

TUTORIAL: Learning Songs On The Fly

“Go ahead. Pick a song – any song!”

It’s one thing to learn a song from a lesson that I’ve provided, but it’s a horse of a different color when you decide to tackle one on your own. While some songs are extremely easy to figure out, others can be downright frustrating. My goal in this tutorial is to take you step-by-step through a few techniques you can use to quickly play any song in only a few minutes.

Important Notes

1. While this technique will work for any song, please realize that if you have chosen an extremely difficult or rare song you might need to spend a few minutes more on it.
2. Just because you can learn how to strum and sing along to a song does NOT mean you will make it all the way through it without errors. No matter what you’ll still need to practice it so that you can fine tune the creative engine that goes along with it.
3. You may run into chord that you are unfamiliar with. This is part of the process, but I’ll give you a few tips and links that will help you work with less than normal chord shapes.

Step 1: Decide on ONE Song

While this seems obvious, it can be one of the hardest steps. I’m sure there are dozens – even hundreds of songs you want to learn, but for now you need to decide on one particular song that is either easy or at least relatively easy. Here are a few things to avoid for now:

- Songs originally performed on piano: This isn’t always a big deal, but if you want to learn songs from Elton John, Billy Joel, Lady Gaga, Little Richard, Freddie Mercury, etc. you’ll find that many of these musician’s songs are actually a bit difficult.

Take for example the song “Walking in Memphis” by Marc Cohn. This song is basically F, C, G, and Am the entire time, excluding the crazy bridge. However, because this song is performed on piano, the only way you’ll play it is if you are prepared for some intermediate fingerstyle. The real issue here is that the chords come way too fast for basic guitar strumming. Even if you applied only power chords, the movement is just too brisk. In the case of this particular song, it’s not about weird chord shapes – it’s about playability.

- Songs that feature a variety of key changes: This isn’t always a big deal either, but if when listening to a song you find that the ‘feel’ of it drastically changes, odds are there is a ‘change’ – a key change.

The song “The Gambler” by Kenny Rogers is an example of a song that CAN be played, even though there is a key change. The change takes place from E to F, so really it’s not a big change either vocally or with the chords involved. With the EZ Strummer series, I usually take songs that DO have key changes and omit them if possible (“Thriller” by Michael Jackson is an example of a song that contains key changes in which I omitted. The song itself is hard enough to sing and play – correctly). It DOES affect the integrity of the song at times, but not always. Besides, what

we're learning with EZ Strummer is not theory or intense song structuring – we're concerned with playing chords and singing at the same time - even if the singing isn't always top-notch.

A different example of a song that DOES contain key changes is another Michael Jackson song. It's called "Earth Song" and changes key from Em to F#m. Again it's not a BIG change, but it is a change nonetheless and is very vocally challenging. There are a ton of songs that do this, but realize that when you first start trying to learn songs on the fly, a key change can and usually will affect the entire end or beginning performance.

Quick Note: How do we know if there is a key change? Without getting into too much confusing theory, the main thing you'll notice is a change in structure.

For example: A given song has a Verse 1 progression of Am – C – F – G and is played throughout the entire first verse. Let's say you've played through two verses that have the same progression, a chorus that had a standard progression, and now you're at the third verse. Verse 3 has a progression of A – E – D – A. I just chose one real quick as an example. What has happened here is a key change from minor to Major. An A minor now becomes an A Major. This is a key change. It's an instant red flag. The song "Something" by The Beatles (George Harrison) changes key at least three times! While not all key changes are extremely noticeable, usually you will hear them – or as I like to say – 'feel them.'

