

A little essay

*About the history  
of many kinds of GUITARS  
February 2015*

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## BR *Essay about the history of guitars* Feb 2015

### Introduction

In this essay, I want to briefly outline the history of the guitar - which nowadays seems to be the most-used music instrument. This means that I need to talk about three kinds of instruments: Guitar precursors (such as the oud and the lute), the acoustic guitar (set up around 1200), and the electric guitar (introduced 1930).



And as my little essay is certainly not really a professional article, I won't write too much, yet certainly include quite a few pictures, of both, guitars and musicians!

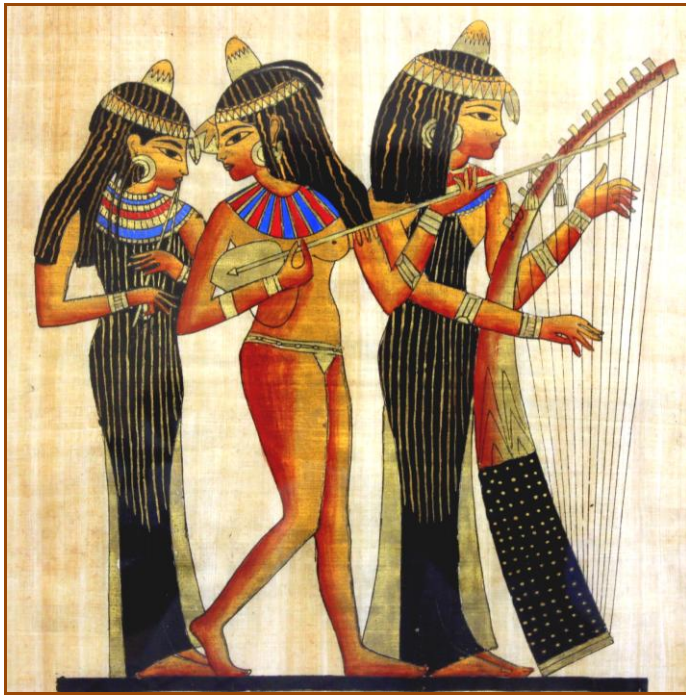


### Earliest images of guitar-like instruments

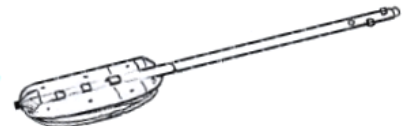
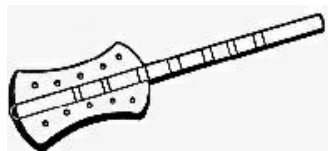
Is the guitar the first music instrument in human history, beside the human voice? No, it's not! Archaeology says that flutes are the earliest ones - a number of flute-like excavation pieces have been rated as about forty thousand (!) years old. The next-oldest instruments seem to be all sorts of percussion tools & drums.

Guitars are string instruments which belong to the instrument family called chordophone. These are made from wood; the strings are either gut or nylon or steel strings. Earlier instruments include the the tanbur, the barbat, the pandoura, the oud, the vihuela, and four-course or five-course baroque guitars.

In the historic Egypt empire, a string instrument called tanbur was essential; it's shown on many tomb paintings, being at least 3600 years old. It has a rather small bottom and a slim very long neck.



Another very old guitar-like instrument can be seen in Catal Huyuk on Hettite monuments. They are 3300 and 3000 years old.



The left one looks like a pandoura; the right instrument seems similar to the tanbur.

The next picture shows the lithograph of a bas relief from Mantinea in Greece, a muse playing a pandoura. It is 2400 years old.

Below are two Roman mosaics presenting a pandoura musician.





Finally, in central Asia countries lutes were played as well for a long time. The statuette below, from Uzbekistan, shows a musician playing something like a pandoura.



To sum up, precursors of what eventually became the guitar have been established for almost 4000 years.

### History of the name "guitar"

Here is what the "guitar researchers" have fiddled out:

The Spanish word *guitarra* came up in the 13th century. This led to *guitare* in France, *Gitarre* in Germany, *guitar* in England. Linguists believe that *guitarra* comes from the Andalusian-Arabic *qitara*, derived from the Latin *cithara*, which in turn goes back to the Ancient-Greek *κιθάρα* ~ *kithara*.



In Spain, originally *guitarra latina* (left) and *guitarra morisca* were distinguished (left and right in the above painting). Morish refers to ouds brought along when southern Iberia fell to the Muslim invasion.

### Medieval lute (Europe)

After the end of the Roman Empire, for some time mainly instruments similar to the pandoura dominated.



