Create a Candy Apple Red Finish with ColorTone Aerosol Lacquer

Keeping it Simple: The ColorTone® Finishing Sets let you finish an entire instrument without an elaborate spraying setup or equipment.

Products included in this set:
1 - White Vinyl Sealer
1 - Metallic Laquer: Silver Sparkle or Firemist Gold
1 - Candy Apple Red Tinted Lacquer
3 - Clear Gloss Lacquer

Spraying Tips

Always wear an NIOSH approved respirator, even when spraying outdoors!

Nitrocellulose finishes should include a minimum of 6–12 total coats, combining sealer, metallic, color, and clear layers. The exact number will vary based on individual coat thickness, the amount of level sanding, and desired final finish thickness and appearance.

If you're a beginner, more is better—it's recommended to apply at least 10–12 coats, with the majority being sealer and clear. This provides enough material for leveling and helps prevent sanding or buffing through the finish. Just don't apply too much too fast, stick to the schedule outlined ahead.

Pay special attention to the base coats of sealer: a flat and smooth foundation will make for an easier process and more professional-looking final product. For a vintage or distressed look, fewer coats may be sufficient. For highly porous woods or those with unfilled grain, you may need additional coats—and possibly an extra can of sealer—to achieve a proper foundation.

Patience and practice are essential for achieving a professional-looking lacquer finish. Don't rush the process. If you're new to this, we recommend keeping extra cans on hand to practice on scrap pieces to get comfortable with your technique. Mistakes are a natural part of learning, and it's far better to make them on scrap than on your final piece.

Follow the instructions carefully, take your time, and practice first, and you'll achieve a finish you can be truly proud of.

Spraying Conditions Matter

For best results, always spray in a low-humidity environment. The ideal conditions are around 70°F with approximately 50% or less humidity. Acceptable ranges are 60°–80°F with humidity under 65%.

Warm, humid conditions can cause blushing—a milky white haze that forms when moisture becomes trapped in the lacquer.

Tips to prevent blushing

- If humidity is above 50%, apply lighter coats. Heavy coats are more likely to trap moisture and blush.
- If a coat begins to turn white, stop spraying immediately and allow it to dry.
- Blushing often disappears on its own within 24 hours as the finish dries.
- If it persists, apply light coats of Blush Eraser (#1313) until is dissipates.

Temperature and Can Preparation

- Warm cans spray better than cold ones! The ideal lacquer temperature is 70°–75°F.
- Below 60°F: Lacquer becomes thick and difficult to spray evenly.
- Above 80°F: Lacquer may dry too quickly, resulting in poor flow, rough texture, and increased risk of blushing.
- Use a laser thermometer to confirm that your lacquer cans are within the optimal temperature range.
- In cooler environments, warming your cans helps maintain proper flow and finish quality.
- To warm cans, soak in hot tap water, ensuring the water does not exceed 100°F. (Water can exceed ideal temps since cans cool fast when removed, but don't overdo it, monitor the temperature carefully.)

Nozzle Care and Spray Quality

Keeping the spray nozzle clean helps avoid clogging and paint spitting. As a can empties it loses pressure and becomes more prone to spitting and clogging—especially at the start or end of a spray pass.

Start and stop each coat off the workpiece, and reserve fresh cans for color coats and final coats of each step, especially your final clear coats.

After each coat, turn the can upside down and spray for 2–3 seconds to clear residual paint from the nozzle and reduce buildup.

If the nozzle spits or sprays poorly

1. Remove the nozzle from the can.
2. Soak it in lacquer thinner for 30 minutes to dissolve dried material.
3. Reattach the nozzle, turn the can upside down, and spray for several seconds to fully clear it.

If the can is old or less than 30% full, consider starting with a fresh one. Older cans are better for early build stages when heavy sanding is expected or practice pieces.

Pay attention to the position of your finger on the nozzle. If your finger creeps too far forward on the nozzle, small amounts of overspray can build on the tip, this can interfere with the spray pattern and cause spitting.