- Watch out for a difficult combination of songs: Unfortunately I can't avoid this, but you can. Even though the focus of Step 1 is to 'pick one song' I cannot stress enough that when you begin building your song arsenal you must be careful of the songs you are choosing. When I produced the 5 DVD, 100 song strumming collection I had a HUGE variety of songs to play for you. One minute I'm working on "Talk Dirty to Me" by Poison and the next minute I'm working on "Mean" by Taylor Swift. There's a vast difference as you know. It's not that those songs are hard to play – it's just that those songs are quite different in their approach. If you can play both of these songs one right after another then you have no worries. You're right on target with creating song diversity for a live set or a gig. However, not all of us can do this repeatedly. Often you can get by with a few songs of different styles, but as you keep going you'll find not only are you literally 'confusing your own voice' you are also creating an awkward feeling for your audience. Again, we're not focused on building a set list, but I wanted to touch base on picking songs that are in an odd combination based on learning them. Everything between the two songs I just mentioned is different. The chords, the singing, the strumming and even the attitude – they're all just completely different. Wait until you are 100% ready to do such a thing or you'll end up frustrated.

So, you've found the song you want to learn and are ready to get started? Let's begin.

Step 2: Song Research

Don't worry – there isn't really much to it. This is really the true 'skin and bones' of learning any song, so be sure you pay close attention to this step. It's exactly how I am able to get so many songs done in a short period of time. Of course, I don't spend an enormous amount of time on any one song, because my focus with the EZ Strummer series is to provide you with a guide in learning a variety of songs. I don't always sing the best – and the chords I use are sometimes highly over-simplified, but I also leave it up to

you to build to or take away from the lesson I provide you. Remember – it's about what YOU can do with a song. The following points should be approached AFTER you've decided on your song.

- **Go to YouTube.com** and enter the song title. It's the easiest way to listen to a song and often offers other variations from other musicians, both amateur and pro. Sometimes you'll find actual performances and sometimes you'll find 'user-created' videos. As long as the song is there it doesn't matter.
- **Listen to the song** until you reach the first chorus, or major change. In a song like "All Along the Watchtower" you won't hear a dramatic difference between the verse and chorus, so this is an example that you could listen to all the way through if you'd like. However, a song such as "Lucky" by Jason Mraz and Colbie Caillat has a completely different approach from the verse to the chorus. When you listen to the song and hear what sounds like a change of some sort, be sure to stop listening.
- **Search for the song online** using keywords such as "lucky chords jason mraz" and odds are you'll find a version. (Hint: I NEVER try to decipher the chords myself unless I can't find someone's version elsewhere – it is totally not worth your time.)
- **View the chord structure** from the version you've found. Often you'll find that songs are right in key, but you'll often find the opposite as well. Sometimes the versions are just plain wrong. The lyrics aren't all that important. If you find a version that includes the lyrics, great. If you don't, there's no need to worry. You really just need the chords anyway. Now that you have the song pulled up, go back to the version you saw on YouTube.
- **Lightly play along** with the song. If there is an intro to the song, don't concern yourself with that for now. You're just listening to the chord structure to see if it fits in some way or another. After you've pressed play on YouTube and listened (not played) through the intro (if applicable) the overall theme should start coming in. It doesn't matter if the song starts with a chorus or a verse. Once you get into the real idea of the song, you'll instantly know whether or not the version you've found is going to work. If the core 'feel' of the song is there, you'll be able to work with the song. Here are some important points:
 - a. **If the version you pulled up says to begin with a C chord, and it sounds like it might actually be a C7 chord, realize that the song is still playable. It could just mean that the song has been stripped to an even easier version than necessary. There are a ton of absolute beginners out there, and a C7 chord could look terrifying even though it really isn't.** *Of course, the advantage of taking lessons through me is that I take care of all of this for you so you'll never have to worry about the accuracy of overall chord formations – I've gotten rather accustomed to hearing and seeing the errors after so many years.*
 - b. **Pay very special attention to any instructional notes given (when they are given) to guarantee that you are playing a particular song with a capo or not, tuning appropriately, and even whether or not the song itself is even in the original key.** **This happens often and for an assortment of reasons. A song DOES NOT need to be in the original key to be played. The key could have changed because of a capo, tuning, or just for ease of vocals. I always try to provide you with a song closest to the key of the original – and sometimes my vocals suffer for it – but you don't necessarily need to worry*

about that when learning songs on your own. Sing what feels natural. Take for example “You’re Beautiful” by James Blunt. It calls for a capo on the eighth fret, and unless you know how to sing in octaves – something I’m not too good at myself – you might find it to be entirely too high in pitch to sing. Simply move the capo to a lower fret number, or remove it entirely. Play around with that idea and you might be surprised at how the song itself changes the tone or ‘feel’ instantly.)

