

# Electric Guitar Parade

If you're looking for an energizing way to ring in the Winter Solstice, it's hard to do better than a parade for electric guitars and percussion. Seeing and hearing a pack of free-range electric guitarists coming down the street is an unforgettable experience.

Inspired by the example of *Tilted Axes* – first created for Make Music Winter in 2011 by composer/performer Patrick Grant – we invite you to create your own electric guitar parade for Make Music Winter, with its own title and repertoire. This handbook will explain the basics and help you get started.

“I’ve lived in the neighborhood for 22 years and I’ve never seen anything like this,” a passerby said as Patrick Grant and his small platoon of electric guitarists and percussionists filed into St. Mark’s Church on East 10th Street. The musicians – roughly 20, with guitars plugged into miniature, battery-powered Danelectro amplifiers – had just finished a circuitous 85-minute journey...

The procession proved a fascinating barometer of New Yorkers’ tolerance for mild artistic eccentricity. Most people whose paths the ensemble crossed either smiled and stopped to watch, or scarcely glanced at the players, as if a parade of amplified guitarists was something you were likely to see at any time here... No one seemed impatient or put out. And many a cell-phone was drawn to document the performance.

– “Marching to Their Own Drummers,” by Allan Kozinn, *New York Times*, December 22, 2011





## WHAT YOU'LL NEED

**1. A group of electric guitarists.** Fifteen to eighteen players will give the event an impressive look and sound, while still being compact enough for everyone to stay together.

**2. Three percussionists:** one playing floor tom (hung around the neck), one playing snare drum, and one with shakers. These players provide the essential elements of a rock and roll drum kit, and keep everyone together without the need for a conductor. The snare drummer should walk in the middle of the group.

**3. A portable, battery-powered amplifier for each guitarist** to plug into and carry on their left hip as they walk, **and a fresh set of batteries for each one.** There are several options depending on your budget. The Danelectro Honeytone N-10 Guitar Mini Amp is inexpensive (about \$20) and weighs less than a pound, but it isn't very loud and battery life is short. The Marshall MS2 Micro Guitar Amplifier is more expensive (about \$45) but is more powerful and just as lightweight. Finally, the Vox MINI 3G2 Amp (about \$135) will give a far louder and richer sound, with batteries lasting over 5 hours at high volume. It weighs 7 pounds, but has knobs on the side that allow it to be comfortably carried with a second guitar strap.

**4. Signs on posterboard or foamcore to cue the group, and a conductor to hold them up.**

The signs keep the guitarists on track, while serving as a “framing device” for the audience to know what’s happening, too.

**5. (Optional) A unifying visual element for the players.** On December 21, players will likely be dressed in their bulky winter clothing, and it’s hard to feel like a rock star while wearing a parka. Matching hats or scarves can tie everyone together as a unified band.



**6. (Optional) A banner on stanchions at the front of the parade, held by two standard-bearers, and explanatory fliers to distribute to audience members along the way.** These are great ways to explain to puzzled onlookers what is happening, and give thanks to sponsors or supporters.



## HOW TO ORGANIZE

### Permits

Your event should not require a parade permit – a group of guitarists walking together on the sidewalk will not impede traffic or require streets to shut down. Since the instruments are amplified, however, some cities may ask you to apply for a sound device permit. There is a lot of local variation and each city has its own regulations. If you think a permit may be required, make a good faith effort to secure one.

Whatever the permit situation, be respectful of your neighbors. If you conduct the event at a reasonable time, and keep the players moving so they aren't parked in front of someone's bedroom window for 20 minutes, you shouldn't get any complaints.

### Repertoire

The guitar plays a role in a vast range of musical genres. Your guitarists could play jazz standards, or hard rock power chords, or Bollywood songs. Whatever repertoire you choose – or create – here are some thoughts to keep in mind.

