

PERFORMANCE 2

By Vinnie DeMasi

Instructional Design: Stig Mathisen, Guitar Program Chair, Musicians Institute

Edited by Joe Bergamini

Digital book design and cover by Mike Hoff

Layout by Rick Gratton

Music engraving by Willie Rose

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Managing Editor: Joe Bergamini

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Chapter 1: The Acoustic Guitar

From the lute music of the early Renaissance to the breathtaking cascade of notes summoned by masterful steel-string players like Tommy Emmanuel, the stringed acoustic instrument has held a prominent place in the musical lexicon. For centuries, the traditional acoustic guitar was the European classical style. These instruments were hand-crafted from wood. They were originally strung with gut strings and later—thanks to the mass production of synthetic fiber—nylon strings. The mass-produced steel-string guitar was a 20th century American development made possible by the manufacture of cheap wire for steel strings and industrial machinery that allowed for the intricately sculpted and braced wood bodies to be built cost-effectively in larger quantities. Compared with nylon strings, steel strings produce a brighter sound with more frequency response across a broader spectrum range. They also put more tension on the neck. As a result, steel-string acoustics require more internal bracing to compensate for this added stress.

Absent its own tradition of classical music, the United States began to develop a rich heritage of “folk” music. Among the different genres that emerged, early styles such as blues, bluegrass, and country/Western relied heavily on acoustic instruments like banjos and mandolins. In 1916, a leading manufacturer of acoustic instruments, the C.F. Martin Company, introduced the dreadnaught body-shaped steel-string acoustic guitar. Named after a class of battleships, the dreadnaught proved to be the perfect combination of shape, sound, playability and marketability. By 1931, Martin had perfected the dreadnaught-steel string acoustic, and the D-28 models from that year became the standard against which all other acoustic steel-strings would be modeled and measured.

In the late '40s and early '50s, the American Folk movement in popular music featured many artists singing along with acoustic guitar accompaniment. Lead Belly, The Kingston Trio, Woody Guthrie and The Weavers first brought acoustic folk music into American homes via radio hits and TV performances. In the early '60s, Bob Dylan and a new generation of folk artists such as Peter, Paul and Mary, and Phil Ochs used the music as a platform for political and social commentary, attracting an audience of young adult listeners and elevating the steel-stringed acoustic guitar to iconic status.

Influenced by Dylan and encouraged by an audience that was artistically broad-minded, bands like The Beatles and The Rolling Stones began integrating acoustic 6- and 12-string guitars and folk elements in their music. During the '70s, even hard rock combos that normally relied heavily on loud amplification and the latest electronic equipment would feature acoustic music quite prominently in their repertoire. Led Zeppelin regularly played a three- or four-song acoustic set during their otherwise electrified concerts, and several early compositions by the band Genesis (such as “Supper’s Ready”) were built around three layered 12-string acoustic guitars. The Who’s “Behind Blue Eyes,” The Rolling Stones’ “Angie” and “Wild Horses,” and Pink Floyd’s “Wish You Were Here” are all examples of mellow acoustic hits by otherwise hard-rocking electric bands. Other artists of the era such as Joni Mitchell, America and Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young had a sound that incorporated electric instrumentation but was predominantly acoustic guitar-based.

