# The Guitar According to Mark

A workshop for guitar students
with Mark Dvorak
Old Town School of Folk Music
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## Part One: On Time

A good way to practice keeping time is to work with a metronome. Playing fast is never as important as playing in control. A metronome helps us keep a steady tempo throughout a piece. A metronome can also help us keep tempo through difficult transitions.

Working with a metronome helps us develop technique, and helps us develop strength

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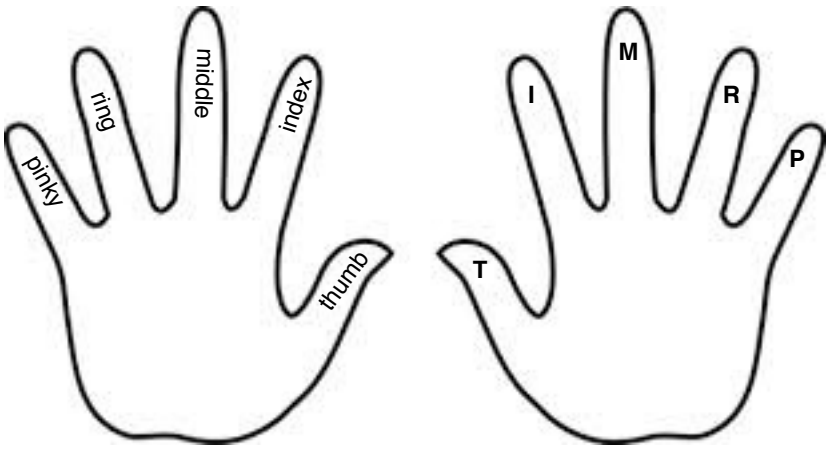
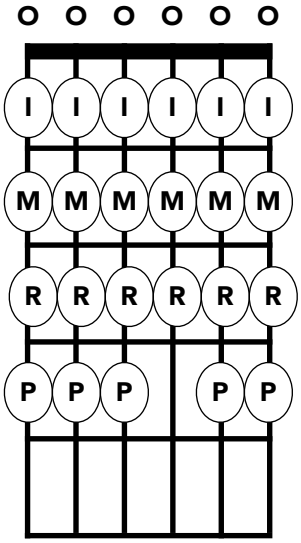
**Chromatic Exercise:**



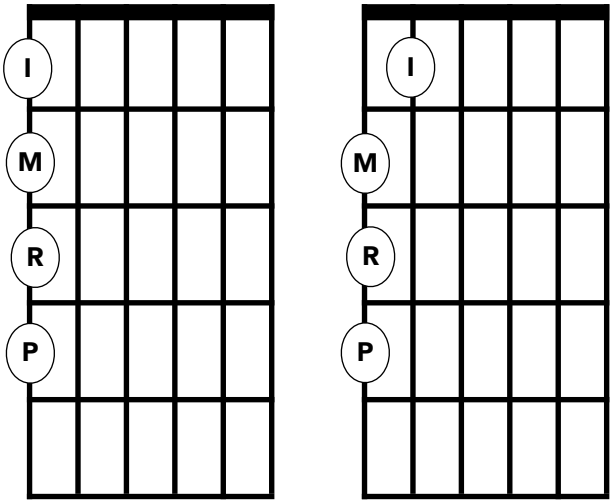

1. Use a flat pick and sound the 6th string open, and then ascend and descend on the string using the fingering in the diagram
2. Repeat for each string. Strive for clear tones and smooth changes.
3. Set your metronome to a really slow tempo. Now try starting with the lowest tone (open 6th string) and ascend through the entire six string sequence until the highest tone (1st string, 4th fret) is sounded.




4. Now descend from the highest tone to the lowest, again striving for clarity and smoothness. You alone are the judge.
5. If you don't like what you are hearing, slow the tempo down.

**Strength Building Exercise:**

1. Set your metronome to a very slow tempo. Fret the 6th string at the first fret and sound it, holding the tone for four beats.
2. Leaver your index finger on the first fret and add your middle finger to the second fret again sound the tone and holding for four beats.
3. Continue until all four tones on the 6th string have been sounded, each held for four beats.




4. Here's the tough part. Move your index finger to the 5th string, 1st fret and sound that tone, leaving your other three fingers on the 6th string. Next, move your middle finger to the 5th string, 2nd fret, sounding the tone leaving your other two fingers on the 6th string. Continue in this fashion across all six strings.
5. This exercise develops individual finger strength. It get's a little easier after a while. If you tried this every day for ten days, you'd gain a lot of strength and dexterity in your fretting hand.

