

AG 110

Blues and Beyond

Adrian Whyte

Freight Train

This month I want to share with you a wonderful piece of music that I first discovered myself as a young Australian Guitar Magazine reader back many years ago. Around 15 years ago there was an article and some sample tab of this piece, and it resonated with me as a budding teen. At just eleven years old, african american Elizabeth Cotten composed this piece on a right handed guitar played upside down, picking the bass notes with her index finger and using her thumb to play the melody. This style was later dubbed 'Cotten Picking'. Thank god there were no ipods at the time, or she may have just got really good at candy crush instead, and what would i have done for today's column? Another pentatonic piece?

Technique

A quick word on the technical approach and learning of this piece: For this interpretation, I rest my First finger of my picking hand on the third string, second finger on the second string and third finger on the first string, with the thumb taking care of everything on the lower strings. Of course if you are a lefty playing a right handed guitar you could experiment in the true Cotten style, but that's not the intention for this piece. My interpretation is likely most influenced by the technique of the wonderful Chet Atkins.

To work through this piece, break down each beat and consider the bass notes and melody vertically - don't try to learn the bass line and add the melody! See which melody notes line up with which bass notes, and listen extensively to the moderately tempo'd track, which is at 120bpm.

Bars 1- 4

Now, whatever you do, don't skip the pickup notes! Many students start practising from Bar 1 because the pickup notes are very simple. You will find however that you will struggle to form the first chord leading off the pickup notes if you don't practice it slow!

I've included chord shapes at the top as a loose guide to forming the left hand. You'll find the first two bars revolve around C, with the pinky of your left hand doing the only fine work as your right hand picks away at the strings. Often finger picking tunes are much more about working out the picking hand with the left hand being fairly still. Think of notes on the beat (with the bass notes) as being pinches, and melody notes off the bass notes being the 'in-betweens'. By bar three you will have grabbed a G form, however you don't need to play a full G chord because we aren't strumming, so make the most of this and fret only what is needed! The end of bar three demands quick picking between your second and third finger finishing with a 'pinch' on the first beat of bar four. Break this down and count it as 1 2 3 and 4 and 1. Cruise to bar five by thumbing the bass line for the rest of the bar.

Bars 5- 8

Just remember that your thumb will always be playing the sixth, fifth and fourth string and in any situation where you are using the first finger or other to play any of these bass strings, you're probably doing it wrong! So the next two bars are very simple with the melody coinciding with the bass notes on the one and three of both bars. Bars seven and eight see a

return of the rhythmic motif that will again have you alternating between your second and third finger, nailing a pinch right after on beat one of bar eight. You have to practice these bars slow and in time, as mentioned for the end of bar three.

Bars 9- 10

This is my favourite passage of the song- a brilliant shift in the harmonic structure and a clear departure from your regular blues. Play the E chord and if you can, push your thumb a little harder and strike the fourth and third string at the same time. After the third bass note or beat three, you have to flatten your first finger across to the first string to sneak in that kooky little F natural on the first string. Any time you play a note off beat you will follow up quickly with a bass note- keep this in mind when breaking it down slowly. Bar ten has you holding the E chord still and using your pinky to play a D on the second string.

Bars 11- 12

The good news is, if you can get through the next two bars you'll need no help with the rest of the piece! To play the F form for this section, I recommend using your thumb on your fretting hand. Simply grab the first fret of the sixth string with that thumb and play

the first fret of the second string at the same time- then you can focus on getting your third finger down on the third fret of the fourth string by beat two. Fingerpicking allows you to construct as you go, unlike strumming, so in some ways it's not so challenging! Next up, you have to do a banjo style hammer on that starts with striking the open third string, and hammering the second finger on to the second fret with your left hand at the same time as striking the bass note on the fourth string. Isolate this bar and practice it! It's followed up in bar 12 with a pinch on beat 1, with your pinky bending and releasing the bend in time for beat two's fourth string bass note, followed up with an 'in between' off beat strike and a banjo roll like passage.

Bars 13 - 16

Bar 13 should be simple by now with a return to the C form, followed by a beautiful rolling G figure in bar 14, resolving with a pinch of the root notes at the beginning of bar 15. Keep that thumb moving and remember that bar 16 is simply the resolution before the pickup bar begins again!

Summary

This is a very challenging piece and it boggles the mind to think that it was constructed and played in its initial form by an 11 year old! So when you begin to complain that it's too hard, just think about that. The good news is, should you master this piece, you'll be able to walk into a guitar shop and raise a few eyebrows for good reasons. It will make you feel really good! In fact, I might go do that right now...

12

C C/G Em7(no5)/G C

3 (3) 1 2 3 0 3 0 3 1

3 2 3 3 2 2 0 0 0 3 2 2

1 1 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3

16

3