

# UNDERSTANDING & USING OPEN TUNINGS

## A Beginners Guide and Basic Manual

GENERAL THEORY, BASICS, TECHNIQUES, CHORD CHARTS, SLIDE GUITAR  
AND 4 STRING INSTRUMENTS

This book deals with open tunings in general - primarily open E, A, D & G. This information is also applicable to almost any open tuning. Understanding these 4 tunings should be of help in exploring & using the endless combinations of open string tunings on both 6 & 12 string guitars, slide guitar, dobro, banjo, violin, mandolin, uke, etc..

### **OVERVIEW**

I have been playing in open tunings almost continuously for 35 years - since 1966 when I saw Tom Rush at a little club out side of Fort Bragg, NC. He played a dynamite song that was about a train & he used a Telephone Jack on his little finger that slid up the neck to make these groovy sounds. On his break I was able to talk with him & I asked him how he did that.. "open E" he said "you make an E chord by winding up the 3 strings that you would fret to make the regular E chord". I went back to the barracks & tuned my guitar to open E and I have been playing only in open tunings since then. In 1967 I heard some John Fahey records which solidified my fondness for open tunings. John Fahey was a phenomenal guitar player & composer for guitar – find & listen to the Takoma recordings Volumes 1 thru 6.

I taught myself how to play guitar in open E, A & D. I did this with no outside help & because of this I evolved my own way of keeping track of what each chord was relative to the tuning I was in. For example, to me the chord "A" in open E was "up 5" because five frets up from the note E is the note A. This method of "keeping track" may end up to be the ultimate teaching and learning tool for guitar & fretted instruments in general. This method of "keeping track" will be a major part of what I am trying to teach with this book.

I used my own "numeric" method until I got into 5 string banjos & discovered that they were tuned to an open G chord. The strings had essentially the same relationships as the open E tuning that I used - but 3 frets higher. I got the Earl Scruggs Banjo book - with ALL the chords & I then knew the NAMES of the chords (like A, Bm, C#, etc) that I knew as NUMBERS .like "up five". Earl also showed me minor, 7ths & augmented chords.

Open tunings can be used to play almost any style of music – they simply offer another way to tune the instruments string relationships. Open tunings are already used in bluegrass 5-string banjo and dobro. I play bluegrass in the key of E by tuning to open E and putting a capo on the 3<sup>rd</sup> fret – to produce open G. This offers a great platform for the basic "boom chick" bluegrass rhythm. Open tuned fiddles and mandolins can also be found. Blues, rock and country are naturals for open tunings, Slide guitar and Hawaiian lap steel are also done in open tunings. Finger style guitar is also played in many open tunings. One of the Everly Brothers was playing his guitar

on open G to get the unique rhythm guitar style on Wake Up Little Susie. Many of the recordings of John Fahey, both finger style and slide, were done in various open tunings. I highly recommend listening to his recordings Volume 1 thru 6 on the Tacoma record label. They are monumental in the world of acoustic guitar and the use of open tunings. Using these tunings has been a great help to me in understanding how the stringed instrument fret board works. With understanding comes increased potential for improvement.

An interesting aspect of open tunings is that the open chord seems to create an environment to wander around in – you play out of the open chord – it is always there as a firm base to go forth from and return to. For solo slide guitar I prefer the somewhat more “organic” sounding open A (or G). For lead slide work open E (or D) adds needed range and it is a little more “sterile”. Dobro tuning is another example of a characteristic sound that is directly related to the music. I found getting all chords to sound good in a standard tuning to be almost impossible. When I went to open tunings I found that it was much easier to get all chords to sound good – even E in Open G and other somewhat dissonant chords.

It will be possible to use & understand this book with little or no musical training. I will actually stay away from most music theory and try to replace it with simple ways to “keep track” and understand chords, notes and the guitar fret board. I will add what I know about playing blues, bluegrass, slide and finger style guitar. Using open tunings will also improve your understanding and playing in concert tuning. NOTHING in this book is meant to help you play like anyone else. EVERYTHING in this book is meant to help you play like YOURSELF.

## **SECTION 1 - THEORY & BASICS**

### **THE GIST OF THIS BOOK**

The main thing to learn is that RELATIONSHIPS exist between various chords in music and between the notes that make up those chords. Those relationships apply directly to the scheme of the guitar neck & frets. Understanding how notes & chords are created on a guitar neck helps a lot in learning how to play. For example the chord "A" has the same relationship to the chord "E" as the chord "C" has to the chord "G" - The C/G chords are just 3 frets up the neck from the E/A chords. The understanding of these relationships will allow you to play with others in any key or to play in a key that suits your voice. The ability to "transpose" chords and notes from one key to another will result. Understanding this rather simple system will also lead to learning by thinking about what should happen & then trying it - even the mistakes become learning experiences - its the thinking/understanding that can be useful in learning.

### **NO PREJUDICE SIMPLIFIED MUSIC THEORY**

Music theory as it has been taught for the last 100 years or so is ok – especially for learning piano. I believe that it can get in the way of actually understanding the stringed

instrument fret board and the relationships of notes and chords to each other. For example; some notes have 2 names – like A# and Bb – even though they are THE SAME NOTE. Somehow there seems to be 2 classes of notes – the nice, easy, “natural” notes like “A” & “G” shown as WHITE keys on the Piano and the other “Sharp” and “Flat” notes shown as BLACK keys. While playing the piano and other instruments in a classical setting requires understanding this rather confusing system I want to point out that the guitar fret board DOES NOT DISCRIMINATE between “good” & “bad”, “sharp” or “flat” – ALL NOTES ARE CREATED EQUAL. I have seen people who think that you cant move a chord up the neck 3 frets because “one of the notes should be flatted in this key” or some such crap.

## **NOTES, CHORDS & THE GUITAR NECK**

High school physics uses a simple apparatus to explore sound produced with one vibrating string. Sort of a one string guitar with a ruler for a fret board & instead of frets there is one fret that touches the string and slides along the ruler to make higher & lower pitch sounds. The tightness of the string can also be controlled (tuned). Dudes like Pythagoras were heavy into this stuff centuries ago in Greece. Anyway the guitar/neck and general music theory is a result of that science. Whew using this device (or a guitar) you move the “fret” toward one end to produce higher & higher tones (notes) you get to a place where you are making the note you started with - just higher in PITCH (frequency) - an OCTAVE higher. For example an open string tuned to A vibrates back & forth 440 times each second. As you fret the string each fret up the neck the pitch gets higher & the notes progress A,B,C,D,E,F,G, and then A again except the string is vibrating at 880 times a second - twice as fast. This is an Octave - it has 7 distinct notes plus the duplicate end note that is the octave higher – eight notes total. If one were to take the basic high school physics apparatus and listen to the sound as the moveable fret makes “all the notes” as it is moved. Seven distinct tones will stand out and be perceived as most pleasant sounding. These are the “natural” notes also known as Do, Re, Mi, Etc.. or as C,D,E, etc.... If measurements were taken of the 7 positions it would turn out that there are some rather large gaps between some of the natural notes but the 7 notes fall on a “grid” of 12 spaces. The “gaps” between the natural notes are filled with the remaining 4 notes that are named as being either “sharp” (higher pitch) or “flat” (lower pitch) relative to the note it is next to.

Take your guitar & make sure that it has at least one string on it. Tighten the string until it sorta sounds OK. Pick the string near the bridge, then push down on the string just in back of the 1st fret - the one closest to the tuners - & pick the string again. Continue “fretting” the string & picking it until you get to the 12th fret - the note produced by the 12th fret is THE SAME NOTE you started with - only an octave higher. Note that there are 11 frets before the note repeats itself - at the 12th fret.

Now, back to chords: These 123 INTERVALS (notes) were chosen because all of them COMBINE with 2 or more other of them to form these beautiful sounding things called chords. The 3 note chord sounds greater/fuller than the 3 individual notes. Almost any combination & number of notes will produce some kind of chord. I am going to stay with basic MAJOR and MINOR chords until later in this book.

It is too bad that the resulting system of music theory results in 4 of the notes each having 2 names – a Bb is also an A# for example, and that the gaps between the “natural” notes are not consistent. There are no gaps at all between B&C or E&F. Not much to do here but to deal with it - it will become second nature in a month or so. On a piano the Sharp & Flat notes are the black keys & the “Natural” notes are the white keys. Note that there are very few guitars with black & white frets or fret boards. I feel that it is important to note that the guitar is not “prejudiced” & does not distinguish between Black/White – Sharp/Flat. It is sort of saying that the relationships of the intervals between strings and frets is what is important – not what they are called.

### **Trade Offs**

I find that open tunings make it easy to play guitar – especially if the song is in the key of the open tuning. The trade off in general is that there are limitations such as not being as flexible in playing all chords in all keys without the use of a capo – which takes time to put on & re-tune. In some cases it may be hard to duplicate an exact guitar tune if it was played in standard tuning. I find the use of a capo to be a little trouble but I like the results and new “voicings” for the guitar are achieved due to the capo and how the chords are formed.

