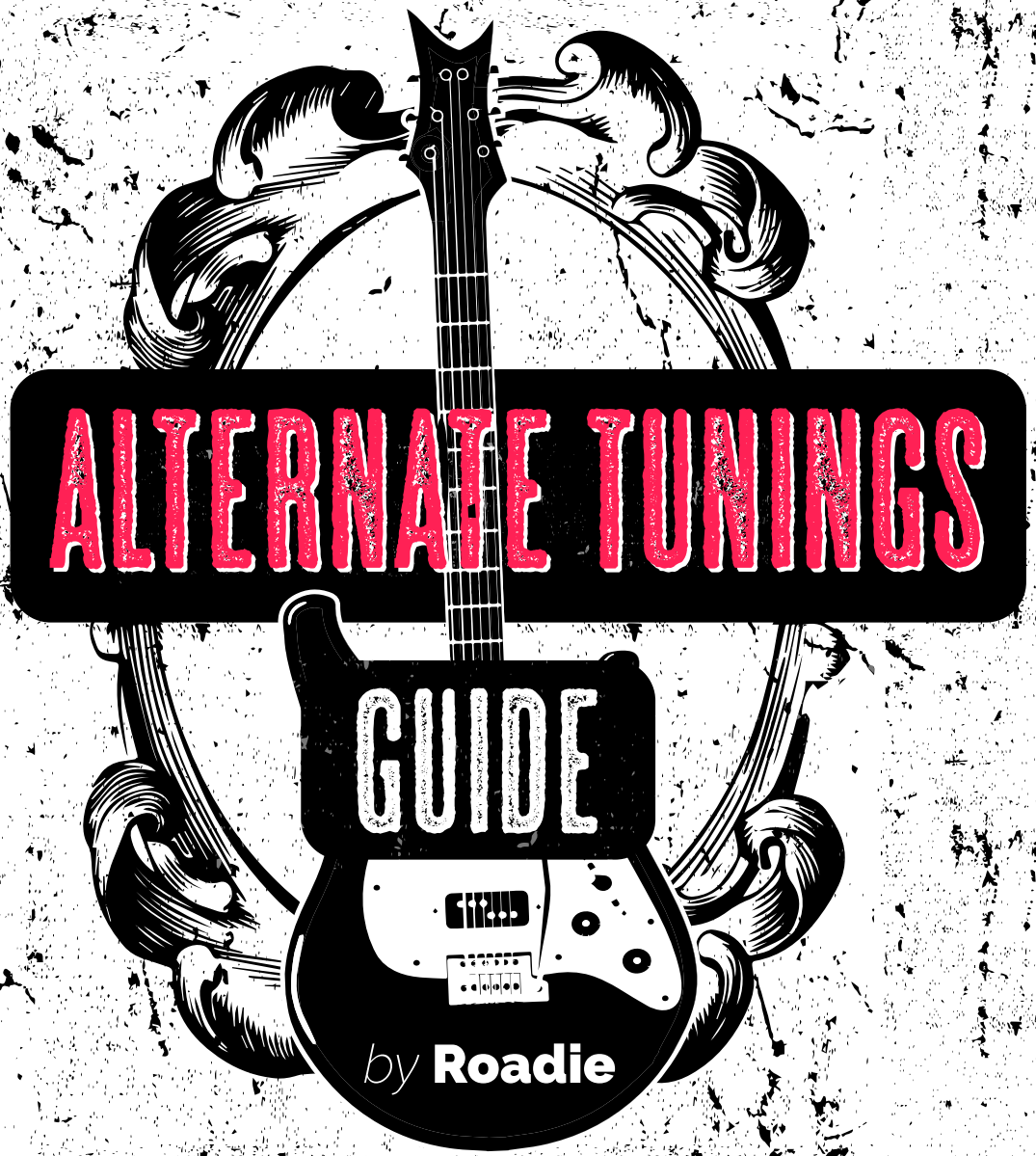

ALTERNATE TUNINGS
GUIDE
by Roadie

The Roadie Tuner Guide to Alternate Tunings

"If I didn't have all these tunings, my songwriting would have dried up years ago." - **Mark Tremonti**

Modern guitar master Mark Tremonti knows a thing or two about alternate tunings. Throughout his time in Creed and Alter Bridge, he's used them to startling effect. They're his secret weapons when it comes to creative and unique songwriting, and classic tracks like Creed's "My Sacrifice" and Alter Bridge's "Blackbird" wouldn't exist without them.

