

# Introduction: How to Use This Book

This book is for beginning guitarists who want to learn to play fingerstyle country blues guitar in the styles of Robert Johnson, Big Bill Broonzy, Mance Lipscomb, Lightnin' Hopkins, and Mississippi John Hurt, as well as their followers like Taj Mahal, John Hammond, Jr., Mary Flower, and Eric Clapton. It's unusual in that it's designed to develop awareness of style as well as the basic techniques and concepts, "feel," and thinking that go into this style of playing. For this reason, it can be used along with other books, videos, lessons, and learning approaches, rather than instead of them. Many books and teachers teach you to play by example. This book is intended to get you thinking as well.

This book assumes that you already know your basic chord shapes: the chords on the first two or three frets in the keys of A, C, D, E, and G. It also assumes that you're used to plucking the strings with your fingers rather than a flatpick, or at least that you're willing to do so. That's all you need to be ready to go. Most of the fretting handwork in this book is fairly simple, and takes place on the lower frets of the fingerboard. The emphasis is primarily on the sound and rhythmic security of the picking hand.

This book teaches a creative approach to fingerstyle acoustic guitar blues. Once upon a time, roots musicians learned by watching and playing with older musicians, mostly in family or social situations. In the blues tradition, younger musicians like Robert Johnson got a chance to study firsthand the techniques of older masters like Son House. Sometimes they copied licks. But most important was to strum and sing—that's what came first, keeping the beat going so you could sing your message. The early guitarists of country blues also played a lot for dancing. Again, the beat was primary.

Today, many would-be blues guitarists learn to play out of books, learning from notes or tablature reinforced by a CD, video, or sometimes a live teacher. Often the teacher relies on tablature for his or her teaching (and probably relied on tablature for his or her own learning), and

uses a teaching technique based more on showing and rote repetition than on explaining, or on breaking the music down into its component parts. Students become copycats, able to play by rote but lacking the conceptual equipment to create music on their own. Worst of all, since they learn to play notes rather than working outwards from rhythmic gestures in their picking hands, their music lacks rhythmic vitality. The result has been to create two categories of musician. One plays the guitar. The other plays tablature.

This book concentrates mostly on keeping your playing rhythmic and alive. The fretting work is fairly simple—at least, as simple as I can make it while still providing challenges and musical interest—in order to give you a chance to concentrate on learning to play with feeling. In my experience over forty years of teaching the guitar, you can always learn to make your fretting handwork as complex as you care to as time goes on. Learning to play with a compelling rhythmic feeling, if you don't get it at the outset, is much harder to get later on.

By the very nature of book-learning, no book can completely solve this problem. Only practicing and playing live can. But, by presenting a rhythm-based learning method in which the music is broken down into physical and conceptual pieces as part of the learning process, I mean for this book to go a long way. Teachers, I hope, will adopt it as a supplement to their own teaching, using it along with their own materials. Even more, I hope this book will be useful for self-taught or self-teaching students who feel caught on a fogged-in plateau, trapped in the frustrations of rote learning. I hope that by using this book they'll be able to find their way out of the mists, understanding more deeply the music they copy, and learning to use it as a springboard for further exploration and development.