Step 3: Dissecting the Song

So far you’ve (1) found the song (2) listened to it a bit to determine relative accuracy and (3) decided whether or not the version you’ve found feels playable. Now it’s time to dissect it. This, more than anything, is *not* a step-by-step approach, but an overall task.

* Remember not to worry about the intro yet. An intro is not always the same as the verse, chorus, bridge, solo, etc. and can be addressed after the core concept has been implemented.

You have the song queued on YouTube. You have the chord names from wherever you found the song. You agree that (let’s say) the verse you’re listening to on YouTube from the song itself sounds relatively close to the chord names you have in front of you. Odds are the overall chord progression you’ve found is probably pretty close. The version you found might have a few omitted chords or added chords that are (1) technically incorrect because of name, shape, etc. (2) the lyrics – if applicable, are completely wrong and/or (3) the key seems off – which is probably ok depending on the song itself. (Remember that the version you find might be more suitable for that person’s vocal. A man singing a song originally from a woman – or vice versa – will usually allow you to embrace these key changes. TRUST ME!)

Now it’s time to figure out the strumming pattern! Even if the song isn’t a strumming song you can usually make it one – if the chords are rather straight forward. Virtually ANY song can be fingerpicked, sped up, slowed down, or any combination of the three. The goal is to determine how you want it to sound. Always keep in mind that sometimes less is more. You need to do your best in creating an accurate representation of a song while keeping your own style involved. When I say accurate I don’t mean that a song must be exactly as the original, or even close to it. Instead I am referring to the idea that you want to keep a given song enjoyable and a close relative so that others can instantly hear what you are trying to do. As much as I loathe “American Idol,” there are plenty of times in the past (when I watched it) that I instantly knew what song was being played before the actual core of the song came in. Recently I have been watching more of “The Voice” because it seems to fall more into what I am trying to do for you. Regardless of opinion over which (if either) show is a better representation of what the overall goal as a musician/singer is, the truth is that both of these shows convey the same idea – doing your best in making a song ‘your own.’ So, all that aside, how do we figure out the strumming pattern?

WARNING: The following is ALL opinion. You do not necessarily need to agree with me here, but if you’ll just try what I am about to tell you, I think by the end you will agree – 100%.

My opinion is that virtually EVERY song has only a handful of strumming patterns. That’s right – EVERY song. In the past I talked about this, but as I keep moving forward the feeling is becoming even truer with every song. You just hear it.

So, which strumming patterns almost always work? Before I get into this, I need to give you a quick reference on how I offer strumming patterns.

- D = this always equals a down stroke
- U = this always equals an up stroke
- , (comma) = a rest or break between a given pattern
- X = sometimes I use this to equal a mute

So, for a pattern like this:

D, DD, DUD

I am indicating a down, a rest (or slight gap) two downs, another rest/gap, one down – one up – one down

Notice that the first “D” was followed by a comma, but that the next “DD” didn’t have a comma in between. That is due to a quick strum, meaning there is no rest/space/gap between these two strums. The same applies to the “DUD” where you simply play it as “**Down-Up-Down**” and not “**Down, rest, Down.**”

What about the “X” or “mute”?

Every now and then you might see this, but usually I allow you to add this in as you listen or learn the song that contains an “X/mute” because in many instances you can choose to omit it or add your own influence to it. An example of a song that uses mutes (and one that you pretty much **MUST** play the mutes) would be “Smells Like Teen Spirit” by Nirvana.

Here is the chord pattern for the intro theme (standard tuning):

e	----- -----
B	----- -----
G	-----3-3- -0-----6-6-
D	-3--3-3-xxxx-3-3- -06--6-6-xxxx-6-6-
A	-3--3-3-xxxx-1-1- -06--6-6-xxxx-4-4-
E	-1--1-1-1-xxxx----- -4--4-4-4-xxxx-----

F5 – A#5 – G#5 – C#5 (repeat)

You’ll notice the open notes on the A, D, and G strings (creating a Dsus4 chord!) at the end of each measure. Those are really just breaks in between each chord, and can be played either as a one-stroke, open, and quick change, or those could actually be muted as well. That part is irrelevant. What we’re looking for is the overall strumming pattern.

