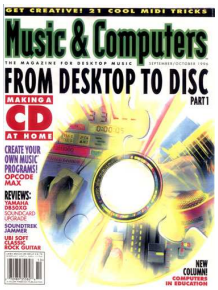

Ubi Soft Classic Rock Guitar, Vol. 1

Guitar Hits : volume 1 (CD-Rom by Ubi Soft)

Music & Computers
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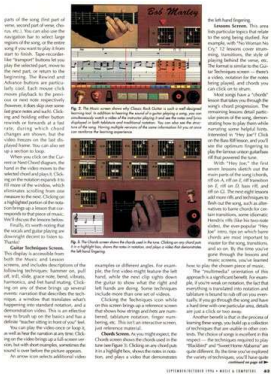
By Craig Anderton



Classic Rock Guitar is a CD-ROM that's designed to teach classic guitar licks and styles to intermediate guitarists. It's assumed that you have at least a rudimentary knowledge of the guitar and notation. The program is based around eight pop songs, which are analyzed with respect to chords, phrasing, and technique through approximately 80 lessons and 180 exercises. Note, however, that none of these involve rock-and-roll soloing; the emphasis is on playing accompaniment behind vocals.

Although instructional CD-ROMs in general have a somewhat spotty reputation, Classic Rock Guitar is one of the welcome exceptions. It makes excellent use of the CD-ROM medium and delivers solid production values.

Fig 1. This is one of the two main windows from which you select a song to learn. Clicking on the volume knob icon will let you adjust the computer's volume, and clicking on the guitar case will exit the program.

Guitar Hits : la méthode de guitare sur DVD la plus complète et interactive, www.guitarhits.fr

Installation. We reviewed the Windows version; the Mac version is due by the time you read this. Pop in the CD under Windows 95 and thanks to plug and play a screen appears with installation instructions. Under Windows 3.1, you do the usual ”install\setup.exe” routine. When the initial screen appears, you can decide whether to display the guitar neck graphics vertically or horizontally.

Installation is kind to your computer; it creates a program group with a shortcut to run the program, and a “read me” file. The process doesn’t transfer gobs of stuff over to your hard drive (although the program checks for Quicktime for Windows and adds it if it’s not present). This approach leaves more free space on your hard drive and makes it unlikely that installing Classic Rock Guitar will cause any conflicts or problems with other programs.

The down side is that just about everything gets read from the CD-ROM, which slows down access (you’ll be happiest with a 4X or faster drive). However, due to the program's instructional nature and pacing, the speed penalty is really not an issue except when pulling something like help information from the disc, which you want to appear as fast as possible so you can get back to the real action.

One caution: If you have disabled your soundcard (for example, in Device Manager), the program will freeze after showing the main screen. I assume there’s some kind of soundcard auto-detection routine, and if the program doesn’t find anything, it goes off in a corner and sulks.

Yours for a Song. The program's instruction method is based around analysis of “Hey Joe” (Jimi Hendrix), “No Woman No Cry” (Bob Marley), “Life by the Drop” (Stevie Ray Vaughn), “Sweet Home Alabama” (Lynyrd Skynyrd), “Dust in the Wind” (Kansas), “Blowin’ in the Wind” (Bob Dylan), “Wild World” (Cat Stevens), and “Blackbird” (Beatles). These are not the original performances, but they feature acoustic guitar parts that (like the rest of the audio) are well-recorded. Ubi Soft says they rearranged the songs slightly to work on solo guitar but tried to stay as true to the original as possible.

Except for “Life by the Drop”, it’s a very '60s/'70s collection, but since the disc is labeled as "Volume 1," I wouldn't be surprised if something more along the lines of “Smells Like Teen Spirit” shows up in future releases. *[Ed Note: just before we went to press, we saw a preview of Volume 2, which is based on eight Lennon/McCartney songs, including “Help”, “Let It Be” and “Yesterday”. Volume 2 is also slated to include a digital audio recording function, so you can compare your playing against the instructor’s. The Windows version should be available by the time you read this, with the Mac to follow Based on their description of other works in progress, Ubi Soft will be sticking pretty closely to the classic rock theme, so Nirvana songs may be a ways off].*

This is not an instructional disc in the traditional sense, where you go through a linear series of lessons in search of a particular goal. Instead, the disc consists of a number of small, self-contained lessons that you can access in various ways. For example, if you’re mostly interested in song structure, you can deal with that family of lessons. If you find you’re a little shaky on basic guitar techniques, you can duck into that section at any time, even while pursuing some other topic. If you just want to be able to play the intro to “Hey Joe” note for note, you can do that too. This type of random access approach is well-suited to the CD-ROM medium.

After selecting the song from one of the two screens of songs, you hear a snippet of music, then a narration that describes a bit about the song and the techniques that will be covered for that song. Meanwhile, a main song screen appears showing clickable icons for four additional screens (Music, Lessons, Chords, and Words). This screen also shows four options that are always available: Volume, Guitar Tuner, Return to Main Menu, and Exit. (This last option uses a guitar case icon… guess that means you’re putting your guitar back in its case.) You don’t get a chance to change your mind if you exit, so hit this icon only when you’re really sure that Elvis has indeed left the building.

