

# ALTERNATE TUNINGS FOR GUITAR...A BRIEF LOOK



Standard Tuning EADGBE seems to have appeared around 1700, taking firm hold around 1800. One wonders how many guitar tunings have existed down through the centuries before we settled on today's standard tuning. The earliest known representation of anything that resembles a guitar dates back to 1400 BC and is found in the Hittite illustration shown above. How this instrument was tuned is anyone's guess. How similar instruments predating that one were tuned is also a question. And what all the tunings might have been in the 3500 years that got us from there to here is also likely to be a mystery. What the Hittites in 1400 BC made strings from, where they got them, how accurate they were and how long they lasted pose a question. Equally interesting: what did they sound like? Did they stay in tune? Were the notes evenly spaced along the string length? Were they tuned to maximize the efficiency of the player's fingers? They didn't have tuning forks so how would you know if you were in tune? Don't you love that this player is using his left thumb?

Before the industrial revolution and the availability of precision made strings, players had to get along with limitations that gut strings imposed. Just to keep valuable strings from breaking a player might have had to work with more than one tuning. Itinerant musicians looking for work were often the historians and news spreaders of the day, and the "guitar" playing songwriters among them might very well have written songs that worked with the tunings their strings could manage.

Eventually string making and instrument building became predictable. Frets came along. Tuners were refined. Standards were adopted. By the 1500s the guitar's ancestors the vihuela and the 4-stringed guitar were tuned GCFADG and CFAD. Within a few hundred years the vihuela was falling out of fashion and the guitar was tuning up a whole step and adding a 5th string, A. It is thought that by the late 1700's the 6th string was added and EADGBE was on its way to becoming the standard.

In today's modern guitar revolution guitar building and string making have evolved to a fine art and standard tuning is the norm. Yet with all the refinements and the global adoption of a Standard Tuning guitarists continue to search out new tunings to fit the needs of the songs that they transcribe or invent. While Standard Tuning offers a huge set of possibilities, it can't cover them all. Certain combinations are not physically possible to play, and certain bass notes are simply not there. Alternate Tunings make possible an expanded repertoire, and in many ways the invention of new musics.

Much of American folk music and particularly Delta Blues evolved because of open tunings. In the hands of impoverished musicians cheap instruments with impossibly high action could be tuned to open chords and played with a slide. Blues licks and chord progressions work particularly well with this setup. More or less at the same time, but on the other side of the planet Hawaiian guitar music evolved for similar reasons. But open tunings on an instrument that is easy to play eventually suggest other possibilities. While Delta Blues slide guitar still embraces perhaps only a handful of open tunings, Hawaiian "Slack Key" now uses hundreds of tunings. During the "Folk Scare" of the 1960's open tunings found favor among many songwriters of the day. In the 1970's electric guitar players occasionally would tune the whole instrument down a half step because of the 'darker' sound that resulted. Acoustic guitar playing in the 1980's took a deep plunge into alternate tunings as more and more instrumental guitarists discovered these "new" sonic possibilities. These days open tunings are common all across the spectrum of guitar playing. They are found in classical guitar, folk, blues, rock and roll, to some degree jazz, and in a host of steel-string acoustic guitar music whose genres are still evolving and in some cases have yet to be defined or even named, let alone categorized.

Altered lower strings typically extend bass range down (of course, though sometimes they are raised) thus changing the foundation. Altered upper strings allow for a new range of open-string chords, fingered chords, melodic lines, and most importantly upper harmonics. These upper harmonics define the background sonic landscape, the thing you hear when you pluck a note and then mute the string you just plucked. Some part of the note you plucked resonates for a time in the open strings. For musicians who

compose on the guitar and who are inspired in part by the sound itself changing the sonic landscape often inspires new ideas.

For those who are just getting started with alternate tunings here is a way to look at it. Altered tunings can loosely be categorized into two types: 1.) a tuning that is standard tuning with only one or two strings changed, usually the bass strings. The rest of the strings stay the same, and therefore "look, sound & behave like standard tuning. 2.) All the other tunings...that is to say too many strings have been changed for the tuning to be like standard tuning anymore. Getting to know one or more new tunings in some ways is dependent on your mode of playing. Here is what I mean...