This was true in both clerical and secular contexts, such as cloisters or king courts. Yet in medieval times eventually a different kind of chordophone took over, which is mostly called a lute.

Lutes are made from wood. Regarding the strings, these are, with an exception, pairs - thus an 8-course Renaissance lute usually has 15 strings, and a 13-course Baroque lute has 24.



Many artists have painted musicians playing a lute; two impressive examples are below.



By the way, the European lute and the – much older - oriental oud developed more or less independent of each other, however, they share essential features, including the shape of the instrument.

### **Oud (Muslim countries)**

The oud is widely used in North Africa, Near East countries, Turkey, Armenia, Iraq and Iran. Its “parents” seem to be instruments from the Egypt Empire, such as the tanbur, and instruments developed long time ago in Central Asia, such as the barbat, which is still in use in Iran. The oud is an established instrument since around 600 or 700, and clearly essential for the Arabian culture.





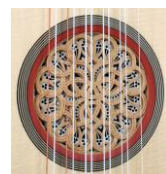
The oud has 11 strings - 10 strings are paired together, whereas, the lowest string remains single. The wood work is performed with great care, and usually finest decorations are added.



Arabic books about the theory and practice of music, including how to play the oud, have appeared for more than thousand years.

### **Viuhela (Spain & Portugal & Italy)**

A further precursor of the guitar is the vihuela, which was created in the mid-15th century in Spain, and also became common in Portugal and Italy. It was the foremost instrument for 150 years.



Vihuelas are like flat-backed lutes. They have 6 double-strings (paired courses) made of gut. Many instruments show splendid handicraft work.



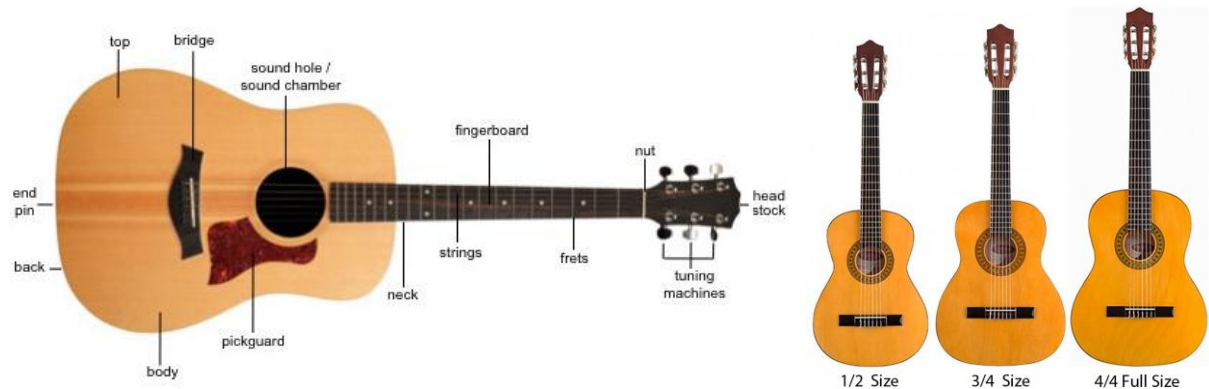
How well-established the vihuela was can also be inferred from the very many drawings and paintings which show musicians playing it. At a later time, a special Mexican vihuela developed as well.

### **Latin guitar (Spain)**





The guitar originated in Spain, almost thousand years ago. As the crucial predecessors usually two instruments are mentioned, the European lute and the Oriental oud. The guitar eventually outshined the vihuela and became the dominant acoustic instrument all over Europe and the Americas. In Spain, later the flamenco guitar was added. There is also a bass guitar.



The images above explain the 'machinery' of guitars. Regarding the number of strings, this varied between 4 and 12, yet finally 6 strings became the standard; bass guitars have 4 strings.

Beside manifold technical features, there is also a long tradition of art facets. This is particularly true for the sound hole of guitars.



Presenting guitar music has become an art form. This may be solo artists or small groups of guitar players, mostly performing orthodox music. However, a guitar is customary part of many orchestras – classical, folk, jazz, mariachi and so on.





The originally Spanish “Latin Guitar” presented here eventually became *the* classical “acoustical” guitar all over the world, and it may indeed - still - be the most employed music instrument.

### **Mandolin (Italy)**

The mandolin was invented in Italy during the 17th and 18th century, mainly in Napoli. It is based on the lute. The deep bowled mandolin became common in the 19th century, both as folk instrument and as part of classical music – even Beethoven composed mandolin music.