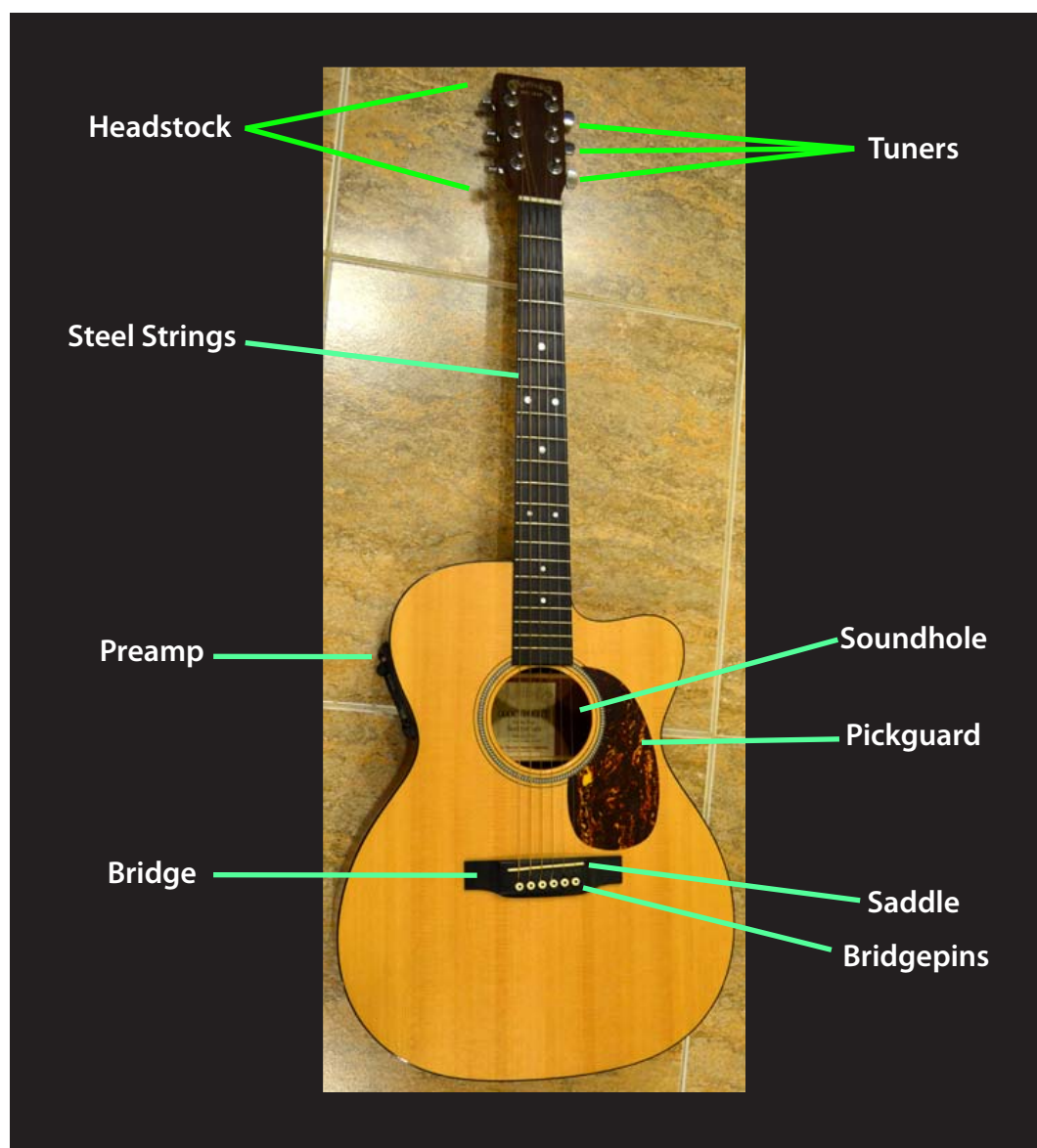
Because of its portability and its inherent ease at producing a rich full sound without amplification, the steel-string acoustic guitar became the instrument of choice among amateurs and solo singer/songwriters. By mastering just a few basic chords and strums, one had the ability to perform and/or lead sing-alongs at coffee houses, parties, rallies, classrooms, churches, or even in the middle of a public park. Songwriters could also accompany themselves and present their music in small intimate venues. The initial push of digital technology and enhanced recording techniques in the '80s relegated the acoustic six-string to the background, and although the decade saw a few acoustic-based hits (Extreme’s “More Than Words,” for example), acoustic rock was generally less in favor and regarded as a relic of a by-gone era.

The grunge and anti-corporate movements of the '90s largely reversed this anti-acoustic trend. MTV produced the highly successful "Unplugged" TV series, and many of the decade's prominent bands, like Nirvana, Stone Temple Pilots and The Foo Fighters all had success performing definitive acoustic version of songs they had previously recorded electric. One of the era's most popular artists was The Dave Matthews Band. Matthews was a singer/songwriter who played an amplified acoustic guitar almost exclusively (albeit a special, amplified nylon string). Matthews' popularity again put acoustic rock front and center and helped inspire a whole new generation of acoustic guitar-playing singer/songwriters that included John Mayer, Jason Mraz, Jewel and Jack Johnson.

