

FOR MEN ONLY: No Hairy Arms (or ankles)

(Well, ladies may read the last paragraph)

By Douglas Niedt

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Okay gentlemen--let's talk. If you're playing the guitar in public, people are focused on YOU, especially your hands and therefore your arms. Let's be blunt--no one wants to see your hairy, veined arms. They're a distraction, okay? Wear long-sleeved shirts or sweaters. The same goes for your ankles.

A famous guitarist once played here in Kansas City and wore crew length socks. Well, as the concert progressed, the already too short socks worked their way down his ankles. Plus, the way we guitarists sit with a footstool tends to raise our pants legs up a bit anyway, so there he was, playing a beautiful concert, but the music took second stage because the audience was distracted and amused by this distinguished gentleman in a stylish tuxedo with bare hairy ankles! WEAR LONG SOCKS!

Now you may say, "Fine Doug, that's great advice. But I thought this was a technique tip, not a fashion tip of the month."

Well yes, this IS a technique tip which brings me to my next point. Even if you are young enough or "buff" enough to carry off wearing a tank type muscle shirt and can muster up a Sylvester Stallone "attitude", you're going to PLAY a lot better wearing long sleeves. Without sleeves, your right arm tends to stick to the guitar, restricting its movement. YOUR ARM NEEDS TO MOVE.

Here are some situations where smooth mobility of the arm is important:

1. One of the most obvious examples is changing tone color, say from plucking close to the bridge (ponticello) to sliding the arm along the guitar to play over the soundhole or even the fretboard (sul tasto).
2. Another obvious example is the necessity to slide the arm from normal playing position to a position nearer to the waist of the guitar to execute right-hand harmonics (usually artificial harmonics).
3. Changes of arm position to execute percussion effects.
4. Small changes of position to execute a scale where "i" and "m" playing rest stroke must travel from the 6th string to the first string or vice versa.

In all of these examples, you never want to lift the arm off the instrument to change position or execute these techniques. That produces tremendous instability in the right arm and therefore the hand and fingers. Keeping the arm on the instrument at all times gives the arm, wrist, and hand a reference point that tells the fingers where the strings are and a feel for the distances to be traversed. Having a long shirt sleeve enables the arm to easily and effortlessly glide on the instrument to change position to execute these techniques with authority, reliability, stability, and confidence.

Which brings me to my final point which applies to men and women. As summer and warm weather approach, when we're practicing at home or taking a guitar lesson, we naturally wear light, short-sleeved clothing. Even when we're not performing in public, it's important to preserve the mobility of the right arm on the guitar.

Some people put a cloth on the guitar where their arm rests. The problem with that is that the cloth moves or falls off. You have to reposition it a lot. **The best thing is to take an old sock, cut off the toe end, and slip it on your arm when you practice. The elastic in the sock will hold it on your arm.** Try a few different socks to see what material feels most comfortable and cool. Also experiment with different lengths. Not only will you play more effortlessly and comfortably, but *the sock will also protect the finish of your guitar somewhat from the perspiration from your arm!*

Next month: Recommended hair styles for guitarists. Just kidding...