It usually has four courses of doubled strings, i.e., strings. The design of mandolins varies quite a bit, as it is meanwhile built in many countries.





The mandolin is still well-liked and widely played. And of course there are countless photos and paintings presenting these entertainers ...

### Balalaika (Russia)

This unique instrument is the national music instrument of Russia. It was invented in the 18th century. Usually it has three strings, yet six (three sets of double courses) are also occurring.



Balalaikas are made in 6 different sizes, reaching from piccolo to bass. Instruments of the common size, "prima", frequently show remarkable paintings on top.





## **Banjo (USA)**

Naively speaking, the banjo appears like a combination of a guitar and a snare drum ... It was developed in US-America in the 18th century, and became soon very popular in folk, bluegrass and early jazz music. It's also important in Irish country music.



Most banjos are 5-string instruments, but there are also 4-string and 6-string versions built.



Furthermore, some companies have developed mandolin-banjo and guitar-banjo hybrids, including electro guitars, as the one below.



Especially in USA, the banjo is an essential part of country music for more than 100 years, which has been painted and later photographed very often.



Sometimes a family formed a whole "banjo band" - like the two ladies and three girls above.

### **Ukulele (Hawaii)**

Based on instruments of Portuguese settlers on Pacific islands, the ukulele was created in Hawaii around 1880. It became Hawaii's home instrument, yet soon got very popular in North America and Europe, and later in Japan as well.



Ukuleles are made in five sizes, yet the small "soprano" one is dominating. They have usually four strings.

Because of its considerable popularity, especially for young people, it gets manufactured in a lot of colours - the original unpainted design seems to become rare.



The ukulele is not just played by children! There are many ukulele societies, and they perform orchestra-like.



The industrially made ukeleles may not be a highlight of handicraft art, yet they are amazingly cheap, and thereby important to trigger musicianship in young girls and boys.

### **Dobro guitar (USA)**

This distinctive guitar was invented by the *Dopyera brothers* from 1926 onwards; they named their company *Dobro*.





Its design is based on a single inverted bowl-shaped resonator. On top of the cone sits a cast aluminum spider that had eight legs.



In the following years a wide variety of metal- and wood-bodied single-cone guitars were created, including electro guitars.



Dobro instruments are the only guitars build completely from metal. Many of these have unique designs of the guitar body.

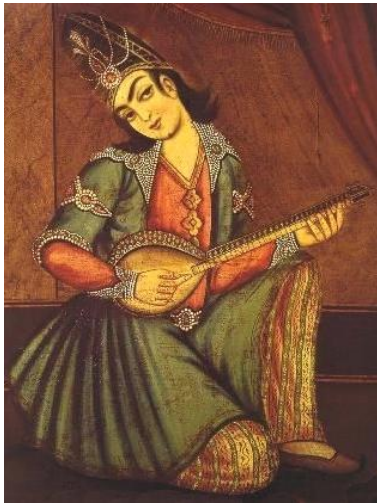
### Sitar (India)

The sitar is certainly *the* music instrument in India. It is about 1.2 m long has up to 20 strings.



The sitar is a complex instrument. The long bridges are fixed to the main resonating chamber, "kaddu", at the bottom of the instrument. Some sitars have a secondary resonator, the "tumbaa", near the top of the neck.

Regarding its history, it is assumed to have evolved into the present form in the 1700's, during the end of the Moghul Empire, as a 'marriage' between the Persian setar and the south-indian veena. Persian lutes were been played in the Moghul courts for hundreds of years. Sitarers are mostly used in classical music, and to some degree in folk.



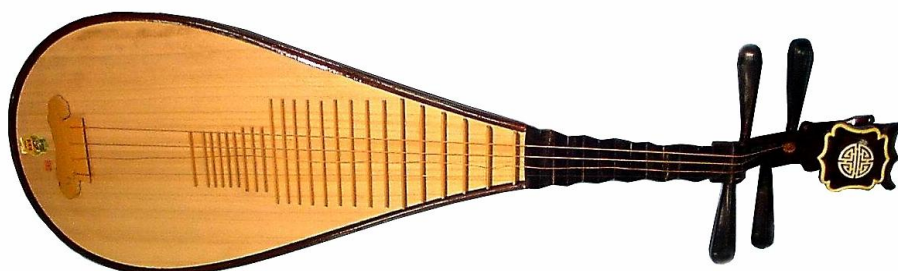
Sitarers, made from wood, are highly decorated instruments. This is especially the case for the "kaddu" at the bottom.



