

The Old-Timer's Guitar Method

When I first took up music, I had preconceived notions. I thought that songs were learned individually. Mastering those songs, note by memorized note, would get me to some sort of musician's nirvana.

What I longed for was the fluid ease of the old-timers who mentored me at fiddler's picnics around Pennsylvania. These were working men and women in their 70s and 80s. They had been playing on front porches and community events their entire lives. Jamming with them was always an experience as the music was constantly changing.

A jam with the old-timers was always a circle. Each musician was provided the opportunity to call out a song. This was nice in that we all felt equal. It was also a challenge because each picker would throw out a different rhythm, key, or time signature. To a beginner like me, this was harrowing. To the old-timers, it was all the same. From *Wildwood Flower* to *Highway to Hell* to *Pennies from Heaven* to *Walkin' Blues*, the old-timers would just ask for the key before diving in. They could play backup or lead through the song as easily as fish swimming in a pond.

They made it look so easy.

One of those old-timers was a Washington Square beatnik. He played with Ramblin' Jack Elliot, Dave Van Ronk, and a young Bob Dylan back in the day. When I was starting out, Paul introduced me to Peggy Seeger. It was a short, but life-altering lesson. Her advice was to keep it simple and sing.

Keep it simple and sing.

So, on the banjo and later the guitar, I played simple rhythms and sang. It was hard at first. I was trying to remember the lyrics, the chord progression, how to make those chords, and keeping my rhythm steady. It seems so simple watching a guitar player, but that perception changes with an instrument in your hands. I was convinced that I had to focus on each element, putting me in a Sisyphean situation. Nothing worked. I practiced until my fingers bled, and still could not put the puzzle together.

Some of the guitar players told me not to separate things. To feel the chord progression rather than remember it. To find melody within the chords. A local guitar ace gave a workshop where he broke some of that down. He said chords were built over scales, and that when I held any chord, the melody was just moving one finger while holding the chord.

Then, I ran into an old-timer who taught me how to do just that: find scales in chords.

Countless hours of trial and error later, it started to come together. I even befriended a moonshiner who traded his wares for guitar lessons. His teacher was the one and only Merle Travis.

Play the guitar long enough, and you realize how small the world truly is.

I was a teenager then. I am in my 50s now. Younger players watch me and say I make it look easy. I guess that's progress.

If you have a guitar handy, pick it up. Tune it to standard EADGBE tuning.

Now, clap your hands and count slowly to four a few times. That will help you with the rhythm shortly.

With your strumming hand (can't exclude the lefties), pluck a bass string with your thumb and count one.

Now, with the same thumb, strum the strings and count two.

One, two, three, four. Bass, strum, bass, strum. Nice and even. Steady tempo.

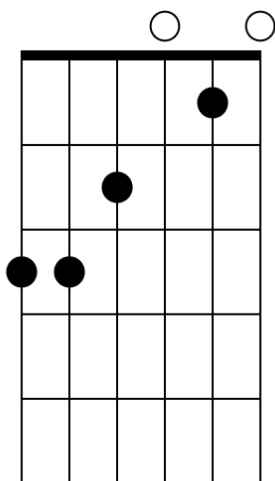
We are now playing a simple rhythm in 4/4 time. That means four beats per measure, with each beat counted as a quarter note.

We can halve any of those quarter notes into eighth notes. After a bass note or chord, pick up with the index finger.

Bass, up-pick, strum down, up-pick. One and two and three and four and.

I know some guitar players use other fingers. Merle used thumb and index, along with countless others. It's simple and it works. Don't complicate things. It's just a guitar. The song is more important than you showing off.

With your fretting hand, make a C chord.



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Fret the second string with your index, the fourth with your middle, and the fifth and sixth with the ring.

Fretting two bass strings at once is easy. Just aim between the strings. You will catch enough to get the job done.

You should hold the guitar and fret the strings in a way that allows your fingers to come straight down on the strings. Like pistons. Don't reach, as it will just strain things.

Now, take a real look at that C chord. It's a full band!

The fifth and sixth string is your bass section. As you experiment, you will discover there are countless bass runs you can apply to our simple picking pattern. From Johnny Cash style boom-shuck to any other rhythm you can imagine.

The third and fourth string is the rhythm section. We brush these strings as we play that bass-strum pattern.

For example, we can rock back and forth between the strings.

The second and first strings handle melody. The beginnings to thousands of songs are right there in that chord shape.

Second string, first fret is do.

Grab the second string at the third fret with your pinky for re.

First string open for mi.

Flatten the index to catch the first string at the first fret for fa.

First string at the third fret with the pinky for so.

Do, re, mi, fa, so, and you can finish the scale by playing along the first string.

The next challenge is not playing a song. Instead, just run the scale out of the C, F, and G chords while maintaining that thumb-brush.

Mixing the thumb bass line and rhythm with the major scale while holding a chord form sounds impressive. All we are really doing is moving a finger here or there.

Pick a simple song. Something you can sing. Folk songs were good enough for Woody Guthrie to start out with, and it's probably the same for you.

Begin by singing the song and playing a simple rhythm. Then, play with the rhythm as you explore the melody on the first two strings.

At first, the chords will feel clunky. Your hands will work against each other. Then, your hands will seem to work against you. Like Doctor Strangelove. The harder you try, the harder the problem seems to fight back. This sense of abnormality is normal. Keep singing. Keep strumming. Listen and feel both your voice and the guitar in your hands.

Eventually, it will start to flow.

The first song I worked out using this simultaneous mix of bass, rhythm, and melody supporting my voice was *Stagolee*. Furry Lewis' arrangement practically fell out of the guitar. I got so excited that I ran out into the rain, waving my metal body guitar over my head in triumph. It's a miracle I wasn't struck by lightning.

From that point on, I saw music differently.

There are basic skills you must practice until naturalized. Then, you must give yourself freedom to fail. Practice is not about

making things perfect. Practice is time to become familiar with the medium, your instrument, and your voice. You can only do that by giving yourself time and space to have some fun. They don't call it working the guitar, do they? No. It's playing the guitar. So, play!

When you do screw up in public, don't stop playing. The old-timers taught me to play through mistakes. On our side of the guitar, that mistake may be a big deal. To the folks listening, it's one note or chord in a stream of music. It goes by so fast; the audience won't notice most of the time. Just go with the flow.

This idea of blending bass, harmony, rhythm, and melody runs through most of the instruments I play. From the rhythm and diatonic fretboard of the mountain dulcimer to the weirdness of frailing banjo, the main goal was always to support the voice. If you got good enough to support the voice and show off a bit, that's swell – but don't be putting the cart before the horse. There will be time to show off once you can play simply and sing.

Keep at it. There is no definite goal. As your skills and understanding of music grow, your priorities will change.

Then, one day, you will find yourself in a jam session. There will be a kid looking at you as if you were Gandalf. Your guitar will be covered in battle scars. Your pants will go up to your armpits. The kid will be asking the same questions you have now. As you share some pointers, it will hit you that, somewhere along the way, you became an old-timer.

That's just how the folk process works.