

## Rhythm Guitar Basics

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Good rhythm guitar playing is arguably the most important tool in a guitar players toolbox. The vast majority of guitar players will be playing far more rhythm parts than solo parts. In addition a thorough understanding of underlying chord progressions can only help the guitar player craft relevant soloing over the top of these progressions.

This lesson assumes the student is already familiar with chord construction and diatonic harmonies. This lesson is designed to help the student play rhythm guitar in ensemble situations rather than as the only guitar player behind a vocalist or other melodic instrument.

Is there a difference ? you ask. Yes. A big one. When the guitar is the only instrument it must serve not only as the 'rhythm guitar' but also as the rhythm section. This typically involves playing the root of the chord on beat 1, and playing open and other full chord voicings to provide a full sound behind the melody.

The job of the ensemble player is far different. Roots will for the most part be left to the bass player. Quite often the ensemble player will play an entire song without ever using the lower E & A strings to leave room for the bass player to occupy this sonic space. The ensemble player needs to fit in – to enhance the rhythm of the music rather than provide the rhythm in its entirety. I have heard it said that the best rhythm guitar players are the ones that you never notice – until they stop playing. The rhythm guitar player has to let the music breathe and find the spaces to fit in and just as importantly the spaces to lay out. To this end, the rhythm guitar player has to constantly exercise good ears to hear where they are in relationship to the ensemble around them.

Often times, the bigger the ensemble, the smaller is the sonic space that the rhythm guitar occupies, relying on two, three and four note voicings to properly complement the music. The rhythm guitar player needs to be conscious of the lead melodic instrument at all times to ensure that the chord voicings complement the melody rather than work against or interfere with it.

In addition to using complimentary voicings, the rhythm guitarists has to find rhythms, or 'grooves' that fit with the rhythm section. The rhythm guitarist must keep good time !

Tough Job ? Absolutely. Let's look at some basic concepts see how we do.

First off, get to know as many voicings as possible. ALWAYS know where the roots of particular voicings are so you can choose to omit them. GET TO KNOW voicings as their component parts in relationship to the key you are playing in, i.e. are you playing a 1-3-5 triad (basic major chord) or a 3-5-<sup>b</sup>7 (dominant seventh triad).

How can we ever do all this ? Slowly, carefully, deliberately, and most importantly enjoyably !

### Voicings using the C-A-G-E-D theory

The CAGED theory tells us that any chord can be played in consecutive or 'connected' shapes using the C, A, G, E, and D shapes in that order, but starting on any shape. Entire books have



The image shows a musical score for guitar in E major. The top staff is a treble clef with a melodic line. Below it are three fretboard diagrams for the Treble (T), Middle (A), and Bass (B) strings. The diagrams are labeled with 'let ring' and show various voicings for the E chord and its extensions. The fret numbers are: T: 0, 0, 0, 4; A: 1, 2, 1, 2, 4; B: (5) 5, 5, 5, 9; (9) 10, 9, 9, 12; (12) 12, 12, 12, 14; (12) 12, 12, 12, 14. The diagrams are labeled H and sl.

These examples just scratch the surface, but hopefully can get you started. Get familiar with these in other keys. Extend them up and down the neck. Notice how the second set of examples only uses some of the chord tones. Once you get familiar with the voicings, look ‘inside’ those voicings to find smaller voicings and ideas. See what else (there is so much else!) you can do with these ideas as a springboard.

So far we have not ventured far from the 1-3-5 (E-G#-B) E chord and its’ “Sus” cousins. . There are a myriad of extensions we can apply to chords. Again, whole books, even whole SERIES of books have been devoted to the subject of chords and their extensions. We will not dig that deeply here but hopefully dig deeply enough to get you started.

Funky Stuff

Seventh and Ninth Chords can go a long way when playing funk and blues. Let’s look at some of the more basic forms. For starters, make good use of the dominant 7<sup>th</sup> triad. These are located all over the fretboard. Here are some examples in the key of C. Note that there are others. Find them !

The image shows a musical score for guitar in C major. The top staff is a treble clef with a melodic line. Below it are three fretboard diagrams for the Treble (T), Middle (A), and Bass (B) strings. The diagrams show various voicings for dominant 7th triads. The fret numbers are: T: 1, 1, 1, 1; A: 8, 8, 3, 3; B: 7, 10, 3, 3; 10, 5, 1, 3; 5, 8, 11, 11; 8, 8, 8, 10; 12, 7, 12, 12.

- Bar 1 above shows two different ways to play the same two triads (1-3-b7 and 1-5-b7)
- Bar 2 shows the same triad (3-b7-1) played on three different string sets
- Bars 3 and 4 show C7 triads that move upward harmonically
  - 5-b7-3, b7-3-5, b7-3-b7, 1-3-b7, 5-b7-3.

The preceding examples also are meant to remind the student that triads can be formed in any order. Look for what fits – especially in ensemble playing.

Using the above examples and ones that you find on your own, you will find that mechanically speaking, sus2 and sus4 based ornaments work very well in some voicings and not so well in others. Use the sus2 and sus4 (when applied to seventh chords these are technically now 9<sup>th</sup> & 11ths) to create movements with dominant seventh triads too !

### 9<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> chords

Remember to demystify these terms. Keep it simple.

These chords are basically dominant 7<sup>th</sup> chords that add:

- 9<sup>th</sup> – adds the same pitch as the second note of the scale
- 11<sup>th</sup> – adds the same pitch as the fourth note of the scale
- 13<sup>th</sup> – adds the same pitch as the sixth note of the scale

A beautiful technique available with 9<sup>th</sup> chords is to approach them from a half step below, or approach them from a half step above.

The image shows four measures of music on a grand staff. The top staff is treble clef, and the bottom staff is bass clef. Each measure contains a chord voicing with a circled guitar fretboard diagram below it. The fretboards are labeled T, A, and B for Treble, Alto, and Bass strings. The first measure shows a 9th chord (A9) with a circled diagram showing frets 8, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7. The second measure shows an 11th chord (A11) with a circled diagram showing frets 8, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7. The third measure shows a 13th chord (A13) with a circled diagram showing frets 8, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7. The fourth measure shows a 9th chord (A9) with a circled diagram showing frets 8, 7, 7, 7, 7, 7. Each fretboard diagram has a circled 'sl' below it, indicating a slide.

Another classic move is to go from a 6 chord to a 9 chord with this move in the key A:

The image shows two measures of music on a grand staff. The top staff is treble clef, and the bottom staff is bass clef. The first measure shows a 6th chord (A6) with a circled guitar fretboard diagram below it. The fretboard is labeled T, A, and B for Treble, Alto, and Bass strings. The diagram shows frets 7, 5, 4, 5, 5, 5. The second measure shows a 9th chord (A9) with a circled guitar fretboard diagram below it. The fretboard is labeled T, A, and B for Treble, Alto, and Bass strings. The diagram shows frets 14, 12, 12, 12, 12, 12. Each fretboard diagram has a circled 'sl' below it, indicating a slide.

Notice the second measure is an octave higher than the first. Also notice that the second measure is the “top” of the ninth chord shapes used in the first two measures of the previous example.

Enjoy !