THE ART OF THE FOLK-BLUES GUITAR

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FOLKWAYS RECORDS FL 8355

AN INSTRUCTION RECORD BY JERRY SILVERMAN

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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Library of Congress Catalog Card No. 62-448
The Art of The Folk Blues Guitar

by Jerry Silverman

SIDE I

Band 1: Introduction

Of all the areas of folk guitar technique in America, it is in the realm of the blues that the most possibilities are offered for the creative and imaginative guitarist. And if one calls to mind names of outstanding folk guitarists - not popular folk singers who also strum along - the chances are that most of them will have made their mark largely in the world of blues!

Well then - what is blues? That's a good question. In its most basic form a folk blues has a three line stanza, a characteristic melody - which is often 12 measures long - and three or four simple chords.

But in its most refined form it is a free rhythmic, melodic, harmonic and lyric expression of the performer's innermost feelings at one specific time - that time coinciding with the actual performance of the song.

Let your own definition grow out of your own experience as you develop musically with the blues...

Band 2: Tablature - Meltab and Gitab

Ever since the invention of music notation countless generations of instrumentalists have been trying to avoid learning to read music. During the last 700 years or so elaborate systems have been developed to show the player which holes to cover, which keys to press, which strings to pluck or which frets to stop - instead of the actual notes on the music staff. These systems are referred to generally as "tablature".

The desire generally to avoid learning to read music is nowhere more prevalent than among folk instrumentalists. So what we shall do here is combine standard music notation for the melody of the song with its tablature - which we call Meltab - and standard music notation for the guitar part with its tablature - Gitab - as follows...

The spaces above each of the six lines in the first diagram indicate the open strings of the guitar.

1st String - E
2nd String - B
3rd String - G
4th String - D
5th String - A
6th String - E

Incidentally, now would be a good time for you to tune your guitar to mine. We'll do that once more.

The numbers in each space indicate at what fret the string is pressed to the fingerboard by a finger of the left hand.

tablature would show it in this manner:

Meltab, when used, will be written directly below the melody line. Gitab, when used, will be written directly below the guitar part.

By the use of Meltab it will be possible for you to play the melody of all the songs on the record. For in addition to being able to learn the tunes,
playing the melody - and passages inspired by the melody - is a vital factor in blues guitar performance.

Gitab (and the guitar part itself) will be written out only where there is a specific need to illustrate some point. Experience has shown that it is unnecessary and confusing to write out measure after measure of a repetitive strum when merely describing it once would suffice.

Band 3: Basic Blues Arpeggio

"Oh, it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing!"

Do you remember that song? I think that was the only lyric it had - and a truer sentiment was never expressed. "That swing" can be gotten on the guitar in a variety of ways. The basic rhythmic feeling, or swing, in blues is a series of long-short, long-short alternating beats. Like a series of dashes and dots:

A poet would call this meter "trochaic."

If you're not sure what this means, try intoning "The Raven", schoolboy fashion, accenting the syllables like this:

Once upon a midnight dreary
As I pondered weak and weary
Over many a quaint and curious
Volume of forgotten lore...

Of course, that's an exaggeration - but, nevertheless it gives a clear feeling of trochaic rhythm.

This trochaic - or triplet - rhythm may be played on the guitar in a variety of ways. Let's try a simple arpeggio involving the thumb, first finger, second and third fingers together, and the first finger again.

Finger a C chord. Now strike the A string - the 5th string with your thumb. Then the 3rd string with your first finger. Then the 2nd and 1st strings with the 2nd and 3rd fingers, respectively. And then the 3rd string with the 1st finger again.

In the trochaic rhythm...

Try the same thing with an F chord. Make sure all the strings sound clearly.

How about G7?

A good song that we all know which has this rhythm pretty much all the way through is "Frankie and Johnny"...
And, of course, your sheer technical facility in getting around the fingerboard will have been greatly strengthened. The melodies will be written out here in Meltab for your convenience.

Returning to our basic strum once again here is one of the oldest blues known in the characteristic three-line form: In E.

Joe Turner

Notice all that musical activity taking place on the last word of each verse. C - F7 - C and G7. Notice, too, that each verse - except the final, which we haven't done yet, of course - ends on the dominant 7th chord (in this case, G7). Don't begin playing the tonic chord (C) in subsequent verses until you begin to sing that verse. This "hanging over" on the dominant 7th is a very, very important characteristic of blues.

...Notice the last three chords, C - F7 - C... G7...

Notice I didn't go back to C until I started to sing "Frankie went down to the corner..."

Last verse... We leave out the final G7 and end on C.

