

**W**elcome to **The Song Train**, where great songs are rolling along and you just hop on board. The songs we have loaded onto this train will take you for a tour of the American musical landscape. These songs are special. They have been sung and recorded by an astounding roster of artists (page 79). The very bloodstream of our culture pulses through them, they are pure and strong and fresh, and they are easy to play. In fact, none of them has more than 2 chords. This makes them ideal for learning to play music, or for any time you might need to lead a jam session, or play music with someone else.

**The songs are presented here on a recording rather than in a book for three vital reasons:**

- **So you can learn and absorb them by listening**
- **So we can include copyrighted songs** (*More than half of these we cannot legally put in a book or video. Nor can we provide you the original recordings of them. But we can record our versions of them.*)
- **So we can show you how we arrange and sing them with just a guitar and simple chords**

The songs are sequenced for enjoyable listening, so songs of different styles and skill levels are scattered around the 4 discs and you'll have to explore.

**T**he **Song Train** introduces you to a respected body of music that even a beginner can play. It is not an instruction method or lessons, but it is a

unique and old-fashioned approach to solving a big problem in learning music. It is both a repertoire of songs you could learn, and a model of how to actually play them. You can definitely have fun and deliver a song effectively without fancy techniques, which is what we did here. We believe that it will have great value in inspiring and helping people to play their own music. The best way to learn to play music is by playing songs, and there is no better place to start than some good songs that are easy to play. We also tell you about the songs, who has recorded them, and give you all sorts of helpful information about music and about how we arrange and play the songs.

With just a copy of **The Song Train**, a guitar, and a few things from a music store, you could start on a lifetime journey of playing real music. We mostly discuss guitar in this book, since it is the most popular instrument, and it is what we play. But you could also learn to play bass, fiddle, mandolin, harmonica, banjo or other instruments by playing along with **The Song Train**.

These songs cover a lot of musical territory, and if you find one you want to learn, you're in luck. Songs themselves can actually teach you what you most need to know about music. Hidden in them is a wealth of information about the world they came from, about rhythm, melody, chords, and about how to play them with your guitar. We hope to replace the usual handful of uninspiring songs at the beginning of music instruction materials with a "trainload" of good



but uncomplicated songs that you can internalize by listening to the recording. Perfect beginner songs, these are also very valuable for musicians of all levels.

We decided to present the 56 songs all in one big pile, because our purpose is to show that there is a lot of great music that's not hard to play, and so there would be plenty for everyone. (There are also other great 2-chord songs we could have included.) The folk, country, blues, rock, bluegrass, celtic and gospel songs here are music you could play in a school, nightclub, church, coffeehouse or living room, at a campfire, or even on a concert stage. They are not "training wheels" or songs you use as lessons and then discard. Many were popular hits or were done by famous artists, though most are not at all widely known.

It normally takes a surprisingly long time to master basic guitar chords and make it through a song, and the difference between 2 and 3-chord songs is significant for a beginner. There are probably millions of 3-chord songs, but the list of 2-chord songs is vastly shorter— maybe just a few hundred.

You won't find the notes or the words to songs here in these pages. (You can download lyrics and charts for the un-copyrighted songs on our web site.) They used to call it "playing by ear." If you know what a song sounds like and you have it "in your head," you just learn the guitar chords and start singing. So we want to put some good songs in your head that you'll be able to play. Many people who try to play music are greatly disadvantaged

because they are not familiar with songs that might get them going. People also haven't heard much guitar music that wasn't played with a whole band.

It's kind of a paradox: If you don't "know" a song it's hard to learn it. And if you have never heard a song before, it does not help you much to find it in a book, unless you read music. A song takes root in someone's life when they hear it, either in person or on a recording.

Americans have done a fine job of teaching themselves to enjoy things like cooking, sports, home improvement and gardening without going to school or paying for lessons. With some basic gear, some pointers from the pros and a healthy attitude, we like to tackle a whole range of activities, and it's reasonable to think that just about anyone can play some music. People understand that artists like Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash are not technically great guitarists, but they appreciate the power of the music they can generate. Many people sense that they could learn to bang some songs out on their guitar and have a good time, but they don't know where to start. If you learn some songs, you will know some songs, and you will also end up knowing something about music. If you just try to "learn music" without focusing on playing songs, you may not end up getting very far.

