

Chapter 4 – Deciphering Strumming Patterns

So maybe you've spent a year, a decade, or half of your life DESPERATELY trying to understand how strumming patterns work. You've seen it all. Arrow diagrams, beats using 1, 2, 3, 4 and even patterns based on note values – but nothing really works?

That's because – unfortunately, you're simply trying too hard. You'll NEVER, and I repeat NEVER find a musician that is so uniform in their strumming that there is an actual guaranteed template that works. Instead, you'll find a musician that tends to use the same overall concept, or even more importantly – one that improvises.

Willie Nelson is a good example. He rarely uses the same strumming pattern, or even the same riffs for that matter. He is an example of a guitar player that uses improvisation instead of an overall concept.

Bob Dylan is a good example of a musician that tends to lean toward an overall concept.

Three things that DO NOT matter when learning to strum:

1. Time Signatures – before you say I've lost my mind, hear me out. Time signatures ARE important – if you're into music theory and complete duplication of a given song. However, you're following my EZ program, and by now you've most certainly realized that my whole formula revolves around making a song 'your own.' In other words – you don't need to focus on the logistics of a song. Instead you need to dissect it. We'll be doing that here.
2. Note Usage – Eighth note? Quarter note? Dotted notes? Staccatos? Half notes? It's all WAY too confusing. What if you don't want to play straight eighth notes? Say you want to provide a bit of suspense in a chord, a chord change, or even an entire progression? Do you need to adjust each and every note within a song to make it work? No. I'll show you how to avoid it all in this chapter.
3. Tempo – Ok. This DOES matter a little, but not to the point where it is of extreme importance. You've seen variations of popular performances played in what feels like a slow motion rendition just as often as you've heard songs that are sped up. It might FEEL like Hendrix' version of "All Along The Watchtower" is sped up tremendously. It's not really. Just a little. However, the way Hendrix took Dylan's version and created an amazing rock anthem out of it does tend to make the listener feel as if it has been dramatically altered. Another example, still using "All Along The Watchtower" is the Dave Matthews version. If you haven't heard it yet – you simply MUST search for it online. You'll find it. In this performance, Dave uses the same chords as the original Dylan version, but instead he slowed the tempo down to create a very unique and engaging introduction and vocalization. All he did was slow the lyrics down as well. That's the key to it all. If you slow down the chord progression, you MUST slow down the vocalization, or lyrical delivery. That's all there is to it. The beauty of the EZ Strummer method is that I use the concept of chords supplied with lyrics so that no matter your ability, you can pick up the song without fussing with note usage, tempo, or time signatures.

Now that you know what you DO NOT need to focus on, let's work with what we DO need.

The Key to Deciphering Strumming Patterns

If you already know this, consider it a refresher tutorial. Before I begin this tutorial, please understand that there ARE times that you read a chord/lyric sheet and the chords run off the page, making it look strange – out of whack so to speak.

Here's an example using "All Along The Watchtower" that is correct:

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Am          G          F    G
"There must be some kind of way out of here,"
Am    G      F G
said the joker to the thief,
Am          G    F G  Am    G    F G
"There's too much confusion.....I can't get no relief.
Am G          F    G  Am G    F G
Business men, they drink my wine, plowmen dig my earth,
Am    G    F    G  Am    G    F G
None of them along the line know what any of it is worth."
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Here's an example that is incorrect:

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Am          G          F    G
"There must be some kind of way out of here,"
Am    G      F G
said the joker to the thief,
Am          G    F G  Am    G    F G
"There's too much confusion.....I can't get no relief.
Am G          F    G  Am G    F G
Business men, they drink my wine, plowmen dig my earth,
Am    G    F    G  Am    G    F G
None of them along the line know what any of it is worth."
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As you can see, it's not the chords that are incorrect. It's the way they are lined up. This happens from time to time, and just needs to be adjusted visually.

Am G F G
 "There must be some kind of way out of here,"
 Am G F G
 said the joker to the thief,
 Am G F G Am G F G
 "There's too much confusion.....I can't get no relief.
 Am G F G Am G F G
 Business men, they drink my wine, plowmen dig my earth,
 Am G F G Am G F G
 None of them along the line know what any of it is worth."