As Tremonti shows, harnessing alternate tunings can unlock a whole new world of potential for your guitar playing and songwriting. But, before you can do that, you need to understand what alternate tunings are, and how they work.

That's why we wrote this guide: a comprehensive overview of alternate tunings for any aspiring guitarist.

By the time you've finished reading it, you will know:

- **What "standard" guitar tuning is, and why it's the standard**
- **Why we use alternate tunings in the first place**
- **The circle of notes, and how it relates to alternate tuning**
- **The most important alternate tunings, the guitarists that use them, and what they can bring to your guitar playing**

Oh, and we'll be bringing you recommended tabs and plenty of interesting quotes from guitar legends along the way.

So, have your axe at the ready, grab your guitar tuner (ideally a Roadie, but we won't hold it against you too much if it isn't!) and let's dive in.

Contents

Standard Tuning: The “standard” for a reason

“When you’re playing in standard tuning all the time, you’re sounding pretty… standard.” - Thurston Moore, Sonic Youth

If you’ve been playing guitar for even a short amount of time, you’re probably well used to standard tuning. Standard tuning, in which the guitar strings are tuned, top-to-bottom, E-A-D-G-B-E, is the most commonly used guitar tuning in the world. When you bought your first guitar, the store clerk almost certainly tuned it to E-A-D-G-B-E. You’ve probably been tuning it that way ever since, and it’s the tuning that the vast majority of pieces for guitar use.

“That’s all well and good,” we hear you ask. “But, why?”

The history of standard guitar tuning is fascinating, especially when you consider that the vast majority of stringed instruments invented in the past 1,000 years – including violins, cellos and mandolins – are tuned completely differently.
The consensus is that most stringed instruments are best tuned in fifths (which is inventively called “all-fifths tuning”). What this means is that the interval between each of the open strings is a perfect fifth.

"Standard" guitar tuning, on the other hand, comprises a series of ascending perfect fourths and a single major third – three intervals of a fourth (low E to A, A to D and D to G), followed by a major third (G to B) and then one more fourth (B to high E).

Did you know?

Pretty much every musician in the world tunes their instruments to the same frequency – 440 Hz for the note A. That's why, no matter where you are, the notes on the scale sound the same. Of course, experimenting with pitch is a great way to discover new sounds on your guitar. That's why, with Roadie, you can alter the pitch from 440 Hz to anything you'd like. It's customizable in 1Hz increments from 420 Hz to 460 Hz.

So why, when it comes to tuning, does the guitar buck the trend established by all other stringed instruments? Well, it's all down to comfort, and the way the instrument is played. Violins, cellos and mandolins lend themselves to fifths tuning because of their short scale length. But, with guitars, which are larger scale, and played with the neck diagonal to the player, it's difficult to spread out the fingers to reach the required notes in "all-fifths tuning." Fourths are closer together, which makes things easier for the guitar player. As Television guitarist and all-round instrument guru Richard Lloyd notes (https://www.richardlloyd.com/solute.htm):

“On a guitar, a person with a normal-sized hand can reasonably be expected to sound the major third with the pinkie finger while holding down the tonic with the index finger. So it makes sense that the next string should be the fourth.”

That’s all solid reasoning, but it raises of the question of why the guitar isn’t just tuned to perfect fourths. Where did that major third from G to B come from? Well, if that major third wasn’t in there, the guitar would be tuned to E-A-D-G-C-F. The problem with that is that the outer strings are half a step apart, and half-steps are a nightmare to get your head around from a musical perspective.

As Richard Lloyd once again notes, “half-steps are extremely discordant: full of tension; the bottom E string would become the leading tone of the top F string, and have a strong desire for resolution.” That major third is in there to compensate for this and gain outer consonance, which “is much more musically satisfying than if the two outer strings were a half step away from each other.”