Overview of the Acoustic Guitar

Below is a photo showing the parts of a typical dreadnaught acoustic steel-string guitar.

Ex. 1.0



Strings

The strings on an acoustic guitar are generally of a heavier gauge than those on an electric, and they are often coated in bronze (.011-.053mm is considered a standard acoustic size, as opposed to .009-.0042mm for electrics). Also, whereas the third string is left unwound on an electric, it is traditionally wound on an acoustic. These thicker strings produce a full, rich sound, but make certain techniques—such as multi-string barres and bends—more difficult.

Soundboard

The top surface of an acoustic guitar, called the soundboard, plays a critical role in the overall tone of the guitar. The most desirable soundboards are constructed from a single piece of wood (traditionally spruce) and are referred to as *solid-tops*. Solid-top guitars generally produce enhanced resonance and greater frequency response than guitars with tops made from several pieces of wood glued together (called *laminated tops*).

Bridge, Saddle, and Bridge-Pins

The bridge of an acoustic guitar is constructed from a separate piece of wood glued to the guitar's soundboard. Unlike an electric guitar, which has individual saddles for each string, acoustic guitars have one long saddle for all six strings. The six removable end-pins at the back of the bridge extend approximately 1½" into the guitar's body and hold the "ball end" of the string in place.

Sound-Hole and Pick-Guard

The sound-hole is the hole in the center of the soundboard, from where the sound projects. The irregular-shaped piece of plastic beneath it is called a pick-guard and is there to protect the soundboard from wear caused by the repetitive motion of strumming.

Preamp

Since the '80s, many steel-string acoustic guitars come equipped with an on-board preamp that allows the guitar to be plugged in. The preamp is battery-powered and usually has basic volume, tone and/or equalization (EQ) controls. Some also have an onboard tuner. An amplified acoustic guitar is sonically much different than an electric guitar. Plugging an amplified acoustic into an electric guitar amp can produce a somewhat shrill and raspy tone. Acoustic guitars are preferably plugged into specially-designed acoustic amps or directly into the PA system.

Plectrum Based-Playing

Using a plectrum (also known as a pick) to strum chords on an acoustic guitar is one of the simplest and most effective accompaniment techniques for a wide variety of music. It is most commonly employed in rock, country, folk, and bluegrass, but it can be adapted to fit just about any musical style, and is especially effective for solo performers.

Mastery of acoustic guitar performance techniques is a must for the aspiring professional guitarist.

Chapter 2: Acoustic Strumming

The Plectrum

Choosing a plectrum is a highly personal choice that varies among individual guitarists. Generally picks made of nylon or Tortex (an artificial material used in lieu of tortoise shell after tortoise shell picks were outlawed) are preferable for their durability. Often a guitarist may choose to switch to a larger pick for acoustic strumming, as it is easier to grip when performing wide alternating strumming motions. Thicker picks will produce a louder, more “up-front” sound, while thinner picks work best for softer textural background strumming. There are several ways to hold the pick. One established method is to grip it between your thumb and the side of your first finger (Ex. 1.0a). Get a firm grip on the pick, exposing only what is necessary to string the string. This will ensure better control when strumming.



Ex. 1.0a **Basic pick grip**

Some players use a **thumb-pick**: a pick that is attached to a plastic ring, and fitted on the thumb (Ex. 1.0b). Thumb picks are most often seen in conjunction with finger style guitar, which will be discussed in a later chapter.

Note: Refer to Guitar Technique 1 for more images and information about pick technique.

There are acoustic guitarists who opt to strum solely with their fingers, although for this course we recommend at least becoming familiar with pick technique.



Ex. 1.0b **Thumb pick**

Basic Strums

Keeping good time and getting in to the rhythmic groove of a song is essential for all musicians. Acoustic rhythm guitarists lock into the beat by *alternate strumming*. This involves alternating the strumming arm in a steady, even down-up-down-up motion that corresponds to an eighth-note pulse: Strum down on the downbeats (beats 1, 2, 3 and 4) and up on the upbeats (the “&’s”) as shown in Ex 1.1 below.