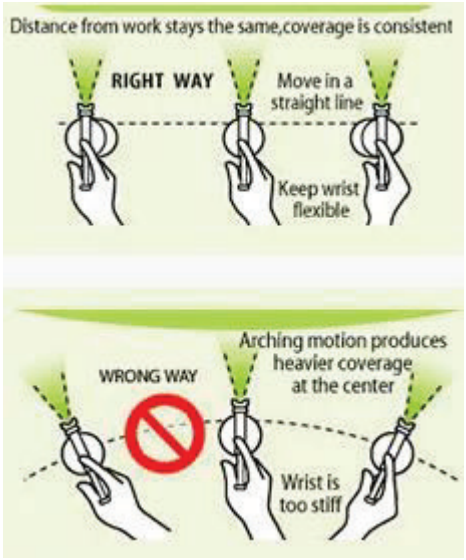
Spraying Technique: Thickness, Timing, and Distance

Achieving a professional-looking finish depends not only on the materials and climate but also on how heavily you spray each coat and how often you spray. Even how you guide the can plays a role; proper technique matters.

Always shake cans thoroughly before spraying and continue shaking throughout the process to maintain consistent mixing.

Basic guidelines

- Keep the can 6–12 inches from the surface.
- When spraying outdoors, move closer if it's windy, farther out if it's not. Too much wind will cause lacquer to miss the work piece, it's best to wait for calm days.
- Apply no more than 2–4 coats daily.
- Wait a minimum of 1–2 hours between coats. (There is no maximum time—nitrocellulose always bonds [burns in] with previous coats.)
- As you spray, move the can in a straight line perpendicular to the workpiece, not "swinging" at an arc. This keeps your coat uniform and is especially helpful with color coats to maintain a consistent shade.



Spray volume matters

The distance from the surface directly affects the volume of applied lacquer and how "wet" each coat is when it makes contact.

Heavy coats:

- Apply more material, build thickness faster and aid in the leveling process.
- Can flow out smoother.
- Require more drying time and fewer overall coats.
- Reduce the number of coats you can apply per day.
- Carry higher risk of runs and sags if applied too heavily.

Lighter coats:

- Are less likely to run or sag but build thickness slower.
- Dry more quickly.
- Increase the number of coats you can apply per day.
- May not flow out as smoothly leaving a sandy texture that requires more leveling.

Lacquer sprayed too heavily without enough time between coats risks a soft finish, cracks, checks, bubbles, or adhesion issues; but too light and it dries too fast and doesn't flow out well, requiring more level sanding and increasing the risk of going through coats.

Finding the right balance takes practice. Aim for coats that flow smoothly and build consistently—without sagging or running.

Fixing runs or sags

If you notice a run, sag, or similar flaw:

1. Stop spraying immediately!
2. Do not attempt to fix it while wet.
3. Allow the area to dry for at least 24 hours.
4. Level sand with 400-600 grit sandpaper using a flat sanding block.

Surface Preparation Before Finishing

Proper surface prep is essential for a high-quality finish.

- Steam out dents using a wet rag and a soldering iron or household clothes iron.
- Sand the entire surface up to at least 320 grit to remove all scratches and create a smooth base.
- Use compressed air, a tack cloth, or a vacuum to eliminate dust and debris.
- Wipe the bare wood with a clean, lint-free rag and either naphtha, alcohol, or mineral spirits to remove oils or residue that could interfere with adhesion.
- After level sanding between coats, repeat this cleaning step using naphtha only.

Filling the Grain

To achieve a flat, smooth, and professional-looking finish, it's important to fill the pores of certain woods before applying lacquer.

- Open-grain woods—such as mahogany, ash, walnut, rosewood—have large pores that should be filled to create a level surface.
- Closed-grain woods—like maple and basswood—do not require grain filler.
- Optional woods—including alder, poplar, and limba—have fine pores. Filler may be helpful depending on the specific piece and the desired finish quality.
- In many cases, the pores in these woods will fill in with your early base coats just like closed-grain wood, but filler can improve surface smoothness and reduce the number of lacquer coats required.

Recommended fillers:

- Epoxy filler (#103686) is highly recommended for best results. It provides an excellent foundation for a level base coat prior to lacquer and shrinks less than other fillers.
- Water-based fillers (#0269) are also effective but allow for ample drying time (at least 24 hours). Multiple applications are typically necessary, as they tend to shrink and settle into the grain as they dry.