In summary, standard tuning is the standard for a reason. It’s physically comfortable for the guitarist’s fretting hand, as well as being musically convenient.

Why Do We Use Alternate Tunings?

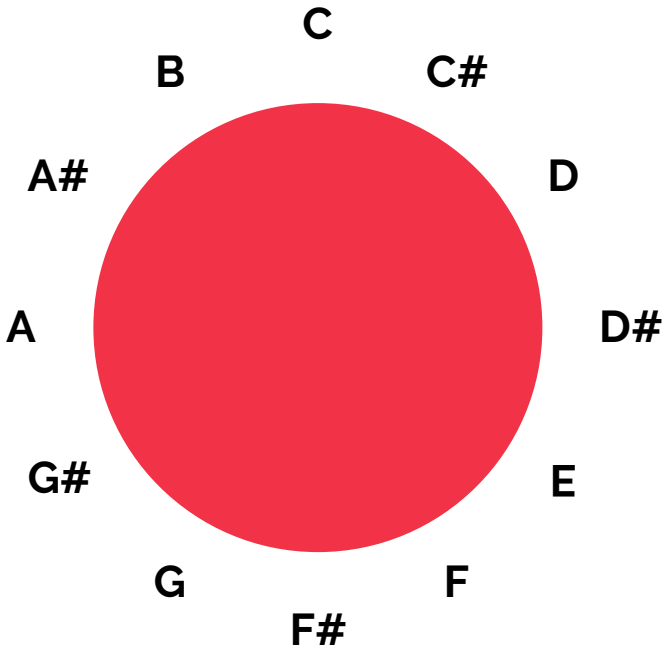
“When you tuned a guitar a new way you were a beginner all over again and you could discover all sorts of new things...It allowed us to throw out a whole broad body of knowledge about how to play the guitar.”
- Lee Reynaldo, Sonic Youth

If standard tuning is convenient and comfortable, then why do we need alternate tunings? Because, as the above quote from Sonic Youth’s Lee Reynaldo shows, they’re a great way of getting out of our musical comfort zone and discovering new sounds. Whether you’re stuck in a rut with your guitar playing and songwriting or want to broaden your horizons as a guitarist, harnessing the power of alternate tunings is an amazing way forward.

That’s the main reason why we’ve created this guide to alternate tunings: to empower you in your creativity and guitar playing. And, in fact, that’s also the main reason we developed the Roadie Tuner in the first place.

The Circle of Notes

We're almost ready to jump into the different kinds of alternate tuning, but first we wanted to highlight the circle of notes, as it's a very useful tuning resource.



Throughout this guide, we'll be referring to tuning up and tuning down in steps and half steps. You can use the diagram above to work out what that means in real terms. Each note on the circle represents a half step. So, for example, if you wanted to tune the low E string (string six) a step down to D, we'd be moving two steps anti-clockwise (this would equate to loosening the string's machine head on your guitar, which would lower the note). If you were tuning B a step-up to C, you'd be moving 1 half step clockwise (and tightening the string's machine head to make the note higher), and so-on-and-so-on.

Right. Now that we've got that sorted, let's dive in!

Roadie Tip

With Roadie's automatic tuning system and saved tuning presets, all of the guitar tunings that we mention in this guide are accessible to the player in a matter of seconds, cutting down on the faff off tuning and maximizing your time for creative playing. **Get Your Roadie Now**

Alternate Tuning Types

Step Down

Why are we starting off with step down and step up tunings? They're the easiest kinds of tunings to get your head around. Quite simply, step down and step up tunings mean tuning all the strings on the guitar a given number of steps higher or lower than standard (E-A-D-G-B-E). So for example, if you were tuning your guitar one step down, you'd be going from E-A-D-G-B-E to D-G-C-F-A-D. If you're struggling to get your head around it, use the circle of notes above to help you map it out.

Half-Step Down Tuning

Strings:	6	5	4	3	2	1
Notes:	E♭	A♭	D♭	G♭	B♭	e♭

Used in: Hard Rock

Half-step down tuning is particularly common in the world of rock and metal. In the 1970s and 1980s, bands like KISS, Thin Lizzy and Guns N' Roses popularized half-step down tuning – E-A-D-G-B-e (or D#-G#-C#-F#-A#-D#) – and used to achieve a fatter, meatier rhythm sound.

