

Guitar

The Basics

Column #14 – Learning Songs

How many songs do you know?

I'm not just talking about how many songs you "kinda sorta got bits and pieces of them" here. I'm talking about whole songs that you actually can play from start to finish.

Let me go one step further. Let's remove all the soloing and wanking tunes and focus on songs you could play with an acoustic guitar at a party to entertain people who ask you to "play a song". How about at an open mic, just you and the guitar?

I imagine the majority of you are now looking at less than ten songs - and some of you can't even play five songs all the way through, which meet that criteria.

I'm not ragging on you here. This is a serious topic.

For guitar players, when starting out, they are song oriented in their desire. "I want to learn to play (fill in the blank, listing the songs that inspired you to want to learn to play in the first place)." The problem comes after they start learning to play. They find the song(s) that inspired them to pick up the guitar to be beyond reach, perhaps a year or more away from actual realization. Apart from some basic, easy tunes in the beginning, they are learning techniques, scales, chords and all manner of "stuff" they need to know. And, they really do need to know all that stuff.

However, without a context to demonstrate the "why", it becomes an endless parade of bits and pieces of knowledge rather than a cohesive and practical methodology, a directed path that encourages retaining the "song oriented" learning process.

And for self taught guitar players, it's even worse. Without directed guidance and a pragmatic introduction of necessary materials - without one-on-one instruction - most people learn to play things, but not much in the way of *whole songs*. In truth, virtually every guitar player who has come to me for lessons, who has been playing for a while (a year or so), none of them, not one, knows more than a few whole songs all the way through. And they don't sing, either.

People who join or form a band will tend to overcome this issue because they have to. To these folks, good for you - but you still need the information in this segment! For the rest of you who do not have regular jam sessions, where whole songs are actually played, this goes double!

So then the question arises: What is the best way to learn a song?

For all my students, from Day One, I ask them to give me five to six songs they would like to learn to play or that they are struggling with (if they already play). I tell them to try to pick easy tunes - even people who come to me who already know how to play get this directive.

I want to build confidence in their ability to play songs. For me, that may require creating a simplified arrangement of a song, telling them this is not "note for note", but rather more accessible for their skill level. The more capable a person is, the quicker I move them to an arrangement closer to the actual recording.

In each case, as students improve, and if they desire, I gravitate them toward the "as on the record" arrangement through stages they can handle, making sure that at each stage they are able to play a faithful arrangement of the song.

I focus on rhythm first. If you can't play the rhythm parts, forget the solo stuff! Remember, I want them to be able to play a whole song, when asked by friends. That is why I focus on a solo arrangement first.

Therefore, you need to tackle learning the rhythm guitar parts first. **Stay song oriented!**

How you do this is pretty simple because there are a number of ways to do this.

First, get a written copy of the song with the lyrics and chords. Make sure the chord chart is in the actual key of the song! Avoid Tablature for now - seriously. Tablature gets in the way of things that are better learned by ear at this stage. And you'll need to **buy a copy of the song** if you don't already own the CD or mp3.

Please: do not pirate music. No matter what you think about how music should be free, it is stealing if you didn't buy it yourself, even if your friend gives you a copy of a tune; it's still illegal to possess if you didn't purchase it. I am a song writer; it is one part of how I make my living, along with teaching and performing. If you steal a recording of a song I wrote, you are taking money out of my pocket, and making it harder for me to earn a living.

Think about it: would you give away your services for free? Would you work for nothing? How are you going to take care of your family, or afford food, gas, rent, all the stuff you need to survive if people expect you to give your skills away for free? Your skill comes through hard work and a lot of time spent learning your craft, and you should be compensated for your knowledge and abilities. Well, so should I, right?

With a copy of the lyrics and chords in hand, along with the audio, you can begin to get a sense of when the chords should be played, the order of the chords, how long the chords are played, and the general rhythmic "feel" of the song. Listen to the audio while following along on the

chord chart (assuming for the sake of argument that it is correct!) and see how it flows. Focus only on the rhythm feel.

Once you think you have a sense of it, begin to play along - but don't jump right into the actual strum of the song, just play to the beat: one down stroke strum per beat, and walk through the song this way. What you are doing is "mapping" out the song in a simplified way that doesn't overwhelm.

By doing this, you are allowing yourself the time to think about the chord changes, when they occur, and "word cues" from the lyrics that signal a chord change. All this will help you once you begin to piece it together, closer to the actual guitar part.

Once you've done this a few times, and have learned any "new" chords and got them down, you can begin to work on the strum pattern, which helps create the "feel" of the rhythm in the song. Make sure you **count it out**, "One, and, Two, and..." so you can determine how the strum pattern syncopates with the beat - where in relation to the beat the strum elements take place. You can use the drums for this, too, particularly the snare and kick. Doing this furthers your understanding of the feel of the strum and rhythm of the song.

It's going to take time. Don't rush. You're developing a **methodology** here, a **repeatable process** that will help you learn any song you want to play - this methodology applies across the board and to any style of music.

Then, once you think you have it, play along with the whole song. Take note of where you're stumbling and having trouble. That's where the deeper work takes place, to help you overcome the problems so the song will flow.

You jettison the easy parts - the parts you play well - during this part of the process. You focus on the strum pattern, chord changes or transitions that trip you up. **Slow down and play through the part with deliberate intent** and resist trying to speed up too fast once you have the mechanics of what you're playing figured out and can play them correct. Use a metronome to help you do this work. You will thank me later.

Once you have a part figured out, play through the song again and see how it works. If it's fine, move on to the next trouble spot and fix that one, too. Repeat the process for each troubled part.

Once you have it all done, play it through to make sure.

Since we're more concerned with an acoustic approach here, you will have to adapt the rhythm somewhat to the acoustic environment. Many songs don't need much of a tweak at all, and may have an acoustic guitar part in there already. That makes it easy. But if it is an all electric tune, don't despair. You simply "acousticize" the tune by modifying the strum pattern a little to make it sound more like an acoustic song. De-electrify the part, basically. Play it like an acoustic guitar song would play the parts.

Some songs do not lend themselves well to this process. Eric Clapton took Layla, a song nobody would have thought could be made into an acoustic song, and rearranged the whole tune - even changing the feel of the song from a rock/blues thing to a more Swing thing, taking that signature lead line figure and slowing it down and turning it into a chord progression. Talk about a classic example of stellar arranging!

So you may have to totally remake a given song in order for it to be performed in an acoustic environment.

Back to the topic at hand: Once you have gotten the first song figured out, and sounding good on the acoustic guitar, play it for someone and get some feedback. Make it someone who likes your playing, but who will be honest enough to let you know that it might need more work.

This hasn't been an exhaustive treatise, but it should get you pointed in the right direction. Just remember that it takes time to get a song sounding good. And you should learn to sing, or find a singer to sing the lyrics if you won't. Learning to sing is invaluable to your education, to really learning about how rhythm works in relation to vocal placement. You'll see why some things work and why some things don't work. You really get a deeper understanding about syncopating rhythmic elements and lyrics when you can sing the tune. And you become self contained and able to entertain and perform without anyone else having to be there (even if you generally work with a singer and/or a band). And that is always a good thing!

And here is the most important part of learning a song... You should come back to it in three months to see what you missed. Trust me, you missed something. Go back and find out what it is. Now that your ear is adjusted and comfortable with the song, you will be listening to it with different ears. You will hear things you missed before. You can now adjust the tune by learning the new stuff and incorporating it into the song.