Just a word here at the outset: A great many factors combine to make a blues guitarist out of "just" a guitarist. It would be difficult to single out any one facet of the art as the most important. However, the sine qua non of the blues guitarist is the ability to play the melody of any of the songs he sings. This is very important because in playing the melody not only will you learn more about the guitar itself, but when the time comes - very soon, we hope to begin creating your own bluesy instrumental passages and solos you will find that the inspiration for them will spring largely from the very tune of the song being played.

Notice the little breaks there - the passages - in measures 3, 7 and 8.

Just a slight departure from the strum...
Now listen to this... A very important place in the song to begin building is at the very end. Just as in Frankie and Johnny we had some extra chords, here we have a descending series of diminished chords which you can see in the music and tablature.

You can vary the rhythm and contour of this passage in any number of ways:

And so on... Be sure to keep singing the last word - the last note - as you play these chords...

Just to round out the picture a bit more, here's "Careless Love" in the key of D - played with the same strum - and with some extra chords thrown in which may not have occurred to you.

**Careless Love**

Guitar Rhythm

```
D A7

D G7 D B7

love. Love, oh love, oh careless

D A7 D

love. Love, oh love, oh careless
```

Band 4: Another Blues Strum

That beautiful and somewhat complicated passage is Josh White playing the introduction to "Number 12 Train" taken from an old recording. For a complete analysis of that performance I'd like to refer you to the more complete book, "The Art of the Folk-Blues Guitar" - upon parts of which is based this record. The book contains a great deal more material than was possible to squeeze onto the two sides of this disc.

What concerns us here more particularly is the strum - the basic rhythmic pattern that Josh and many other blues guitarists use very effectively throughout the body of a song of this type.

Finger an E chord.
This is a two-part strum. In part one the thumb strikes the sixth string and then brushes rapidly downward across the rest of the strings. As the thumb moves across the rest of the strings, the wrist, which is normally arched, is lowered until the heel of the hand is brought into contact with the vibrating strings - thereby muffling them. You can see what this rhythmic figure looks like in its musical notation...

The accent comes on the 2nd beat.

At the beginning of the second half of this pattern, the right hand, which has moved vertically downward across the strings, now moves rapidly upward as the first finger brushes over the strings - highest note first; lowest, last. Then, either the thumb or the finger nails are brought rapidly downward over the strings again with the same muffling motion of the wrist. Up-down - up with the first finger - down with the thumb. This completes the cycle.

And we are ready to begin again. The whole pattern sounds like this:

Thumb strikes bass
Thumb strikes chord (muffle)
1st finger brushes up
Thumb or nail down (muffle)

Part I  Part II  Part I

You might like to practice it singing that great American classic, in E minor...

The worms crawl in
The worms crawl out

Part I  Part II  Part I  Part II

Or, "Number-12 Train"...

**NUMBER TWELVE TRAIN**
Listen to this slow, deliberate performance of "St. James Infirmary," and observe where the bass note of each new chord appears in relation to the words and pulse of the song...

St. James Infirmary

Once you get a little more comfortable with the strum you might like to try some of these breaks written out in measures 4-5 and 8-9.

Watch this ending...

Now, I know that's a heck of a way to end — just leaving you hanging there on the B7th chord — but before we go any further, a very important point must be brought out. Unlike the first basic blues strum you learned — and probably most of the other guitar strums you know, the first beat of this strum does not get the accent even though it consists of the thumb playing the bass note of the chord. Rather, the accent falls on the second beat — the strum down across the whole chord. This produces an interesting counter rhythm between the actual pulse of the strum and the changing of the chords. Since blues chords generally change at regular intervals — and usually on the first (or third) beat of a measure, this strum produces a conflict because it begins one eighth-note — actually one triplet eighth-note — before the first and third beats of each measure.

This means that even though the chord symbols will continue to be written in their customary places (over beats one and three), when using this strum you will have to anticipate the changes by that preliminary, unaccented thumb-on-the-bass-note part of the strum. Saying it another way: The melody and the chord changes are slightly out of phrase with each other.

Notice how the E of the E7th chord comes in before the word "old" and the A of the A minor comes in before "bar"

... See how the chords anticipate the downbeats?...

SIDE II

Band 1: Choking The Strings

The relatively simple device known as "choking the strings" under certain conditions produces the bluest of all blues sounds. For example - in "St. James Infirmary" in A minor, attack the third fret of the second string, as follows; Press down normally with the third or fourth finger of the left hand
on the 3rd fret of the 2nd string and play that note (D). Then, keeping the finger in firm contact with the fret, pull the string downward or upward, as shown in the diagram, while the original note is still sounding.