### **Open E, A, D & G and These Lessons**

The lessons are based on Open E. We have to start some place and I choose E because the 2 E strings and the B string stay the same as standard tuning and, when fretted, the 2 Open E strings are also the same notes as the Barr chords in open E.

All of the exercises and lessons shown in E can be duplicated in D – the fingerings are identical – the notes and chords are 1 note (2 frets) lower – that’s all. Understanding the open E tuning lessons should make it easy to repeat in open D – TRANSPOSING the chords is a part of learning open tunings. All of the major and many other chords are also supplied as a part of this book for reference and general use.

The open A and G tunings are very similar to the open E & D tunings. If you compare the Charts on Figures 1,2,3&4 you can see that the Chord FORMS are very similar – they have just moved 1 string toward the high E. Note also that open A is to Open E as Open G is to Open D – in virtually all tonal and chordal relationships. This may not make sense right now but it should eventually. I will also transition to Open A for the Slide Guitar part of this book.

Open E and A tunings require tightening some of the guitar’s strings to higher than normal tension. On the other hand, open D and G require loosening the tension on all of the strings to a point where I feel that they no longer sound that good. Both of these conditions can be dealt with by using the right string gauges. For Open E or Open A you can use a set graduated from .011 to .052 or .010 to .050. The ideal would be a custom set that went from .011 to .052 with skinnier A,D & G strings. If at all possible use a WOUND G string. To prevent loose strings resulting from open D or G you can go to a set of .012 to .056 strings.

## **LESSON #1 The Barr Chord**

Get your guitar & tune it to open "E". Here are the notes from "Fat to Skinny": E,B,E,G#,B,E (see Top of Figure 1). The "fret relationships" for this tuning are 7 5 4 3 5 (Fat to Skinny) - by which I mean assuming that if the fat string is sorta close to E you dont really need a tuner if you fret the fat string on the 7th fret it will make the note that the 5th string should be, then fret the 5th string on the 5th fret, etc... NOTE tuning is critical to making good guitar music. Practice tuning - practice tuning without a tuner of any kind. A tuner is a good thing & it will really help BUT there is another dimension to open tunings that allows you to listen & tell when the string is "in sync" with the others. Spend time tuning & you can make the thing sound BEAUTIFUL. However you may have to do some tweaking to get the notes to sound right when fretted up & down the neck with other strings still open. Dont spend a lot of time trying to play perfect barr chords - we will look at technique later on - I am just trying to illustrate a point rite now.

With the strings tuned, strum all 6 strings from fat to skinny - do it a lot if you want - it should sound goood. You are making the CHORD "E Major". Now fret all 6 strings at the first fret - this is known as a "barre" chord. It is now the chord "F Major" JUST LIKE THE NOTE "F" IS ONE FRET HIGHER THAN THE NOTE "E" (see Figure 1). Now move the barr (i'm a droppin the "e") to the 3rd fret & strum again - you are making the chord G Major. Note that you can now make ALL of the major chords, including sharps & flats, simply by moving the barr chord up the neck. Study the illustration & note which fret makes which chord. Note that by the time you barr the 12th fret you are back to E. For slide guitar players this simple lesson is the most important one. It is also very important to the non-slide player because the concept of simply moving up the neck to make any major chord is so simple yet functional - you can play guitar in a matter of months. Using this method to start making full chords also keeps reminding you what fret makes what chord and you should start to notice & remember RELATIONSHIPS of Chords - for example Songs played in the Key of G will have you barring the 3rd (G) 8th (C) & 10th (D) frets. You should start to notice that C is five frets higher than G, That G is 3 frets higher than E, C is 2 frets lower than D, etc... For those few traditional high action, all 6 strings, no finger fretting slide guitar players - most of the next few sections will deal with fretted chords & cant be readily applied. Some of the chord formations are actually used for "angled slide" chords sometimes used in Hawaiian & other steel guitar styles so they are worth knowing. Otherwise there is an up coming section on slide guitar.

You may find that getting all six strings to sound clearly is hard to do. Your guitar should be in playable condition - the action should not be "way high" and stuff like that. I place my index finger over the strings in back of the fret & at the same time put my middle finger on top of the index for more power/support, NOTE also that TECHNIQUE must be developed - for example you only need to really push down when you start to make the chord & you stop pushing down to stop or quiet the sound.

## **LESSON #2 More tuning**

Spend time tuning the guitar - especially the low E & B strings - pick/strum, turn the tuner & listen for a spot where the note seems to blend & reinforce the strings next to it - they begin to resonate together when they are tuned just right. eventually all 6 strings should be in this kind of resonance. Tuning tip: Fret the 5<sup>th</sup> string on the 5<sup>th</sup> fret and the 3<sup>rd</sup> string on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Fret and strum and listen; when the guitar is fretted this way there are only 2 notes - E&B being made so it is easy to spot the one that is "out". In most cases the 3<sup>rd</sup> string (G#) will need to "sharpened" just a little and the 2<sup>nd</sup> string "flatted" a little. This is due for the most part to a poorly intonated guitar and it can be fixed by a competent repair person.

There is a good chance that the guitar tuning may have to be "fudged" a bit to make good sounding chords of the 1st position. This has to do with some subtle characteristics of physics & music theory that are too deep to deal with here. Most guitars in standard tuning will require a little tweaking to make all the chords in a certain key sound good - the same thing is required to optimize an open tuning. so after spending time making all 6 strings sound good when strummed "open" - begin tuning for "Chords of the First Position" by repeating the tuning exercise above that produced only E&B notes and then try all of the chords you intend to play on that tune as a final check – tweak as required.

## **LESSON #3 - Chords of the First Position**

"Regular" or "concert" tuned guitar methods include "chords of the first position". For regular guitar players they are the familiar E,A,G,F,D, etc..... that are played up near the Nut & machine heads & First Fret. Open tunings also have this set of chords - although they are limited to a noticeable degree by the inherent open chord that the guitar is tuned to.

Refer to the Open E Chord Chart at the top of Figure 1. The 6 horizontal lines are the 6 strings, the vertical lines are the frets and each finger is shown with the initial for Index, Middle, Ring and Pinky as I,M,R & P. We will make a "simplified" A chord by pressing down with the index finger on the 3rd string, 1st fret & with the middle finger on the 5th string, 2nd fret. This makes a rudimentary A chord. Note that there are 2 B strings. Make the chord "full" by pressing down the 2nd (B) string on the second fret with the Ring finger. For certain applications you may opt to not fret the 2nd string - whatever sounds better. Try strumming the 6 strings a few times with no chord (open) and then make the A chord and strum a few times. Do this with some kind of steady rhythm and change from open to the A chord on a regular cycle. This should produce a rather pleasant sounding "chord change". If this sounds ok to you then you are now officially playing the guitar.

We will now try the D chord of the first position. Refer to Figure 1 and make the chord as shown but leave the pinky off the 2<sup>nd</sup> string. Strum it a few times and then make the rudimentary A chord by moving the index finger over to the A position and leaving the middle finger off. Strum a few times and then move the fingers back to the D position again. Repeat this change from D to A to D while strumming. You can also try going to the Open (e) chord from the A position so that now you are going D,A,E,A, D,A,E,A you are now playing a progression of 3 chords. Now we finish the lesson by adding the pinky to the A & D chords. Beginning players will have to practice making the chord & strumming, changing to another chord and strumming. For beginners, practice making the change from open E to A to D to A to Open E and any combination of the 3 until you can make the changes smoothly and “in time” to the rhythm you have going. Add the F# minor chord to the mix and continue to practice going from any one chord to any other. Some pleasant sounding chord “progressions” will reveal themselves. Now add the B chord from Figure one – you can leave out the wrap around thumb and not play the low E string to make it easy. Continue to add the remaining chords of the first position until you can easily change back and forth to any of them while strumming while maintaining a steady rhythm. Increase the speed at which you can do this exercise. If you can do the above you can now pretty much play rhythm guitar to most any song. You will need a capo & know how to use it to be able to play in any key and that will be addressed in a later lesson.

### **First Position Chords and Fingering**

Experience has led me to the finger positions shown on the chord charts in Figure 1. For the most part they are simply the most natural way to form the chord. Note that it is easy to go between the A and D chords – the index finger doesn’t move and it acts as an anchor so your fingers have an easier time knowing where to go. Make the A Chord and then lift the Index finger to make the C# Minor and then back again. Make the F# Minor chord. Now lift the Ring finger to make the A chord. Adding the pinky to the A to make the A7th is also easy. The full B chord is quite a bit trickier and leaving the wrap around thumb out and not playing the low E string is a good option until later on.

Because we are in an open tuning we can add the barr chords for the first 4 frets to the chords of the first position. I am doing this for a number of reasons; It will help in teaching theory, the G chord on the 3<sup>rd</sup> fret is needed for blues riffs and rhythms in this key and G# chord is also sometimes used in the key of E. Barring the 5<sup>th</sup> fret produces another A chord – but not “of the first position”. Practice barring to produce the F, F#, G and G# chords – a little of this is enough for now.

