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PRIVATE LESSONS

B A S I C S



Blues Fingerpicking

By Pete Madsen

Blues can be classified into several regional categories: Chicago blues, Texas swing, country blues, ragtime (St. Louis) blues, etc. Fingerpicking blues, however, usually brings to mind a rural landscape: the Mississippi Delta and the Appalachian foothills of Georgia and the Carolinas known as the Piedmont. Delta blues has a hard, primitive sound that often uses a single-string "dead-thumb" bass technique, while country blues uses more of an alternating-bass technique. The alternating bass is a guitar player's way of emulating ragtime and early blues piano players.

Listening to players like Mississippi John Hurt, Reverend Gary Davis, and John Fahey will get your ear accustomed to fingerpicking blues. In this lesson, we'll apply the techniques they're known for to a 12-bar blues, but you can also use them to play ragtime, early jazz, and folk.

Let's start with a basic picking pattern on an open E chord (Example 1 on page 94). You'll use your thumb to play the notes on the bottom three strings and your fingers to play the top strings. I recommend using a thumbpick—it helps put more oomph in your oom-pah. Begin by playing just the bass strings. This is called an alternating bass because you alternate between two strings, in this case the E and D strings. Next, add the melody notes, using your middle finger to play the B string and your ring finger to play the high E string. Notice that the bass strings are always struck on the beat, but that the melody notes can be played on the beat or the offbeat, which provides a little syncopation.

Example 2 is a slight variation on this pattern, substituting the G string for the B

string. Use your index finger for the notes on the G string and your ring finger for those high notes again. Example 3 adds a hammer-on to the G string. To play the hammer-on, raise your first finger off the G string and pick the open string with your right hand. Then firmly hammer your index finger back down on the first fret while you pluck the next bass note. It will probably take a little practice to get both hands coordinated. Example 4 adds a new chord, E6, but notice that it's very close to a regular E chord. Just finger the E chord normally and put your pinky on the B string at the second fret. The rest of the pattern is the same as Example 3.

Now let's try the same kinds of patterns on another chord: the IV chord in the key of E, A7 (Example 5). Once again, start by just playing the bass notes. This time the bass alternates between the A and D strings. You can fret this chord either by barring the D, G, and B strings at the second fret and fretting the high E string with your ring finger or as a normal first-position A7 chord with your middle finger on the second fret of the D string, your ring finger on the second fret of the B string, and your pinky on the third fret of the first string, as shown in the chord diagrams. Example 6 adds some melody notes to the second measure of Example 5. Use the first-position A7 chord for this variation. In Example 7, barre the first four strings at the second fret and stretch your pinky up to the fifth fret of the high E string.

Now let's move on to the V chord in the key of E: B7. Example 8 is a B7 pattern with slightly more complicated bass movement. Notice that the D string alternates with the A and E strings, encompassing three strings instead of two.

Ex. 1



Musical notation for Example 1: Treble and bass staves. Treble staff has a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a 4/4 time signature. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes. The bass staff shows fingerings (0, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2) and includes a 'H' (harmonic) marking on the 4th string 4th fret.

Ex. 2



Ex. 3



Ex. 4



Ex. 5



Ex. 6



Musical notation for Examples 4, 5, and 6: Treble and bass staves. Treble staff has a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a 4/4 time signature. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes. The bass staff shows fingerings (0, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2) and includes a 'H' (harmonic) marking on the 4th string 4th fret.

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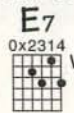
Ex. 7



Ex. 8



Ex. 9



Ex. 10



Ex. 11



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Train Stop Blues

Music by Pete Madsen

Chord diagrams and musical notation for "Train Stop Blues". The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#).

Chord Diagrams:

