



The Twelve String Guitar

by Richard Gilewitz

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I have been playing the acoustic guitar for nearly thirty-three years. At least thirty-one of those years have included playing the twelve-string, the instrument I became enamored with as a sixteen year old in Huntsville, Alabama. The magnetic pull towards fingerstyle guitar occurred almost immediately for me - as it did with so many players today - after hearing guitarists John Fahey and Leo Kottke in the 1970's. Prior to discovering these pioneers of fingerstyle guitar technique, the banjo was the primary instrument triggering my soon to be apparent permanent venture down a musical path, particularly as I recall my interest in the soundtrack from the film "Bonnie and Clyde". With a solid base of annual family visits to the Renfro Valley, Kentucky bluegrass festivals and "Foggy Mountain Breakdown", a popular repertoire staple piece for the Bluegrass bands of my formative growing years, I was granted a lifetime's worth of fuel for me to stick to the process of learning to play "something". After hearing Arlo Guthrie's "Alice's Restaurant", I navigated from the banjo toward the guitar, which seemed to suit me more because I could never quite figure out why those banjo players put that high string where the thumb is supposed to strike!

To this day I only sing if people irritate me, and as a result I seem to have become known as an "instrumental" guitarist. During my high school years, the music of steel-string instrumental guitarist John Fahey attracted my attention with his beautiful and melodic, if not sometimes repetitive, guitar compositions. Since John's music was not quite as rapid fire as Leo Kottke's works, I was much more easily able to discern and dissect the patterns of Fahey and his compositions opened the door for me to the use of open tunings and slide guitar. While attending the University of Alabama I was exposed to the classical guitar repertoire, mostly due to David Walbert, an extraordinary teacher whom I have studied off and on with for the past twenty- five years.

It was during this time in college that I began noticing how crucial it was to gravitate towards an instrument's calling when developing a musical repertoire. Although there are many pieces of music that can easily translate to multiple instruments more often than not, sometimes a piece of music tends to live on one type of guitar. The nature of a piece can take on an entirely different personality on a steel-string versus a nylon-string guitar. A capo on a guitar can also produce an entirely different feel or "home" for a piece.

Such is the nature for the twelve-string guitar. Many luthiers and players have suggested that the instrument be pitched down at least one full step from standard tuning. There is much less tension on the neck as well as more flex in the strings; therefore it is easier to play. The capo could then be placed at the 2nd fret in order to play with others or for a singer to return to standard pitch.

The range of a twelve string can be truly remarkable. It can still be pitched to standard and, with a capo placed at the 4th or 5th fret; the guitar can produce a harpsichord-like effect. Personally I am most fond of going the other way. I tend to pitch the guitar down



two full steps and then will put the guitar in an open tuning. This allows for a Bb note in the low bass, which when produced through a sub-woofer, can be quite thunderous. I have always enjoyed the twelve-string guitar in this range as I feel more of a gravitation toward the growl that it can produce, as well as the chiming bell-like tones obtained from the harmonics. I've always felt that the twelve-string craves to roar like a lion. Just listen to players like Hudie Ledbetter, Pete Seeger, Leo Kottke and Peter Lang for some examples.

Another advantage of the twelve-string is in the octave strings. The first and second strings are paired as unisons (same string, same note), whereas strings three through six have an octave string just above each string. I have a strong personal preference for the fifth string octave to be a 22-wound string. As a fingerstyle player I prefer to hear a thicker sound in the low range, which tends to be minimized when using an unwound string. This is why I particularly enjoy the custom set of D'Addario EJ37 Phosphor Bronze strings that comes complete with the precise string setup I currently use on my Breedlove 12-string Northwest XII Jumbo Cutaway

I also feel that the action, which is the height of the strings from the fingerboard, needs to be relatively low. Why go to the gym and try to bench press 400 pounds? Although I do pitch my instrument down very low, I still keep my action fairly low. For slide playing I simply adjust my touch and attack. If I want to "blast out", I just plug it in and turn it up! Another point here being my preference for magnetic pickups over saddle pickups, not only in general but especially for the twelve-string. I am currently more than satisfied during a live setting using an LR Baggs M1 magnetic pickup through a para-DI box combined with an external Audio-Technica 5150 condensor mic, which picks up the true sparkle and full range available from my D'Addario Strings. It's a great combination that makes my twelve-string roar!