### **LESSON #5 - Chord Forms**

Still looking at the top of Figure 1 note that a barr chord in open E has the same name as the note produced by the E string being fretted as a part of that barr chord - A

barred 5th fret in Open E is the Chord A just as the note A is produced when one of the E strings is fretted at the 5th Fret. Make the Chord of the first position A. Then make a barr chord on the 5th fret - they both produce the chord A - they can be used interchangeably in a song for example. You could look at it this way: you can make a B chord by making a chord of the first position or you could think that B is 7 frets above E so you could also make a B chord by barring the 7th fret. Hopefully this will lead to you knowing the relationships of all of the chords/notes by how far up OR down it is from any other note/chord/fret. For the previous example I can add that B is also 5 frets LOWER than E or that E is 7 steps higher than D. Eventually, all you should need is the first page of each set of chord charts – the one with the Neck/String Layout and the Chords of the First Position. For example, you can make any Minor chord by moving the F#m chord of the first position “up the neck” In this case the name of the note/barr chord fret will be the same as the minor – pretty simple.

Now we can apply this method of making different chords by simply moving a chord FORM up & down the neck just like the barr chord.. The Chord of the first position D is a true chord form - the F# Minor is another - the four strings being fretted maintain their relationships to each other - but the tone/note/chord changes as it is fretted higher up the neck. For example: "2 frets up from D is E" so if we take the D chord of the 1st position & simply slide it up the neck 2 frets we should get an E CHORD - check it out - it really works. This is an important concept that can really help learning & playing in almost all types of open tunings. It can be applied to understanding how to play lead out of various chord forms & positions - its the UNDERSTANDING of whats goin on that is important. Note that there will be places on the neck where a particular chord form does not sound good because there are some open strings that conflict with the chord at that position - for the most part this is not a problem - for one thing you could only play those 4 strings that are being fretted - for another, most of the chords you would be playing in the KEY of E would not be on those frets that produced the dissonant conflicts. Also - there are times when adding a dissonant note is the rite thing to do.

Make the chord of 1st position D, strum, move it up 2 frets & strum again now up 3 more & strum again, then 2 more, then 2 more - they all sound good - even though the 1st & 6th strings remained open - this illustrates my previous point. It also leads to another experiment: Remove the pinky from the D chord form & repeat the previous exercise - still sounds good !! OK now do it again but leave off the middle finger - STILL sounds good! - The point is that open tunings, chord forms up & down the neck & open strings can combine to make great sounds - but you have to experiment - the more you try - the more you learn.

Refer to Figures 5 & 6. They show the names of all of the major chords produced as the D Chord of the first position is moved up the neck. Refer to Figures 7 & 8 and make the F#Minor Chord of the first position & strum, move it up 2 frets & strum again - sounds goood. You have made a G#Minor chord which is used for dramatic effect in the key of E. Anyway, figures 7 & 8 show all of the Minor chords as they can be produced by moving the Chord of the first position up the neck.



Make the Chord of the first position D, strum, then change to the chord of the first position F#Minor and strum. Sounds good. Now repeat as in the previous exercises - up & down the neck but making BOTH chord positions before going to the next position up or down the neck. Still sounds good. We are experiencing some of the advantages & magic of open tuning - the ease of achieving a lyric quality AND the ability to understand what we are doing. For example - you can now make any minor chord in open E tuning by moving the F# Minor chord form up the neck. You can make any major chord 2 ways - by barring or moving the D chord up the neck.

## **LESSON 6 Adding to the Barr Cord**

With no strings fretted, strum all 6 strings "Open" (your basic open E chord). Then make an "simplified" A chord of first position using only the Index & Middle fingers and strum again. Repeat E,A E,A E,A, - sounds good. Ok, barr the 5th fret with your index finger & strum. Leave the index finger barring the 5th fret AND NOW - make the same A chord of the 1st position using the middle & ring fingers. The chord you are now making is D. Strum the same as in the first part except the chords are now A,D A,D A,D. Do this for a while - going from EA EA in the first position (open) & then on the 5th fret using the barr chord & the ring & middle fingers. Before your index finger collapses run up 2 more frets from the 5th to the 7th & repeat the same barr & fingered chords - (BE BE BE). If you do this for a while you will be playing the basic chord progression for a lot of rock & roll and blues. It is difficult to this for long on an acoustic guitar but a lot of fun on an electric. Mental exercise: The A chord made at the barred 5th Fret was the same as the D of the first position or a barred 10th fret.

## **LESSON 7 The Capo and Transposing Chords**

It is unlikely that you will only be playing music in the key of the open tuning you are in. If you sing, then using a capo to match the key of your voice makes sense. Most music that you compose will be in the key of the open tuning you are in. Just as in using a capo to match the key of your voice – it can be used to match the key of a tune being played in a group. In many cases you will move the capo to the fret that matches the key they are in. There are many times when when you will have to move the capo to a fret that is in a "compatible" key. For example, A tune may be in the Key of C – using C,F & G chords. Moving the capo to the 3<sup>rd</sup> (G) fret puts the guitar in Open G but it is still easy to play the C,F & G chords. It would be possible to make chord charts for all of the tunings with a capo on every fret but you should eventually be able to figure out how to "transpose" keys with the capo and selecting the right chords to play. Going beyond the 7th fret with the capo could be considered bad form and indicates the need to transpose a little. In general, C,F,G,D,Em and Am chords can be played in G and A,B,E,D, and F#m can be played in E.

I play a lot of Bluegrass. With the guitar tuned to open E & using a capo on the 3rd fret I am playing in the key of G. Looking at the open E chord chart page should confirm this. I am now playing G,C,F & D JUST LIKE I WAS PLAYING E,A,D&B. So, what ever

you learn in the "open" position of any tuning can be played in other KEYS by using the capo and learning how to "transpose". Knowing what fret to put the capo on and transposing chords will come as you gain experience with the open tunings of your choice. The important lesson here is to remember the relationships that are involved - in the chord changes. I also find that playing on the 3rd fret is much easier than way back up the neck. The slightly higher pitch also fits in real well with the 'grass. Fiddle & Mandolin tunes are played in the key of A a lot - just move the capo up to the 5th fret & play on Garth - in the key of A.

## **LESSON 8 Slides & Bottlenecks "pinkie" style**

The story of 17th Century Spanish explorers in the South Pacific, Hawaiian Slack Key, & evolution to National, Dobro & Pedal Steel is very interesting. Suffice it to say that more than one person has found that placing a smooth rounded surface across strings tuned to an open chord produces some very nice sounds. This principle is applied to the guitar in many ways from a "pinkie" slide used on a regular guitar tuned "standard" to a full on Dobro or National or Martin played face up on the lap with the strings raised up "way high". There will be an entire set of lessons for slide guitar - I just want to point out a few basics now. A standard tuned guitar STILL makes a true 3 note chord - the A chord. So.... if you are playing some blues you can put a small slide on your pinkie or ring finger & play those 3 notes or "out of" those 3 notes by moving the slide to the chord being played. This technique is totally valid - I just want to point out the involvement of the open A chord - even in Standard tuning.

This same pinkie (or ring finger) technique can be applied to open tunings - you can use all the chords & fingerings you want AND be able to add the sound of slide any time you want. A lot of Delta blues is played in open tunings with a slid on the little finger. string height will be a factor - with this technique the strings must be low enough to fret & maybe high enough not to hit the frets when "Slid". All 6 strings can now be played using this method - Tony Furtado is a master of this technique. Leo Kottke also uses it sometimes - very nice.

The other technique for slide is to have the strings raised up off the fret board so that they can be barred with a slide, steel or bottle neck FIRMLY, without having the strings hit the frets - some of these instruments dont have frets - just painted lines where frets would be. The extra height allows for very clear & ringing tones to be produced. Many other subtleties can be produced because the strings can be "vibratoed" by pushing them down as well as moving the slide back and forth. A major aspect of playing with the strings raised is that only the slide or steel can be used - the fingers cant be used to fret strings. Individual strings can also be played with the slide with the rest open or simply not played. "Slanting" the steel to make 3 notes of the D chord of the 1st position is also done - too much for me. More on slide later.

## SECTION 2 - TECHNIQUES and STYLES

### BASIC TECHNIQUES

All of the techniques used in stringed instrument playing can be applied to playing in open tunings. They range from instrument type - nylon string classical, to 12 string, to dobro, etc... to typical techniques including Fingerstyle, Flat picking, Bottleneck, Slide, Rhythm, Hammering On, Bending/Pulling notes, Sliding Chords, Harmonics, Etc.... These things end up in a unique mix that is yours. For additional info on Flat picking, Finger picking, Blues, Dobro, etc you will have to go to other sources. Below is an overview of styles including basic finger picking. "Raised String" Slide will be covered later.

### LESSON 9 - CHORDS & RHYTHM

**DO RHYTHM:** Tune your guitar to sound as good as possible when making the chords of the 1st position. Practice strumming all 6 strings while changing from open E to A - about a thousand times - it is THE CHANGE. Anyway continue on & throw in a B now & then. Also do a D, A,(open)E thing - vary the rhythm & chords & repeat stuff that sounds good. Hint - don't stay on any 1 chord too long - it will hurt your fingers MORE. Also go from E to A to C#Minor. Substitute an F# Minor for the C#Minor & repeat stuff that sounds good. Strum the strings all up, all down, both ways, any way that sounds good. With a pick, with out, "fandango" with all four fingers, just DO RHYTHM !!! You will find that the Barr chord is real nice here - you can also VAMP the barr easily - turn it on & off by pressing down on the barre when strumming & then letting up when you want the chord to stop. You can also "vamp" or "choke off" any chord formed with the fingers.

