SOFTWARE & TECH

How To Play Smoke On The Water

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Introduction: Why Smoke On The Water Remains a Guitar Rite of Passage

Few songs in rock history command the instant recognition that **Smoke On The Water** by Deep Purple does. Released in 1972 on the album *Machine Head*, the track has become synonymous with the electric guitar itself. Its main riff is arguably the most famous guitar riff ever written, and for good reason: it is powerful, deceptively simple, and utterly unforgettable.

For anyone asking **How To Play Smoke On The Water**, the journey often begins with that iconic four-note sequence. But learning the song properly involves understanding the rhythm, the chord changes, and the feel that makes it a masterclass in hard rock. Whether you are a complete beginner picking up a guitar for the first time or an intermediate player looking to refine your technique, this guide will walk you through everything you need to know.

This article is designed to be your complete resource for mastering this classic. We will break down the main riff note by note, explore the verses, examine the chord progression, discuss the legendary guitar solo, and offer practical tips to help you play with confidence. By the end, you will not only know how to play the notes but also understand the musical context that makes this song so special.

The Essential Gear and Tuning

Standard Tuning Is Your Friend

Before you dive into the riff, ensure your guitar is in **standard tuning** (E-A-D-G-B-E). Ritchie Blackmore, Deep Purple's guitarist, recorded the song with his Fender Stratocaster tuned slightly flat at times, but for learning purposes, standard tuning is perfectly fine. If you want to match the original recording exactly, you can tune down by about a quarter step, but most learners and live players use standard tuning.

Amp Settings for That Classic Tone

To capture the essence of the song, set your amplifier to a clean or slightly overdriven channel. A **distortion pedal** with moderate gain, such as a Tube Screamer or a Boss DS-1, works beautifully. The key is to avoid excessive fuzz. Blackmore's tone was biting and articulate, with plenty of mid-range presence. Set your bass at about 5, your mid at 7 or 8, and your treble around 6. A touch of reverb can add depth, but keep it subtle. The goal is a clear, punchy sound that cuts through the mix.

Breaking Down the Main Riff

The main riff is built on a simple but brilliant use of the **blues scale** and chromatic movement. It uses only four notes, but the rhythm and phrasing are everything. The riff is often mistakenly taught as purely a power chord pattern, but in reality, it is a melodic line played on the low E and A strings.

The Four-Note Core

Here is the sequence in tablature form, played in 4/4 time. The key is G minor.

1. First note: Play the 3rd fret on the low E string (G note). Use your index finger.
2. Second note: Play the 6th fret on the low E string (A#/Bb note). Use your ring finger.
3. Third note: Play the 8th fret on the low E string (C note). Use your pinky finger. This stretch is crucial.
4. Fourth note: Play the 6th fret on the A string (D#/Eb note). Use your ring finger or pinky, depending on comfort.

The rhythm is a driving eighth-note pattern with a slight swing. The iconic "dun-dun-dun-dun" repeats with a distinct pause between phrases. Practice each note slowly with a metronome set to 70 BPM before increasing to the original tempo of around 116 BPM. The magic lies in the **palm muting**technique. Rest the side of your picking hand lightly on the strings near the bridge to create a tight, percussive sound. Release the mute slightly on the final note of each phrase to let it ring out.

Common Mistakes Beginners Make

- Incorrect finger placement: Many beginners use the wrong fingers, causing difficulty with speed. Use your index, ring, and pinky as described.
- Not muting properly: The riff sounds sloppy without palm muting. Practice muting the lower strings while keeping the played note clear.
- Rushing the pauses: The riff has rests between repetitions. Counting "1, 2, 3, 4" and resting on beat 4 is essential.

Understanding the Chord Progression

Once you have the main riff down, the next step is learning the **chord progression**that underpins the verses and chorus. The song is built on a classic rock progression centered around the G minor tonality.

The Verse Chords

The verse uses a straightforward progression of power chords:

- G5 (3rd fret on low E string, with the 5th fret on the A string)
- B-flat5 (6th fret on low E string, with the 8th fret on the A string)
- C5 (8th fret on low E string, with the 10th fret on the A string)

These three chords form the backbone of the song. The rhythm is syncopated and driving. Strum with a down-up motion, but focus on the downstrokes for a heavier feel. The chord changes happen quickly, so practice transitioning between G5 and B-flat5 smoothly. The C5 chord is held slightly longer before returning to the main riff.

