you have ascertained that there is
absolutely nobody in the room who can
really play and there is nobody who can
tell when you screw it up, then maybe all
those years of mediocrity can be of some
use.

So remember that some night if you
hear somebody else hacking out You’ve
Got to Hide Your Love Away or some
other Beatles tune. Don’t be too critical.
Because somewhere between the
dubbed chords and the strained voice
and the obvious flaws is someone com-
municating back to a purer state of be-
ing, when all things were possible and
nothing was lost. Someone is dreaming
of the day he first picked up that shiny
new guitar, when he was overwhelmed
by the beauty and mystery and the magic
of it all, when he decided he was going to
be a star.

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ing in Guelph, Ont. His favourite chord is

E minor.