**HAMMER ON:** Garth.... You can "hammer on" a string while playing a chord: place your fingers in the position to make an A chord. Lift up the index finger before strumming, strum and then push the index finger rapidly down (hammer) to finish forming the A chord. You can also hammer on the whole chord - which can result is the "ultimate Cajun riff" Oh less jess do it now.....its one of my favorite open tuning thins to do..... play, play,play, Cajun, Cajun, Cajun..... The basic lesson here is to TRY all combinations of hammering any string(s) or chord as a part of your learning process & style. Another "Hammering On" exercise: Make the F#m chord and then lift the pinky and hammer/strum, repeat with the middle finger, then the ring finger. Then, reverse the order back to the pinky. Hammering-on produces some very nice tonic and rhythm effects. You also "get a free note/beat" in the process.

**PULL OFF:** For this technique you will pull on the string with the fretting finger right after a not has been played on that string. A second note is produced by "plucking" the string as it is "pulled off".

**SLIDING:** For this technique you will fret one or more strings and produce secondary notes/beats by sliding the fretting fingers up or back one or more frets right after playing those fretted strings.

## **LESSON 10 – ALTERNATING BASS**

The E,A,D&G tunings in this book have “extra” Bass strings which facilitate playing an “alternating bass” pattern found in bluegrass, country, Irish, Mexican and Polish and many other forms of music. In bluegrass it is called the “Boom Chick” which emulates the sound of the rhythm it produces.

In open E pick the 4<sup>th</sup> string only and then the 5<sup>th</sup> string only. It will make a familiar “Dum Dum, Dum Dum” sound – these are the 2 bass notes for the open E chord. Now, play the same pattern but Strum the 3 or 4 skinny strings below each of the bass strings right after you pick each base note. Do this in a simple, regular pattern that will sound something like “Dum Chang, Dum Chang”, repeated. This is called the “Boom Chick” in bluegrass – with the Single picked bass note as the Boom and the strummed open strings as the Chick – which sounds better than “Dum Chang”. Do this until you can hear the alternating bass “booms” and the corresponding quick strums that pluck the rest of the chord.

Now make the A chord of the first position (pinky optional) and play exactly the same pattern on exactly the same strings. This should sound similar to the first pattern in open E but the 5<sup>th</sup> string changes to allow alternating bass for the A chord. Go back and forth between the E chord and A chord while playing the alternating bass “boom chick” pattern. Now finish out by going to the B chord (thumb optional) and playing exactly the same pattern again – this is the structure for many country and bluegrass songs. Now try the same alternating bass pattern with all of the chords of the first position.

It is also possible to continue the alternating bass pattern up the neck – usually by playing the pattern on the same 4<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup> strings. Make the D chord of the first position and play the alternating bass pattern. Now move it up 2 frets to make the E chord as per the open E tunings chord charts. Repeat the alternating bass pattern. Now move the same chord “form” up 5 more frets to make an A chord (as per the chord chart). Notice that the alternating bass patterns remains stable. The same holds true for the other chord “forms” that can be moved up the neck. This is a very useful lesson.

Now just to finish up on this boom chick thing: in the bluegrass band the guitar is playing both the boom and the chick AND the bass accentuates the bass Boom note at the same time. The mandolin responds/alternates with the “chick” – when the full chord is “chopped” & then Vamped or Choked to keep the strings from ringing into the next “chick”. The 5 String and Dobro also have their “chick choke” too.

To play a waltz in this mode you would go Boom Chick Chick, Boom chick chick.

**LESSON 11 - VAMPING, CHOKING & QUIETING STRINGS:** During the above exercises you may have noticed that the strings tend to keep “ringing on” as long after they are

picked as you push down (fret) on the string. The string becomes quiet when you stop pressing down. Make the same D chord of the first position & right after strumming it, lift up all four fretting fingers to quiet the strings. You don't have to lift your fingers off the strings just lift them enough to let the strings come off the frets and deaden against your finger tips. Now Strum a d chord of the first position rather quickly and then immediately dampen the sound as you just practiced. Repeat 4 times and then move the chord up 2 frets to make an E and repeat. Move the same chord up 5 more frets to make the A and repeat – it will have kind of a reggae sound. The exercise to make a fairly loud, staccato full chord and then immediately dampen it to make a single, punctuated chord. This technique is sometimes called “choking”, “vamping” or “framing” the chord. You can also add this to the Alternating Bass Boom Chic to quiet the “chick”.

This technique can be used with any fretted string or chord including barr chords. Using this technique in some form or other evolves as you play the guitar and is actually an integral part of "regular" guitar playing style. The D chord form allows fast full "vampable\chokable" chords anywhere up & down the neck. Playing & choking only the Chick part of the rhythm structure reduces your presence even further & can be applied when others are taking a solo or when backing up vocals - sort of a "Choke Chick".

## **LESSON 12 – SOME STRUM STYLES:**

If you play for more than a month or 2 in this way you will begin to develop a style - possibly without thinking about it - just as a result of fooling around. Here are some things to fool around with:

**Main Strum** - Start with the down stroke – on the way down strike the strings with the nails of the first 2 or 3 fingers. On the way back UP - strike the strings with the THUMB nail. Repeat 1000 times & note that a fluid rhythm should develop that involves how you are moving your hand back & forth the get the fingers/nails to strum DOWN & the Thumb/nail the strum UP. Now- add the A chord of the first position & repeat 1000 times & vary how & when you make the A - use as many of the above techniques as seem applicable. In general it is the NAILS that make the strum for both the the finger's on the way down & the thumb on the way up.

**Fandango** - Now do the same chord change practices but add a strum on the way down that uses all 4 fingers "fanning" across the strings one after another as the strum goes down. Return up with the regular thumb nail. Practice.

**Fingers Down Only** - using the 4 finger nails hit 4 strings at the same time. Make a D chord of the 1st position & repeat doing the down stroke only with all 4 fingers. Now Choke the chord right after the 4 finger hit - sort of a Chug, Chug - a useful rhythm technique. Punk rock - dude.

**Thumb and Fingers** – play the Bass string only with the thumb, and then “grab” the 3 main strings just below the bass note and pull back toward the thumb. This creates a bluesy alternating bass/chord style.

## **LESSON 13 – FINGERPICKING: or FINGER STYLE**

**WITHOUT FINGERPICKS:** uses the TIPS of the fingers & thumb OR The NAILS of the fingers & thumb - in this case not the back side of the nails but the underside area & edge of the nail. Your style may use the fingertips more than the nails of the nails more than the tips. The tips offer a quiet somewhat muted sound and the nails produce a clearer & louder sound. Getting the finger tips to roll off the strings is a little easier without involving the nails. Using what you have learned so far you can try just picking individual strings with the thumb & finger(s). If you just keep "noodling" in this way you may develop a finger picking style of your own. Note that finger picks really help in playing "rolls" (see below) – especially at a fast pace.

**WITH FINGERPICKS:** If you want to play loud and fast finger style guitar then get some fingerpicks and a thumb pick. The proper use of good Finger & Thumb picks can have a positive influence on style - the fingerpick glides over the strings while the bare fingers grab just a little &/or the nail grabs just a little to make the note. A way to illustrate the impact of fingerpicks would be to ask a bluegrass dobro or 5 string banjo picker to play a little without the picks – good luck. I recommend ONLY Ernie Ball or Jim Dunlop picks – finger picks are a science and many of the ones for sale don't work for beans and make it that much harder to play. You try'em - you'll like'em too! Use a plastic thumb pick if at all possible and get a few different ones and make sure that grab your thumb pretty good – without rotating when a string is played hard.

**THE ALTERNATING ROLL:** There are 2 basic patterns that use the thumb, index and middle fingers: The Alternating Roll and the Forward Roll. For open tunings – especially open D and E - I find the Alternating roll vastly superior for beginning to intermediate levels of playing. For the basic alternating roll the middle finger plays only the highest (1<sup>st</sup>) string, the Index finger plays only the 2<sup>nd</sup> string and the Thumb covers the 4 lower strings (3,4,5&6). It looks like the Thumb has a lot to do & it does; It plays the alternating bass notes and much of the melody with the 2 fingers adding harmonious notes. For Fingerpicking lessons the Thumb is "T", the index finger is "I" and the Middle Finger is "M". The Alternating Roll pattern consists of Thumb, Index, Thumb, Middle (TITM) repeated as required. If you like fingerpicking, try this roll. It is a pattern of 4 so it works well for most folk, bluegrass and country 2/4 or 4/4 time. For just starting out the Thumb will play the first alternating bass notes (string 5), then the index string 2, then the thumb picks string 3, then the Middle finger string 2, then the Thumb alternating to string 4 and then the middle finger string 2 and on and on in this pattern. After some practice it can be played quite fast. In effect the Thumb is playing the Base "boom", then it plays the Melody "chick" and then the other bass "boom"; with the Index and Middle fingers adding to the pattern one note between each of the thumb notes.