## Part Two: In Tune

With a pluck of your thumb, a single string is sent vibrating into motion. What we hear is the air around that string vibrating with the same frequency. There's a moment right after impact when the tone flares and then a moment when it settles a bit and rings. Then it begins to fade. Listen to it fade. Can you hear the moment when the tone disappears completely?

Tuning your guitar is listening to your guitar. Believe it or not, all humans are born with the ability to distinguish differences in pitch, and so were you. Musicians sometimes describe a pitch as being high or low. Or higher or lower than another pitch.

Pitch can be measured by the number of vibrations, or cycles, per second. If you sound the first string of your guitar while holding it down at the fifth fret, it will vibrate somewhere around 440 times per second. Let's say that's a lot of vibration,

and on the guitar, it is. Hold down the third string at second fret and pluck again. The sound you hear is vibrating around 220 cycles per second. That one's somewhere in the middle. Sound the fifth string open (don't hold it down at any fret), and it’s around 110 cycles per second. We're starting to get down there.

Without using machines or calculations, our amazing ears can tell, almost immediately, that these three tones are different in pitch. Can't they?

I don't like to tune using an electronic tuners, but I have one. And I do use it. But I don't like using it as much as I like listening to my guitar.

If you're exasperated from trying to get your guitar in tune, or curious about an electronic tuner, I'd say go on down to the guitar store and get one. Nothing beats being in tune.

Then try this. You need two people and two guitars to do this and one of the guitars has to already be in tune. Find a quiet place and sit close, facing each other. The guitarist whose instrument is in tune will give the tones and the other will match those tones. Name your strings one through six, one closest to the floor as you hold your guitars, and six closest to the ceiling.

You can start with any string, but we'll start with the fifth string. The giver sounds the fifth string over and over to a slow, steady beat. Like, one tone every two or three seconds, or something. The matcher also sounds his or her fifth string to that same slow, steady beat. Listen for the moment after impact and after the little flare up of sound. Listen for the sound of the two tones ringing and listen to them fade. Before they fade away completely is the time to strike your strings and listen to them again. Do it some more and don't say anything, just listen.

Decision time. Continuing to sound your fifth strings in unison, the matcher need only determine if the sound of his or her string is the same or different from the sound of the giver's. It's not yet time to worry whether it's higher or lower in pitch.

Determine only whether it's the same, or different, or maybe you can't tell. Those are your choices. Again: same, different, don't know. Make your decision in one second or less. Really.

If you think they're the same, then they're the same. Move on to the next string. If you think the two strings have different pitches, or you're not sure - sometimes it's hard to tell - here's what to do.

Find the tuning gear that controls the tension of the fifth string by tracing that string from the point at which you're plucking all the way down the neck, past the nut to where it's tied off on the post. Turn the tuning gear each way while plucking the fifth string and you'll be able to tell which way tightens the string, or raises the pitch, and which way loosens the string, or lowers the pitch. There.

Have the giver begin sounding his fifth string as before. The matcher also

sounds his fifth string, one hand steady on the tuning gear. As fifth strings sound in unison, the matcher begins to loosen his fifth string to a point where he is absolutely certain it is lower in pitch than the giver's. If you're not sure, keep loosening. If your idea of absolute certainty is loosening your fifth string until it flops around like a sagging clothes line, so be it. The idea here is to begin using your ears and to begin trusting them. If you can't tell when your string is lower in pitch than the giver's, keep loosening the string until you can.

If the matcher is now certain his or her string is lower in pitch that the giver's, the matcher is also certain which way to now go. Up. Continuing to sound fifth strings in unison, the matcher begins tightening steadily, perhaps a quarter turn at a time. Maybe less, but always steadily increasing the tension. Sound the strings in unison to a slow beat, turn the gear steadily.

When the matcher's string begins nearing the pitch of the giver's, you'll hear waves of sound ringing, almost clashing. Think how circles of ripples expand and finally collide when two stones are plopped side by side, into calm water. It's kind of like that.

The clashing ceases when the two strings are in unison not only in rhythm, but now also in pitch.Ahh. It's not uncommo n for the eyes of the giver and matcher to meet when this moment occurs. Isn't that funny?