The musical notation consists of two staves. The top staff is in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It shows a G chord for the first two measures and a C(add9) chord for the next two measures. Above the notes, there are 'V' marks for downbeats and 'v' marks for upbeats, indicating an alternating strumming pattern. The bottom staff shows the bass line with eighth notes corresponding to the strumming pattern.

When alternate strumming:

- Keep your wrist and forearm locked in place. Don't bend your wrist to correspond to the down-up motions.
- Articulate your up-strums with slightly less emphasis than your down-strums, and aim to strike only the highest three or four strings on the guitar.
- Keep your alternate strums relaxed, loose, and balanced. It should sound like you are grooving, not like you are trying to saw your guitar in half!
- Begin to switch chords on the "&" of beat 4. Even if you lift off fretting hand fingers and strum only the open strings, it will sound fine—as long as you land solidly on the next chord on beat 1 of the next measure.

Syncopated Strums

When playing strums with syncopated rhythms, you will obviously not be strumming on every eighth note of the measure. Still, it is crucial that you maintain an alternate strumming motion throughout! Make a ghost stroke motion for down and upstrokes on beats when a note isn't being articulated. This will ensure that you stay locked into the beat and that your strums are played with the appropriate accents.

Ex. 1.2 is a common strum pattern that will sound appropriate with most pop, rock, folk and country-rock songs. Notice the chord change on the upstrum on the "&" of 3 in the third and fourth measures.

Ex. 1.2

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a guitar exercise in 4/4 time. Each system consists of a treble clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a bass clef staff. The first system covers measures 1 and 2. Measure 1 starts with a G chord (G4, B4, D5) and a downstroke, followed by an upstroke on the "&" of beat 1, and then a down-up strum pattern on beats 2 and 3. Measure 2 starts with a C(add9) chord (C4, E4, G4, Bb4, D5) and a downstroke, followed by an upstroke on the "&" of beat 1, and then a down-up strum pattern on beats 2 and 3. The second system covers measures 3 and 4. Measure 3 starts with a G chord and a downstroke, followed by an upstroke on the "&" of beat 1, and then a down-up strum pattern on beats 2 and 3. Measure 4 starts with a G chord and a downstroke, followed by an upstroke on the "&" of beat 1, and then a down-up strum pattern on beats 2 and 3. Above the treble staff, chord names (G, C(add9), G, D) and strumming directions (V for downstroke, (V) for upstroke) are indicated. The bass staff shows the corresponding fretting hand positions and strumming directions.

The ghost strums are shown in parentheses. Practice the pattern first on its own, then within a chord progression. Listen to how the syncopation on beat 3 provides a certain energy and rhythmic motion to the strum. Be sure to keep your strumming hand locked in with the alternate motion at all times! This point cannot be over-emphasized!

For ballad-type songs at slower tempos, we will lock our alternate strumming motion into 16th notes instead of eighth notes. Practice the ballad-type strum chord progression in Ex. 1.3 below. Use a light touch on the 16th-note up strums and give a slight accent to the down strums on beats 2 and 4 shown by the *accent* mark > above the chords.

Ex. 1.3

♩ = 68-72

A Dmaj7(sus2)

(V) (V) (V) V (V) (V) (V) V etc.

Another common pattern with a 16th-note pulse is a country/folk/bluegrass style bass strum. In Ex. 1.4, pick the bass note of each chord on beats 1, 2, 3 and 4, and play alternate strums on the "& ah." Keep a light and jaunty feel throughout by emphasizing the bass note a bit more than the chordal strums.

Ex. 1.4

E C B7

(V) (V) (V) V etc.