Words Screen. Clicking on the Words icon brings up (not surprisingly) the lyrics. Chord changes (A, Cm, F7, etc.) are shown above words, while underlined words are used to show emphasis. (You have to go to the music screen to hear the words performed in context, however.) Clicking on any of the

designated chords brings up a screen with the associated fingering and plays a strum. This lets you move through a song and learn the changes, as well as the words, at your leisure.

A metronome option ticks away to give a rhythmic reference. The timing wanders a little bit, but works well enough for the intended purpose. The metronome defaults to the song's tempo, but you can change this to anywhere from 10 to 250 bpm (beats per minute). One minor irritation: If you switch pages (most songs require three pages of lyrics), the metronome has to be restarted on the next page, and it always resets to the default tempo.

Music Screen. This is one of the most important, and often-used, screens in the program. The layout is the same for all songs: video window in the upper left (the screen shot shows the F that plays just before the subsequent G and C chords), chord guide (current chord and next chord) in the upper right, notation in a strip toward the middle, and a "navigation bar" that lets you jump to specific parts of the song (first part of verse, second part of verse, chorus, etc.). You can also use the navigation bar to select large regions of the song, or the entire song if you want to play it from start to finish. Tape-recorder-like "transport" buttons let you play the selected part, move to the next part, or return to the beginning. The Rewind and Advance buttons are particularly cool. Each mouse click moves playback to the previous or next note respectively (however it does skip over some fast grace notes and such). Clicking and holding either button rewinds or forwards at a fast rate, during which chord changes are shown, but the video freezes on the last displayed frame. You can also set up a section to loop.

When you click on the Current or Next Chord diagram, the hand in the video moves to the selected chord and plays it. Clicking on the notation expands it to fill more of the window, which eliminates scrolling from one measure to the next. Clicking on a highlighted portion of the notation brings up a lesson that corresponds to that piece of music. We'll discuss the lessons below.

Finally it's worth noting that the vocals and guitar playing are downright decent to listen to. Thanks!

Fig 2. The Music screen shows why Classic Rock Guitar is such a well-designed learning tool. In addition to hearing the sound of a guitar playing a song, you can simultaneously watch a video of the instructor playing it and see the notes and lyrics displayed in both tablature and traditional notation. You can also see the structure of the song. Having multiple versions of the same information hit you at once can reinforce the learning experience.

Guitar Techniques Screen. This display is accessible from both the Music and Lesson screens, and includes descriptions of the following techniques: hammer on, pull off, trill, slide, grace note, bend,

vibrato, harmonics, and fret hand muting. Clicking on any of these brings up several events: narration that describes the technique, a window that translates what's happening into standard notation, and a demonstration video. This is an effective way to brush up on the basics and has a definite "teacher sitting in front of you" feel.

You can play the video once or loop it, as well as hear the narration at any time. Clicking on the video brings up a full-screen version, but with short examples, sometimes the sound is over before the picture appears.

An arrow icon selects additional video examples of different angles. For example, the first video might feature the left hand, while the next clip sights down the guitar to show what the right and left hands are doing. Some techniques include more than one set of videos.

Clicking the Techniques icon while on this screen brings up a reference screen that shows how strings and frets are numbered, tablature notation, finger numbering, etc. This isn't an interactive screen, just reference material.

Chords Screen. As you might expect, the Chords screen shows the chords used in the tune. Clicking on any chord puts it in a highlight box, shows the notes in notation, and plays a video that demonstrates the left-hand fingering.

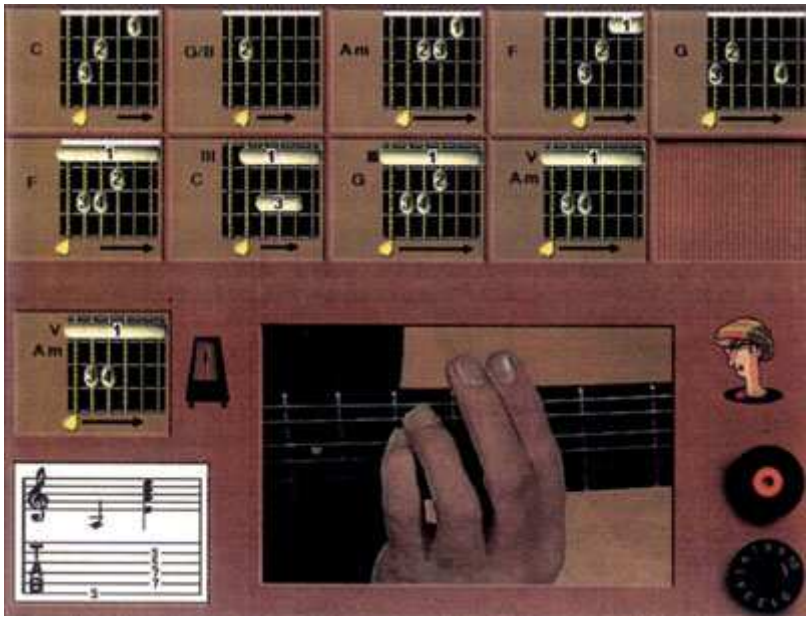


Fig 3. The Chords screen shows the chords used in the tune. Clicking on any chord puts it in a highlight box, shows the notes in notation, and plays a video that demonstrates the left-hand fingering.