Recommended tabs:

Guns N' Roses: November Rain

Thin Lizzy: Don't Believe A Word

Fun Fact

Why can't you play along to "Layla"?

Playing along to the studio version of Derek and the Dominoes' classic "Layla" has given guitarists headaches for years. Even if your guitar is in tune, it'll still sound flat compared to the recording. Why? It turns out that the studio version of "Layla" was sped up slightly (presumably because the band thought it sounded better faster), changing the pitch of the recording. It's actually a quarter step above standard tuning!

Step Down Tuning

Strings:

6	5	4	3	2	1
D	G	C	F	A	D

Notes:

Used in: Hard Rock/Metal

One of the advantages to step down tuning is that the guitar is played identically to standard tuning, resulting in a heavier tone without the guitarist having to learn different chords or fingering. For great examples of this, see Nirvana's "Come As You Are" and Metallica's "Sad But True." Both are played one step down from standard – D-G-C-F-A-D – and allowed Kurt Cobain and James Hetfield to create a massive, heavy rhythm sound while using standard chord shapes.

Recommended tabs:

Nirvana: Come As You Are

Metallica: Sad But True

Two-Step Down Tuning (“C” Tuning)

Strings:	6	5	4	3	2	1
Notes:	C	F	A#	D	G	C

Used in: Extreme Metal

And it gets lower still! Plenty of metal bands out there including Arch Enemy, Hatebreed, In Flames and even fictional cartoon metallers Dethklok are known for using two-step down “C” tuning (C-F-A-D-G-C or C-F-B-E-G-C) for a really heavy sound. By the time you’re hitting tunings this heavy, though, you’ll probably need to fit your guitar with a heavier gauge of strings. Otherwise, it’s very easy to unintentionally bend notes and chords out of tune, which undermines the brutal effect somewhat!

Recommended tabs:

Arch Enemy: Enemy Within

In Flames: Come Clarity

Dropped Tunings

Dropped tunings typically start with standard tuning and then lower (drop) the pitch of a single string – almost always the low E string. By far the most famous dropped tuning, and the one you're most likely to come across, is Drop D.

Drop D

Strings:	6	5	4	3	2	1
Notes:	D	A	D	G	B	E

Used in: Heavy Rock, Metal

One of the easiest alternative tunings to use, drop D simply requires "dropping" the low E a whole step down to D. The advantage of this? It creates an open power chord (a three-note-fifth) with the low three strings (DAD). As a result, drop D allows for faster transitions between power chords. It also adds two lower semitones to the bass range of the rhythm guitar, which creates a deeper, heavier sound. In rock, early examples of drop D include The Beatles' aptly titled "I Want You (She's So Heavy)" and Led Zeppelin's "Moby Dick." But, it was in the eighties and nineties, with the popularization of heavy metal, that drop D really entered mass consciousness. Allowing for huge sounds and fast riffing, it was the perfect tuning for guitarists on the heavy side of the spectrum. As a result, it was tracks like Metallica's "The Thing That Should Not Be," Rage Against the Machine's "Killing in the Name" and Soundgarden's "Outshined" that really brought drop D to mass consciousness.

Recommended tabs:

Soundgarden: Outshined

Rage Against the Machine: Killing in the Name

Other dropped tunings

Used in: Metal

There are plenty of other dropped tunings out there. In the world of metal, many bands play in step down, or C tuning, and then "drop" the lowest string even lower. Killswitch Engage's "My Curse," for example, is tuned a full step down, but with the low string tuned down another step to C:

Full Step Down w/ Low C

Strings:	6	5	4	3	2	1
Notes:	C	G	C	F	A	D

Songs like Mastodon's "March of the Fire Ants" take things two steps further. They're tuned down a step, but with the low string dropped all the way down to A:

Full Step Down w/ Low A

Strings:	6	5	4	3	2	1
Notes:	A	G	C	F	A	D

The result of using this tuning is that the power chords played on the bottom two strings become octaves, creating a particularly gnarly sound.

