

An Overview of Open Tunings for the Dances of Universal Peace

The standard guitar tuning, EADGBE, works well for so many Dances. Yet, for others, or for leaders who may not feel fully proficient with standard tuning, an open-tuned guitar works beautifully.

Indeed, in the early years of the Dances, leaders who wanted some basic accompaniment to the voice found satisfaction with open-tuned guitars. Unlike others kinds of open tunings, these specialized tunings were based upon the tamboura (aka, tanpura) common to most forms of Indian music. These tunings involve only two notes which create a dronal foundation over which any melody can be sung.

One of the beautiful things about the open-tuned guitar is that no chords are necessary for this kind of basic support of the voice and Dance. And, because many forms of Asian and Middle-Eastern music are “melody-over-drone” music, many of the Dances affiliated with those traditions sound especially lovely with an open-tuned guitar.

If you have read this far, chances are you are interested in exploring the open-tuned guitar for the Dances. Maybe you know something about them already and you're ready to dive in.

But, you may have some questions: Which is better, standard or open-tuned guitar? Will I need a dedicated guitar, or can I switch back and forth from standard to open tuning on one guitar? Is there more than one open tuning? Which tuning is best for me and how will I decide? Will I need to buy different strings? Will I need to learn lots of new chords? Can I play melodies, instead of chords?

You may have other questions. I hope this document will help to guide you into the world of DUP open tunings for the guitar!

Is there one open tuning, or several?

There are four common tunings for the DUP, each having its own advantages. These are Open G, Open B-flat (Bb), Open C, and Open A. Each of the open tunings for the DUP employs only two notes! Let's look at each tuning, in the order they are most popularly used by leaders.

Open G

In the early days, folks developed the Open G tuning - G G D G G D (low to high) - as a relatively quick and easy way to transition from standard to open tuning, in part because this tuning does not require changing strings. Open G continues to be used by many Dance leaders.

For Open G, you tune the high E string down to D; the B goes down to G; the G remains G and the D stays D; the A string goes down to G; and the low E tunes up to G.

You don't need to obtain custom string gauges for this tuning. However, it works very well to replace the B string with a G string from a standard set, so that both high G strings are of the same type.

Learn more about the Open G tuning in this comprehensive piece written by Sky Majida Roshay:

<https://www.dancesofuniversalpeacena.org/na/open-g-tuning.htm>

Open Bb

I played in Open G for a couple of years, but I found one disadvantage: When playing in the key of C – the “common key,” common to so many of our Dances – I “lost” a lot of the neck of the instrument.

To play in the key of C in an Open G tuning, the capo clamps onto the Fifth Fret, which is about a third of the way up the neck. For the key of D, the capo goes two frets further up. If I try to play in Eb or E, I lose most of the neck! And with the capo that far up the neck, to my ear the guitar begins to sound and feel a bit more like a mandolin than a guitar.

Also, with some methods of open chording, I need to come very far up the neck toward the body to form those chords. This makes some chords very difficult or barely attainable.

I was happy to learn about the Open B-flat tuning. In this tuning, the capo rests at Fret Two for the key of C, so the neck-room feels almost like there is no capo on the guitar at all; one still has most of the neck to work with. Discovering the fuller sound resulting from the longer expanse for the strings to vibrate, along with the increased room for chording up the neck, I became ready to face the challenge this tuning requires: changing some of the strings to custom gauges, effectively assembling my own new string sets for the guitar.

The usual tuning for Open B-flat is Bb Bb F Bb Bb F - low to high.

Richard Wahiduddin Shelquist has written this excellent piece on the increasingly popular Open Bb tuning, including detailed information on the different string gauges needed:

<https://www.dancesofuniversalpeacena.org/na/open-b-flat-tuning.htm>

Open C

Similar to the Open Bb tuning is Open C. Open C has the beautiful advantage that when playing in the key of C, one has the full range of the neck to play with, as well as the full vibratory range of the strings. And, a bit like Open G, standard gauge strings may be used for this tuning, mostly.

One disadvantage of the Open C tuning is that it becomes nearly impossible to play below C, keys like B or Bb, which are called for in some Dances of Universal Peace. In Open C, one would simply play those songs at the higher pitch, C.

Anahata Iradah, who has long played her 12-string Ovation tuned in Open C, writes in her book, “Guitars of Universal Peace”: “I have found that the C tuning works particularly well for 12-string guitars. It also works well for 6-string instruments but the advantages do not seem as prominent. To experiment with retuning a 6-string guitar to C open tuning I suggest you use a regular set of standard strings, except substitute the high E string (usually a gauge of .011”) for a thinner string .008” or .009”. This puts less strain on the highest string and allows it to play more easily.”