The potential for use and exploration of this pattern is enormous. When applied to a standard tuning this may be called “Travis Picking” or “Thumb Style”. It can be heard in some John Fahey recordings in open tunings. Practice this roll while changing chords of the first position. Also practice moving chord “forms” up the neck while continuously playing the same roll. Interesting effects happen due to the open high E string when the Chord forms are moved up the neck – try them all – you will hear some interesting stuff. If you continue to pursue this form of fingerpicking the index finger may venture out to the 3<sup>rd</sup> string, you may move the entire pattern up toward the bass strings & many other variations.

**THE FORWARD ROLL:** The other most common finger picking pattern is the Forward Roll Consisting of Thumb, Index, Middle, (TIM) in the pattern TIMTIMTIM. I will deal with the application of this roll pattern in 2 sections; Open D or E and then Open A or G. This is due to absence of the high/octave string in the A & G tunings which will affect which strings the 2 fingers play most of the time.

**Open D or E;** For open D or E the middle finger mostly plays the 2<sup>nd</sup> string, the index finger plays mostly the 3<sup>rd</sup> string and the thumb alternates between the 3 bass strings. You must also make the index finger alternate to the high D/E string as a part of the pattern. The roll is boring without alternating the index to the high string once in a while or even every other time. After a while you will find that there is a need for the index finger to play the 4<sup>th</sup> string as a part of the pattern to keep the pattern in line with the melody. The basic pattern being Thumb plays the 4<sup>th</sup> string then the Index plays the 3<sup>rd</sup> string, then middle finger plays the 2<sup>nd</sup> string, The thumb then goes to the first alternating bass note, then the index & middle fingers again, then the thumb back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> string, then the index staying on the 3<sup>rd</sup> string and the middle picking the 1<sup>st</sup> string and on and on. Basically the Thumb alternates between the 3 low strings and the Index & Middle fingers follow each thumb pick. This pattern is in sets of 3 so there are many times when an extra note or beat must be added to make things work out in 2/4 & 4/4 time music. The forward roll is inherently “faster” and somehow smoother than the alternating roll but it requires a higher level of skill to keep from sounding repetitious due to training the middle finger to move between 2 strings “at will”.

**Open A or G;** I find these tunings much harder to adapt the forward roll to. This is due to the absence of the high “octave” string found in the open D & E tunings. For the astute learner what has happened is that the high D/E string has fallen off the guitar and re-appeared as the low bass string. So for these tunings I would tend to play the 1<sup>st</sup> string with the middle finger, 2<sup>nd</sup> string with the index and cover the 4 lower pitch strings with the thumb. There will be times when moving the whole pattern up one string to the same positions outlined in the open D/E section above. For slide or Dobro I play out of the forward roll covering the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> strings as in the open D/E section above, including excursions to the 1<sup>st</sup> string as a part of the roll. I do not use this roll normally in Open A or G but find it cumbersome for open A or G.

**Moving the Pattern;** As soon as you have mastered the forward roll in the exercises above, try moving the entire pattern up or down one string – like moving your entire hand up or down one string.

A good place to hear guitar that uses the forward roll a lot is Leo Kottke recordings. Another is Jerry Reed. The 5-string banjo is a great place to hear the forward roll set free AND it is played in open G. I have been able to use a lot of the banjo style but the thumb hits another bass string instead of the high 5<sup>th</sup> banjo string. The 5 string player deals with the same problem you may have with the forward roll – it is a pattern of 3 imposed on a pattern of 4 – that being 4/4 or 2/4 “time” with 4 beats to the measure. Add to this the tendency to play the melody with the thumb with the 2 fingers adding syncopated harmonic notes. In any case the need to make up the 4<sup>th</sup> beat/note in the pattern while maintaining the correct timing for the chord changes and melody notes leads to a number of tricks or devices such as hammering on, pulling off, slides, even a vamp to produce the correct mating of forward roll pattern to melody and beat. This is actually responsible for many common banjo “licks”. Hitting a note twice in succession is another technique (ala Foggy Mountain Breakdown).

**YOUR OWN FINGER PICKING STYLE:** There are many ways to play the guitar with the fingers; Thumb & 1 Finger (Cotton Pickin), Thumb and 2,3 or 4 fingers, with or without finger or thumb picks, etc... learned the alternating Roll by watching what my fingers were doing when I heard a pattern that I liked. It is very possible that there are numerous players out there that have a nice sounding style that just evolved as the learned to play. If you feel comfortable playing in your own way, then play on. You may wish to try some of the more standard patterns later on. "Noodling" around playing random or various patterns while changing chords of the first position is another way to get into fingerpicking. There are many fingerpicking artists & styles that you can check out and absorb into your own style. The more you play the more your style will evolve - both thru the discipline of rote & the subconscious. Play around - its music - you can go outside the lines. For me, open tunings and finger picking were meant for each other. It is possible to apply open tunings to classical guitar playing with all of the finger movements, patterns and styles but in an open tuning.

**LESSON 14 – FLAT PICKING:** The use of a Flat Pick or Plectrum has been around as long as people have played stringed instruments. In general the guitar is played with a flat pick more that any other way. Most hot lead guitar playing in Bluegrass, Country, Rock & Blues is done with a flat pick. In live situations with only acoustic instruments the flat pick really helps. It is almost a requirement for Bluegrass. If there is a limitation for open tunings it is that some of the string relationships hinder fast lead playing. The string/note relationships of standard tuning (55545) offers the least physical reach to play scales up & down all 6 strings - sort of up 2 or down 3. With open D or E tunings the steps are 75435 which makes the short span between 4 & 3 get in the way while the long span between 5&6 can make you reach up to 6 frets. As discussed earlier, open tunings may need the help of a capo to play in some keys, while the standard guitar tuning is adaptable to most keys without the use of the capo. Otherwise open tunings & flat picking are about the same as regular tunings & flat picking.



Bluegrass IS flat pickin & the bluegrass guitar style can be easily played with a flat pick in open E with a capo on the 3rd fret when playing in G or at the 5th fret for A. See the above section on the Boom Chick & open tunings. I think that even hot lead can be played this way but I have not heard it done - what a nitch... just waitin - give it a try.

In general, stay away from wimpy flat picks - the fwapp fwapp sound that they make is louder than the notes & the sound is distracting. The way to use a flat pick is to go with at least a medium and EXTRACT the note from the string or strings. This requires becoming very familiar with the exact & many relationships between pick & string(s) that produce many types of flat picked sounds & styles. One extreme for example is "popping" the note or chord by holding the pick with minimal projection from the grip which causes a Pop when the finger hits the just plucked string. A name for one of the many possible relationships of pick to string is called the "Angle Of Attack". Consider that the angle of attack could have 3 or more "sub-angles" & you will see that you should spend a lot of time trying to gain control over & understand the subtleties of what is involved in EXTRACTING all of the sound potential there is in a note or chord. The Rounded triangular end of the pick is not swiped past the string absolutely parallel to it (180 degree ANGLE OF ATTACK) - it is much better to swipe the string with the pick at say an angel of 30 degrees. Now add to this how much you let the pick get under the string and the ANGLE that you pull or swipe with to make the note & add this to your study. Consider that some hot 'grass mandolin pickers use a ROUND pick - its the ANGLE OF ATTACK!!!

**LESSON 15 - ROCK & ROLL:** With the guitar in Open E, strum all 6 strings & play the chords EEAAEEAA a few times, then barr the 5th fret & play the same 2 chord fingerings/relationships - AADDAADD. Repeat the first step & then do the same 2 chord relationships at the 7th fret - Rock & Roll. Open E ROCKS!!! Its that simple. Throw in the Ultimate Blues chord & UCP from the lessons above & you'll be a rockin & rollin soon. Green Onions - the basic rhythm is a gass in open E. And on and on... Acoustic or electric - throw on a pinky slide and your'e jammin. There are an endless amount of rock styles and riffs that can be found in open tunings. Playing electric adds to the potential.

**LESSON 16 - BLUES:** Using just the Thumb & 3 fingers play the same chord progressions as in the lesson above but plunk the low E with the thumb & then pluck strings 5,4&3at the same time with the 3 fingers - 1 finger per string. What a great foundation for a blues song - or maybe about half the blues that ever was. Open E & the blues was meant for each other - they grew up together. The premier example being Robert Johnson - King of the Delta Blues - played in open tunings. Muddy Waters - Open slide Guitar. Elmore James - King of the Slide Guitar - open E. And Many many more. If youy like blues, open D,E,G and A is where it is. The basic style just shown can be expanded with finger picked lead riffs and even a pinkie slide. For playing single notes you can pick almost any string on the open, 3rd & 5th frets - they are all blues notes.

Barring the 3<sup>rd</sup> (G) fret when going between E and A or A and E is a very nice riff. The Barred G can also be “vamped” in a rhythmic way as a part of the blues style.