How did all of us learn to sing "Happy Birthday?" Lots of birthday parties—not from a book. Many people want to learn to play recreational music, though even after the guitar has been the dominant instrument in

our culture for decades, it's hard to believe that there is still no organized infrastructure in place for learning to play. Unless you are lucky enough to learn from friends or family members, it is not easy to stumble on a good musical path, and surprisingly hard to even find out how to proceed.

**The Song Train** is sort of a radio station that plays songs you can learn; it's a sort of an almanac to help you get started with music. Play and sing along until you can wobble to your feet and get one of them going all by yourself, or just memorize and internalize a song and then blast it out of you however it comes out. Like seeds that can grow into a tree, simple good songs like these carry in them, almost like DNA, all the information you need about how to sing, keep rhythm, play your instrument, and most important-- how to find an outlet for your spirit and feelings.

Modern American musical culture does not work the way that it did centuries ago, and although many aspects of it have improved with new technology, music isn't learned and transmitted like it used to be. Instead of coming from our families and neighbors, it reaches us now mostly through recordings and broadcast media. Music is still being spread around, but it is driven by market rather than cultural forces, and dominated by large entertainment corporations whose sole interest is money-making. Unless a song is owned by one of the big players in the game, it is not likely to spread very far. The advent of new technologies, the internet and personal media are showing signs of becoming healthy new ways

for music to disseminate.

Americans of the “baby boom” generation had an advantage in learning music that has now largely disappeared. As a result of the “Folk Revival” of the 1950’s and 60’s popular performers were on TV singing folk songs. In elementary school many of us learned the simple folk songs that you usually see in instruction books. But now schools are dropping their music programs, and prominent performers are no longer singing these songs. Young people are not hearing the songs that will help them learn music. Seldom performed, they become less effective as teaching tools, and are spiraling out of circulation.

Music stores, schools, camps and now web sites try to teach everything from note-reading and folk strumming to rock riffs and solos; many seem to teach guitar skills and hardly mention playing songs or their role in learning. The majority of beginning guitar books start with “Notes on the E String” which leads you down a different and difficult path of note-reading guitar music. A lot of people buy some books or take lessons, never really get going, and end up blaming themselves for a lack of talent or dedication, when maybe all they needed was some good songs to show them the way.

Commercial music has strayed far from its roots, and electronic sounds manipulated with computers are taking the place of musical instruments. Few modern hits are just people playing music, and it can be very hard for someone with just a guitar to figure out how to

effectively perform a popular song that was recorded by a full band and pieced together by a computer program.

**W**e think **The Song Train** can help in a number of ways. We want you to enjoy the songs here, but most of all we hope that you will latch onto a few of them and learn to play them yourself. Anyone can learn to do it at some level, and the pleasure you get is not linked to your skill or proficiency. By all means go find other versions: change the groove, the words or the tempo if it feels right. You will hopefully discover artists here whose other work you can explore.

It does not take talent, dedication, lessons, exercises or practice regimens to add music to your life-- real magic can happen all by itself with nothing more than one good chord and one good song. (7 of the songs included here are 1-chord songs and the other 48 have 2 chords.) Music is a unique, tangible yet spiritual joy whose mysteries have fascinated people since the beginnings of civilization, and its value and allure are as strong as ever. Throughout history people have found great meaning and pleasure in making their own music, and have learned that it is not best to leave it to the geniuses and the professionals. It’s not just about talent or training— but it has a lot to do with whether you get encouraged and whether you know and like some easy songs.

So grab your guitar or banjo and sing a song. You’re riding on **The Song Train...**

*Harvey Reid & Joyce Andersen*



*“...The fancier it is the worse it is.  
The plainer it is the easier it is,  
and the easier it is, the better it is-”*

**WOODY GUTHRIE**