Finishing Schedule

Base Coats

After completing surface preparation and grain filling, apply up to 2–4 coats of white vinyl sealer per day, allowing at least 1–2 hours between each coat.

- After 2–4 coats allow 24 hours to dry and lightly sand with 400-600 grit sandpaper.
- Repeat this process if needed until you can level sand the entire sealer coat smoothly leaving an evenly white surface.
- Good foundation coats make good clear coats, so don't neglect this stage, if you can see a defect now, chances are you'll see it in the final result.
- Be especially careful when sanding around edges, corners, screw holes, and cavities—these areas are thinner and sand through easily.

- Allow your last leveled coat to dry for at least a full 24 hours before proceeding to the next step.

Metallic Coats

If your sealer layer is properly prepped and leveled, you'll typically need only one or two coats of metallic lacquer for full coverage.

- Apply each coat wet enough to flow smoothly, but not so heavy that it runs.
- Your goal is a clean, even surface that does not require sanding before the color coat.
- If the surface feels rough, sandy, or loose, you may lightly level it with 600-grit sandpaper and reapply one final unsanded coat to ensure uniformity.

Practice on scrap before applying to your actual instrument. This is the safest place to dial in your spray technique and troubleshoot any issues.

Color Coats

Apply your Candy Apple Red tinted lacquer just as you did the metallic coats—wet enough to flow smoothly, but not so heavy that it runs. Apply only as much as needed to achieve full coverage at your desired shade.

Keep in mind that each additional coat will darken the shade and mute visibility of the metallic sparkle underneath.

The ideal number of coats depends on your preference, so use your test piece as a reference. A typical range is 1 to 4 coats, spaced 1–2 hours apart.

Avoid sanding between color coats, as this can create light spots that show through the finish.

If you need to correct an imperfection

1. Let the lacquer dry for 24 hours.
2. Carefully level sand the area using 600-grit sandpaper, blending outward to keep the shade of color as uniform as possible across the entire workpiece.
3. Apply one final, untouched color coat to blend the surface evenly.
4. Allow it to dry for another 24 hours before moving on to the clear coats.

Clear Coats

Clear coats are what give your finish its depth, durability, and high-gloss appearance. This step is essential for achieving a professional, showroom-quality result.

Apply 2 to 4 coats per day, with at least 1 to 2 hours between coats.

After building up 3 to 4 smooth coats, allow the finish to dry for 24 hours, then begin light leveling with 400–600 grit sandpaper.

For an aged patina, add a coat or two of Vintage Amber (#103560) after your first round of leveling your clear coat. It will simulate the natural color the lacquer takes on after years of exposure to light. Do not sand this layer (treat it as an extra color coat,) once you reach your desired shade, go back to building your thickness with regular clear over that, or switch to Relic Clear which will mimic the cracking and checking effect of vintage lacquer.

Sanding Tips

We recommend Eagle Abrasives Assilex sheets (#103615) for leveling and Eagle Abrasives Bufflex sheets (#103617) for polishing prior to buffing.

Both are dry-use abrasives that cut quickly, leave a smooth, scratch-free surface, and give consistent results—even for beginners. Because they're used dry, they eliminate many of the problems that come with wet sanding.

Wet Sanding is the traditional method for leveling lacquer using soapy water or naphtha. Our High-Quality Finishing Papers (#5977) and Micro Mesh products (#3710) work great for this, but wet sanding carries some risk.

- Avoid using too much water, and don't let moisture penetrate screw holes or end grain along cavities. Water can cause swelling and cracking that can undo all your hard work.
- You can reduce this risk by using naphtha instead of water, but naphtha requires gloves, proper ventilation, and a respirator.
- For wet sanding with water, fill a bucket or large tub with warm water and a few drops of dish soap. Use it to keep the paper clean and lubricated—don't flood the surface.
- Keep plenty of clean rags handy and wipe the finish dry as you go.
- Always wait at least 24 hours after spraying your final coat before any wet sanding.

Edges and corners are thinner and especially vulnerable when sanding. Even light pressure can cut through the clear coat and expose the color, leaving a light spot that's difficult to hide. Take extra care in these areas to preserve your clear coats.

Be Conservative When Leveling

Don't expect a perfectly flat surface right away. You'll build up thickness with additional coats, and full leveling will come later. Focus on smoothing the surface without over-sanding.