After World War 2, the sitar became much wider known, because sitar masters performed all over the world, and many musicians - even including rock and jazz - travelled to India to study the sitar in its home country.

## **Pipa (China)**

A four-stringed Chinese musical instrument is called pipa, it's played for almost 2000 years.





As with many European instruments, there is a large number of pipas which show artfully decorations, mostly paintings.



Performing music on pipas used to be a societal affair yet is has become a folk event as well.

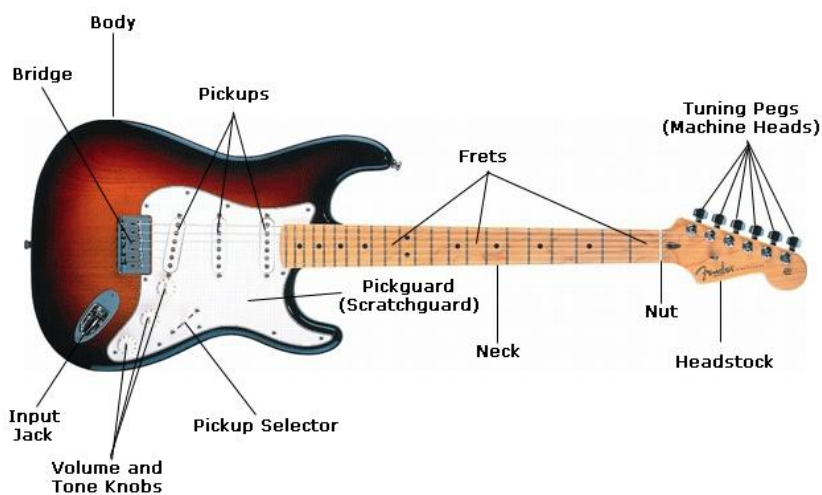


Plus, pipa musicians, mostly woman, have been presented in many paintings as well.



## Electric guitars (USA)

The first electrically amplified guitar was designed in 1931 at the US-American National Guitar Corporation. Electric guitars utilize a pickup to convert the vibration of its strings into electrical impulses. They became soon vital in pop and jazz music, and later dominated rock.

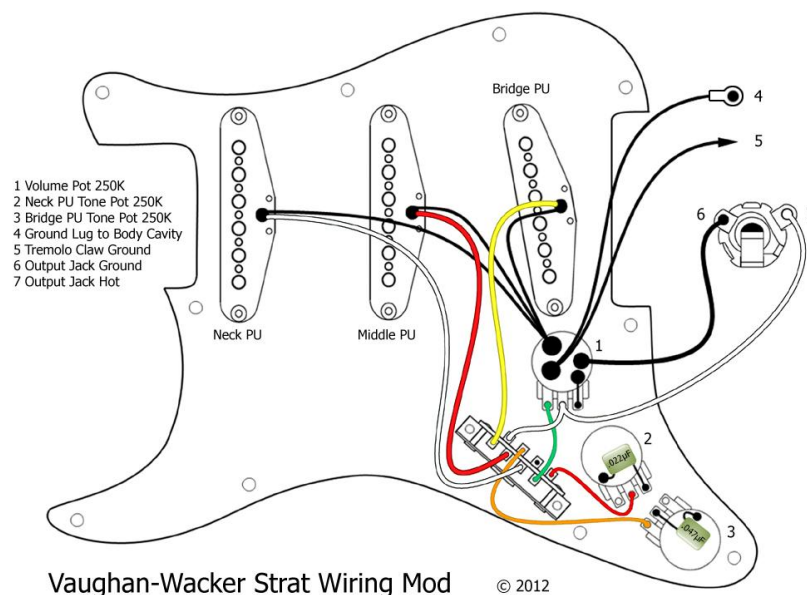


Given the enduring development of electronics, the features of electric guitars have been extended again and again.

Below is a compact history overview.



To explain the electric technology used in guitars is obviously beyond the objectives of this essay. However, the selected sketch below may give an idea.





Electric guitars do not "play by themselves" - first of all, an amplifier is indispensable for presenting the music. Furthermore, over the decades an incredible range of guitar 'gadgets' has been developed, beginning with the wah-wah pedal.



Finally, increasingly computers are used to shape the music created by electric guitars.

### Twin guitar (USA)

For quite a long time multi-neck guitars have been built. The most employed "twin" guitar is the double neck guitar - mostly an electric guitar with 12 strings on the upper and 6 on the lower neck.



Playing "twin" guitars - mostly done in rock and jazz music - requires considerable skills.



