

Fretboard Care

by John LeVan

Proper Fretboard Conditioning

I have received some great questions lately that fall into the category of "Fretboard Care." Never fear, all of these questions will be answered.

- Why is it important?
- What kind of wood needs conditioning?
- What happens if I don't condition my fretboard?
- How often do I condition my fretboard?
- Moisture & Conditioning
- How to do it right

Why Condition?

Fretboards require regular cleaning and conditioning, otherwise, some pretty nasty things can happen to them. (We will explore these problems in detail later in the article). Conditioning the fretboard will keep it looking new and prevent a host of problems as the guitar ages. Moisture is also very important and should be controlled in addition to regular cleaning and conditioning. Be careful not to substitute one for the other. They work hand-in-hand when preserving fine wood.

Figure 1.1 Fretboard.



Photo by John LeVan

What kind of wood needs conditioning?

Fretboards come in a variety of woods. Ebony, Rosewood, Maple, Bacote, Pau Ferro or even Ziricote are just some of the woods used make fretboards. Some are very common, others are quite exotic.

Some have a finish over them, but most do not. Any guitar with an un-finished fretboard should be cleaned and conditioned regularly – at least every string change. Maple fretboards will often have a finish on them and won't need any conditioning. If you have a maple fretboard that is unfinished, then it's a good idea to keep it clean and conditioned.

Figure 2.1 Dry Fretboard.

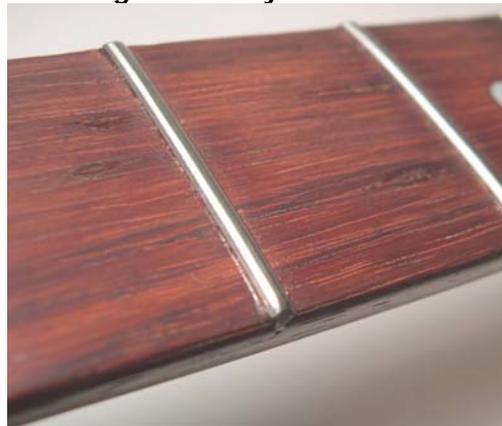


Photo by John LeVan

What happens if I don't condition my fretboard?

All kinds of damage can occur when a fretboard is neglected. Here is a list of common ailments:

- Cracks
- Chipping
- Loose frets
- Discoloration
- De-lamination
- Loss of sustain
- Premature wear

I see a lot of these problems in the summer & winter. Many players don't realize how the seasonal changes can and will affect their guitar. Any exposed (unfinished) wood is susceptible to the list above if not properly cleaned and conditioned.

Figures 3.1 Cracked fretboard caused by lack of humidity and conditioning.



Photo by John LeVan

How often do I condition my fretboard?

Every time you change your strings, you should clean & condition your fretboard. This will remove the dirt, sweat and grime that build up on the neck and around the frets. In addition, it will keep your fretboard looking brand new.

Figures 4.1 Spray the Planet Waves Hydrate Fretboard conditioner right onto the fretboard.



Photo by John LeVan

Moisture & Conditioning?

What's the difference? Moisture or humidity is the amount of water in the air and within the cells of the wood. This is very important because it prevents some of the problems listed previously. Conditioning prevents the cells of the wood from becoming brittle, discolored and wearing prematurely. When the humidity fluctuates, the conditioner will help stabilize the wood and prevent cracking and loose frets.

Figure 5.1 Planet Waves Humidifier.



Photo provided by D'Addario & Co.

How to do it right

I always polish the frets before I condition the fretboard. The Planet Waves Fret-Polishing System is specifically designed for this. It includes 5 sheets of polishing paper, fret polishing template, and detailed instructions. Just remove the polishing paper, open the template and place it over the fret you want to polish. The template has a slot for both narrow and jumbo frets so you can choose the right size for your frets. Then rub the polishing paper over the fret to polish it to a high gloss. It's that simple.

Figure 6.1 Planet Waves Fret Polishing System.

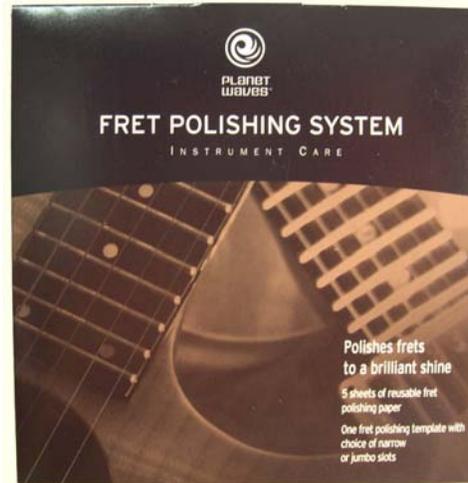


Photo by John LeVan

Figure 6.2 Open the template and place over the frets.

