



# 10 Steps To Playing A Cover Song

So what happens when you're on your own and simply can't figure out a strumming pattern, or one isn't available?

This has been the question for some of our members. I have a lengthy tutorial about this, but I'll touch base on this concept right here to refresh some of our member frustrations.

Learning WHAT style to strum and when is actually REALLY easy, but the concept is tricky.

Here's what I do:

1. **Find The Song That I Want To Play.** This can be any song from any artist on any....um....planet?  
Just try to stay within your own style of music. More on that below.
2. **Listen To The Song First.** With our modern technology, the song you are looking for can almost ALWAYS be found on the web. I usually go to YouTube to find my songs because either the band has a video or someone has done a 'tribute' to the song and the original recording is there in the video tribute.
3. **Find The Chords:** This can be done in many different ways. If I find a good chord version online, I use it. If not, I'll almost always pull up a PowerTab version or Guitar Pro version to make sure the concept is still roughly the same. Almost all PTB and Guitar Pro files have the rhythm section for you. As a matter of fact, you can even listen through the song using those files to hear it in your head. USE WHAT YOU CAN to learn a song.

4. **The Hard Part:** After you have listened to the song for the chords being played, you MUST MUST MUST listen to the lyrics. I can't tell you how many times I have heard guitar players (and just lovers of music) say, "Well I don't listen to the lyrics, I hear the music." That's a HUGE MISTAKE!!! The ABSOLUTE most important aspect to listen to is the singer when playing chord versions of ANY given song. That's right – I said it. It's the SINGER that you need to hear. If you are all alone in your song, you've got it made. By listening to the original recording, you can see where the singer starts, stops, takes a breath, and more. If you control the lyrics 'output' you control the strumming. I'll get into that more below.
5. **Start Slowly With ONLY The Verse:** Learn how the singer/guitar player comes in after each chorus. Don't even LEARN the chorus yet. Just work with the verse(s) before tackling anything that may change your strumming pattern. Choruses, bridges, and solos can change your strumming pattern quite a bit, so learning the backbone (verse) of a song, you'll find that the transition from verse to chorus is much easier.
6. **Try The Other Elements (Chorus, Solo, Bridge, etc.):** Those are the parts MOST listeners will hear and relate to, even if the verse is catchy.
7. **Make It Your Own:** After you have gotten the bare bones of the song, including all the elements, AND played it mostly like the original – you can do this easily. Why AFTER you have learned the original recorded song? Because if you are playing at a club, bar, or other local organization, no matter how well YOUR version of the song sounds, people still want to be able to relate to the song. If you played "Free Bird" (don't do it – just kidding!) in a Reggae style, people may love it, but you've still got to allow the song to remain the same in feeling. Maybe starting out real original like Skynyrd did would ease them into the change you are making to the song. Don't hit them up front with a completely different rendition. It scares the listener. Gradually bring them in with a little improvisation or even a few striking chord stops.
8. **The 'Make It Right' Slogan:** This is NOT my slogan, so don't tell Mike Holmes (Holmes on Homes – watch it on Discovery Home at 5pm daily – LOL) Seriously – This makes sense, so bear with me. This show is awesome. What he (Mike Holmes) does is go in to houses that a contractor has screwed up through either negligence, lack of knowledge, or a plain "I don't care what the homeowner wants" attitude and "makes it right." This is the same idea as playing someone else's song. You may be able to change a song like "Free Bird" into a Reggae song, but SHOULD you? That all depends on how you approach it.  
Jack Johnson (the singer not the boxer LOL) could get by with it because his usual style is that of Reggae/Folk/Pop Rock. People are used to hearing it, so they are more likely to accept it. BUT – what would you think if Tom Petty did it? Gross. It just doesn't make sense. Not that Tom

Petty isn't good, it's just that people don't expect to hear it from him. This can SOMETIMES be a blessing, but usually it's a curse. **How To 'Make It Right':** Don't confuse your audience – but more importantly – don't confuse yourself. If you are covering say 10 songs, then about 8 of them need to be rather standard, unless you have another guitar player there to accompany you and make the song more instrumental. The other two cover songs could be really expanded on or changed entirely using what you want to in making it sound like your own. People will cherish a respectful version of their favorite song much more than a 'new-and-improved' (or so you think) version that you have come up with most of the time. Just practice the strumming options, but don't deviate TOO much from the original theme of the song. That's 'making it right.'

9. **Test Your Song On A SMALL Audience:** I do this frequently. I'll hear a song and play it for my wife. If you are lucky like me – then he/she will tell you the truth. You may be reading this and thinking, "Yeah right. My wife/husband won't tell me the truth. They'll just say 'oh it sounds good honey' and then just get back to what they were doing." This is true in many situations, so I can't guarantee that this will work, but I have always found that it does IF you tell the person that you are thinking of playing this live and wanted to see what he/she thinks about it. If you explain to the person that playing this song could be a make-or-break situation, he or she will usually come to your rescue if the song sounds REALLY bad. Most of you can tell with the person's body language – even if that person won't specifically SAY anything to you.
10. **Give It A Go:** Just try the song on an unexpected audience that you play for. If it doesn't work the VERY FIRST TIME, odds are it won't really work the second. Trust me on this. I tried and tried to get one of MY favorite renditions out there for others to hear and it just fell flat. I absolutely LOVE James Taylor, but unfortunately the song I really liked to play was "Sweet Baby James," and didn't really translate well live. It sounded fine musically, but I think the audience wasn't really familiar with the song when I was playing it. If I would have played "Fire and Rain" it would have been fine, but I didn't want to. I just wanted to play that damn song! Sorry – but I had no success. That song now sits in a filing cabinet in File 13, so it won't be used again. It just happens. EXPECT IT and ACCEPT IT.

