

Fingerstyle Guitar *In a Flash*: Module 2 – Beyond The Basics

Alternate Tunings

There are plenty of alternate tunings out there that really push that acoustic fingerstyle sound to the next level. Many of them end up making both chord and fingerstyle arrangements even easier. I'll walk you through a few snippets of songs that use alternate tunings.

The first thing I'd like to do is start out in Open G.

D G D G B D

Here you are tuning your low and high E down to D. Your A string also goes down to G. As you can quickly see, the open notes produced here will end up sounding like a G Major chord, which uses the notes G, B and D. This tuning allows for great rhythm or slide guitar playing in major keys. With a G major chord as your root, you can play major chords by simply barring all of the strings at the same fret with a single finger or a slide.

This tuning can be found in “Walkin' Blues” by Robert Johnson (which Clapton also covered). Here's a snippet:

The image shows a musical score for a snippet of "Walkin' Blues" in Open G tuning (D G D G B D). The score is divided into two measures. Above the staff, the chords G5, G7, G6, and G are indicated for the first measure, and G5, G7, G6, and G for the second. The notation includes a mix of chords and single notes. Below the staff, a fretboard diagram shows the fingerings for each note. The first measure has fret numbers 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0 for the strings from high to low. The second measure has 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0. A slide is indicated with an asterisk and the word "slide" above the staff. The fretboard diagram shows a slide moving from fret 2 to 3 to 4 on the low E string in the first measure, and from fret 3 to 4 on the low E string in the second measure. The fret numbers for the other strings are 0, 3, 3, 2, 2, 0 for the first measure and 0, 0, 3, 3, 2, 2 for the second measure.

While it's not absolutely necessary to break this down, I will do that real quick to help you see where the tones come in:

G5 G7 G6 G G5 G7 G6 G
 D B G D G D B G D G D B G D
 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0
 0 3 3 2 2 0 0 3 3 2 2 0 3 4
 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0
 D B G D G D B G D G D B G D
 G B G D A A# B sl.

The hardest part about transcribing notes as a general rule is the fact that you are tuned differently. I know that seems obvious, but in this case it's also strange because we do still have the D, G, and B strings tuned naturally. So, in order to understand what tones come from an altered tuning, it's a good idea to always revert back to your open strings.

The G5 here is pretty obvious. The G7 chord uses G, B, D and F. Here the “D” is omitted but the 7th property shoots right through doesn't it? This is mostly because that previous G5 had the dominant “5” in it – and by adding the 7th property to the arrangement it REALLY turns bluesy.

While I haven't really discussed the G6 chord, it's pretty easy to follow. The G6 uses G, B, D and E. Thus, the arrangement is 1 – 3 – 5 – 6. Since you know the G7 has that added F note in it, you quite literally move DOWN one tone from that F to get an E note. (So, 7 down to 6 or F down to E)

Everything else here is self-explanatory as far as the notes used. The A – A# - B is reflective of the “new” or altered open G string (which was an A note played open in standard tuning)

Now HOW do we play this? Well – it's EASY for your picking hand.

The image shows a musical score for a guitar run. The top staff contains notes for chords G5, G7, G6, and G. Below the staff is a fretboard diagram with fingerings: 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0 for the first measure; 0, 3, 3, 2, 2, 0 for the second measure; 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0 for the third measure; and 0, 0, 3, 3, 2, 2, 0 for the fourth measure. A slide is indicated over the 3rd and 4th frets in the second measure. Below the fretboard diagram is a thumb position diagram: T, 2, 1, T. The text '*with slide' is written above the fretboard diagram.

If you followed by very first installment on finger flexibility then you can already quickly establish that the thumb can “brush” downward on the first two stacked notes. From there on out it's just the “Crab and Bird Pinch” that you've worked with from the very beginning. While this overall run is basically an A group run (a total of 5 string sets played overall) it also hints at a D group run. The reason this pattern somewhat deviates is for 2 reasons:

1. We are playing something specific from an artist – which isn't the same thing as what I've taught.
2. The tuning is different, so you'll have to adjust a bit. However, it's still a stacked T-1-2 concept.

Another tuning that I think you'll find pretty useful is Open D tuning.

D A D F# A D

Here you are tuning your Low and high E strings down from E to D. Your standard A and D strings remain the same. Your G string comes down slightly to F# (Gb) and your B string goes down to A. As you can expect, this produces a D Major chord (D, F#, A) without fretting anything.

One of my favorite examples of this tuning is “The Cave” by Mumford & Sons. However, there are a few variations of this song with slightly different tunings. First, here's the song in open D:

D A F# D A D
 F# E D A B D F# D B D F# D A D F# D
 4 2 0 0 2 0 0 2 0 0 0 0 0 0
 sl.
 1 T T 1 T

When played in open D tuning, you're dealing almost exclusively with the overall "D" chord concept. However, you can also see that since our tuning has changed, we have to consider a slightly different finger arrangement. When you see what I have tabbed in terms of the picking hand, you'll notice it's all built around just one string plucks that alternate between your thumb and 1st finger. While you COULD very well use your 1st finger for the open D string and then follow up with your 2nd finger for the open F# string, this particular run doesn't necessarily require it.