Chapter 3: Performance Notes

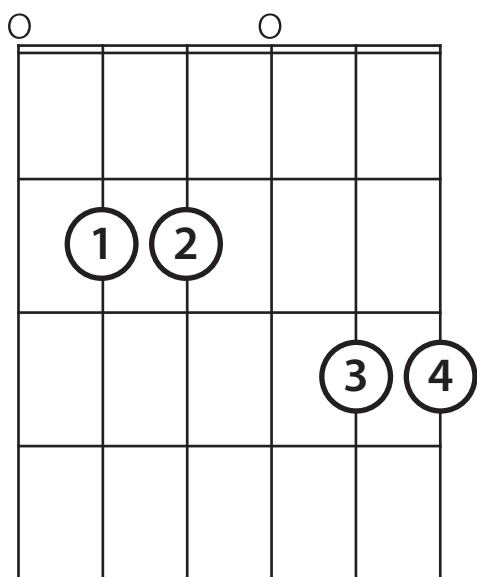
Our chart for Unit 1 is a funky strum-based acoustic groove in the style of Ben Harper's "Diamonds on the Inside," Oasis' "Wonderwall" or an acoustic rendering of John Mayer's "Waiting for the World to Change."

Don't be intimidated by the exotic-sounding chord names. For the majority of this song, you will be keeping your third and fourth fretting-hand fingers planted on the third fret of the second string and the third fret of the first string, respectively. These static notes add interesting color tones to otherwise pedestrian Emi, C, D, and A chords. Play through the following chord shapes below to get a feel for the sound of these grips.

Remember: keep your third and fourth fretting-hand fingers in place!

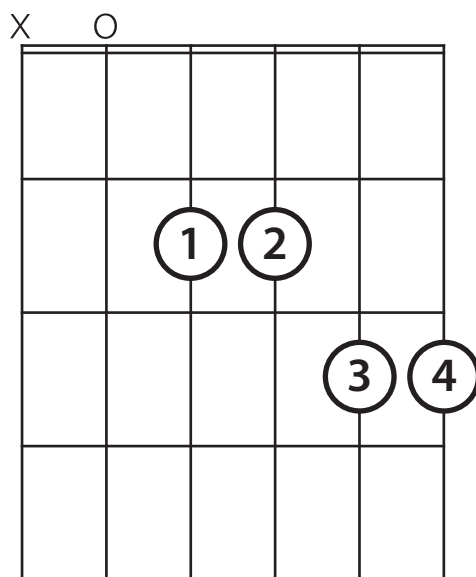
Ex. 1.4a

Em7



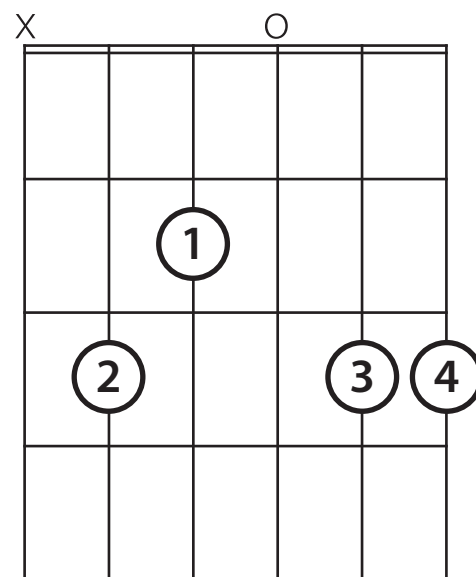
Ex. 1.4b

A7sus4



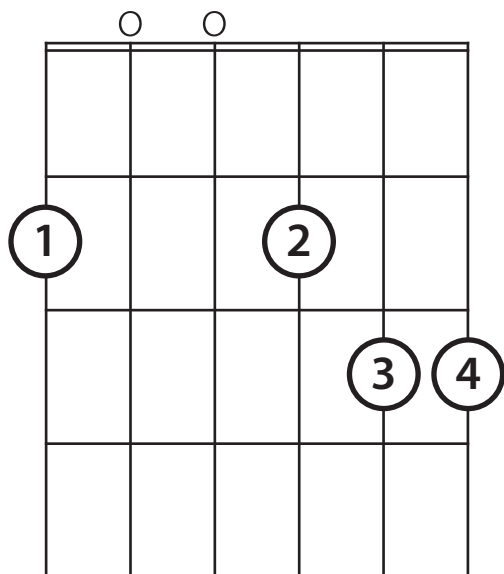
Ex. 1.4c

C add9



Ex. 1.4d

D(11)/F#



Ex. 1.4e

Dsus4