There are several modes of playing the guitar: sight reading, playing by ear, you-sho-me-I play-it, improvising and making stuff up, and playing from memory. If you sight read TAB you can start playing in alternate tunings right now. Most alternate tuning songs that are written out these days are written in TAB. So just go find some transcriptions. If you play by ear then you are familiar with the hunt-and-peck method. I suggest you start anywhere and see what happens. If you are a you-sho-me-I play-it type you can learn from a friend or teacher, or buy video instruction, or head for Youtube. If you are an improviser then you have either a studied or a visceral understanding of music and guitar playing and I suggest you start by matching the 6th string to whatever key you are playing in, develop new bass possibilities and go from there. If you play from memory then you are already one or all of the other types.

## A word or two about Standard Tuning.

Standard Tuning takes advantage of a handy coincidence. It is tuned mostly in 4ths. Humans have 4 fingers. Counting the open strings and the first 4 frets a human with four fingers on their fingering hand can play through a chromatic scale without leaving first position. A full two octaves are within reach. A huge range of melodies can be played. Because of the spacing of intervals in common chords just about any triad or tetrad can be played in first position. There is the potential to add up to 3 color notes to any triad (depending on its inversion) and all of this can be done with relative ease. Because most of the string intervals are the same, (4ths) patterns of intervals and scales repeat themselves in different locations and are therefore easy to predict and learn. One drawback is that closely voiced chords are often a challenge and this is an area in which Alternate Tunings often excel. But overall, because of the coincidence of 4ths tuning and 4 fingers Standard Tuning ends up being perhaps the most versatile tuning. But we are here to talk about Alternate Tunings. So.....

One other thing. You can put a capo on any one of these tunings and it becomes another tuning, actually the same thing only higher. Then there is a kind of crossover world where partial capos can make the 'open' chord an altered tuning, but the rest of the guitar Standard Tuning. That is if you are working from Standard Tuning to start with. If you are using an Alternate Tuning & a partial capo then you enter yet another world. What follows is a short list of tunings, starting with a few of the the most common ones. Online websites list hundreds more, often correlating them with artists and the songs they used them on. They are too numerous to list here. I am also including a list of Hawaiian Guitar 'Slack Key' tunings (some of which are repeats) just because I like that they have names. Not that the Hawaiians have a patent on the idea. Try looking up Spanish Tuning, or Dobro Tuning, or Sabastopol tuning sometime.

EADGBE  
DADGBE  
DGDBGE  
DGDGBD  
DADGAD  
CGDGBE  
DADF#BE  
DADF#AD  
FADGBE

Lute tuning .... EADF#BE      What this tuning does is move the major 3rd over one string. In this tuning you can play a lot of Lute TAB transcriptions or Standard Notation with lute fingerings.

Nashville Tuning ..... EADGBE The first three letters are shrunken here to indicate they are tuned an octave higher and require thinner strings. This works well for strumming, particularly on recordings where the sound of strumming is needed, but the dense sound of full range strings can be avoided.

Common Slack Key Tunings	Notes Used
G Major or <i>Taro Patch</i>	D G D G B D
G Wahine	D G D F# B D
D Wahine	D A D F# A C#
<a href="#">Open D</a>	D A D F# A D
C Major or <i>Atta's C</i>	C G E G C E
Mauna Loa	C G E G A E
C Wahine or <i>Leonard's C</i>	C G D G B D
C 6	C G C G A E
Old Mauna Loa	C G C G A D
<a href="#">Open C</a>	C G C E G C
F Wahine	C F C G C E
Open F	C F C F A C
Double Slack F	C F C E A C

Once upon a time in the not too distant past there were hardly any books on the subject of Alternate Tunings. Now they proliferate. Every major music instruction book publisher lists a posse of books on the subject. Guitar has become the most popular instrument in the world. For this we can thank Andres Segovia, Elvis Presley, Ricky Nelson, Bob Dylan, and the Beatles and obviously a few more... but you get my point. Where once the guitar was looked down upon it is now the pivotal money maker in the music instrument industry.

In the last 70 years a juggernaut in the form of the recording industry (song writing, music publishing, records and film & tv) have rolled across the music landscape, generating billions of dollars in revenue and making and breaking hundreds and thousands of businesses and careers. Frank Zappa once said, "The most important thing on the stage is the song." He is right. Without the song none of that stuff would have happened and I wouldn't be writing this. So when we pick up the guitar what we should be doing is figuring out the best way to make the song happen. Alternate tunings offer another avenue for meeting the goal.

– K Nelson 2011