That's one of the many reasons I use the blueprints I do. They can easily reflect either a consistency OR the option to slightly alter the arrangement into most any tab. In this tab it's got a boom-chuck feel, so I think just your thumb and 1st finger works fine. If you struggle with the crab and bird pinch you might consider playing that open D and open F# string as a 1st and 2nd finger arrangement.

This song has also been played with a capo on fret 2, so I've included that below:

E B G# E B G# E
 G# F# E B C# E G# E C# E G# E C# E G# E
 4 2 0 0 2 0 0 2 0 0 0 0 0 0
 sl.
 1 T T 1 T

The DADF#AD arrangement is now reflective of a "2" increase from the capo.

Add “2” from the D ($D \rightarrow D\#$) and you land on E (low)
Add “2” from the A ($A \rightarrow A\#$) and you land on B
Add “2” from the D ($D \rightarrow D\#$) and you land on E
Add “2” from the F# ($F\# \rightarrow G$) and you land on G#
Add “2” from the A ($A \rightarrow A\#$) and you land on B
Add “2” from the D ($D \rightarrow D\#$) and you land on E (high)

This song, thanks to the capo, is actually going to sound out in E Major. Neat, huh?

Another great alternate tuning is C6 tuning, which is ALSO heavily used by Mumford & Sons.

C A C G C E

This one is SUPER low, but it's fun. You will bring your low E DOWN to C. The A string stays the same. The D string goes DOWN to C. The G string stays the same. The B string goes UP to C and the high E string stays the same.

I am emphasizing the down and up in terms of tuning because that part is super important. If you tried to bring your low E up to a C it would spell out disaster. Your string will break for sure.

If you weren't playing any notes on the “A” string, you'd end up with an open C tuning (C, E, G) so this particular tuning is rather effective if you are somewhat careful.

In the tab below I have abridged the overall concept behind “I Will Wait” by Mumford & Sons in a way that you can actually see where this C6 tuning can become so effective.

The diagram shows a guitar fretboard with six strings labeled E, C, G, C, A, C from top to bottom. The fret numbers for each string in four measures are as follows:

Measure	E	C	G	C	A	C
1	0	0	0	0	3	3
2	0	0	5	5	5	5
3	0	0	0	0	3	3
4	0	0	7	7	7	7

Chord diagrams below the fretboard:

- Measure 1: C E G
- Measure 2: F E C
- Measure 3: C E G
- Measure 4: G E C D

What this ultimately ends up sounding like is a C – F – C – G progression, which is basically the main verse theme. What makes this sound rather interesting is that you have those open notes coming through that hint both at the overall chord with a slight “off” tone. The first and third measure is purely C (C, E, G) but the second measure is only partially F (F, C) with that extra “E” coming through. That actually ends up sounding like an Fmaj7 more than anything, where Fmaj7 is F (A) C, E.

There's just no “A” in it – but the doubling of C is pretty nifty. The last measure is built on a neat little idea as well. It starts at the overall “G” note, which makes us think it's purely G. However, it's actually a Cadd9 chord. This is also where the concept of a split chord becomes pretty neat as well. It's going to SOUND like a G just because of that overall G tone at the beginning. When it's played consistently (4 times in the measure) it will stay that way. The inclusion of the E, C, D stacked tones mixes things up.

While G uses G, B, D you only find the G and D in it. Those C and E notes (which were consistent from the beginning) keep the overall “FEEL” as though it's purely a C progression.

In terms of the fingerpicking pattern, I would actually BRUSH this one:

E 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0
 C 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0
 G 0 0 0 0 | 5 5 5 5 | 0 0 0 0 | 7 7 7 7
 C
 A 3 3 3 3 | 5 5 5 5 | 3 3 3 3 | 7 7 7 7
 C

T 1
 1
 1

T 1
 1
 1

T 1
 1
 1

T 1
 1
 1

You'll see what I mean in the video. As you can see above, there's no “easy” way to use the crab and bird pinch here because the thumb would have to move rather quickly from the low to high strings. So, a brush would work. However, since we are nearing the end of this series, I will go ahead and show you a possible way to play this using a “full (ish)” FOUR digit approach:

E 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0
 C 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0
 G 0 0 0 0 | 5 5 5 5 | 0 0 0 0 | 7 7 7 7
 C
 A 3 3 3 3 | 5 5 5 5 | 3 3 3 3 | 7 7 7 7
 C

T 3
 2
 1

T 3
 2
 1

T 3
 2
 1

T 3
 2
 1

I wouldn't dwell on this as it can be rather tricky, but if you have no issue keeping that 1st and 2nd finger “glued” together, you might find that the 3rd finger is also pretty easy. That's how you get BIG fingerstyle progressions.

In any event, you are always free to stack as many fingers together as you want or can. The biggest point is to make sure that you ARE able to stack the 1st and 2nd fingers together easily. If not, try an alternate route. If so, then you already know how to make any basic fingerstyle passage MUCH bigger with that added 3rd finger. It will always stack below your 2nd finger. Naturally, this would also mean you could use your 4th finger, but that's somewhat uncommon unless you are working with some serious fingerstyle from artists like Chet Atkins or Tommy Emmanuel.