"Before" ➔ "During" ➔ "After"

The pitch will rise approximately half a tone. Then allow the string to return to its original position - still keeping the finger pressed down tightly - and the note will return to D.

St. James Infirmary

Guitar: crowd was there
Gitab: Choke

In "Frankie and Johnny" in C, choking that same note gives a somewhat different feeling...

Frankie & Johnny (I)

Guitar: done her wrong
Gitab: Choke

Joe Turner in E... Careless Love in D...

#12 Train...

Joe Turner (II)

Guitar: Turner's come and gone
Gitab: Choke

Carless Love (variant)

Guitar: Careless love has done
Gitab: Choke

Number12 Train

Guitar: I could not keep from cryin'
Gitab: Choke

Guitar: Sometimes I'm not myself
Gitab: Choke
You will observe that the choked notes involve either the flatted third or fifth - and sometimes also the 7th of the chord being played. These notes are known as blue notes. Look for them in other blues and see how they enhance the sound of the song - like a little spice added to an otherwise delicious meal.

Band 2: Walking Bass and Boogie Woogie

In its simplest form the boogie-woogie walking bass consists merely of the notes of a chord played one at a time with the addition of either the sixth or the flatted 7th of the scale to the basic first, third and fifth notes of the chord. In actual practice, the guitarist usually alternates each downstroke on the bass with an upstroke on the chord. This upstroke may either be played with the first finger brushing over the strings in an upward direction, or with the three fingers plucking the first three strings in the normal manner. Here's Leadbelly playing "Good Morning Blues" using this boogie-woogie technique. Listen to the guitar carefully.

Now, Leadbelly - playing a 12-string guitar - used the G major fingering, but because of the lower tuning of the 13-string, the song as performed here is actually in the key of E. On the 6-string - using the key of G, the boogie-woogie bass would sound like this...

...Usually at this point - in the D7th part - the boogie-woogie disappears...

That was the accompaniment to Good Morning Blues...

**Good Morning Blues**
There are a number of other examples of blues played with boogie-woogie walking bass in several keys in "The Art of the Folk Blues Guitar" - including "Get Thee Behind me, Satan" and "The Midnight Special".

Now, here's the same thing in E...

**Good Morning Blues**
Band 3: The Flat Pick and The Church Lick

A great deal of good blues music can be made with a flat pick. Particularly in the realm of white blues - that is, hillbilly and cowboy derived melodies, yodels and rhythms coupled with Negro blues harmonies.

With the pick grasped firmly but flexibly between the thumb and the forefinger, just try strumming a few chords in the simple bass-chord pattern. Try alternating basses. You may run into difficulty hitting the string you want to until you get used to the feel of the pick. That shouldn't take too long. Don't bang the string too hard - that's not the purpose of using a pick.

A good rhythmic feeling is achieved when you strike the chord lightly on the way up as well as the way down. Woody Guthrie used to call it the "church lick" and he used it to play many of the songs in his vast repertoire of folksongs and original compositions.

Play an E chord. With the pick, play the bass string - then all the rest downward. Then come back up over the first three or four strings... bass-down-up.

Now try this: Bass-down-bass-up-down-up...

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\text{Bass down} & \text{Bass up} & \text{down up} & \text{count:} \\
1 & 2 & 3 & 4
\end{array}
\]

Now let's add something to that. We're going to add a little blues wrinkle involving the flatted third. You remember the flatted 3rd was referred to as the "blue note". On the fourth beat - which in this strum is normally a downstroke - on the E chord, lift the first finger of the left hand off the g string. The chord will momentarily be E minor. On the following upstroke put the finger down again and return to E major. It sounds like this: Bass-chord-bass up - lift the first finger off - down - put the first finger down-up.

On the A chord you'll have to revise your fingering a bit to get this blues wrinkle to sound. Look at the diagram ...

Keep your first finger on the first fret of the B string and lift the pinky off on "4" and replace it on "and".

On the B7 - it's more like the conventional hammer on the 3rd beat.

**Mule Skinner Blues**
Band 4: The Peripatetic Pinky

A much neglected finger is the pinky of the left hand. It's usually the last finger to be used in a chord and most of the time it just hangs there patiently. It is precisely for that reason that using the pinky in certain situations will add a delightful sparkle to an otherwise complete strum. - Let's develop an interesting pick and pinky pattern.

- First, the rhythm on an E chord...

E:
```
3 bass up down up down up down up
```
Bass-up-down-up, down-up, down-up. Now add the pinky on the 2nd, 3rd and 4th beats, playing the notes c#, d and c#, respectively...

Try a similar pattern with an A chord... adding 7b, g, 10.