The easy part is already done for you. You have the chords listed SOMEWHERE above the lyrics. However, they just aren't in a logical format because you know that in this song, The Am appears BEFORE the line "There must be..."

It's just a fact and only takes a second to realize. What else do you notice about JUST the first and second lines? The chords repeat. Am – G – F – G over and over. What does this tell you? For starters, it throws up a red flag that at LEAST the first two lines offer the same chords – and in turn – MUST offer the same pattern. Now keep digging. Do you see ANY chord change from Am-G-F-G at all in the first verse? We don't do we?

That can ONLY mean one thing – if you get the first two lines down, simply repeat what you've just learned. Of course, there are songs that don't repeat the same progression over and over, but I'll get into that in a moment. Remember – even though we are using the lyrics to decide the progression, in this case we only have a simple and CONSTANT progression, which means in THIS case we don't need to focus on the lyrics. Instead our simple progression just needs to be strummed out to decide a consistent concept.

Even if you use straight downstrokes in a 1,2,3,4 fashion, you can easily hear where a chord change needs to take place using JUST the lyrics.

Lyrics are just like sentences, with up and down inflections for particular words. Here's a quick English lesson for you (I was an English major – sorry).

"Are you going to the store today."

What's wrong with this sentence? It's not a question is it, because it doesn't include a question mark. Therefore it is a statement. However, the signification of "Are" lets us know that it NEEDS to be a question. I won't get into why, but you know typical 'question' words. (Are, When, Why, Where, Is, Could, Do, etc.)

"Are you going to the store today?"

Now that we've added the question mark, we KNOW it is a question (in addition to the word 'are'). What if we added a few elements to this question that produce vocal inflections? Sounds easy – and it is.

When we want to provide emphasis in a word, we tend to either **BOLD** it, use UPPER CASE, or even *ITALICS*. Am I starting to go off track? No. Actually it is the EASIEST way to understand how lyrics can provide chord changes for you. For now let's use BOLD to denote our vocal inflection with the sentence I've just provided.

“Are you going to the store today?”

There are a total of FOUR bolded inflections here. ARE, GO(ing), STORE, and (to)DAY. The parentheses indicate that these are only a part of the word being used.

First, ask this question without changing your tone at all. Monotone basically. There's absolutely no emphasis or inflection at all is there?

Now, ask this question and RAISE your pitch a little when you speak the words in bold. Do you hear the inflection? It signifies a guaranteed question. Music is just language. Remember that.

As you will hear, there is a definite difference between the two same sentences.

But does it work in songs? Absolutely!

Here is the first phrase of “All Along The Watchtower” again, without the chords:

“There must be some kind of way out of here...”

This phrase does NOT start with a question-based word does it? Does that mean we can't use the same format? No. Check this out:

“There must be some (kind of) way out of here...”

Most songs will start with a series of intro chords or lead passages that reflect somewhat of the same tone found within a song. In the case of this one, we intro with the same chords of Am, G, F, and G.

So, at the end of the G, just when you're ready to begin your verse, we need an emphasis. Have you ever noticed when you talk, you generally speak in a much louder tone with the first few words you speak. Sometimes you do this AS you begin speaking more and more.

Try whispering a funny story to someone.

You'll start off with a whisper, but as you get more excited, you'll either raise your tone, raise your pitch, or both. It works the same way with learning strumming patterns with lyrics.

When you first begin this phrase, you want to emphasize that it's 'time' to speak or sing. Let's add the bold to the first word in the phrase:

“**There** must be some (kind of) way out of here...”

Now we’re looking for ‘important’ words. ‘Must’ and ‘be’ aren’t really important words because when you use the phrase you’ll find that you slur ‘must’ and ‘be’ to the point that there is no real vocal inflection. In other words, when you speak this line, odds are you say it as ‘mustbe’ without any upward or downward tone.

Because there are a total of four chords played, even if they are chords that repeat, we need to find four logical words to attach these chords to.

*Note: In the original Dylan version, he just says “There must be some way out of here..” but this doesn’t matter. There are quite a few variations on this song.

When you speak this phrase, you’ll find that you use emphasis on the word ‘some’, as if you are pleading for a specific KIND of way. The words ‘some’ or ‘any’ lead the listener to search for the way. It may seem like this is MORE work than just learning the strumming pattern. It really isn’t because once you learn this ONE time, you can use it for any song.