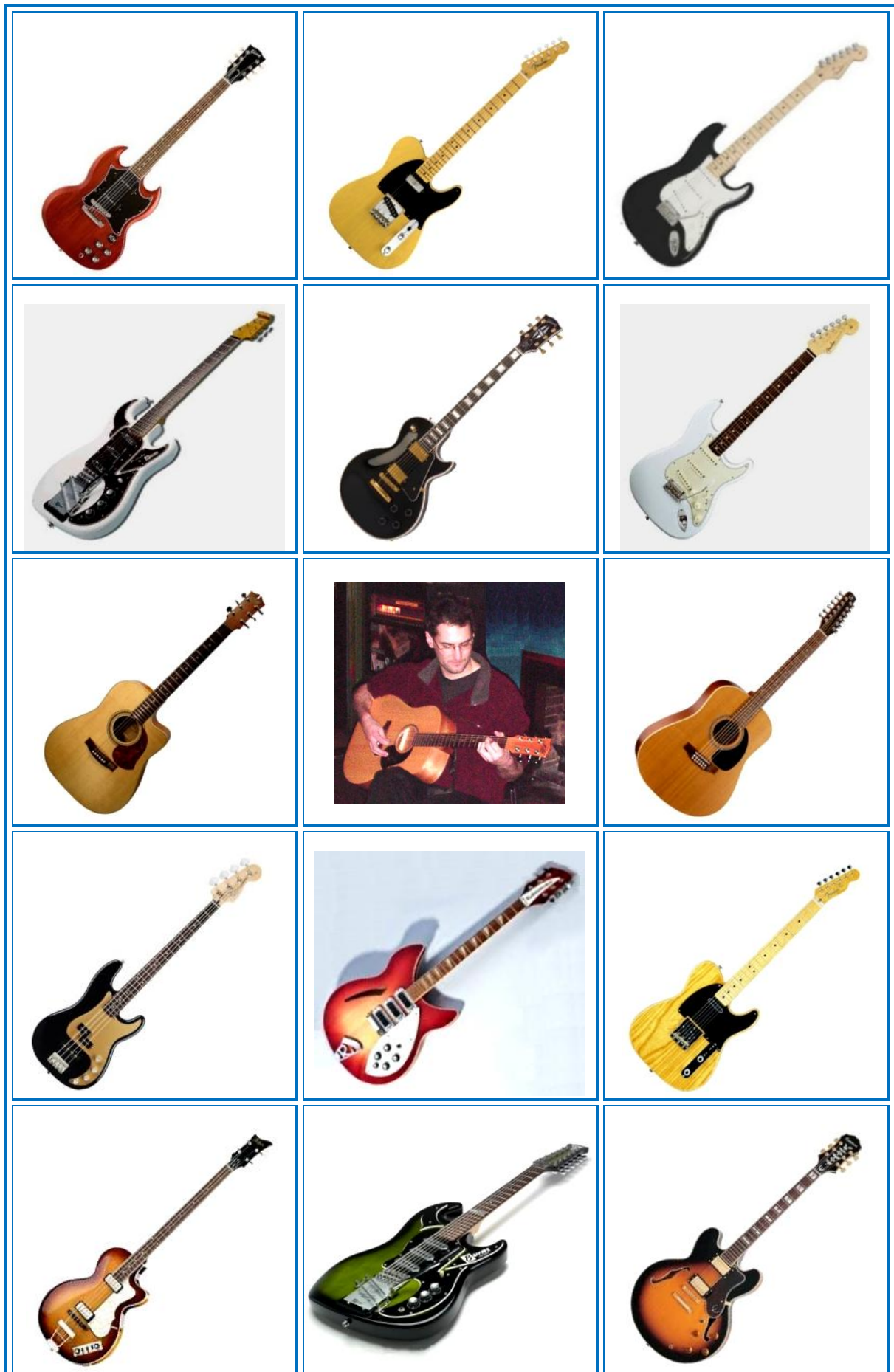
## Distinctive guitar musicians

Of course my viewpoints are completely subjective - yet here are some of those I do admire !  
The time range is almost 100 years ... I have records of all these musicians ...



## The guitar collection of Simon

Simon plays guitar and collect guitars, lots! Here is a collage of his acoustic & electric guitars.





## Weird designs of rock guitars



Well, these are just 6 out of limitless examples, re guitar shape and re paintings!



## Final words & outlook

For sure it wasn't easy to create such an essay - yet fortunately this guitar here spoke to me!



Of course I hope that all guitar people continue to play and utterly maintain their music spirit!



A world without music would be gloomy - yet guitars let music far and wide flourish!