Play A as a barre chord on the fifth fret and add the pinky in precisely the same way you did with the initial E chord - only this time it's on the 2nd string.

Do the same thing with B at the 7th fret...

Now try B as a barre chord on the 2nd fret. This is analogous to the first A chord pattern. But it's a toughie - because the 3rd finger has to cover the 2nd, 3rd and 4th strings without muffling the first...

Here is the same series of chords with a slight variation of the pinky. See if you can spot it...
E C7-7 B7
Meltab

Guitar

Gitab

E

Meltab

west.

Guitar

Gitab

E

bel-ly full of whisky and a headfull of gin. The

Metab

Guitar

Gitab

E7

doctor says it'll kill me but he don't say when.

Meltab

Gitab

A7

Lord, that'll love me the best.

Meltab

Gitab

E C7-7 B7

Final Ending

E

See pretty

Meltab

Gitab

E7
Band 5: The Seven-Seventh Chord

Mention must be made here of an extremely important blues chord...

Physically, as you can see from the diagram, it is nothing more than a B7th chord moved up one fret to C7th. But it is played with the dissonant addition of the open b string. Actually, in context, the open b string is not really added, but rather, left over, or "suspended" from the E chord which usually precedes it and becomes consonant (more or less) in the B7th chord which usually follows it. Functionally, it serves as a leading - or dominant - chord to the B7th in many blues situations. For example, at the end of The Long-Line Skinner...

...There we heard it twice. Once before the last word and then in the break between verses. We'll call the chord "C seven-seventh" for purposes of identification. Some other 7-7th chords, conveniently played are A7-7th - A7 - D. Careless Love. D7-7th - D7 - G. Good Morning Blues. E7-7th - E7 - A or Am.

Careless Love

Care-less love has done
Good Morning Blues (l)

Morning how are you
Frankie and Johnny

But he done her wrong.

And of course B7 - 7th - B7th - E.
Number 12 Train.

Number Twelve Train

Some-times I feel I'm dy-in'.

Band 6: Finger-Picking and the Independent Thumb

The old adage about the right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing is doubly true of the guitar. Not only must the actions of both hands be separated (albeit coordinated), but the fingers of the right hand must be trained to move independently of each other. Particularly must the thumb be able to keep a steady, square beat in the bass while various combinations of fingers go to town on the upper strings.

Finger an E chord. Get the thumb going slowly and steadily on the bass string. The thumb may strike more than one string at a time or alternate basses.

\[ \text{T T T T} \]

Pluck the first string simultaneously with the bass. Use your first and second fingers alternately on the first string.

\[ \begin{array}{c}
\text{first string} \\
1 \text{T} \\
2 \text{T} \\
1 \text{T} \\
2 \text{T}
\end{array} \]

\[ \begin{array}{c}
\text{sixth string} \\
1 \text{T} \\
2 \text{T} \\
1 \text{T} \\
2 \text{T}
\end{array} \]

Pluck the first string twice as fast as the bass. Two to one. Maintain the alternation of the first and 2nd fingers and the bass.

\[ \begin{array}{c}
\text{first string} \\
1 \text{T} \\
2 \text{T} \\
1 \text{T} \\
2 \text{T}
\end{array} \]

\[ \begin{array}{c}
\text{sixth string} \\
1 \text{T} \\
2 \text{T} \\
1 \text{T} \\
2 \text{T}
\end{array} \]

Now pluck the first string using the blues trochaic rhythm of the very first strum illustrated on this record.

\[ \begin{array}{c}
\text{first string} \\
3 \text{T} \\
3 \text{T} \\
3 \text{T} \\
3 \text{T}
\end{array} \]

Now leave out the 1st, 7th and 8th strokes on the first string but continue the bass as before.
After you feel comfortable with this syncopation try playing different notes on the upper strings.

Now, using variations of this pinky movement...

**SPORTING LIFE BLUES**

Meltab I got a letter from my

Guitar

Gitab

home, Most of my friends are dead and
Band 7: The Break

One of the major characteristics of blues melodies is the pause in the vocal part between phrases. If the stanza is three lines long, consisting of twelve measures of music, the chances are that only approximately six of those measures will be vocalized. The pauses in the singing generally occur two measures at a time - at the end of the first, second and third lines, respectively.

BACKWATER BLUES

Well, it rained five days and the sky turned black as night. Yes it rained five days and the sky turned black as night.

The how and why of the break is the backbone of the blues guitar, for you will note that in any typical blues verse the guitar must solo roughly 50% of the time! So, once again here is Backwater Blues with typical breaks inserted in the proper places.