The above styles can be extended into finger pickin blues by using just the thumb on the bass E & and alternating 1 finger or sometimes 2. Again no picks required. Using thumb & finger picks and playing mostly rolls is another viable blues technique - in short, most any “normal” guitar style can be used for playing the blues in open tunings - especially open E. And of course Blues is a good way to get into Slide Guitar which will be covered in the next part of this book.

**ADDITIONAL SPECIAL CHORDS:** Here are some additional chords that I have learned:

**The Ultimate Blues Chord:** For open E or D, make the “up 7” chord and then add the little finger as shown in Figure XX. This is normally played as the 3<sup>rd</sup> chord in the blues progression. Bending the 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> strings after the strum increases the blues feel.

**La La Land:** A very pretty chord – especially when finger picked. Shown in Figure XX. It is very harmonic to the open chord.

**La La Up 2:** Move the La La Land Chord from the preceeding exercise up the neck 2 more frets as shown in figure xx – still sounds nice and unusual. It is also very harmonic to the open chord.

**A nice Up 7:** Make the chord as shown in Figure xx. This chord is an unusual substitute for the “up 7” chord (B in open E, A in open D, etc...) This chord sounds good in conjunction with the 2 previous “La La” chords – especially when finger picked in the alternating roll.

**The Fahey:** Make the chord as shown in figure xx – some kinda minor. Especially nice when played with the alternating roll.

**The Oriental:** Move the “Fahey” chord from the above exercise “down 2” frets as shown in Figure XX. Do this right after playing the Fahey, continuing the alternating roll.

**Sharp Open:** Actually the open chord “sharped” with a lot of open strings. Very nice when played with the Fahey and Oriental. Also you can move this up 2 frets to merge with the Fahey.

There are numerous other fingerings and finger movements but this is enough for now. On to Slide Guitar.

## SECTION 3 - SLIDE GUITAR:

For me “true” slide guitar is played in an open tuning and uses all 6 strings – as opposed to playing out of the 3 string A chord in standard tuning. This style is usually played “lap style” with the strings and fret board facing up and the slide coming in from the bass side. Traditional country/bluegrass Dobro is also played this way along with Lap Steel guitar. It is possible to play in a more typical style with the slide coming in from the treble side – usually worn on the Pinkie or Ring finger. Tony Furtado is a master of this style which usually has the strings low enough to fret with the remaining fingers. There is a style of slide guitar played in “standard” tuning that mostly plays out of the A chord form with a slide on the Pinky or Ring finger. I do not play in that style so I have very little in specific recommendations – but most of what follows for the “lap style” is applicable to either orientation of the slide.

A “slide” is usually round or tubular and for lap style is it usually worn on the index finger. A “steel” is a specially shaped chunk of steel usually used by Dobro and Hawaiian players. It is usually held between the Thumb and middle finger and the Index finger “on top” of the steel for support & control. The middle finger is also used for damping the strings by twisting the wrist so that the middle finger rolls onto the strings as the steel lifts. I find the Steels much harder to get to use and I prefer a metal tube that fits snugly on my index finger. String damping is no problem – the same middle finger is used as for the Steel. A glass slide that fits the finger is fine. I made mine from a piece of brass tubing. It fits my finger snugly and has become sort of an extension of my finger when I play.

### LESSON S1 – GETTING STARTED

Note that a guitar with very high strings is ideal for slide playing. Significant down force can be applied to the high strings without them buzzing on the frets – high action is almost essential and for lap style guitar with high action used only for slide is a good way to go. There are lots of garage sale guitars with “too high” action that can be had for cheap. Tune the Guitar to Open A, G, D or E. Strum all 6 strings “open”. Now move the slide (with your finger in it) to the 5<sup>th</sup> Fret and strum again. Go back to the open chord and repeat making the change to the 5<sup>th</sup> fret. The slide must push down evenly on all 6 strings or some of them will buzz. You may want to try placing your thumb lightly against the under side of the neck as you move the slide up and down the neck. Keeping the thumb in this position helps gain control when pressing the slide down. High action is pretty much required to keep the slide from knocking against the frets. Also practice moving the Slide up to the 7<sup>th</sup> fret after playing the 5<sup>th</sup> fret. Lift the slide between the chord changes. Practice making the slide touch all 6 strings evenly before strumming them.

Now do the same exercise but keep the slide on the strings for the move from the 5<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> frets and back again. This are the basic chords for the blues – sing the first line

Open, repeat first line and play fret 5 then up to fret 7 for the concluding line of the verse. A typical blues variation would slide up to the 5<sup>th</sup> fret for the first and second lines of the song. These are also the 3 chords used in many, many country folk and pop tunes – in these or various other combinations (chord progressions).

Also, for blues or other accents, play the 3<sup>rd</sup> fret between the move to and from the open and 5<sup>th</sup> fret chords. Finally slide up to the 12<sup>th</sup> fret and you have “da blues”. This is the octave chord of the open tuning and is a good place to move to for breaks that would use the open chord. Add another chord by playing the 10<sup>th</sup> fret. Play any or all combinations of these chords – you will find many pleasing combinations of these 5 “positions” for the slide. You can continue to experiment with moving to slide to all of the frets and combinations thereof – you are a composer at that point. Practice any and all of the techniques given previously or below as you change the position of the slide – or steel.

Now tune the guitar to one of the 4 major tunings – Open A, G, D, or E. Now refer to the top of the first page of the Chord charts for the tuning you have chosen. It shows the schematic of a guitar neck with the barr chords named along the bass string side of the neck and with the fret numbers along the treble side - each fret has the name of the major chord produced with the slide on that fret and each fret is numbered. I find it easier to play the guitar by counting frets than by tracking the order of the letters – especially if you add that some notes/chords can be the same letter as the one next to it but it is “special/sharp or flat”. So note the NUMBER of the fret as you note the chord being played with the slide. No matter which tuning you use, eventually you will see that D is always 2 frets lower than E, or that G is always 3 frets higher than E. , etc.... Learning these relationships of the chords to the frets is important.

By practicing simple strumming and moving the slide up and down the neck you should now be able to play any song that uses all major chords. For now, minor chords can be “faked” by playing the 3 bass strings in E or D tuning or the 4 bass strings in A or G tuning. Actually any strings but the 3<sup>rd</sup> for E and D tunings and the 2<sup>nd</sup> for the A or G tunings can be played. The “omitted” 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> strings must be played one fret flat to “fit” the minor chord scale.

## **LESSON S2 – More Strumming and Adding Styles**

In many ways the slide guitar begs for finger picked notes – strumming only is seldom encountered as a slide guitar style. Without finger picks, it is pretty easy to mix strumming with accents produced by picking individual notes – either with the fingers or with a flat pick. Flat picks are also seldom seen in the “lap slide” style. If finger picks and/or a thumb pick is used, strumming can be quite tricky. We will come back to strumming with picks on in a later lesson.

If you are happy with simply strumming and moving the slide you will still find other things of value in the lessons ahead. You may also want to begin picking individual notes as a part of your style.

Once you are comfortable with making good sounding chords you may find your self playing “riffs” of many different types. Many more riffs will come about as you learn and

play more. There are many styles, methods and tricks used in slide guitar. They include Finger picking/rolls, vibrato, uncovering strings, vamping, touching single strings with the slide & others. I will try to build these lessons in an order that lays a foundation to work from. This lesson was the beginning of the foundation.

### **LESSON S3 – Finger Picking**

Slide playing in open tunings lends itself to “noodling” or playing riffs. If these riffs are strung together with some rhythmic strumming of finger picking you are playing slide guitar. You may want to spend some time just fooling around with the slide and doing what ever sounds good. You can continue doing this and evolve your own style “organically”.

**THE ALTERNATING ROLL:** For basic finger picking and in order to get the most from the next lessons I recommend learning and using the Alternating Roll. You can go back to Lesson 12 for the Alternating Roll lesson – just use the slide to make the chords instead of fretting the strings with your fingers. Play 4 sets of rolls with the strings open, then move the slide “up 5” to make an A chord and do another 4 sets of rolls. Return to the open E and repeat the 4 sets again. Now finish by moving to the B chord – “up 7” frets and play another set of 4 rolls. This is a very common chord progression and, with small variations, it is used in many songs. Play around with these 3 chords and make up some “progressions” of these chords and play them while playing the alternating roll. Also practice sliding up and down to the next chord in the progression. Add the 3<sup>rd</sup> fret between some of the A & open E chords – it adds a blues flavor. Also try playing the 10<sup>th</sup> (D) fret as a part of a progression using the octave E (12<sup>th</sup> fret) and the A and B chords. You can make a lot of pretty music by simply playing the alternating roll and changing chords with the slide.

**YOUR ROLL OR NO ROLL:** By now you should be able to play basic slide guitar and be able to play along to songs as long as you know the chords to be played. If you are not comfortable with the alternating roll, then use what ever feels comfortable as far as using your fingers to play patterns of notes that can be repeated as you change chords. You may also opt to use the fingers but play no discernable pattern – just what feels right. Finger picks are also optional as the style gets more free form. This can be put to good use when playing lead or riffs when others are carrying the rhythm.