Try this whole thing again for the fourth string. Then the third, second and first strings. Save the sixth string for last, it's the lowest in pitch and sometimes the most difficult to hear. By the time you get to it, you'll be in good practice.

Keep the process moving. Listen, lower your pitch, bring it up to what you think is in tune, and move on to the next string. That's better than laboring over your pitches and worrying about perfection. Your ears are not muscles, but like tiny muscles, intensive listening can tire them out quickly.

If a string seems cantankerous and doesn't want to get in tune, skip it. Go back to it after you've done the others. When you've attended to all six strings, strum a G chord (we use all six strings when strumming a G chord) and listen for a quality of wholeness. If you think you're there, then you're there. If not, try each one again. Or get out your electronic tuner.

## Part Three: Duple Meter

The Sanskrit word *prana* means "breath" or "vital energy." *Yama* is to extend or draw out, and not restrain. In yoga, *pranayama* means "extension of the *prana* or breath," or "extension of the life force." The practice of yoga begins with an awareness of one's breathing.

In a way, when we make music on stringed instruments, our guitars, banjos, fiddles, mandolins, and stand-up basses are all breathing together, and a long time ago a name was given to this breathing. It was called *duple meter*.

*Duple* is Latin and means "two." *Meter* is from a Greek word meaning "measure." So *duple meter* means we measure our musical breathing in twos. And believe it or not, there are a lot of ways to count to two.

Children on the playground teeter-totter in duple meter. Your crabby boss storms across the office in angry duple meter. We run to the bathroom in urgent duple meter. Watching people walk or at play, you may imagine the unheard music in their movement.

The *prana* in playing music is the care and intention with which an instrumentalist sends his or her strings into vibration. The *yama* then, is resonance.

The strong beat in duple meter is the first beat. The other one is the back beat. Bass notes fall to the first beat, strums and brushes to the back beat.

Here's a neat game to try the next time you gather with friends to play. It's a good warm up exercise. After everybody is tuned up, have a single guitarist set a tempo. Make it on a D chord and make it a person in your group who is comfortable going it alone. The guitarist sounds the fourth string on the strong beat, and strums across the strings on the back beat. On the next strong beat, he or she sounds the fifth string followed again by a strum.

Have another guitarist fall into time with the first. Take a minute to listen to the two instrumentalists dance together on a D chord. If there is one, have a bass player jump in.

Don't change chords yet, just stay with D. There are no words so you won't need sheets or anything. Your eyes are free to help manage your strumming, and you can focus attention on the simple sound in the room. Look at each other.

Next, have a fiddle player or two, or three, stroke their strings in short bursts on the back beat, where the guitarists are strumming. Fiddle players, try doing it more loudly, then more softly. Guitarists, strive for a full-sounding bass note, and a quieter, more compact strum. The ever-present bass should also blend.

Then come the mandolins, banjos, harmonicas, ukuleles and what-all else. The role of these instruments in our Duple String Symphony in D, is to find each other on that back beat and blend. The strong beat is given authority by the bass and

guitars, the back beat becomes a bubbling stew of chunking, percussive and resonant strings.

If every player in the circle can hear every instrument, then you're all breathing together in a musical way. Try bringing the collective volume down to a whisper and see what happens next.

## Part Four: Finger Picking

Most people finger pick using the thumb, index and middle finger of their picking hand. In our first approach is in 4/4 time and the thumb makes all the beats. Which strings, and the order in which they are sounded depends upon which chord is being formed with your fretting hand.

Here's what. Out of the four beats in each measure, the first beat is the most important. The the place we want to sound the root tone of the chord. If we are fretting a C chord, the root tone is C. The root of an E chord, is an E, and so forth.

If the chord name begins with A, B or C, the root tone is on the fifth string. If the chord name begins with E, F or G, the root tone is on the sixth string. The root tone of a D chord is on the fourth string, and D gets special treatment that we'll discuss later.

A useable thumb pattern then can be written as such:

R 4 R 4

"R" means root tone. Finger a C chord. The root tone of C is the fifth string. Sound it with your thumb. Then sound the fourth string. Then repeat over and over keeping a steady tempo.

5 4 5 4

The space between these four beats are counted too. We say "and" to represent them aloud and use + to represent them in writing.

