

# ColorTone Wipe-On Poly Finishing Set

Tips and instructions for achieving a great looking finish with ease

**Keeping it simple:** The ColorTone® Finishing Sets let you finish an entire instrument without an elaborate setup or spray equipment. This set includes:

- ColorTone Wipe-On Poly Finish
- ColorTone Powdered Grain Filler, Mahogany
- 3M Gold Sandpaper, 2 of each grit: 150, 220, 320, 400
- Foam Sanding Blocks



## Additional supplies needed to finish your instrument

StewMac item numbers are included where applicable:

- Naphtha (#0766) or water for cleaning wood
- Clean gloves when handling clean bare wood
- Clean cloths, several for dusting and cleanup
- Containers for mixing, jars with lids are recommended
- For grain filler: stiff bristle brush and spreader (#4939 or an old credit card)
- For finish: applicator pads made out of cotton and an old t-shirt (see "Making applicator pads" section), or 1"-wide disposable foam brushes
- Optional: ColorTone Liquid Stain (#5038 Red Cherry for example)
- Optional: Buffing supplies (#2304 ColorTone Hand Polishing Set)

## Prep wood for finishing

Preparing the neck and body for finish is just as important as applying finish. The key to a great looking finish is patience and lots of it. Before starting the sanding and finishing process, inspect the body and neck for any dents, chips, or other imperfections and repair them.

For information on how to steam out dents, see Trade Secrets video #317 "Fixing a guitar dent by steaming it out".

stewmac.com search:

### Sand the body and neck

Using 150-grit sandpaper and sanding block, sand the entire body and neck working only in the direction of the grain. When sanding the neck take care not to sand on the fretboard face or fret tops. You can use Double-stick Tape (#1689) to attach the sandpaper for better control when sanding. The dense block is for sanding flat surfaces of the body and neck, the flexible block is for areas with curves like the headstock and cutaways.

After a complete sanding, dampen a cloth with water and wipe the body to raise the grain and reveal fibers that need

more sanding. Let the dampness dry completely, then sand the raised grain with 220-grit sandpaper and block. Before moving on to a higher grit, make sure you completely sand away the scratches left by the previous grit. Removing these scratches is absolutely paramount to getting a good finish, and while tedious—it's an absolute must. After sanding, raise the grain again and sand a third time, using 320-grit sandpaper and block, and once more with 400-grit sandpaper.

While sanding with 400-grit, slightly soften any sharp edges on the fretboard, body, and peghead. Softening hard edges promotes even finish coverage. Later, when you're finished sanding, these edges are less likely to sand through to bare finish.

### Cleaning wood after sanding

When you've finished sanding, remove the dust and wipe the body and neck to remove any oils or grease. You can use water if working in a non ventilated area but, we recommend using a naphtha-dampened lint-free rag, like a clean t-shirt or cotton rag, for this step. Naphtha will dry faster and clean more thoroughly than water. From this point on, use clean hands or wear gloves when handling so you won't contaminate the wood.

## Fill the grain

Open-grained woods such as rosewood, mahogany, koa, ash and walnut have porous surfaces. Filling and leveling the pores leaves the surface smooth for applying uniform finish coats. The mahogany filler provided in the kit will highlight the grain of lighter woods like ash, and will lessen the appearance of grainlines in darker woods like rosewood. While many manufacturers use grain filler on their builds some are foregoing this step in favor of a thinner finish. The choice is yours to use the grain filler or not. If you do not fill the grain, your finish will sink into the grain and can be uneven.

Prepare ColorTone Powdered Grain Filler: mix 1:2 parts water to powder, then thin or thicken based on your needs. Mix thoroughly. If applying with a brush, mix to ketchup consistency, no thicker than sour cream. If applying with a Grain Filler Leveler (#4939) or card, mix to viscosity between sour cream and peanut butter. A card can be any flexible piece of plastic with a straight edge, like an old credit card.

Apply the filler liberally in the direction of the grain, then against it. Allow to set up for 5–10 minutes depending on the thickness of your application. Using your card or leveler, squeegee off excess filler. Wipe at a 45-degree angle to the grain. When dry, wipe off the remaining residue with a clean dry cloth.

Let dry 1 hour before sanding, color will change to chalky. Sand surface with 320-grit sandpaper and block. Clean up with warm water. 2–3 applications of filler are recommended to get a nice flat surface to build finish coats over.

Allow to dry for 2–4 hours before applying the finish.



## Making applicator pads

You can use either a foam brush or an application pad to apply the finish. You should use a new brush or pad with each coat of finish—once the poly begins to stick or harden on it they're no longer usable (the brushes can dry out a little quicker than the pads). Depending on your number of coats and size of instrument, you may need up to 10 fresh applicators.

We find the pad is much easier to control and to get a level, even finish. Practice on scrap to get the hang of it and you'll be very happy with your results.

**To make an application pad** use a cotton cloth—a piece of clean t-shirt works well. Make a wad of cotton balls about the size of a ping-pong ball to use as the filler and tightly wrap it in the middle of a cover cloth. Tie it up with a rubber band and you're ready to go.



## Applying finish

**Overview:** We recommend applying several thin, even coats of Wipe-On Poly to get a protective finish, which may take several days to allow proper drying time. In the end, you'll have approximately 4–8 coats, and drying 2–3 hours between each coat. Test on scrap and follow all safety precautions on packaging.

Start with about 4 oz. of poly in a jar with a lid so you can keep it air tight in between applications.

**Tint your first coats:** If you want to add color to your instrument, add stain to the first few coats of poly. See sidebar for adding stain.

Lightly dip your brush or pad into the finish—you want just enough finish to easily wipe smoothly over the body. Do not soak or apply too much finish.

**Brush application:** Move in long even strokes the length of the body and sides.

**Pad application:** Move the pad in a circular motion followed by long strokes running the length of the body and sides.

Make sure you don't get too much finish in the body cutaways, which will make these areas thicker than the rest of the finish. Watch for streaks and uneven areas.



After each coat, allow to dry 2–3 hours. It may be necessary to scuff-sand between coats to ensure a level build of coats. To scuff-sand, fold 400-grit sandpaper around a foam block, and make light passes to knock off any high spots. Make sure all dust is removed before applying your next coat.

When finishing the neck, follow the same procedure as the body. Do not apply finish the fretboard face or fret tops. Any residual finish that ends up on the fretboard face will be scraped back once it dries.

**Final coat:** After applying 4–8 coats you should have a nice build of finish, depending on your preferred thickness. Let dry for 24 hours. Consider if another sanding is needed to level the surface. If so, lightly sand the entire surface with

### Adding stain (optional)

If you want to add color to your instrument, add stain to the first few coats of poly. We recommend using ColorTone Stains, they're 100% compatible with ColorTone Wipe-On Poly and come in over 20 colors specially formulated for guitars.

In a glass jar mix 1:16 ratio of stain to poly (example measurements below). Stir to mix, don't shake, to prevent air bubbles.

For the body: add 1/4 oz. of stain into 4 oz. poly  
For the neck: add 1/8 oz. of stain into 2 oz. poly

**Test on scrap!** Allow to dry to ensure the color looks the way you'd like it to. If it's too dark, add a little more poly to weaken the color. If it's too light, add an additional drop or two of stain. Remember, a small amount of stain goes a long way!

Follow basic application instructions (at left), however **DO NOT sand your color coats.** About 2-3 color coats are usually all that is needed for an even color.



400-grit sandpaper and a block (making sure to not sand into the color coats). Remove all dust and apply a final coat of clear finish.