The Chorus and Bridge Elements

The chorus section introduces a slight variation, moving to chords that provide a lift. You will encounter an F5 chord (1st fret on the low E string) and a G5 again. The bridge section, which includes the lyric "We all came out to Montreux," features a descending bass line. Pay attention to the rhythm guitar part, which doubles the bass note movement. If you are playing solo, focus on locking into the **drum groove**created by Ian Paice. The hi-hat pattern is steady eighth notes, while the snare hits on beats 2 and 4 give the song its forward momentum.

Mastering the Iconic Guitar Solo

Ritchie Blackmore's guitar solo in Smoke On The Water is a masterclass in **blues-based rock improvisation**. It is not as technically intimidating as it sounds, and breaking it down reveals patterns accessible to intermediate players.

The G Minor Pentatonic Scale

The solo is almost entirely derived from the G minor pentatonic scale (G-Bb-C-D-F). The majority of the bends, slides, and hammer-ons occur within this framework. Focus on the box pattern starting at the 3rd fret on the low E string. Practice the scale ascending and descending until your fingers move without thought.

Key Phrases from the Solo

Here are three essential licks you can learn:

1. The opening bend: Bend the 15th fret on the B string up a whole step (two frets) toward the 17th fret note. This crying bend sets the tone for the solo.
2. The descending run: Starting from the 15th fret on the high E string, slide down to the 12th fret, then descend through the pentatonic scale. This lick requires clean picking and relaxed fingers.
3. The vibrato finish: On the 15th fret of the G string, apply a wide, fast vibrato. This signature Blackmore technique involves rocking your wrist back and forth to create pitch oscillation.

Do not try to copy the solo note-for-note initially. Instead, learn the phrasing and the feel. Blackmore played slightly differently every night, so capturing the spirit is more important than exact replication. Use a **wah-wah pedal** if you have one, as it was used on the original recording to add vocal-like dynamics.

Rhythm and Timing: The Invisible Teacher

One of the overlooked aspects of learning **How To Play Smoke On The Water** is internalizing the rhythm. The song is in 4/4 time, but the syncopation can trip up new players.

Counting the Main Riff

The main riff lands on the downbeats of the first three quarter notes, then rests on the fourth beat. Count aloud: "1 (G), 2 (Bb), 3 (C), 4 (rest)." The next repeat starts on the "and" of beat 4, creating a push that drives the song forward. This offbeat entrance is a hallmark of rock music. Use a metronome relentlessly. Start at 60 BPM, playing the riff in time. Only increase speed when you can play ten consecutive repetitions without error.

Syncopation in the Verses

During the verse, the guitar chords follow the vocal melody, which often starts on the "and" of a beat. Strumming patterns should be tight and consistent. Focus on playing with the kick drum pattern. The kick drum often lands on beats 1 and 3, while the snare hits beats 2 and 4. Locking in with the drums will transform your playing from mechanical to musical.

Tips for Practicing Efficiently

To learn this song well, you need a structured approach. Do not try to master the entire track in one sitting. Instead, break it into manageable sections.

Section-by-Section Practice Plan

- Day 1-2: Learn the four notes of the main riff. Play them slowly, focusing on finger placement and palm muting. Aim for 50 perfect repetitions.
- Day 3-4: Add the chord progression of the verse. Practice switching between G5, Bb5, and C5 while keeping a steady strumming hand.
- Day 5-6: Combine the main riff with the verse chords. Play along with a recording or a YouTube backing track. Focus on the transitions.
- Day 7+: Begin exploring the solo. Learn one phrase at a time. Use the G minor pentatonic scale as your foundation.

Using Backing Tracks

Playing along with a backing track is invaluable. It forces you to stay in time and teaches you how to listen to other instruments. You can find high-quality backing tracks on YouTube or create your own using a loop pedal. Record yourself playing and listen critically. Are you rushing the pauses? Are your bends in tune? Honest self-assessment accelerates progress.

Common Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them

Even experienced players can fall into traps when learning this song. Awareness of these issues will save you frustration.

Pitfall 1: Ignoring Dynamics

The song is not played at one volume throughout. The verses are more subdued, while the chorus and riff are aggressive. Practice playing with **dynamic variation**. Use a lighter touch on the strings for quieter sections and dig in harder for the loud parts. This adds musicality that separates good players from great ones.

Pitfall 2: Neglecting Left-Hand Strength

The stretch between the 6th and 8th frets on the low E string requires finger independence. If your pinky is weak, do finger exercises daily. A simple exercise: place your index finger on the 5th fret, middle on the 6th, ring on the 7th, and pinky on the 8th. Play each string one at a time, keeping all fingers down. Repeat until the stretch feels comfortable.

Pitfall 3: Overplaying the Riff

Resist the urge to add extra notes or embellishments too early. The power of the riff lies in its simplicity. Play it exactly as written before experimenting with your own variations. Once you have mastered the core,

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