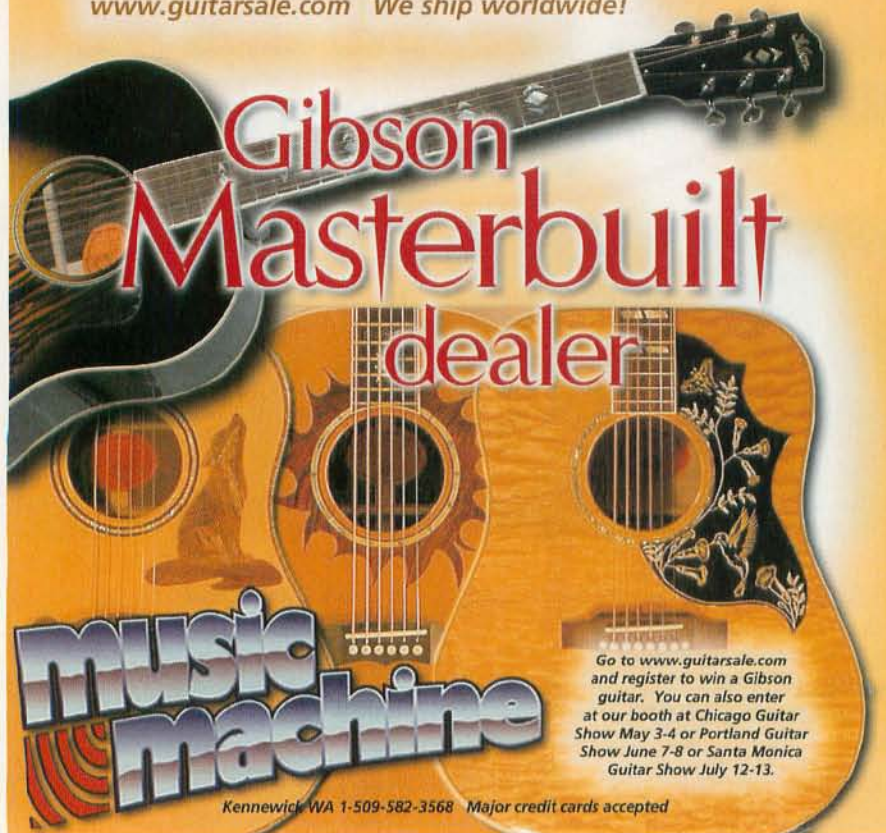
- E:** 023100
- A:** x01230
- A7:** x01113
- E7:** 0x2314 V
- B7:** x21304
- E6:** 023140
- E7:** 0x2001 IV
- A9:** x01214 V
- E:** 023100
- B7:** 131241 VII
- E6:** 023140

Musical Notation:

The piece is written in standard musical notation for guitar, featuring a treble clef and a bass clef. The melody is primarily in the treble clef, and the bass line is in the bass clef. The notation includes various fret numbers (0-10) and fingerings (1-4) for both hands. The piece is divided into four systems, each containing two staves. The first system starts at measure 1, the second at measure 7, the third at measure 13, and the fourth at measure 19. The piece concludes with a double bar line at the end of the fourth system.

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Now you have all the tools you need to play a complete 12-bar blues in the key of E. But before we move on to playing a complete song, let's learn a couple more variations on the E, A7, and B7 chords. In Example 9, you'll use the same picking pattern as the other examples, but you'll start with an E7 chord up at the fifth fret. I really like this E7 inversion; it sets you up to play a nice melody on the high E string. Play the first melody note (B) with your pinky, then lift it off so your index finger—which is already barring across the top two strings—plays the next melody note (A). In the third measure, slide your index finger down to the fourth fret while your middle and ring fingers stay put. Lift your index finger off the fretboard entirely for the fourth measure.

In Example 10's second-position A9 pattern, barre the fifth fret on the D, G, and B strings and use your pinky to play the B note on the E string at the seventh fret, your ring finger on the next melody note (A[#]) at the sixth fret, and then extend the barre to the high E string for the A note at the end of the measure. Example 11 is a pattern using a B7 barre chord. You'll move your pinky around a bit to get the melody notes.

Now it's time to play a tune. "Train Stop Blues" on page 96 is built completely from the above examples. I call the song "Train Stop Blues" because it sounds like a train chugging along when you get it up to speed. Once you get accustomed to coordinating your fingers and thumb you can add a little flavor to the feel by bearing down on the bass notes that occur on the second and fourth beats. Merle Travis would often brush through the strings, hitting more than one note with his thumb on the second and fourth beats. Think of a drummer in a rock band striking the snare drum on those beats and you'll get an idea of the feel I'm talking about. For example, when playing the E chord, the second and fourth bass notes fall on the D string. Try to get your thumb to strike not only the D string but a muted G string as well.

Notice that after the higher inversions in bars 13-18 you come back to a first-position E chord in measure 19. After playing the higher voicings, it is very pleasing to return to "home base" once in awhile. In "Train Stop Blues," this happens in measures 7-8 and 11-12 of each 12-bar chorus.

If you are a singer, try playing the first-position chords while you're singing a 12-bar blues and use the second 12 bars as an instrumental break. You can also try shifting the patterns around or adding inversions. Then the song will really start to go somewhere!