

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 conclusion 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 because of the Beatles. Maybe if *L.A. Law* had been big in my formative years I would be confessing that I am a bad lawyer, 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, pestering my parents to buy me a guitar.

I cut out ads featuring guitar sales from the newspaper, I pointed out guitars in the Eaton's catalogue, I asked for a guitar every birthday, every Christmas, every chance I could. Finally, they relented. They had had enough, and seeing my desire to be a rock star continue undiminished they bought me a fine label instrument (Eaton) and arranged lessons with a guy whose specialty was the accordion — prompting my parents to inquire 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 *listening* 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 Sunburst 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 practiced. 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 musical term applied to a person who feels silly being in a band and not doing anything 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.

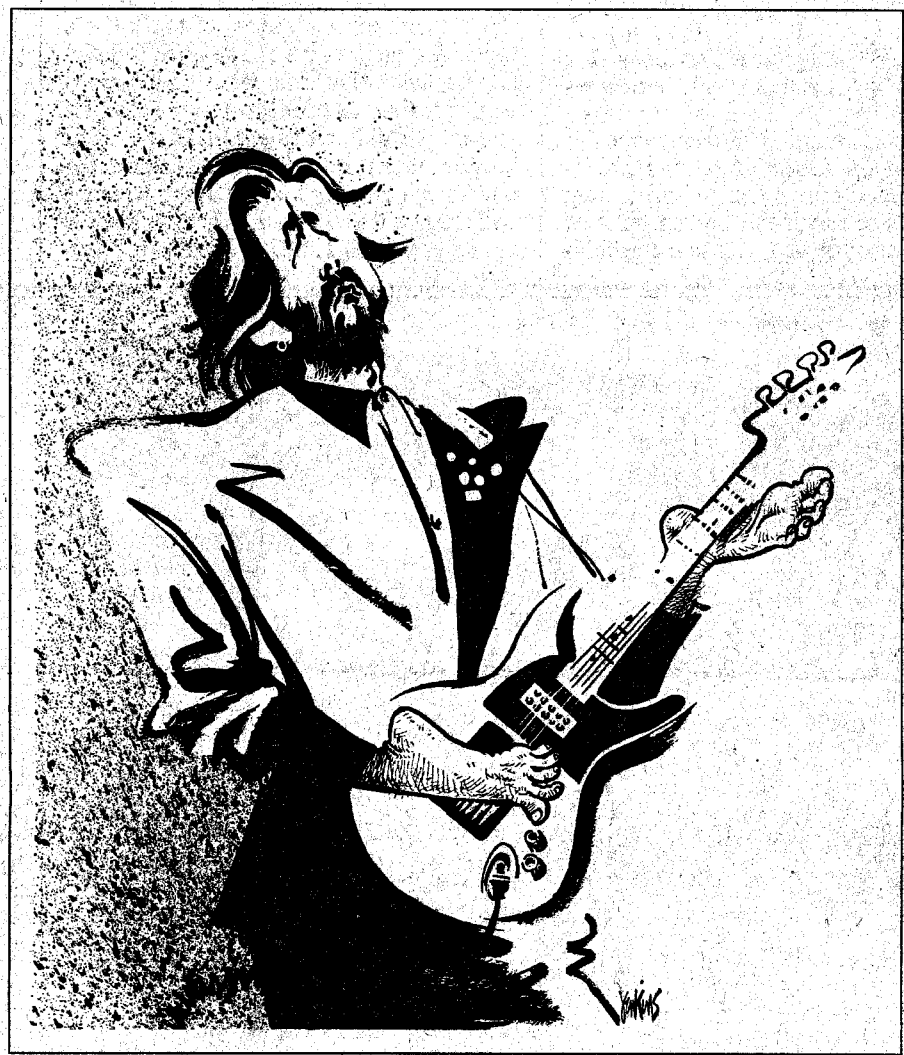
I began to notice, too, that sometimes a person joined the band who couldn't play at all and within six months he was playing better than I did after six years. Clearly something was going wrong with the dream.

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 mistake of forgetting the pain and suffering of this unrequited love, the one-way devotion, 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 *Satisfaction* 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 players, 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?



ANTHONY JENKINS/The Globe and Mail

Well, according to Cowboy Junkie sideman Jeff Bird, a man whom I detest because he has talent and is not a bad anything player, we 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 flubbed chords and the strained voice and the obvious flaws is someone communicating back to a purer state of being, 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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