Lessons Screen. This area lists particular topics that relate to the song being studied. For example, with "No Woman No Cry," 12 lessons cover strumming, transitions, the style of playing behind the verse, etc. The format is similar to the Guitar Techniques screen - there's a video, notation for the notes being played, and chords you can click on to strum.

Most songs have a "chords" lesson that takes you through die song's chord progression. The remaining lessons detail particular pieces of the song, demonstrating how to play them while narrating some helpful hints. Interested in "Hey Joe"? Click on the Bass Riff lesson, and you'll see the optimum fingering to play the famous unison guitar/bass riff that powered the tune.

With "Hey Joe," the first seven lessons sketch out the main parts of the song (chords, riff on A, riff on E, riff transition on E, riff on D, bass riff, and riff on G). The next eight lessons add more riffs and techniques to flesh out the song, such as alternatives to barre chords for certain transitions, some idiomatic Hendrix riffs (like his two-note slides), the ever-popular “Hey Joe” intro, tips on which barre chords are most important to master for the song, transitions, and so on. By the time you’ve gone through the lessons and music screens, you’ve learned how to play the chosen piece of music.

The “multimedia” orientation of this approach is a significant benefit. For example, if you're weak on notation, the fact that everything is translated into notation and tablature is bound to rub off on you eventually. If you go through the song and have a hard time with one particular area, details are just a click or two away. Another benefit is that in the process of learning these songs, you build up a collection of techniques that are usable in other contexts. The choice of songs is excellent in this respect - the techniques required to play “Blackbird” and “Sweet Home Alabama” are quite different. By the time you’ve explored the variety of techniques, you'll have quite a repertoire of tricks up your sleeve.

Printed Companion Guide. The guide booklet gives basics on working with the program (it's pretty intuitive anyway; you don’t need much help). It also includes a description of the historical background behind the songs chosen for the disc, along with additional factoids (did you know the Hendrix recording of “Hey Joe” was completed on October 23, 1966?). A page on understanding guitar notation and a (very) short glossary round out the contents.

By the Way, Who's Jim? The program has a sort of mascot, a cartoon character named Jim who appears periodically in vaguely humorous guises (starting off on the opening screen, where he does an MGM style lion’s roar). Cutesy stuff like this usually turns me off, but the way it’s handled is actually pretty good. He looks like a character out of a French comic book (not surprising, considering that most of the design team is French), and there are some amusing little animations. Also, clicking on Jim gets you to the help screens, which are pretty simple: Click on a function you don’t understand, and a banner comes up that tells you what the icon represents.

Is It Worth It? The big question is how effective Classic Rock Guitar is as a mode of education, and the answer depends on what you expect from a CD-ROM. This is not a “learn to play guitar” program, although you wouldn’t have to be too far along the guitar learning curve to derive considerable benefit from these lessons. If you're patient and click through enough screens, you can learn a lot. The program is positioned more for those who have figured out their way around a guitar, yet want to learn more and become more accomplished. Advanced players won’t find too much of interest here, although self-taught musicians who want to get up to speed on correlating notation to notes played will find this program helpful.

Production qualities are uniformly excellent. The video examples are clear, the performances well-done, the graphics clean and colorful, and the sound quality is above average. Overall, Classic Rock Guitar gets major points for a job well done – professional without being stuffy, friendly without being simplistic or condescending, and deep enough to contain a lot of useful information. If you're a newbie to intermediate guitarist, you'll definitely get your money's worth from Classic Rock Guitar.

Tuner Helper

Classic Rock Guitar’s on-screen guitar tuner is not an afterthought, but a useful addition. Acoustic mode provides reference tones. You can choose to hear sine waves by clicking the on-screen guitar’s machine heads, or click on a machine head’s string post for a sampled acoustic guitar string sound. Unfortunately, there’s no way to loop the reference tone so it can just drone on in the background while you tune. The default duration is approximately three seconds.

Digital tuner mode analyzes a mic or a guitar plugged into the soundcard's mic input. A tuning meter shows whether the pitch is sharp, flat, or just right.

In either mode, clicking on the neck provides a strum. In addition to mode select, icons on this screen include the usual help, return to song, and volume options.

PROS : Excellent audio and video production values. Lessons present concepts clearly and concisely. Takes up very little hard disk space. Easy to navigate. Uses both tablature and notation for examples. Tuner is a helpful bonus.

CONS : Requires 4X of faster CD-ROM drive (unless you're patient). Today's guitarists may not relate to the mostly '70s song selection. Full-screen video mode is not very useful.

BOTTOM LINE : The presentation and overall quality make this package an outstanding educational tool for beginner to intermediate guitarists, but it has little of interest for advanced players.