### **LESSON S4 – Sliding:**

Using what ever roll you are happy with, try keeping the slide on the strings as you move from chord to chord. Play your roll of choice “open” (E), then keep playing the roll, lift the slide and move it to the 3<sup>rd</sup> fret, keep playing the roll and slide up to the 5<sup>th</sup> (A) fret while continuing to play the roll or your pattern or riff of choice.

Using the Thumb and 2 or 3 fingers, pluck 3 or 4 strings all at once with the slide on the strings at the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> fret, then slide up to the 5<sup>th</sup> fret right after playing the 3

strings. Practice this going into the various chords you have played so far. Practice this going from the 10 to the 12<sup>th</sup> fret.

Now let's just slide a single string up to the full chord to be made: With the Index finger pluck only the 2<sup>nd</sup> (B) string and immediately move the slide up 1 to the 12<sup>th</sup> fret and play the 1<sup>st</sup> (E) string. You should hear 3 notes; the first index pluck, the slid up one note and then the high E note. Repeat this until it sounds like a slide guitar riff. Now try it on the 3<sup>rd</sup> string and play the 2<sup>nd</sup> string instead of the 1<sup>st</sup>. Try playing this as a lead in to all of the chords you have practiced so far. Also, try strumming a few strings instead of the single note at the end of the riff. You could practice this one for a long time – it is truly SLIDE guitar at this point.

### **LESSON S5 – Vamping:**

You will need to develop a way to keep the strings from “ringing” after playing some chords or notes. We will call this the “Vamp” – sometimes called the “choke” or “stop”. You may evolve your own technique. For typical lap style, the slide is on the Index finger and the middle finger is positioned right in back of the slide. This is ideal for deadening strings – just slightly twist your wrist so that the slide is taken off the fret and the middle finger touches the strings to stop them from moving – usually right after they are played. In bluegrass the vamp is repeated for each chord change and it becomes the “chick” of the boom chick. It may be tricky at first but it can become second nature if you do it enough. Try vamping entire chord progressions instead of picking them. Try playing along to a tune with a known chord progression and use the vamp for entire sections of the song. After a while you will end up using this method to deaden strings and chords as you play without even thinking about it. The vamp is used a lot to add dynamics and accents to blues and other high energy music forms.

### **LESSON S6 – Uncovering Strings:**

“Uncovering” strings is a very valuable tool on slide playing. It is mostly used in the lap style due to the nature of the bass and treble string layout. With this method the slide is “pulled back” from the first treble string – or 2 while being played in any of the 12 or more fret positions. The 1<sup>st</sup> and / or second strings are still played as a part of the slide chord being played – they are just open/ This technique can produce some very beautiful and unusual chords and melodic patterns – especially as part of finger picking. Try playing the same practice chords from the previous slide lessons but pull the slide back from the first treble string, then push the slide back to cover and fret the string while continuing to fingerpick the strings. Try this at the second fret and 5<sup>th</sup> fret in Open A or G – it makes nice things happen. Now uncover the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> strings at the second fret in Open A or G and play a pattern that uses the fretted and unfretted strings – very nice stuff. Doing similar things at the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> frets will also produce unusual and melodic chords and note combinations that are very new, hip, cool and..... groovy. Note that the slide will work better for this if it has a rounded edge that will glide on to and off of the strings. Most guitar steels are pre-rounded for just this reason.

## **LESSON S7 – Touching Single Notes**

While playing in the OPEN position it is possible to use the tip of the slide to fret only one note while playing the rest of the strings open. You could use this technique to play all of the melody notes for the lines of the song played on the open strings – the ROOT chord of the tune. This technique is used now and then for special accents by a lot of players. Tony Furtado does it as a part of his style.

## **LESSON S8 – Minor Tuning Slide:**

You can tune the guitar to a minor chord and play an entire tune in a minor key. Major chords can still be “fudged” by not playing the one string that is “flatted” during tuning to make the minor chord. For D and D tunings you will drop the 3<sup>rd</sup> string by 1 fret to produce a note one fret lower than normal for that major chord tuning. For open A and G chords you will flat the 2<sup>nd</sup> string by one fret. Note that the difference between the major and minor chords is simply this one note in the chord being one fret flat. My composition Johns Minor Blues is in A minor tuning. The use of the other techniques – especially uncovering some treble strings – will add to the texture of tunes played on the minor chord form.

## **LESSON S9 – Pulling Off**

This technique is comparable to the Pulling Off for fretted playing covered earlier. For slide try this: put the slide across the strings at the 3<sup>rd</sup> fret, pluck 3 strings that are next to each other with the thumb, index and middle finger – at the same time. This one simultaneous “pluck” and “pull” will produce to sets of notes the one plucked with the slide on the 3<sup>rd</sup> fret and a second set of notes when the open strings continue to ring. Note that the second set of notes (chord) is at least as loud as the first. This is the type of technique that occurs over time simply by playing and evolving ones style. This is a sort of Vamp – it also deadens the plucked chord as soon as the slide is lifted.

## **LESSON S10 – adding the Seventh**

Here is a typical “lick” that I have evolved over time. I came by it intellectually by transferring the 7<sup>th</sup> chord stuff I knew in open E fretted chords. For Open A or G, play a roll in the Open position and then move the slide up 3 frets and play only the first 2 treble strings in an alternating pattern. For Open E or D play only the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> strings after going to the 3<sup>rd</sup> fret. This is primarily a blues lick that I use during solos. You can use this lick in all positions – just move up to the 8<sup>th</sup> fret after playing off the 5<sup>th</sup> fret and then resolve the blues progression to the 7<sup>th</sup> fret and slide up to the 10<sup>th</sup> to produce the same effect.

## **LESSON S11 – The Warble**

Well – what would you call it? It is truly a “warble” when used in country music but it has a more force full personality when used for blues. Play a chord progression that uses the Open, 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> frets. During the time when the open chord is to be played, slide up to the 12<sup>th</sup> fret and play only the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> string by quickly alternating between the 2. This will produce the well known “warble” found in Dobro playing (ala Brother Oswald Kirby) and with a little attitude adjustment it becomes the single most well known blues slide guitar riff (ala Elmore James).

## **LESSON S12 – Bowing With The Slide**

This is an example of how to learn technique by playing – and playing. I discovered by accident that I could produce a secondary, simultaneous and somewhat eerie sound when I “covered” and “uncovered” the treble strings at the 5<sup>th</sup> fret. The slide bows the strings as it moves “in and out” of the high string (or strings) while “uncovering or covering” them. You can hear the effect at the end of my recording of Down In The Valley – it emulates the wind blowing. You could also bow with the slide without uncovering any of the strings. Check it out.

## **LESSON S13 – Evolving Your Style:**

The slide guitar is obviously a very “hands on” item and everyone has the potential to develop a style that is unique to that persons hands, playing preferences and personality. Spend time “interfacing” with the guitar and the slide. Try the techniques outlined so far and note the ones you like best and that seem natural to you. It is good to arrive at a simple, easy to play style that allows simple but good sounding chords. Once you can make various chord progressions “on time” with good clear notes you can add more of the techniques given here. Play like yourself – even if you want to play like Jerry Douglas or Houndog Taylor – play like you – that’s what they did. Its OK to learn by any method – half speed tapes, tablature, copying note for note and all like that. The knowledge gained can be of use but I find it limiting, distracting and it can keep you from understanding and developing thru your own learning and experiences. So spend time just messing around with the slide and any technique that comes to you.



## SECTION 4 - 4 String Instrument Tunings:

Most 4 string instruments are adaptable to open tunings. The tenor guitar, tenor banjo, ukuleles, violin and the mandolin (which has 4 pairs of strings) are all adaptable to open tunings. Bass, cello and viola are all fair game too.

Note that the “scale length” (the distance from the ‘Nut’ to the “Saddle”) of your particular instrument AND the string gages will have an effect on the tuning you can choose. For example, if you choose an open A tuning and the strings get too tight and you cant get any smaller on the treble string – then you could go to the open G tuning – which is 2 frets “looser”. A consultation with a reputable luthier will help – or you can email me for advice.

Please note that there are 2 types of tunings given for each of the open tunings – 2 types of open A,D,E and G tunings. One type is more “melodic” and the other is more oriented toward a harder edged blues type feeling. The Melodic tuning spreads one octave over all 4 strings. The harder edged blues types have one octave over the 3 fatter strings with the thinnest string an additional 4 frets above the octave. I recommend that you try both types to see which best suits your musical style and taste.

Also note that if you look closely at these 4 string chord charts you will see that they are the same as the guitar open tunings – except that 2 of the strings are missing: for the melodic versions I have deleted the highest treble string and the lowest bass string with the remaining strings have the same relationships as a bluegrass banjo with the 5<sup>th</sup> string missing. In fact the open G melodic tuning is the same as the 5 string tuning without the 5<sup>th</sup> string. For the harder edged blues type tunings I have dropped the 2 treble strings from the guitar chord charts. In both cases you should be able to spot the chord “forms” from the chords of the first position shown on the 4 string charts and relate them to the corresponding guitar open tuning chord forms. This exercise will help you understand more about open tuning relationships and also let you use all of the chord charts from the guitar open tunings.