Recommended tabs:

Killswitch Engage: My Curse

Mastodon: March of the Fire Ants

Open Tunings

“Once I got the open tunings for some reason, I began to get the harmonic sophistication that I heard that my musical fountain inside was excited by. Once I got some interesting chords to play with, my writing began to come.”

- Joni Mitchell

Open tunings are so-called because they allow a chord to be played by strumming the strings when “open.” (i.e.: when no strings are fretted). Open tunings are usually named for the base chord when played open, which is typically a major chord. Open tunings makes playing chords easy: by simply barring all the strings across a single fret, all similar chords in the chromatic scale can be played.

Originating in folk and blues music, and frequently used in the playing of slide and lap-slide guitars, open tunings became widely used in rock music throughout the 1970s. Why? In no small part because they allow better intonation of chords, dialling out dissonance and creating a big chord sound.

You can create any open tuning, simply by taking the notes in the chord and tuning the strings to those notes. Of course, if you want to create your own open tuning, it’s well worth checking out Roadie, which allows you to save your custom tuning presets with its easy to use companion app.

There's a world of possibility when it comes to open tunings. Below, we've listed some of the most well known variations, and the iconic songs they've been featured on.

Open G

Strings:	6	5	4	3	2	1
Notes:	D2	G2	D3	G3	B3	D4

Used in: Rock, Folk

"Tunings are a strange thing. They take you to musical areas that are not supposed to exist."

Keith Richards

"Honky Tonk Women"; "Brown Sugar"; "Start Me Up": three of the Rolling Stones' most iconic hits are all played in open G tuning, and all three are defined by the huge, open ring of Keith Richards' rhythm playing.

The Beatles' "Blackbird" is another legendary example, and Alter Bridge's "In Loving Memory" and "Watch Over You" are also played in open G. Unsurprisingly, given her noted fondness for open tunings, Joni Mitchell has used open G extensively, on tracks like "Electricity," "For The Roses" and "The Hunter."

Recommended tabs:

The Rolling Stones: Brown Sugar

Alter Bridge: Watch Over You

Open A

Strings:	6	5	4	3	2	1
Notes:	E2	A2	C#3	E3	A3	E4
"Slide" variation:	E	A	E	A	C#	E

Used in: Blues, Rock

The "slide" variation of Open A tuning, which is identical to Open G, but with every string raised one step (two frets) is responsible for two of rock's most legendary riffs. Led Zeppelin's massive sounding, haunting blues-rock epic "In My Time of Dying" and The White Stripes' incendiary "Seven Nation Army." If powerful, moody riffing or slide playing is what you're going for, then this version of Open A might be a good starting point.

Recommended tabs:

The White Stripes: Seven Nation Army

Led Zeppelin: In My Time of Dying

DADGAD (Celtic Tuning)

Strings:	6	5	4	3	2	1
Notes:	D2	A2	D3	G3	A3	D4

Used in: Folk, Celtic, Rock

Different from the other open tunings on this list in that it's modal, rather than chordal, and neither intrinsically major or minor (because it creates an open D suspended fourth chord), DADGAD is great for songs with an otherworldly, middle-eastern vibe. English Folk guitarist Davey Graham is widely credited with bringing DADGAD to western music, inspired to experiment with the alternate tuning after hearing an oud player in Morocco.
But, it's Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page that is best known for using it. Described by Jimmy as his CIA (Celtic/Indian/Arabic) tuning, it featured on early Zep instrumentals like "Black Mountain Side" and "White Summer" (the latter supposedly based on Graham's "She Moved Thru' the Bizarre/Blue Raga").

Its most famous use undoubtedly comes from Led Zeppelin's most monolithic of riffs; "Kashmir." It's DADGAD that gives "Kashmir" that epic, otherworldly quality.

Fun Fact

These legendary recordings feature out of tune guitars.

In the days before guitar tuners like Roadie, keeping your instrument in perfect tuning wasn't always easy. And, some out of tune moments found their way onto famous records as a result. The Beatles' "Strawberry Fields Forever," Led Zeppelin's "Heartbreaker" and AC/DC's "Highway to Hell," Black Sabbath's "Snowblind" and Bob Dylan's "Queen Jane Approximately" all feature surprisingly off-key instances. See if you can find them!