5 + 4 + 5 + 4 +
one and two and three and four and

Let's add some tones to our bass to create an accompaniment pattern. Find the third string using the index finger of your picking hand. Sound the third string right after the second beat:

```
5     +     4     3     5     +     4     +
one   and   two   and   three and   four  and
```

Practice this over and over. Pretty soon you'll be able to do it without too much aiming. Next, find the second string with the middle finger of your picking hand. Sound the second string right after the third beat:

```
5     +     4     3     5     2     4     +
one   and   two   and   three and   four  and
```

Common notation and tablature uses straight lines and brackets to indicate these quarter beat and eighth beats:

```
5           4     3     5     2     4
|           |_____|     |_____|     |
```

So this finger picking pattern can be used for any chord whose name begins with A, B or C. For now, use this pattern for a D chord.

For chords whose names begin with E, F or G, the following pattern can be used:

```
6           4     3     6     2     4
|           |_____|     |_____|     |
```

If the song you are playing is in the key of D, a D chord becomes pretty important. Many players choose to tune the sixth string down a whole tone. Dropped D tuning gives a very rich sound. As our root is now on the sixth string, we can use the above pattern while fingering a D chord.

Here's another finger picking pattern for you to try. For chords beginning with A, B or C

```
5       1       3       2       4               3       1
|_______|       |_______|       |               |_____|
```

For chords beginning with E, F or G, try this one:

```
6       1       3       2       4       1       3       1
|_______|       |_______|       |_____|       |_____|
```

Townes Van Zandt and others use this kind of picking for quieter songs and ballads. It's a beautiful treatment. Sometimes Townes added a hammer-on to the third beat:

```
5       2       3       1       4/0   h2        3       1
|_______|       |_______|       |_____|         |_______|
```

## Part Four: Arpeggio

"Arpeggio" is from the Latin term arpeggiare which means "play the harp." *Arpe* is harp. We borrow the plucking style that harp players use to create a quiet, flowing accompaniment.

The thumb on your picking hand sounds the sixth, fifth and fourth strings. Index sounds the third string, middle sounds the second. There are many ways to create an arpeggio pattern, here are two good ones in 4/4 time:

```
R       4       3       2       R       4       3       2
|_______|       |_______|       |_____|       |_______|
```

```
R       4       3       4       2       3       4       3
|_______|       |_______|       |_____|       |_______|
```

How about this one:

```
R       3       2       3       4       3       2       3
|_______|       |_______|       |_____|       |_______|
```

Here's an arpeggio for songs in 3/4 time or with a 6/8 feel:

```
R       4       3       2       3       4
|_______|       |_______|       |_____|
```

## Part Five: Finger Picking Melody

Here's a chord progression in 4/4 time to study. The assignment is to keep a steady tempo on the bass notes using the thumb of your picking hand. Remember the bass pattern for a C chord is 5 4 5 4. All the other chords use 6 4 6 4

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| C | C | G | G |
| 5 4 5 4 | 5 4 5 4 | 6 4 6 4 | 6 4 6 4 |
| G | G | C | C |
| 6 4 6 4 | 6 4 6 4 | 5 4 5 4 | 5 4 5 4 |
| E | E | F | F |
| 6 4 6 4 | 6 4 6 4 | 6 4 6 4 | 6 4 6 4 |
| C | G | C | C |
| 5 4 5 4 | 6 4 6 4 | 5 4 5 4 | 5 4 5 4 |

## Part Six: Chord Tones

Folk melodies are often very memorable. One reason is they are composed of mostly chord tones. Strum a G chord on your guitar, and the tones you are hearing are the chord tones for G major: G - B - D - G - B - G.

If we look at the G major scale - G - A - B - C - D - E - F# - G - we see there are eight tones. Many choir singers know these tones as Do - Re - Mi - Fa - Sol - La - Ti - Do. Musicians often refer to them as scale degrees and number them instead, 1 through 8.

On a piece of paper, write the number 1 - 8, and underneath each number write out the G major scale. Draw a circle around the 1, the 3 and the 5. Those are your chord tones, G, B and D.