The ‘5’s” you see are indicative of basically power chords (let’s not get into the technicalities of whether or not this is indeed a ‘chord’)

In essence, you’re playing an F - A# - G# - C# (or, if you like them better as flats: F – Bb – Ab – Db)

Here’s the BASIC strumming pattern (not including any mutes):

D, DU, ____ DD, D (repeat)

Try that right now. You'll feel there's something missing, but the pattern is correct. How did I determine what the strumming pattern was? I just played it VERY slowly and watched my pick. Truly it was that easy. Of course, this is an easy song to figure out because we all know it. That's why I picked it.

However, that _____ you see is the massive gap created in the song that needs to be addressed. This is when the mute comes in handy.

As you can see, the tab itself calls for four mutes, indicated with an "X" (and is usually the case.)

So, we're lucky because we have the actual tab. For now let's apply it.

D, DU, XXXX, DD, D (repeat)

So you see that you added the four mutes in, but how do you strum them? This is technically up to you, but often mutes are used as rhythm additions, so a simple DU (repeated if necessary) usually suffices.

That would mean the overall feel of the intro would be this (including the Dsus4 for purposes of the strumming pattern):

Pattern	D, DU	XXXX	DD	D	D, DU	XXXX	DD	D
Chords	F5	(mutes)	A#5	(Dsus4)	G#5	(mutes)	C#5	(Dsus4)
(mutes)	-----	DUDU	-----	-----	-----	DUDU	-----	-----

The pattern is the same, and repeats after each Dsus4 (which are really just open A, D, and G strings).

If you chose to mute the "Dsus4" instead, you would just use an X instead and strum down. Mutes don't technically matter how you strum them, unless you are playing a Reggae-style song. If that is the case you can always remember that Reggae usually starts on the upbeat, not the downbeat, so usually your first strum will be an upstroke.

To be honest, the only way you'll ever really figure out a strumming pattern (if you are determined that you need one – which you really don't – because the goal here is to create your own style) is by playing it very slowly and adding/subtracting a few more or less strums to get in time with the song. I won't go into detail as I have before about how important lyrical deliveries are in a song, but the lyrics are actually the easiest way to determine a strumming pattern. You've seen that tutorial before though. Lyrics are ALWAYS poetry, and ALWAYS have a structure. Surprisingly, rap music is one of the most technical styles of poetry, and while I'm not a huge fan of rap, listening to it will definitely provide you with a better understanding of poetry 'in motion' so to speak.

On the opposite side of rap you have STORYTELLING folk/blues/jazz. Notice I emphasized storytelling. There is a vast difference between (and no offense is meant here) singing and playing "Subterranean Homesick Blues," which contains a bunch of seemingly random phrases that make no real sense as a whole. That's not saying it's not a great song – but that isn't the structure of 'storytelling.' As an English major, I've spent thousands of hours reading about the intricacies that 'make' a story.

Without getting into an actual lesson here, because I promise I'll bore you to death, a true story must have a beginning, middle, and ending (and of course, a rising action, falling action, denouncement, oh here I go...sorry)

Instead, songs such as "Tom Traubert's Blues" by Tom Waits, or even "Hurricane" by Bob Dylan tell entire stories that can be understood from the very beginning to the very end. These songs allow you to really understand a firm structure and implement strumming patterns based on the lyrical delivery. The beauty of songs that actually 'tell' a story (and not just talk about random stuff) is that they allow you to keep a structure while changing and creating entirely different strumming patterns within them. Think about "Hallelujah" by Leonard Cohen. How many versions of this song have you heard? Jeff Buckley took it to an extreme with a crazy intro. The feel is the same, the chords are the same, and the lyrics are the same. However, it felt different.

Enough of all that. Now you need to see an assortment of GUARANTEED strumming patterns that will work for virtually any style of music.

Again – I'm NOT categorizing most of these strumming patterns. The easiest thing to do is find the song you want to learn and see which one of these patterns – in their PUREST form, works. One of them will – I guarantee it.