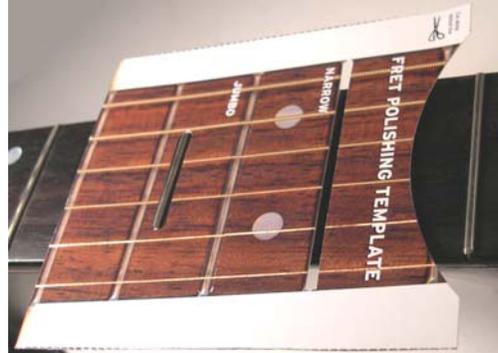


Photo by John LeVan

Figure 6.3 Rub the polishing paper (dark side down) over the frets lengthwise.



Photo by John LeVan

Next, determine what the best conditioner is for your guitar. Many manufacturers have recommendations, but they all differ greatly. According to their websites, PRS, Tom Anderson and Takamine all recommend Lemon Oil for their fretboard. On the other hand, Martin does not recommend lemon oil because it can break down the Nitro Cellulose finish on their necks. Collings Guitars recommends boiled linseed oil for their necks. Linseed oil is messy and has a rather unpleasant smell to it. I quit using it over a decade ago for these reasons. I don't know about you, but I have several different guitars and don't have time to go buy three different products to condition my fretboard! I have tested several different products and I have found the Mack Daddy of them all! The *Planet Waves Hydrate* fretboard conditioner.

Figure 6.4 Planet Waves Hydrate Fretboard Conditioner.



Photo by John LeVan

It's safe on all woods and finishes, smells good and cleans up easier than lemon or linseed oil. Application is so easy! With linseed and lemon oil, things always got messy; with the Planet Waves Hydrate, just spray it on, let it absorb into the wood and wipe it off with a paper towel. No more oily rags around my shop! (I wonder if I can get my insurance rate lowered now) Don't worry about over-conditioning; the fretboard will only absorb what it needs. Clean it up with a paper towel and you're ready to restring.

Figure 6.5,6 Look at the difference between a dry and a hydrated fretboard.

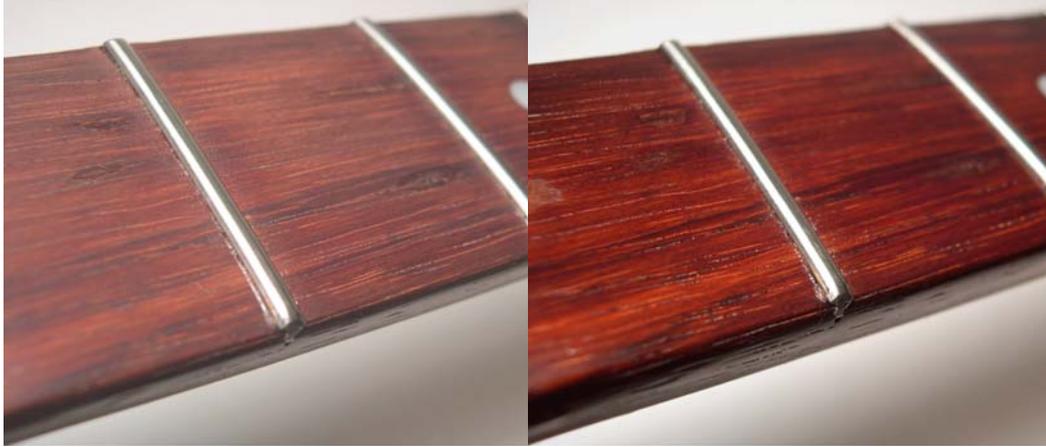


Photo by John LeVan

Now your fretboard and frets look shiny and new. More important, they will last much longer and retain their luster.

If you would like to learn more about the Planet Waves Guitar Care Products, Watch for my latest DVD called ***FAQ Electric Guitar Care, Maintenance and Restringing***. In it I demonstrate how to use the Planet Waves Guitar Care products in an easy to follow format. It's the perfect gift for any guitarist.

Got Questions? E-mail me at: guitarservices@aol.com and check us out on the web at www.guitarservices.com. Each month I will choose several of the FAQs (frequently asked questions) I get for my column. If you would like your question presented in this column, please include your name, e-mail, city, & state. I look forward to hearing from you. Until next time, enjoy them guitars!

Sources:

Martin Guitar Co.: <http://www.martinguitar.com/services/faq.html#q14>

Collings Guitars: <http://www.collingsguitars.com/carefeeding.htm>

PRS Guitars: <http://www.prsguitars.com/csc/care.html>

Tom Anderson: <http://www.andersonguitars.com/questions.html>

Takamine Guitar Co.: <http://www.takamine.com/?fa=care>

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