Please keep in mind that you must pay attention to your instruments scale length, string gages and tension when choosing an open tuning. If possible, don’t go any “thinner” than a .010” string for the highest pitch treble string.

Many people play traditional instruments in open tunings. I believe that Eddie Peabody (the most famous 4 string player) played in open G tuning. He was also very fast and flashy – also due to using open tunings. Note also that the tenor banjo and guitar are “supposed” to be tuned in 5ths – like a mandolin. That 5ths tuning makes it very hard to play full chords – in fact if we define a “true” chord as 3 notes IN THE SAME OCTAVE – then it is impossible to play true chords on an instrument tuned in 5ths! They are “partial” chords. Note also that the typical baritone ukulele tuning has the same relationships as the 4 “skinny” strings of a guitar. The trouble with using those string relationships is that the chords are mostly “partial” and don’t sound nearly as melodic or full as an open tuning. There will be more detail on some of these considerations in the individual sections that follow.

## **LESSON F1 – Mandolin Tunings**

I tune my mandolin GDGB (fat to skinny strings). Standard mandolin tuning is GDAE. This means that the standard A string will be lowered in pitch (and tension) by 2 frets and that the standard E string will be lowered by 5 frets. This will usually require a slightly heavier A string and a much heavier E string. A good set of open G mando strings would be .013, .016, .024 and .036. If you want to play in open A the strings will all go up in pitch by 2 frets: AEAC#. A good set of strings would be .011, .014, .022, .034. An interesting effect can be had by substituting an octave string for one of the 2 low (4<sup>th</sup>) strings – like a 12 string guitar.

The typical bluegrass “chick” that answers the bass “boom” is easy with the open tuning. Barring the corresponding produces an easy way to “vamp” or “chuck” or “chick” the cord. Adding the “up 5” fingering to the barr cord is also easy to do and doubles the number of ways to make the full 4 string “chuck”. Also using the barr and “up 5” fingering works as a good starting point for picking. Hammering on one or both fingers of the “up 5” fingering while starting from the barr position is also a nice effect and accent.

Playing out of the “up 10” position is also a great way to use the open tunings with a mando. That would be the “F” cord of the first position for open G or a “G” cord of the first position for open A. Moving this cord form up an down the neck is easy and produces great results. It is also a good “home” base for lead picking.

## **LESSON F2 – Tenor Guitar and Tenor Banjo Tunings**

Tenor Guitars and Banjos use a shorter scale than guitars – a scale length of around 23 inches. Most guitars are about 25 inches. Another way to look at the short scale length would be to put a capo on the 2<sup>nd</sup> fret of a regular guitar neck. True Tenor guitar and banjo tuning is in 5ths – like a standard mandolin but lower in pitch: CGDA (fat to skinny) I find this tuning very hard to make music with – the cords are “partial” and the large step of 5 notes (7 frets) between each string makes fingering a drag. Many people tune the tenor guitar or banjo like the 4 skinny strings of a standard guitar: DGBE (fat to skinny). I find this tuning easy to understand if you are a “regular” guitar player – but it is also hard to make good chords with. A good tenor tuning would be DGBD – Open G. In keeping with the idea of understanding notes, cords and the fret board notice that all you have to do to make this tuning from regular guitar tuning is to “flat” the normal E string by 1 note (2 frets) down to D. You may find that the strings are a little loose and that the 1<sup>st</sup> (e) string is very loose – because it is now 4 frets flat or “loose”. Taking this in to account a set of strings for this tuning would be .014, .016, .026 and .034. A higher pitch tuning would be EAC#E – Open A. A set of strings for this tuning would be .012, .015, .022 and .032.

The string relationships of these 2 tunings make full, melodic cords that are easy to play and use all the strings. Note that the cord charts in this book for Open A and G will also work for these 2 tunings on the tenor instruments – simply cover up or pay no

attention to the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> strings on the cord charts – the first 4 strings of the cord charts will now work for the tenor guitar or banjo. When tuning using only strings the relationships are 5,4,3 (fat to skinny strings). Fretting the fattest (4<sup>th</sup>) string on the 5<sup>th</sup> fret makes the next (3<sup>rd</sup>) string note. Fretting the 3<sup>rd</sup> string on the 4<sup>th</sup> fret makes the 2<sup>nd</sup> string note and fretting the 2<sup>nd</sup> string on the 3<sup>rd</sup> fret makes the 1<sup>st</sup> string note.

An alternate set of tunings can be used that are more “mandolin like” and are a little better for blues: the tunings use the string relationships of 7.5.4 – like the Mandolin tunings but lower in pitch. A good tenor guitar tuning of this type would be DADF# - open D. A typical set of strings for this tuning on tenor instruments would be .011, .015, .024 and .034. For a higher pitch E tuning a set of strings would be .010, .014, .022 and .032. Note that the cord charts for Open D and Open E can be used to show the cords for the tenor instruments in these tunings – in this case you would cover up or pay no attention to the first 2 skinny strings – the remaining 4 strings on the cord charts show the proper cord fingerings.

### **LESSON F3 – Plectrum 4 string Guitar and Plectrum Banjo Tunings**

These instruments are long scale versions of the tenor instruments and use scale lengths comparable to a regular guitar. For these instruments you can tune the 4 strings the same as the 4 skinny strings in open G or Open A for the full melodic set of cords or you can tune the 4 strings like the 4 fat strings of Open D or Open E.

### **LESSON F4 – Ukulele Tunings**

The next group of 4 string instruments are the ukes – ukuleles. There are 4 sizes of uke: Soprano (13.5” scale) Concert (15” scale), Tenor (17” scale) and Baritone (20” scale). Two main differences of ukes to the other 4 string instruments is that they are strung with nylon strings and the smaller sizes use an octave string in place of the lowest, thickest string. Tenor ukes are also sometimes strung with a “normal” fat string instead of the octave string. Baritone ukes usually use a fat low string.

The Soprano, Concert and Tenor ukes are all normally tuned GCEA (fat to skinny). That is the same as the first 4 strings of a guitar with a capo on the 5<sup>th</sup> fret. A simple open tuning conversion is to simply drop the 1<sup>st</sup> string 1 note (2 frets) to G for an open C tuning of GCEG. You could also wind up strings 2,3 & 4 by one note (2 frets) to ADF#A for an Open D tuning. You can also try using a fat 4<sup>th</sup> string instead of the octave.

Both of the above open tunings have string tuning relationships of 5,4,3. For another musical “feel” try the more mandolin like tunings that use the 7,5,4 relationships (see previous mandolin and tenor instrument lessons). In this case, for the soprano, concert or tenor ukes a good tuning to try would be GDGB. This tuning should work with the standard nylon strings. You may want to use a lighter gage strings for the 1<sup>st</sup> 3 strings because they are raised in pitch.

The Baritone uke is tuned DGBE – like the 1<sup>st</sup> 4 strings of the guitar. Dropping the 1<sup>st</sup> string by one note (2 frets) to D will make a DGBD Open G tuning. Raising the 3 fat strings to EAC#E will make an Open A tuning. Note that the cords for this tuning can be

determined by using the Open A guitar cords with the 1<sup>st</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> strings covered or disregarded.

For the more blues adaptable mandolin style tuning I would try CGCB – this may require a lighter gage 1<sup>st</sup> string because the string will be raised 5 frets in pitch. A little heavier 4<sup>th</sup> string would also be nice. Lighter gage strings could be tuned up to DADF# for an Open D tuning. Note that the open D tuning cords can be found by using the open D guitar cords with the 1<sup>st</sup> 2 skinny strings covered up or disregarded.

### **LESSON F5 – Violin, Viola, Cello, Bass, Charango, Tipple, Gitjo and Whatever**

Is nothing sacred? I guess not - open tuned violins are fairly common with GDGD being used a lot. As for the rest try some open tunings if it furthers your playing goals. The Charango is already tuned to a minor cord but what the heck. Lets add one more to the list – the Gitjo – a guitar that is strung to play like a 5 string banjo. I messed around for 2 years on and off before I finally realized that all I had to do was throw away the bass string, move the treble E up to replace the low E and tune it to open E. previously I had kept trying to add the 5<sup>th</sup> string as an A with a peg on the 5<sup>th</sup> fret. I ended up with a big guitar that was way to high pitched (A) for its size. The gitjo in open E make me sound like a way hot guitar picker – and it is in the key I sing in too. I spread my 5 strings out over the entire width of the 6 string neck. If you don't mind tight string spacing you can actually keep the low E and put the high E just below it – the rest of the strings just drop down toward where the treble E normally is. Try it – you'll like it too!

Final thoughts: the number one TV commercial music composer in the world knows virtually no music theory yet his musical creations and compositions are stunningly beautiful and sophisticated. The more you are “taught” about what is the “correct” way to play the guitar the more restricted your musical imagination becomes. Learn enough theory to make sense of what you want to know and then explore and learn from yourself – by playing in the environment created by open tunings.