

How to Safely Clean and Protect a Rosewood or Ebony Fretboard

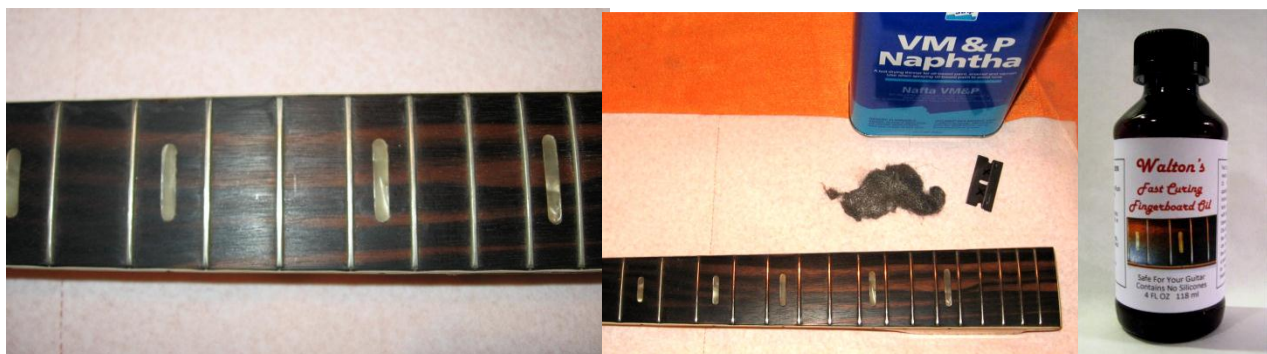
Rosewood and ebony fingerboards are not finished with lacquer like the rest of the wood parts in your guitar. They depend on the natural oils in the wood and your fingers to keep the wood in good shape. This is good up to a point, but over time they dry out and get dirty and need to be cleaned, sealed, and reconditioned. Maple fretboards are lacquered and are cleaned differently.

For a long time I used the classical methods that most good guitar techs use for this. I first cleaned the fretboard with naphtha and if the grime was built up bad enough, used a razor blade followed by 0000 steel wool to prepare the fretboard, then cleaned it again with lemon oil, or mineral oil. Last I sealed it with the traditional finish of boiled linseed oil. The linseed oil takes at least six or seven hours to dry, often overnight. There are plenty of instructions all over the internet for this procedure. This method works well and makes an attractive, very silky smooth feeling surface that is sealed and protected. It can't harm your guitar's fretboard, binding, or finish. But it takes a lot of time.

Then I got the idea to combine some of the steps by making my own fingerboard oil treatment. I use these same time proven ingredients to make *Walton's Fast Curing Fingerboard Oil*. I have added small amounts of a couple of other ingredients to aid in cleaning and speed curing time. These are also safe for your guitar and are some of the active ingredients in other well-known products that have been used by many guitar techs and luthiers for cleaning and protecting fretboards. After some experimenting I came up with the current formula that works faster and cures much faster. Five minutes after using this treatment according to directions, the guitar will be ready to play. That's about the time it takes to get the strings back on it and tune it. It won't be tacky or sticky. Just silky smooth. I won't tell all the ingredients, but the main ones (well over 90% of the total) are pure boiled linseed oil, Johnson's Baby Oil, and Weiman Natural Lemon Oil Furniture Polish (it's the only one with a UV inhibitor). About 60% of the total is boiled linseed oil, and about 33% is mineral oil of various types. No silicones or other damaging ingredients are included. I double boil and filter part of the linseed oil again to speed up the cure time. (Don't try that process yourself, at least not in the house- it's dangerous and stinks to high Heaven) The formula doesn't include naphtha, so you need to do that step separately and provide your own supply.

Here's how I recommend using this product.

Step 1. Clean fingerboard with naphtha. (this is cigarette lighter fluid or VM&P naphtha from most home improvement stores) Don't use any water prior to this step, unless you let it dry out thoroughly before using the naphtha. If necessary use a razor blade as a scraper, and/or 000 or 0000 steel wool to clean off any built up grime and finger oils. Don't use any steel wool coarser than 000. If you use a razor blade or steel wool, clean again afterwards with the naphtha.



This is your Basic Dirty Fingerboard

Cleaning with naphtha and steel wool

Fingerboard Oil

Step 2. Let the fingerboard sit for at least 10 minutes or more for the naphtha to dry out completely.

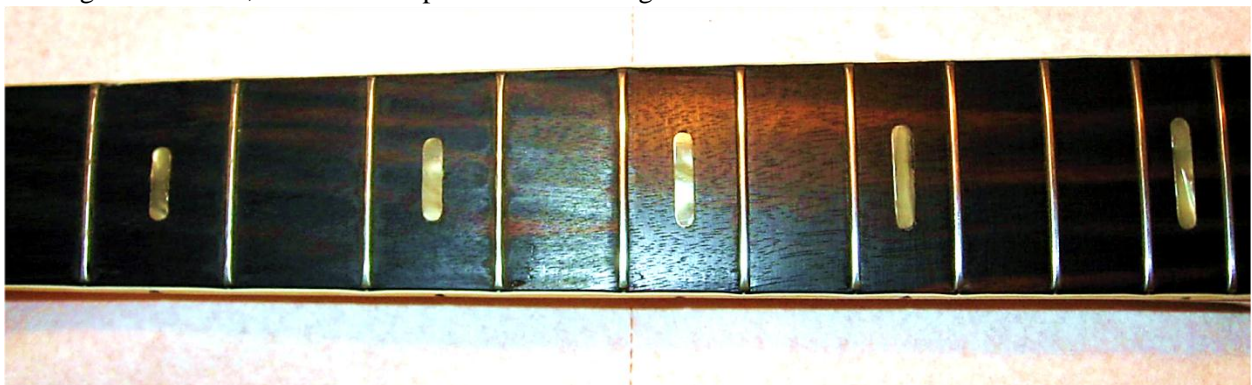
Step 3. Fold a paper towel in half twice (four layers) and put a spot of Fingerboard Oil on it about the size of a quarter – no more. Don't put the oil directly on the fingerboard. I like to use Viva towels for this. Use the paper towel to apply the oil to the fretboard, scrub it in hard, then use your little finger as a squeegee to smooth it out.



At this point, it should look something like this. (I'm only doing the right side here)

Step 4. Wait 10-15 minutes for it to dry and soak in. Important – don't let it dry any longer than this or it may be uneven. During this drying time you can use your little finger squeegee technique again periodically if you wish. At the end of the drying time polish all the excess off with a clean area of the paper towel. For safety's sake, rinse out the paper towel in soap and water before throwing it away. It's just a precaution, but quantities of linseed oil soaked towels have been known to be subject to spontaneous combustion. Then let the fretboard dry again for about 5-10 minutes more. If you wish, polish afterwards with a clean soft cloth like an old T-shirt.

Step 5. If your fingerboard was extra dry you can repeat steps 3-4 up to two more times, waiting 5-10 minutes between coats. Otherwise you are done, just restring and tune the guitar. You may be surprised how much better the fingerboard feels, and it will be protected for a long time.



Left side untreated

Right side cleaned and preserved

This treatment should only be needed about once a year. Overdoing the scraping isn't good, and overdoing the oil can eventually cause the fingerboard to darken, though you would probably need a refret way before that if you play it much. If needed in between treatments, particularly on ebony fingerboards, you can get away with touching up with a little of the oil only, skipping the scraping or steel wool, but use sparingly.