

Finding the Right Key For Your Voice

Theoretically, you could sing any song in any key, but depending on your vocal range and the range of the song, it usually means there are just one or a few of the 12 keys where you can reasonably sing a particular song. In the wrong key, either the highest or lowest note will go beyond what you can sing. It's harder to tell when the key is a little low, and you may be able to sing the song but you may have trouble projecting your voice. It is vital to find a way to play a song in a key where you can sing it, since few of us have the massive vocal ranges that famous singers often do. To be louder, you may want to push the song up a key or two.

Pop artists also often have unusually high voices, so don't be surprised if you can't sing a popular song in the original key. It's also unusual for two people of opposite genders to sing a song in the same key, so if you are male and trying to learn a song by a female artist or vice versa, you will probably have to find a way to *transpose* it to a different key. A two-chord song is still a two-chord song in any key— they are just different chords, and they have the same musical relationship to each other. On the Transposing handout you can see the scale numbers (1-7) for each key (A-G#).

Even beginner campfire guitar involves singing in different keys. The chords to the songs are often shown in their numerical form (see below), since not all of us are going to sing these songs in the same key.

Liberty Tuning allows us to play a lot of songs in more than one key with just 2 fingers, and we can combine it with a full capo until we run out of guitar fingerboard. Beginners now have more options than ever before to match guitar skills to vocal ranges. It can take quite a while to find the best key for each of us, and you may have to compromise either on the guitar chords or your singing, or possibly abandon the idea of singing a

particular song altogether if you can't make it work.

As an example of how uncertain it is to know what key to do a song, let's look at the John Lennon song *Imagine*. High-profile artists have recorded it in at least 6 different keys. Notice that Madonna (low-voiced female) sang it in the same key as John Lennon (higher-voiced male) and that Eva Cassidy and Jack Johnson both chose F#.

Because of the chords, we have to play the 2-finger guitar part in *Liberty Version 2* in E position. By adding a full capo we can play it in the keys of E, F, F#, and G, where both male and female artists have sung it. I like doing it in F#, and Joyce's best key is E.

This illustrates that it is not simple to know what key to sing this song, or many other songs for that matter.

Artists Who Perform "Imagine"

John Lennon (C) *"original key"*
Madonna (C)
Bill Frisell (C) *instrumental*
Rick Springfield (C)
Howard Hewett (C)
Ray Charles (C#)
Chalice (C#)
Joan Baez (D)
Glee Cast (D)
Chet Atkins/Mark Knopfler (D) *instrumental*
Avril Lavigne (F)
Sara Oromchi (F)
Jack Johnson (F#)
Eva Cassidy (F#)
Herbie Hancock + others (A)
Keb Mo (A)

About the Chord Numbering System

If the letter names of the chords that Joyce Andersen and I play were over the lyrics to the songs, then they would be correct only for that one key. People of different ages and genders and with different vocal ranges don't all sing songs in the same key, and *Liberty Tuning* allows us to play guitar chords in more than one key. So we often use what is called the "Nashville" style of chord numbers to show the chord structure of each song in a more universal way. The song "Hush Little Baby" is a good example. It is a 2-chord song, sung in the key of C on our recording, using chords played in the key

of A. So instead of putting either the chord letters C-G, A-E or E-B over each line of the song, we often use the numbers **1-5**, which in troubadour language means: "Two major chords, one built on the 1st note of the scale in this key, and the other built on the 5th note." In the language of music theory, they would be notated with Roman numerals I-V, and called the "tonic" chord and the "dominant" chord. It seems more confusing at first, but it is actually clearer and easier to use the numbers. You could describe this song to another musician as a "one- five song in C."