

Song Study:

How Do You Feel Today – Gabrielle Aplin

Introduction

To my ears, this is very much a tribute to the great Joni Mitchell. She is known for her driving, expansive open-tuning songs. By dropping out of standard tuning, she created a unique sound, which complemented her quirky vocals perfectly.

The other benefits of open tunings are the unusual chord voicings and, often, nice simple chord shapes which can be moved up the neck (for example, a barre chord for major chords)

Technical Notes

The thumb:

- The **Travis Picking** technique, named after country fingerpicking superman Merle Travis, relies HEAVILY on the thumb to keep the driving, four to the floor pulse. The thumb will alternate from the root, up to the next string above, and higher, to create alternating bass lines built on Root-Fifth and Root-4th relationships.

The fingers:

- Once the thumb is rocking away, the fingers interweave, mostly on the off-beats, filling out the pattern to create a flowing, rippling effect.
- By accenting these 'off beats' we can produce a great driving syncopation, breaking the otherwise constant flow of the patterns.
- 'Pinching' notes (playing both a bass with the thumb, and a high note with the fingers) creates chords, and can be used to accent notes, and create syncopation.

Left hand:

- To make the most interesting use of the open tunings, you can deliberately use partial chord shapes to create 'over ringing' – open strings intermingling with fretted notes up the neck.
- The most useful shapes in open G tuning are like a 'split open E' shape, which covers the Minor Chords of the Key, and an 'Em with an added note on the same fret of the 2nd string' for the Major Chords.
- If you use fingers 2,3 and 4 for any shapes which feature a row of notes on one fret (see technical notes sheet for diagrams) you'll have more 'spare fingers' to play with, and will be able to switch to the other shapes more smoothly. If you use fingers 1,2, and 3 (as GA does) you'll find you have to rotate your hand position to make other shapes.

Songwriting and Harmony

- Using an altered tuning instantly makes your songwriting more open to original ideas, as it's much harder to rely on the routines and habits we might fall into as guitarists.
- It's hard to pick out standard major and minor chords, so the chords we choose are more ambiguous. Also, Pentatonics are harder to find, so melody tends to be less clichéd too.
- Having said that – drill down, and take away the altered chords, and you have a standard chord progression. Verses focusing on the Chord I IV and V, and Chorus basically going G(I)-D(V)-G(I)-Bm(iii)-C(IV) and Em(vi)-D(V)-Bm(iii)-C(IV)
- Break them down, and most (catchy) songs adhere to the rule that mostly Primary chords with some secondary ones just work. In this case, using G, C and D mostly, with sprinklings of Bm and Em.
- Using a repeated bass note, such as the open G (the root) makes the harmony subtle, and less clear-cut.
- The chord shapes, as they are similar and repeat up the neck, create parallel intervals of a 6th (between 2nd and 4th strings) and a 10th (between 2nd and 5th strings) which are VERY good intervals on the guitar. See songs like 'Blackbird' and 'Scar Tissue' to see examples of great songs which make use of 10ths in particular.

Links and further study

- Check out this video of Joni to see if the comparison holds up... what do you think?
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LoKBGotuNhc>
- In the video above, Joni is playing a fair bit in Open D, with a capo...
- OK, so this isn't Joni. And the playing is perfect, but you get a good look at the chords shapes going up the neck (and a bit of leg) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJHj-St9QT0>
- For something completely different, but just as good, Pearl Jam's 'Daughter' uses open G with Power chord shapes to create a really distinctive sound.
- Keith Richards, notorious lover of the blues and lazy left-hander, wrote a lot of Rolling Stones songs in Open G. Brown Sugar...Start Me Up... Honky Tonk Woman...etc
- Robert Johnson, for many the ultimate acoustic blues player, used open G.

Practical Work

Try writing a riff, chord progression, or whole song, with some of the following attributes:

- Open G tuning
- Travis Picking with drone notes in the bass
- Sliding and hammering-on as you change up and down the neck
- Using the length of the neck to create melodic arcs

[NEXT UP: Jackson Browne – These Days](#)