

How To Learn A Song

We troubadours generally only play songs that we know. So-called 'music training' is usually built around sight-reading written music, which trains people to play music they don't know. Unfortunately, sight-reading something repeatedly does not cause you to learn it. You just learn to read it better.

A perfect model for how we learn a song is *Happy Birthday*, the best-known song in the world. No one learns it from music lessons or books— we absorb it from repeated listenings. After a few birthday parties we sort of know it, and eventually we find that we know it. We must internalize and absorb each song, then create and remember a way of playing it that works for us. It's the way all music was performed before the invention of paper and written music, and it's the way sight-impaired musicians have always played. Unless you have some songs already in your head that you “know” and believe in, you will never learn to make music that has any magic in it.

So how do we learn a song? Here's what most troubadours do:

1) Listen to the song over and over. Nowadays that's easy. Find the version you like the best, then repeatedly blast yourself with it. (It must have been much different to learn a song if you lived in an igloo with seven other people, with no recording devices and little privacy. Now people sing a lot and learn songs in their cars, and we have headphones.) You need to hear a song as many times as it takes for the melody to imprint in your head. We learn at different rates, some songs are of course easier to learn than others, and you will get better with practice.

2) Put the words down on a full sheet of paper. Lots of web sites have lyrics, but don't trust them. Compare the internet lyrics with the ones on the recording you like most, and make necessary corrections.

3) Organize the words by verses and choruses. Before you write or print out your final version, group the words the best way you can so they fit nicely on a sheet of paper. All internet sites repeat the words in choruses and refrains. You can make the whole song bigger type if you use labels like CHORUS: and then write REPEAT CHORUS on your word sheet. For really wordy songs you may need two sheets, so the words are not too small to read. Word-processor software lets you make type different sizes, but can be slow and frustrating. **Take a few minutes to carefully fit the words to the page as best you can.** You'll be glad you did. Leave as much space between lines of the song as possible. You'll need room to write in the chords above the lyrics in the next step.

4) Determine the chords, and pencil them in carefully above the words. Many web sites have chords for songs, but they are often filled with errors. This can be hard, and might require repeated listenings or someone's help. You will likely need to first learn the chords in the key on the recording you are learning from. That artist may play with a capo, in another tuning, have a band, change keys in the middle, or not even have a guitar on their recording. Try using highlighters or colored pens so you can see both the lyrics and the chords.

5) Transpose the chords to the best key for your voice. This step can take a while, and you may need help. It's a critical step, and can mean success or failure. It's hard to learn a song from a pop star with a high voice, or from an artist of opposite gender. The guitar only plays well in some keys, and most of us sing each song comfortably in just a couple keys. We've provided a *Transposing Chart* to show you what chords to play in each key.

There are 12 musical keys each song can exist in. One of them is best for your voice, and going one key higher or lower might be fine. But being 6 keys too high or too low can be disastrous and make you feel unmusical.

*The guitar plays well in 5 keys, but *Liberty Guitar* mostly plays in just two of them.* And sometimes just one.

*By adding a full capo, you can raise a song from 1 to 5 keys in *Liberty Tuning*,* which is often the solution to matching your guitar chords to your voice. It can also add more confusion while it is helping you.

Once you get a “bare-bones” arrangement together with words sung to chord changes, you can possibly construct a more elaborate guitar accompaniment, with picking or strumming that suits you. Gradually add intros, turnarounds, tags, breaks, vamps and other elements to “flesh out” and personalize the song.

This is a Troubadour's sheet music, showing words with chord letters or numbers, or both like we have shown here in the key of E, where E is the "1" chord, A is the "4" and B is the "5." When you see a troubadour with a music stand, it's for lyrics and chords like this.

CHORUS:

¹
E ⁴
A ¹
E
This land is your land (and) this land is my land

⁵
B ¹
E
From California to the New York island

⁴
A ¹
E
From the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters

⁵
B ¹
E
This land was made for you and me

VERSE I:

⁴
A ¹
E
As I went walking that ribbon of highway

⁵
B ¹
E
I saw above me that endless skyway

⁴
A ¹
E
I saw below me that golden valley

⁵
B ¹
E
This land was made for you and me