- You don't need more than five pieces to play. Because the event is moving down the street, the public is always changing, and audiences will be gone by the time you circle back to the top of the set list. Your guitarists will also appreciate the chance to play the music again, and sound better each time.
- Some pieces could be aleatoric (involving random choices made by the players), others through-composed. Don't shy away from pieces with a repeating form. Since the audience is always changing, and only listening for a few minutes, this will not seem overly repetitious, and it makes things easier on the players.
- The visual image of an electric guitar parade will suggest hard rock to most people. Consider subverting those expectations with gentler or more intricate music.
- You can divide your players into three parts – high, medium, and low, or easy, intermediate, and difficult – and ask them to walk so that they evenly distribute the parts, rather than bunching together with the highs all in one place and the lows in another.
- You may decide to perform more challenging pieces while stationary. This allows you to stand in front of a wall for sound reinforcement, and to put any soloists in the front.
- Choose repertoire that will sound good with whatever rehearsal time you have available.



## Recruiting Players and Rehearsing

To find your 15-18 guitarists, start with musicians you know and trust, who you can count on to practice the music and to brave the elements on December 21st. It's especially interesting to pull together people who don't normally play together – a rock guitarist and a classical guitarist, for instance – and find common musical ground between the players.

If you're worried about people backing out, consider asking guitarists to reimburse you for their own mini amps (and then let guitarists keep them after the event). Someone who pays \$20 to \$135 for their amp is giving a strong demonstration of their commitment.

Once you have your group together, you will need to rehearse the parade in advance. Most guitarists are not accustomed to playing with so many others, while walking, so remind everyone:

- The guitarists need to listen to each other and be part of the ensemble. There may be time for solos, but in general, “the rest of us are not your backup band.”
- With so many players, you do not need to use any effects on your amp, such as distortion or chorusing. The fact of having 15 to 18 guitars will create its own distortion, and its own chorus.
- As you walk, don't hunch over the guitar. Keep your neck relaxed, letting your head rotate forward and up. (Those familiar with the Alexander Technique may find it useful here.) This will keep you feeling energetic throughout the parade.







### Signage

Signs allow the conductor to flexibly direct the event as it goes. For instance, if you think the guitarists need a break, hold up the “Drum Solo” sign, and let the drummers play for a while. If your piece has a repeating section, before it goes to something more complicated, you can let the players repeat as long as it takes for everyone to wait for a traffic light and cross a busy street, then hold up a sign to cue the “B Section” when everyone is across.

Create your own clearly-written signs, explain them to everyone, and practice with them during the rehearsal.



### Choosing a Route

Find an indoor starting point where everyone can gather, store their guitar cases, and tune up. Then map out a route that will take a satisfying but not exhausting length of time to complete – perhaps 50 to 75 minutes. A good route will pass through populated areas, with a minimum of multi-lane streets to cross. At the end, wind up back where you started and put your guitars back in their cases, and then retire to a host venue (such as a restaurant or bar) for an afterparty.

### General Marketing

Because an electric guitar parade requires special equipment and rehearsal, it is less open to spontaneous participation than other Make Music Winter events. That said, you can still invite members of the public to accompany the guitarists with light hand percussion (such as egg shakers).

In addition to your local marketing, please send your event details to [aaron@makemusicday.org](mailto:aaron@makemusicday.org) as soon as possible for inclusion on the national Make Music Winter website and in press outreach.



## WHAT TO DO ON DECEMBER 21

- 1. Gather at the starting location 45 minutes in advance.** Let all of the guitarists unpack and tune up, put fresh batteries in their amps, and plug everything in. If you have a unifying visual element, such as scarves or glowsticks, pass them out and let people put them on.
- 2. Introduce your volunteers, and the conductor who will be holding up the signs,** so that everyone knows where to look for their cues.
- 3. Talk through the route you will be taking,** and whether there are any pieces you will be playing at specific locations. When everything is ready to go, start playing the first piece, and walk out the door.
- 4. Along the route, the conductor should walk towards the front, with signs held up meaningfully above the head so everyone can see them.** If you have lots of volunteers, assign two towards the front, clearing the way for the procession while passing out fliers, and put one in charge of taking photos.
- 5. When the event is over, thank everyone for coming and share the photos with everyone afterwards.**

*If you have further questions about Tilted Axes, feel free to contact Anthony Fremont at [tiltedaxes@peppergreenmedia.com](mailto:tiltedaxes@peppergreenmedia.com).*