Recommended tabs:

Jimmy Page: White Summer

Led Zeppelin: Kashmir

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Instrumental Tunings

As the name suggests, these are tunings used for specific string instruments such as the Bouzouki, the Balalaika, the Mandolin and the Charango, adapted for the six-string guitar. They're a great way of emulating the unique characteristics of those instruments on your guitar, and opening up plenty of new sonic possibilities.

The Charango Tuning:

Strings:	6	5	4	3	2	1
Notes:	-	G	C	E	A	E

Used in: Latin, World Music

With 5 sets of paired strings, the Charango is said to have originated from South America. The Charango comes from the lute family, and its tuning results in a very narrow tonal range in most chords, characterized by pitch duplications. The result of this, though, is a surprisingly powerful sound, with seventh and ninth chords shimmering thanks to the close harmonies.

The Dobro Tuning:

Strings:	6	5	4	3	2	1
Notes:	G	B	D	G	B	D

Used in: Country, Blues

The Dobro is a 6 string instrument that looks similar to an acoustic guitar, but has a much more powerful sound. The reason? It features a built in resonator, which plays the role of an amplifier. If you want to know what it sounds like, here's one of Jerry Douglas's amazing performances!

Regular Tunings

In the first section of this guide, we established that "standard" guitar tuning features five perfect fourths and a major third because it's convenient and comfortable for the guitarist and creates consonance between the outer strings. Well, while that is the case, there are some musicians that choose to tune their guitars exclusively in constant intervals between the successive open strings.

All Fourths Tuning:

Strings:	6	5	4	3	2	1
Notes:	E	A	D	G	C	F

Used in: Jazz/Experimental/Progressive

The most common of these tunings by far is All-Fourths, which creates that dreaded half-step that Richard Lloyd was talking about. All-Fourths tuning makes conventional-chords much more difficult to play. So why use it? Well, it can be particularly useful if you're playing jazz, where improvisation is simplified by regular intervals. Regular tunings have symmetrical scales along the fretboard, making it much simpler to translate chords into new keys. That's why All-Fourths finds favour with the likes of Stanley Jordan. Here's what he had to say about it. Other,

less commonly used regular tunings include “Diminished tuning”, “Augmented tuning”, “All-fifths tuning.” Regular tunings are not for everyone, but if you’re a committed jazz guitarist, you could get a lot out of them.

Create Your Own Tuning

“After a couple of failed attempts, I came up with a weird tuning where I was dropping the G string down a step so that it became a seventh, and it got me to a place where I could play all these figures fairly easily. It was not an easy thing to work out.”

- Lindsey Buckingham

One of the really great things about alternate tunings is that they’re not prescriptive. If you can’t find the sound you’re looking for with any of the tunings on this list, you can go out and make your own! That’s what Fleetwood Mac guitarist Lindsey Buckingham is talking about here, and it’s an approach that has served him well on many of the band’s classic songs.

And Lindsey Buckingham isn’t the only one. Take Will Ackerman, who invented “The Buzzard” Tuning (C-F-C-G-A#-F) for the song “What The Buzzard Told Suzanne.”Unsurprisingly, many special tunings are named after a song played in that specific tuning. You’ve got “The Face” tuning from “Face Yourself,” the “Hot Type” tuning from “Hot Type, ”the Pelican Tuning from “The Pelican” – the list goes on.

Roadie Tip

When it comes to inventing your own tuning, the Roadie tuner really comes into its own. Using the Roadie tuner app, you can program your own custom tuning (meaning that you never forget it) and then tune your guitar to it quickly and easily whenever you need it. And hey, if you come up with something really good, maybe you'll have a tuning named after your own song one day!

So now that you know about alternate tunings, and what they can bring to your music, it's time to start playing! Grab your Roadie tuner and get experimenting. You'll be amazed at the potential that alternate tunings unlock! **Get your Roadie Now**

Roadie

Automatic Standalone Guitar Tuner