“**There** must be **some** kind of way out of here...”

Now we need to find two more word. We’ve already found the words ‘there’ and ‘some’. When you speak this phrase again, or even listen to the way Dylan, Hendrix, or Matthews use(d) this phrase, you’ll hear that the words ‘way out’ are drawn together, BUT the inflection is dedicated to the word ‘out.’

You’ll also hear that in addition to the word ‘out,’ the word ‘of’ is also drawn in. Basically the entire phrase of ‘way out of’ is one quick word pushed together. This is VERY common when singing. Certain words go into groupings to make them easier to understand as a whole. It’s even MORE common in rap and blues music due to the usage of slang.

Of the phrase ‘way out of’ you’ll hear that the most important, or most emphasized word here will be the word ‘out.’ That means we need a chord there. I will go ahead and bold the entire phrase, because depending on how you speak, any of these three words will suffice.

“**There** must be **some** kind of (**way out of**) here...”

In case you haven’t noticed yet, we’re actually using the lyrics to provide the chord changes. I’ve used parentheses for ‘way out of’ to let you know it is a word grouping. We just need ONE more chord.

Since the word ‘here’ doesn’t really offer any kind of solution to the statement, we don’t need to focus on that word. Instead what we are going to have to do here is place the chord at the END of the phrase. Why? Well you know we need four chords, but there isn’t a word to supply the change. Just like with guitar, this would indicate a ‘ghost’ phrase (or ghost note for the guitarist). We are using a dynamic pause here that would indicate the progression MUST begin the repeat. When you come across a series of lines that have no lyrics to accompany the chord, it must be assumed you simply insert it based on the

progression in mind. All we need to do is add a quick G chord so that we can round out the measure and begin our repeat of the same progression.

Now we have the finished product:

“There must be some kind of (way out of) here...” (ghost)

Remember – the word ‘ghost’ is just a term I am throwing in here. It’s not part of the actual song. If we take all of the OTHER words that have been used, we have what is called a fragment. It’s not a sentence, but it can be made a sentence using a general principle of language – forming a statement or question. There are only TWO types of sentences in their basic form. A statement or question.

“There some way out” (this is incorrect because it is a fragment)

“IS there some way out?” (by adding the word ‘is’ you can create a question.)

“There IS some way out.” (by adding the word ‘is’ you can create a statement.)

“There IS some way out!” (still adding the word ‘is’ you create a statement with exclamation.)

Now of course, you know these aren’t the correct lines, but the concept of using the most basic principles of language – after all music IS language – you can deduce where a chord change takes place – as long as you can easily create a statement or question.

You might not even realize it yet, but this works for every single song you’ll ever want to learn – even songs that have no complete sentence structure. Now we just need to add the chords to watch everything unfold.

Am G F G
“There must be some kind of (way out of) here...” (ghost)

Am G F G
“There must be some kind of (way out of) here...” (ghost)

Am G F G
“There must be some kind of (way out of) here...” (ghost)

By simply grouping the words ‘way out of’ you can create your own sped up or slowed down tempo. The video will explain exactly what I mean.

You can create a folk version, funk version, and even a complete time shift if you choose! All you need to understand is how to find the important words in a song.

In Chapter 5 we’ll use a song that doesn’t repeat the same progression or full sentences!

How To Apply The Strumming Pattern

Here's what you've really been waiting for. What you just learned sure seemed like a lot, but now the concept of strumming these chords will be much easier.

We still only need to focus on the first phrase, because the rest of the song just repeats. Let's take a look ONE more time:

Am G F G
“There must be some kind of (way out of) here...” (ghost)

Without getting into time signatures or confusing patterns, the last thing we need to do is use STRAIGHT downstrokes in a 1, 2, 3, 4 fashion.

On the video you'll see me playing the first phrase using the 1, 2, 3, 4. You'll hear that it just doesn't sound developed enough. However, by simply playing the 1, 2, 3, 4 over and over, you'll be able to play the progression. All you have to do now is find where you want to add any strumming changes so that the song (1) fits the tempo of the original – if you choose to do this and (2) allow the vocal passage to stay clean and clear.