

Strung Along

By Benjamin N. Hager '23

To put it mildly, the COVID-19 pandemic threw a monkey wrench into our lives last spring. For those of us who were left with copious amounts of free time, some challenging questions arose. Namely, how should we spend this newly found free time? After much deliberation, I decided to finally learn to play the guitar.

I'd been messing around with my guitar, a gift from my mom the previous summer, for a few months by the time the pandemic hit. I knew a total of three chords, but I couldn't name them or describe them in any way unless I had a guitar in front of me, and I certainly didn't know how chords worked. In fact, I knew next to nothing about music theory. In March, I learned chord names; G, C, and D, quickly followed by Em and Am. I watched hours upon hours of guitar videos on Youtube to learn songs. One of the first songs I learned was "You're Beautiful" by James Blunt. Looking back at videos of me playing that song for the first time, I cringe; my strumming was clunky and awkward, and I hit the pickguard with almost every single strum, adding unwanted percussion to a song that definitely didn't need it. Even so, being able to play that song, however awkwardly, gave me the motivation to keep going. I wouldn't be the same guitarist I am today, and I certainly wouldn't be writing this if I hadn't taken the time to learn that song.

In April, I continued learning simple strumming songs, like "Riptide" by Vance Joy, "Wagon Wheel" by Darius Rucker, "Take Me Home Country Roads" by John Denver, and eventually, "American Pie" by Don McLean. "American Pie" was another breakthrough song for me; it featured way more than the 5 basic chords I'd learned, most of which were in variations that I'd never seen, and the chord changes required to play the song effectively were faster than anything else I'd played up to that point. Even so, I persevered, and after a few days, I'd become even more confident in my ability to improve with constant practice and dedication. "American Pie" remains one of my favorite songs to this day.

April was also the first time I looked at guitar tabs (written music for guitar players) for more complicated songs like James TW's "When You Love Someone," Ed Sheeran's "I See Fire" and "Happier," the Eagle's "Hotel California," The Plain White T's' "Hey There Delilah," Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah," Snow Patrol's "Chasing Cars," and many more songs that were way above my paygrade at the time. The first time I tried to play the intro to "I See Fire," I straight up quit and moved on to easier material (listen to the first 45 seconds or so of the song and you'll understand why I, a guitarist with a couple months of experience, found the level of skill and technique required to play such a piece to be unfathomable). I didn't know it at the time, but I would be able to play each of these songs, including "I See Fire," a lot sooner than I believed.

The first *difficult* song I learned to play was John Mayer's rendition of "Free Fallin'." I was enthralled with his live performance of the song in the Nokia Theatre in Los Angeles in December of 2009, and I was dead-set on learning the intro guitar part. It probably took me two weeks, but eventually I was able to play a version of that introduction that would have been recognizable to someone who

had heard the song before (I didn't play it *exactly* the same way as John Mayer, but he has huge hands and he also had two supporting guitarists playing with him, so cut me some slack). The rest of the song was fairly simple because the same chords repeat the whole time, so it was smooth sailing from there.

"Free Fallin'" was the first song I learned that required *fingerpicking* (a technique that involves plucking individual strings with your fingers) rather than *strumming*, and it set me off on a whole new way of playing. Soon thereafter I learned "Tenerife Sea" by Ed Sheeran, a song that requires non-standard tuning and that took a month to really get right. After that, I became obsessed with fingerpicking, and over the course of the next six months, I slowly learned more and more difficult pieces like "Fast Car" by Tracy Chapman, "Landslide" by Fleetwood Mac, "Let Her Go" by Passenger, and many of the other songs that I first discovered in April.

Over the past few months, I've been focusing on integrating fingerpicking, flatpicking (picking with a guitar pick rather than one's fingers), strumming, and percussive techniques to add depth to playing. Alongside these techniques, I've also acquired a lot of useful tools to help me play, such as a looper pedal (made famous by Ed Sheeran and allowing a player record a piece in real time and then have it play-back in a continuous loop while the player adds more parts over-top of the loop), an amplifier, various microphones, and digital software, all of which come with their own learning curves, but by now I've gotten comfortable with putting in lots of practice in order to improve.

This semester, I'm finally taking guitar lessons for the first time. My basic technique on the guitar is strong, but my knowledge of the fretboard is weak, and that has prevented me from being able to improvise or play with other musicians as easily as I would like. I'm hopeful that the guitar lessons will help me with that. I've only been playing for about a year, but I'm really happy with my progress and even more optimistic about the future. COVID-19 has been a devastating pandemic, but it also sparked a new passion for guitar, singing, and music as a whole that I might not have otherwise developed, and that's something for which I can't help but be thankful.