



The Low-Tuned Guitar

by John Stowell

I first became aware of the beauty of the sound of a guitar tuned to a lower pitch when I heard the great Ted Greene. On his terrific solo recording done in the late 1970's, his playing had a striking depth and resonance. In the last several years I've had the pleasure of playing with the wonderful Cincinnati guitarist Kenny Poole; he always tunes his instruments a major third below standard pitch (C to C), and hearing him play reminded me of my attraction to that deep warm sound.

Any guitar can be tuned lower but ideally, a longer scale length and heavier than normal strings are desirable. I use a standard set of heavy gauge acoustic strings on the low guitar, I believe starting with a .014 on top. My instrument is a Warmouth solid body that has been modified with a chamber carved out of the original alder. Robert Warren, a Washington state luthier, did the modification on the body and added a cedar top in addition to building a

new neck. I'm using a Bartolini acoustic guitar pickup and bronze strings, and the clarity and overtones produced by this combination work very well.

Initially, some practice is required to be able to tune the instrument properly and hear harmonies pitched considerably lower; with some time spent playing, these problems can be resolved. I decided to follow Kenny Poole's example and use a tuning a major third below standard. In my experience playing with this tuning, a light touch with the right hand works best. Open strings are especially prone to lengthy sustain when pitched lower, so I've had to work at controlling and balancing the sound. I favor this tuning for solo and duo playing, particularly in combination with a vocalist, horn player or another guitarist. Performing with a bassist can cause problems due to issues with registers. An added benefit to playing with other musicians when using the lower-pitched instrument is that I'm always transposing up a major third. This isn't a problem on a blues, but can create an interesting challenge with "Stella by Starlight".

Guitar Sessions Editor Stephen Rekas suggested a Christmas carol in the spirit of the season, so for this article I chose "Silent Night". The original version uses I, IV and V chords in a very diatonic progression. Below is my re-harmonization of the tune. I hope that it provides you with some inspiration.

Silent Night, Holy Night

Reharmonization by John Stowell

AM7#11 G7#11 AM7#11 Ab11
Silent Night, Holy Night,

Dbm7 Fm9 AM7 AM7 A7
All is calm, all is bright.

DM7 DM7 DM7#11 AM7 A7
Round yon Vir- gin mother and child,

DM7 DM7 DM7#11 AM7 Bbm6
Holy infant so tender and mild.

F9#11 E9b5 AM Dm maj9
Sleep in heaven-ly peace,

AM7 G13 AbM7 F#m11 FM6
Sleep in heaven-ly peace.

John Stowell has performed and taught internationally for more than twenty-five years. His Mel Bay Book/DVD Jazz Mastery, will be out in late 2005. For questions, comments or information, John can be reached at <http://www.johnstowell.com> or jfstowell@earthlink.net.

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