

# Hard Learned Lessons



By Mike Nash, Luthier & Owner of Alien Guitar Factory

During the last year, it has been my privilege and pleasure to learn the art of basic electric guitar construction. As a “rookie” builder, it is my goal to bring my readers into my personal experiences, so you can better understand what you might encounter in the early going.

## Lesson #1 - Dust vs. Chip

I have to thank my friend Andy Lesuer for this one. It’s not every day that a hand tool will beat a power tool, but this one is no contest! Purpleheart wood is a rather unconventional type to use for an electric guitar neck, but I have a personal fetish for pushing some of these conventions around. I thought I’d found an easy solution for shaping the back of the neck by chucking a sanding drum into a hand drill and locking the trigger down. It was effective, but extremely slow. This attempt to save time had turned into FIVE hours and I was still not satisfied with the results. That’s when I remembered Andy’s words, “If you are taking off a chip instead of dust, you are going a LOT faster.” So my wife Dawna, ordered me a new spokeshave. When it came in, I was looking forward to seeing how it fared on the wood I had now dubbed “Purple-HARD”. I was thrilled with the results! It only took me 10 minutes to completely ruin the neck by going too far....oh well. That’s a lesson for another article!



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## Lesson #2 - Proper tools and techniques

In my experiences in school, we were taught a certain method of dressing the ends of the frets as a “final” step. We were instructed to use a nice long and wide single-cut file, placed along the side of the neck to grind several frets flat at the same time. I had not yet purchased such a file and instead just borrowed a small double-cut file from a neighbor. When trying to grind the frets one at a time, I found the small file would “rock” to the left and right, instead of simply riding on

the metal. This resulted in gouging the side of the fretboard severely!

The understanding of why a particular technique is adhered to might not always be necessary. But finding out the hard way can cost you a really nice fretboard...um...so I’ve heard.

## Lesson #3 - Tricks of the trade

You’d think drilling a small series of holes in a straight line would be easy. In fact, I have had a few frustrations and setbacks trying to perform this seemingly simple task. When drilling holes for tuners, a simple guide fence (such as a straight piece of wood clamped to your drill press table)



will keep them in a line. Ferrules for a string through bridge are just going to require a precise metal jig to guide the bit perfectly. But one of my favorite new techniques is staggering holes where possible. I used this to attach a neck to a telecaster body when I wanted to create a more sculpted area for the player’s fret access up high. I chose washers instead of having a custom chrome neck plate, but then I chose to stagger the bolt pattern for a more exotic, artistic look. But let’s not sugar coat it, I was also “cheating”. When you deliberately stagger a bolt pattern in this fashion, you never have to worry about the bolt holes lining up perfectly! And it still looks great!

*Mike Nash rediscovered an interest from his youth in how electric guitars were made and decided to become a student of lutherie at Red Rocks Community College. He now builds custom guitars under the name Alien Guitar Factory based in Castle Rock, Colorado.*

*For more information about Mike’s current projects and available instruments, contact him at:  
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