Fool-Proof Strumming Patterns (in no particular order):

1. DDD, DU
2. DDDDDDDD, DU
3. D, D, DU
4. DUD, DDDD.....
5. D, DD, DD, DU
6. X, U, X, U, X, U (Reggae)
7. DDDD (Heavy Rock/Metal)

There are more, but virtually every song you'll learn will be based solely off these standard patterns. When you check out the 30 strumming songs you'll see how I altered these basic patterns. I ALWAYS keep the seven patterns you just saw as a template to work with each and every song produced through the EZ Strummer series. Of course keep in mind that there may be a combination of these patterns found within one song, and always remember that virtually every strumming pattern will repeat itself in one way, shape, or form. There may be a few added "D's" or "U's" but the idea is still the same.

Step 4: Finalizing Your Song

Believe it or not you are basically finished. If you found a song that allows you to play right along with the one on YouTube then you are in luck. If there are a few issues, that shouldn't stop you from learning it. Just step back and think of the logical variations of a given chord and see if those work.

When I worked on "This Love" by Maroon 5 there was a D7 listed, which I found would work better if it were a Dm7. I'm not saying that is 100% correct. I don't care. It worked and that is what matters. If you got the collection I highly doubt you stopped immediately and said – "Hmm...that doesn't work!" You probably didn't even notice it. Even though there is a difference, sometimes you just need to fake it.

EXCEPTIONS:

- Diminished chords **MUST** be played. Trust me. Don't run from them. Just learn them. If there is a diminished chord, such as in "Friends In Low Places" by Garth Brooks (E dim) then you'll need to play it.
- There are some chords you can't substitute. You can't **USUALLY** substitute a major for a minor (unless the entire song is wrong) or vice versa.
- While this isn't always the case, you may find that a Bm7 is harder to play than a Bm. Ok, I'm guilty of this. If it sounds "okay" then go for it. However, certain songs need to be played as they are intended. Again, don't hold this against me. These are two totally different chords, but if your goal is to get through a song easily, and you can alter your vocals just enough to get by with it, eh....go ahead. Who cares? Other guitarists maybe, but again – eh.
- Try to avoid changing a Cmaj or Cmaj7 to a standard C. Sometimes this makes a difference. Sometimes it doesn't. (I'm full of 'sometimes' but it really is true.)
- There **WILL** be times you see a series of sharps instead of flats, and sometimes these are shown within the same passage.

For example, "Melissa" by The Allman Brothers Band contains this progression:

E – F#m – Abm – F#m (at least my version)

You may also see it like this: E – Gbm – G#m – Gbm

Always remember sharps and flats have dual names:

A = PRIMARY (no change)
A# = secondary (change = to Bb)
B = PRIMARY (no change)
C = PRIMARY (no change)
C# = secondary (change = to Db)
D = PRIMARY (no change)
D# = secondary (change = to Eb)
E = PRIMARY (no change)
F = PRIMARY (no change)
F# = secondary (change = to Gb)
G = PRIMARY (no change)
G# = secondary (change = to Ab)

Which means this: A#/Bb – C#/Db – D#/Eb – F#/Gb – G#/Ab (where "/" indicates "OR")

Final Thoughts

I hope you enjoyed this tutorial. Even more importantly, I hope it opened a few doors of consciousness that you might not have grasped before. If you leave this tutorial remembering one thing, I cannot stress enough how much I hope it's the following:

No matter what song you want to learn...no matter how easy or hard a song is...no matter how well you can sing and/or play along...and no matter whether you consider yourself a beginner guitarist or an advanced fingerstyle/solo player, rhythm has always, and will always be the most important fundamental in learning to be a well-rounded musician. The goal you should strive for is making rhythm a TOOL and not a crutch. Strumming patterns will only allow you to duplicate a song. Adding or taking away from the original song will allow you to shine as a respected musician. Most importantly – you'll find yourself learning more than you ever thought possible when you take away the confusion of counting beats and worrying about time signatures. After all, the song is there – you just have to plug into it.

Sincerely,
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