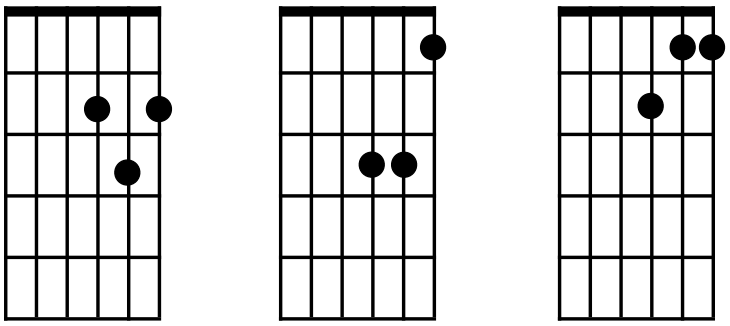
What's left are the 2nd, the 4th, the 6th and the 7th. The 8th is the octave, so let's leave it alone. These remaining tones are often referred to as 'color' tones. Sort of like the relatives outside your immediate family.

The 2nd tone and the 6th add sparkle and shape to a melody. The 4th and the 7th are much stronger and will often add some new dimension to a basic theme.

Good melodies use a combination of chord tones and color tones, and occasionally a tone outside the scale. Those are the aliens. Blues melodies commonly use these.

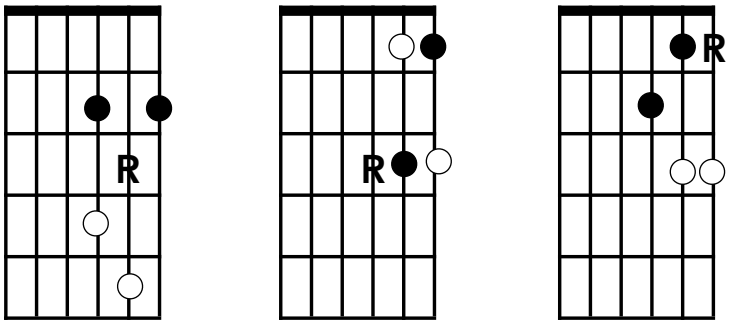
So, in the key of G, are chord tones are G(1), B(3) and D(5). Our color tones are A(2), E(6) and F#(7). The first phase of the hymn "Amazing Grace" uses all of these tones. It begins with three chord tones in a row, D, G, B, then down to the A, back through the root, down to the E. Ever wonder why this song is so universally recognized? Chord tones and color tones.

Here's a way we can use chord tones and color tones on our guitar. Study these three fingerings:



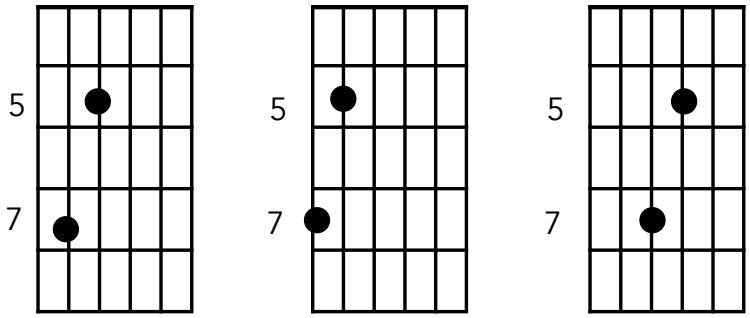
These fingerings in the position their shown are a D major chord, a Bb and an F. The dots where you place your fingers are the chord tones. You can put these shapes anywhere on the neck. The tones will always be chord tones, but their values change when the position is moved. Move the D shape up two frets and you have the chord tones for E major. Move the Bb shape up the neck four frets and you have the chord tones for a D.

Guitarists learn to think and see the fret board through the filter of these sorts of patterns. Let's add a couple of color tones to each shape. It doesn't matter what their names are, and for now, let's not even worry about their scale degree. Get to know where these color tones belong and how to get in and around the neighborhood, so to speak.




Practice ascending and descending each pattern. The "R" indicates the root tone of the shape.

Study these new, two finger chord shapes:



## Part Six: Breaking Up the Blues with Brownie McGhee

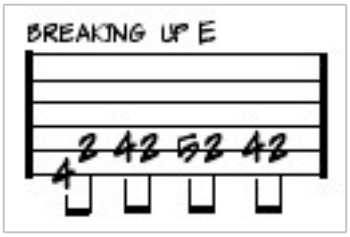
"Blues Is Truth," said Brownie McGhee, smiling, almost laughing. It was the summer of 1994 and we were at the kitchen table in Brownie's home in Oakland, California. The supper dishes had been cleared and we were near the end of a visit that lasted the better part of two days.