“Guitars of Universal Peace” by Anahata Iradah, provides more information and includes easy chord charts and theory, along with DVDs:

<http://travelinglight.aradium.com/#!/category?name=dances-of-universal-peace-books-with-dvd-&category=6ae90dab-01d2-5956-8ce0-592dffabeb43&store=431363413723210>

And finally, Open A

Wren Kothrade has written about what she describes as "the fastest tuning from standard to an open tuning": "I wanted to share with you the tuning I use. Instead of GGD,GGD, it's one full note up the scale to AAE,AAE. Below is a little chart of how to tune from Standard to this Tonic A tuning."

The high E remains unchanged
B tunes down to A
G tunes up to A
D tunes up to E
A remains the same
The low E remains the same

Note that in this tuning, the lowest string breaks the common pattern as it's not tuned to the tonic A, but instead is tuned to the dominant E.

A personal anecdote: Before departing to lead DUP in India in early 2013, Wren shared her Open A tuning with me, and it proved an ideal solution to my concern about having only one guitar for six weeks in Asia. I took my standard and - without needing to change a single string - I was able to tune between standard and open on the spot. The guitar performed beautifully - *with only one exception*: when asked to lead one final Dance of the tour, the G string snapped as I tried to tune back to A!

The main disadvantage of this Open A tuning is the propensity of the G string to break under its greatly increased tension. This tuning works well in a pinch, but the tensions on the strings may not be ideal for a long term tuning.

For more on Open A, see:

<https://www.dancesofuniversalpeacena.org/na/Open-A-plus-nuts-and-saddles.htm>

Some additional considerations about Open Tunings.

The purpose of this article is to help you to navigate decisions involved in transitioning from standard to open tunings or, if you are just beginning on guitar, to help you decide whether to take up standard or open tuning as your first or only method of choice.

Is one tuning better or easier than another?

Let's briefly consider some differences in playing and chording in standard and open tunings.

The chords used for standard guitar are irrelevant to open-tuned guitar, and vice versa, so if you know standard chords, you will leave them aside when you take up playing in an open tuning. If you do not yet play and are wanting to decide *which* to play, understand that you will learn one kind of chording or another, depending on whether you choose standard or open-tuned guitar. If you learn on open, you will have to learn all new chords if and when you add or transition to standard tuning.

Another consideration is lessons. If you want an instructor, it may be helpful to note that if you choose standard tuning, you will have innumerable resources and teachers, whereas if you take up open-tuned guitar for the DUP, your instructors will almost exclusively be other Dance leaders, because these tunings are rarely used on guitars outside of the Dances of Universal Peace.

Generally speaking and from one point of view - as mentioned at the outset of this article -, an open-tuned guitar may be easier to use, because it can be played as a rhythm and drone instrument right from the start, without learning a single chord or playing a melody or scale. Then, when you do learn chords, the chords take relatively few, simple and repeating forms along the length of the neck. Melodies can also be easily played, instead of or in addition to chords, and in several ways.

Some chords are not as effectively rendered in open tuning as in standard, and some songs just seem to sound or feel better in one or the other tuning, while lots of Dances sound equally good in either tuning!

For these reasons, many Dance leaders play both, bringing two guitars into the Dance circle.

Along with asking your Mentor, you may want to ask Dance leaders who play both tunings in order to learn from their experiences around deciding which tunings to play, and why.

Guitar, whether in open or standard tuning, can serve as an ideal accompaniment to the Dances of Universal Peace, providing chords, melodies and rhythms. Whichever tuning(s) you choose, I wish you happy tuning, learning and playing!

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Some additional resources:

For much more information about Open Tunings for DUP guitars, visit this Musicians Resource page at the DUP North America website (look for “Playing Music for the Dances”):

<https://www.dancesofuniversalpeacena.org/na/dupna-leaders-and-musicians.htm>

In this YouTube video, Pir Shabda Kahn demonstrates tuning guitars from standard to Open G:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S26Kh14OKZA>

Zahir Orest has created a vast YouTube video resource for learning and playing in open tuning:

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCnSthHn5o0CxAlvMf5je1lQ/videos?shelf_id=0&view=0&sort=dd

Also, see this website created by Khalif Ramananda Rohsenow, which focuses on the Open G tuning and details major and minor chordings, scales and more:

<http://sufidanceguitar.weebly.com/>