

How Does Liberty Tuning Work?

Liberty Tuning is really a “lucky discovery,” since I was not looking for it when I found it. The guitar is deep and confusing, and few players ever feel like they have ever mastered its complexities.

Most of the players who have spent their lives studying the guitar have done so in *standard tuning*: E-A-D-G-B-E. Guitarists as well as players of its predecessors the *lute* and *vihuela* have also used literally hundreds of different tunings of the 6 strings during the last 500 years or so. Each of those tunings yields a different set of possibilities, and the fingerings of chords and scales are different in each one.

Guitar history has included a few musicians, such as Carl Kress, Pierre Bensusan, Keith Richards and Albert King who spent their careers using an unusual tuning. It is quite common for players to use dozens of tunings. Delta bluesmen like Robert Johnson and Son House, Hawaiian “*slack-key*” players, singer-songwriters like Joni Mitchell or Nick Drake, and skilled instrumental players like Michael Hedges and Leo Kottke have created a large body of guitar music that takes advantage of the different possibilities offered by “non-standard” tunings.

Partial capos are much less common than tunings. It appears that some people were using the idea 200 years ago, but it has only been in the last 35 years that players have begun to explore the idea. I was probably the first to put the two together, and starting in 1980 I began to combine new tunings and partial capos into “*hybrid tunings*.” Nothing I found during those 30 years gave me any clues that anything like *Liberty Tuning* existed.

Apparently no other guitar explorers have come up with a tuning with similar kinds of opportunities that *Liberty Tuning* gives us, and thus far none of the other ways of using partial capos has yielded anything more than a few nice ways to play some easy 1 and 2-finger chords on simple songs. *Liberty Tuning*’s combination of a partial capo and the slight retuning creates a guitar environment that is uniquely rich and useful, especially to beginners or people with less than 4 working fingers. Retuning slightly and popping on a capo is quicker and easier than other simplified methods, and yields vastly more music.

A large part of the beauty and symmetry of the violin, cello and bass arise because the musical distance between all the strings is equal. The violin family are all tuned in “perfect fifths,” and the bass is the only instrument commonly tuned in perfect fourths. In standard guitar tuning most but not all of the strings are in 4ths, so the geometry of scales and chords is partly regular and partly irregular, which is confusing.

We get repeating geometric chord shapes in *Liberty Tuning*, the ability to play in more than one key, access to more complex chords and chord changes, plus a subtle drone-string extra resonance that makes the guitar ring nicely and become more pleasant to play. All these features are a fortunate combination, and even

after several years of careful study, I still don’t feel like I understand why it works the way it does. If you already play guitar and feel like you have some knowledge of the fingerboard, you’ll be quite surprised by *Liberty Tuning* can do. It’s not at all intuitive.

Most tunings and partial capo environments give the guitar a very different sound, and the chord voicings do not sound at all “normal.” It’s quite amazing that easy 2-finger chords in *Liberty Tuning* do not sound

like an odd tuning, and you can play really down-home music like Hank Williams or John Prine songs. The music in *Liberty Tuning* sounds very much like the way a guitar usually does, and I doubt that anyone who heard one of our recordings would even notice that the guitar was not in standard tuning.

Actually, about 3/4 of the chords you play in *Liberty Tuning* are chords that cannot be played at all in standard tuning, and the new landscape of fingerings that becomes available is fresh and exciting. There are a lot of really easy, but beautiful and haunting chord voicings that no one has ever heard before.

In *Liberty Tuning*, you can easily play in minor and modal keys, and also play blues and some jazz chords with easy two finger geometric chord shapes. If you already play guitar you’ll find it really amazing how you can play so many kinds of music in more than one key, and never leave a small area of the fretboard.

The way that great-sounding chords appear on the fingerboard by just moving a couple fingers around a small distance is something that guitarists are going to wonder about for a long time.

Liberty Tuning is a musical mystery. No one suspected that combining a previously unused partial capo configuration with a slight change in standard tuning might bring such a remarkable symmetry and geometric simplicity to the guitar fingerboard.