

Rhythm Guitar Basics

Root Strum and I-V Bass Lines

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When playing acoustic guitar without bass and drums guitar players need to be their own rhythm section. This lesson will get you started on this journey. First some basic information:

The beat is the unit of time in music. Most of us tend to tap our feet “to the beat”.

Basic Root Strum

In folk, pop, rock, blues and many other genres the strong beats in 4/4 time are 1 & 3, the weak or “back” beats are 2 and 4. The strongest beat is usually the 1 or “downbeat”. In many 4/4 songs this will also be the beat where the chord changes.

While there are many ways to emulate the rhythm section, the most basic on the guitar is to play the root of the chord on beat 1 and then strum the rest of the chord on beats 2, 3 and 4. Or.... play the root on beats 1 & 3 and strum on beats 2 and 4. In 3/4 time the most basic rhythm is to play the root on beat on and strum on beats 2 and 3.

The image shows two musical examples. The first is in 4/4 time, labeled 'Gtr I'. It consists of two measures. The first measure has a root note on beat 1 and a chord on beats 2, 3, and 4. The second measure has a root note on beat 1 and a chord on beats 2, 3, and 4. Below the guitar staff are the fret numbers: T (0), A (2), B (3) for the first measure, and T (0), A (2), B (3) for the second measure. The rhythm is indicated by 'R' (root) and 'S' (strum) below the staff: R S S S for the first measure and R S R S for the second measure. The second example is in 3/4 time, also labeled 'Gtr I'. It consists of two measures. The first measure has a root note on beat 1 and a chord on beats 2 and 3. The second measure has a root note on beat 1 and a chord on beats 2 and 3. Below the guitar staff are the fret numbers: T (0), A (2), B (3) for the first measure, and T (0), A (2), B (3) for the second measure. The rhythm is indicated by 'R' (root) and 'S' (strum) below the staff: R S S for the first measure and R S S for the second measure.

Now let's apply this to a chord progression in the key of G:

The image shows a musical example in the key of G major (one sharp). It consists of four measures. The first measure is G major, the second is C major, the third is D major, and the fourth is G major. The rhythm is indicated by 'R' (root) and 'S' (strum) below the staff: R S S S for the first measure, R S S S for the second measure, R S S S for the third measure, and R S S S for the fourth measure. Below the guitar staff are the fret numbers for each measure: G (0, 2, 3), C (0, 2, 3), D (0, 2, 3), and G (0, 2, 3).

In the key of A:

A D E A

T
A
B

In the key of D:

D G A D

T
A
B

While the preceding examples are written in 4/4 time, you can vary them up by playing the roots on beats 1 and 3, and practice in 3/4 time with the roots on beat 1.

If you are new to changing chords, be sure to play the root before forming the entire chord. It is only natural to want to fret the entire chord before playing it but you have time in between beats 1 and 2 to play the root first and then form the rest of the chord with your left hand.

I-V Bass Lines

When we think of our scales we need to be able to think of the notes as ‘degrees’ of the scale i.e 1 through 8 for our first octave. A popular Root Strum Technique is to play the root, or 1st degree of the scale on beat 1, strum on beat 2, the 5th degree of the scale on beat 3, and strum on beat 4.

In any key we can count up 5 “degrees” from the 1 to figure out the 5. In the key of C we can count C,D,E,F and arrive on G as our fifth degree. We have a G located on the 3rd fret of the low E string and we also have one located on the open G string:

Notice that the I can either be lower in pitch than the V or higher, depending on what best serves the song.

Gtr I

I V OR I V

In the key of G we count up 5 from G,A,B,C and arrive at D:

I V OR I V

In the key of A we count up 5 from A,B,C,D and arrive at E:

I V OR I V

Now try this on your own in other “guitar friendly” keys such as E, D, F & B . Note that the V in the key of B is F# . Apply this concept to the progressions given on pages 1 & 2.

Note that the V note in any key is the same whether the key is major or minor.

Some songs will be served well by letting the chords ring out. Other songs may be served well by palm muting for a more percussive, rhythmic feel. ENJOY !