Brownie had been handed a guitar and he was digging in. His big hands worked the strings and familiar sounds began to fill the kitchen, sounds I had only heard before on lp or cassette. "Good tone," he said, remarking on the borrowed instrument. He smiled again, almost laughing.

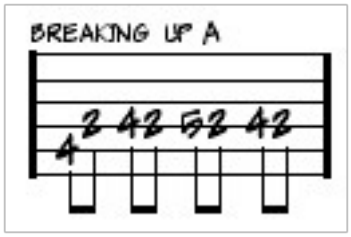
*Good mornin' blues, blues how do you do?*
*Good mornin' blues, blues how do you do?*
*I'm doin' all right, good mornin', how are you?*

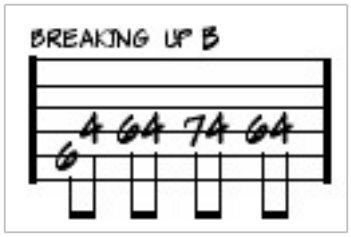
Brownie's driving guitar style was uniquely personal and always musical. His approach to playing blues guitar was based on a concept he called "breaking up the chords." Brownie thought of chords in terms of moveable shapes that could be improvised upon and easily adapted to different positions and different keys. "The Blues is a living thing," he once said.

Often, we think of an E chord as a specific finger shape held down against the strings. When we strum, the tones E-B-E-G#-B-E ring out more or less at the same time, and produce a sound we identify as "E." Strum that E chord four times to a steady beat, and you've got one measure.

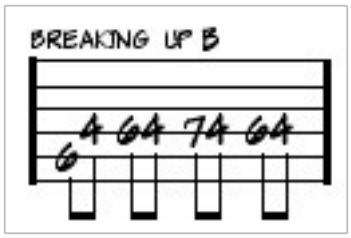



Brownie played his "moving" E chord one note at a time, breaking it up, to a shuffle rhythm. The first two notes of the figure - the 6th string, 4th fret, and the 5th string, 2nd fret - are a G# and a B respectively. Both tones are common to the organization we earlier identified as an E chord. After that, the sequence runs up through a C# and a D - a sixth and a flatted seventh - and back again. These tones, along with a swinging rhythm provide a good starting point at which to begin improvising blues Brownie McGhee style. You could call it a scale if you wanted, but I prefer, as Brownie did, to think of it as a moveable chord shape.



Take a minute then and study the shape. I play the whole thing using only the index and ring fingers of my fretting hand, sounding the strings with the thumb of my picking hand. If we begin playing the same pattern on the 5th string, 4th fret, that gives us a swinging, bluesy, moveable A chord. Then shift the whole shape up two frets and play through a B chord.




Try out these new chord shapes to a twelve bar blues progression, using Brownie's turnaround in the last two measures. Work at a slow tempo, striving to play evenly and with authority. Check out some of Brownie's recordings to hear how he used this, and other moveable figures in context. Good luck, get in touch if you have a question.

## You Are Not Alone

In our short study, we've become acquainted with some basic concepts and explored a handful of simple exercises to help you visualize and improve your fingering and picking.

Every guitarist who ever was and who ever will be, begins from the very same place you have: the beginning. And from there on out you are mostly on your own. The old adage says that everyone has to teach themselves, but from time to time everyone also needs help. Classes and lessons are worthwhile stops along your way, while books, tablature, DVD, video and recordings are some of the clues others have left behind to help mark the route each has taken.

The art of practice - the art of beginning - is the art of opening. Each return to practice marks another step closer toward one's own creative center. And with practice comes the promise that our music will one day reveal a beautiful reflection of who we are and from where we've come.

You are not alone. The way to playing guitar well is thoroughly known, and those who take the time and care, to make just a single, clear, purposeful tone on their instrument, join the many thousands of others who have already ventured down this path. Age and talent have nothing to do with making progress, or making music. They who listen well and show up to work, get to where they are going.

Mark Dvorak continues to be an integral member of the faculty at Chicago's remarkable Old Town School of Folk Music. When he's not on the road, you can find him there teaching, jamming with students and passers by, or just hanging out and soaking in the vibe.

Since 1986, thousands of music students have passed through his classes. He has helped many a beginner get through their first chords and strums, and has hosted a catalogue of master classes and workshops on a range of subjects from old time banjo picking to the legacy of the great Lead Belly, to just about every other topic related to the study of the American folk song.

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