Fresh lacquer often has a shiny "orange peel" texture. As you sand, the surface will dull, but the low spots—the craters of the orange peel—will stay shiny. When all the shiny areas are gone without breaking through the color, your surface is level.

Getting there takes multiple clear coats to build enough thickness for safe leveling.

Watch for Warning Signs

- Pay close attention to your sanding dust (or rinse water if wet sanding).
- If it changes from white to pink or red, stop immediately—you're sanding into the color coat.
- If a light spot appears, you may need to sand the entire surface back, reapply color, and rebuild your clear coats to restore uniformity.
- This is where a practice piece is invaluable. It allows you to make mistakes, experiment with technique, and build confidence before working on your final piece.

Be proactive to avoid issues

Wiping down routinely with Naphtha will not only clean oils, residue, moisture, and grit from the surface that can cause problems, but it will also mimic your clear coat shine and reveal hidden imperfections that still require attention.

- Wet the surface with a rag and Naphtha, then wipe off the wet Naphtha with a clean dry rag before it evaporates.
- Apply Naphtha directly to the rag not the guitar surface.
- Only wet as large a surface as you can wipe clean before it dries. Evaporated Naphtha can allow contaminants and residue to settle and stick to the surface.
- Always wear rubber gloves, this not only protects you from chemicals, but it also prevents your natural oils from contaminating the surface.

Spray Technique Between Sanded Coats

- Apply wet, even coats that flow smoothly without running or sagging.
- Avoid thin or overly dry coats—they don't bond well with the previous layer and often leave a rough, sandy texture.
- This wastes material, as you'll likely sand away the coat you just applied attempting to get a level surface.

Once you've built a smooth, level clear surface across the entire instrument, it's time to move on to drying.

Drying the Finish

Hang the guitar in a warm, dry, stable environment with good airflow. Outside in sunlight on mild days can help accelerate the process, but don't rush it.

- While lacquer may feel dry to the touch in a matter of hours, it can take up to 6 weeks for all solvents to fully evaporate.
- A fully "cured" finish will be harder, more durable, and glossier.
- In ideal conditions, allow at least 10 days to 2 weeks of drying before beginning any final sanding and buffing.

Final Leveling Before Buffing

After the full dry time, resume leveling—this time with 600–1000 grit sandpaper.

Gradually progress higher through finer grits until the entire surface is completely smooth and scratch-free.

The final grit you use depends on:
- Your desired gloss level.
- The buffing tools you'll be using.
- Your level of experience.

Experienced pros with buffing equipment: 600–800 grit minimum.

Beginners or hand-buffing: Sand to at least 1500 grit, or higher for the best results.

The better your finish looks before buffing, the better it will look after buffing. Don't rush this stage—it's the foundation of your final shine. And be careful, you can still burn through your clear coat with fine grits and buffing!

Buffing

Buffing your clear coats requires the right balance of friction and heat to achieve a deep, mirror-like shine. While a buffing machine can make the process easier, you can still get excellent results by hand with care, patience, and some elbow grease.

What you'll need
- A generous supply of clean, soft 100% cotton cloth or microfiber rags.
- Buffing compound: ColorTone Polishing Compounds (#1848) are ideal for achieving a high-gloss finish, whether you're working by hand or using rotary pads.
- A fresh rag or pad for each grit of buffing compound and extras to clean up spent compound.

Optional tools:
- Electric hand buffer or pedestal buffer
- Rotary polishing pads (#3409) for use with a drill

Always wear eye protection when machine buffing to avoid injury from debris or flying compound.

How to buff
1. Start with a medium or coarse compound, applied directly to your cloth or buffing pad, not the finish.
2. Buff firmly in circular motions to build friction—you should feel some warmth building as you work. This heat helps bring out the shine.

3. Be cautious around edges and corners. Just like in sanding, these areas are thin and can burn through easily with friction.
4. Repeat the process with progressively finer compounds, using clean rags or pads for each grit.
5. Between stages, clean the finish thoroughly with clean rags and naphtha to remove any compound residue before moving on to the next grit.
6. A final wipe down with Naphtha or your favorite guitar polish to clean the surface and remove all residue will reveal your final shine.