

## **Things You Can Ask a Guitarist To Do (Besides Turn Down) – Alex Anest**

I've written this short treatise on how to arrange for guitar because I have lately noticed that much of the music I receive is written in a way that is either not possible to play or difficult to read and decipher. This piece mostly deals with chords and what a person without intimate knowledge of the instrument can safely write. The goal is to give the composer/arranger some basic guidance so that she or he can confidently write playable parts for guitarists. There is much more that can be done with the instrument, but this should cover some common issues.

### **Single Notes**

The guitar is a transposing instrument. It is written one octave higher than it sounds. Its written range is from the E below middle C to the B five ledger lines above the treble clef (Fig. 1). Some guitars have more frets but the guitar starts to lose its beauty as it gets too high. Stay below four ledger lines and you'll be better off. Also, please use 8va rather than using more than three ledger lines. We are used to reading in different octaves and so it's much easier for us to read a line on the staff than it is to read one way up in the stratosphere (Fig.2). Guitar can sound great doubling a lead line either in the same octave or one octave down.

### **Double Stops**

Two notes are easy to play on guitar and often sound great. From seconds to tenths and beyond, we can usually play some pretty cool stuff with two notes (Fig. 3). Just make sure that each note can be played on a separate string. Please, if you want us to play sixteenth notes, don't make us play more than one note at a time. We can be pretty speedy with double stops, but the more notes we have to play at once, the slower we move. Using double stops at the last note of a fast passage is generally doable.

### **Three Note Chords**

Triads and other three note chords are generally not difficult on the guitar. Three note tone clusters are not as easy because seconds are difficult to play. The best place to put seconds on a guitar is to have the upper note on the B string and the lower note on the G string. This is because the strings are tuned a M3 apart whereas the rest of the strings are tuned a P4 apart. Seconds are also easier higher up the neck where the frets are closer together (Fig 4).

We sound good playing triads that make up the upper notes of a complex chord. For example, playing a high F triad over a BbM9 chord, or a C# triad over an AM7#5.

Another great approach is to use drop 2 voicings but literally delete the second voice. Guitarists can easily play actual drop 2 voicings – they are our bread and butter – but three note chords move faster (Fig 5). You could also drop the third voice if it makes for a more interesting chord.

### **Four Note Chords**

Close position voicings are usually impossible on the guitar, so please don't write them. When you write close position voicings we have to guess at what you meant and it is less likely that we will sound awesome (Fig 6). The easiest way to write four note chords for guitar is to just write the chord symbol. We'll play an appropriate chord with up to four notes. So if you write C13(#11), we'll play some version of that chord. If you must have a certain note on top, just write that pitch and notate somewhere in the score that it is the top note of the chord. So if we are going from C13(#11) to F7(#9#5) and you want to top note to go from D to C#, just write those notes in there and we will figure it out (Fig. 7). Four note chords sound bad way down low and they get somewhat cramped way up high. We will probably simplify your chord down to three notes if you have gone up too high with the top note. If you must write specific four note chords for guitar, there are two easy ways to do this.

1. Use drop 2 or drop 3 voicings. We can play drop 2 and drop 3 voicings all day (refer back to Fig. 6). Feel free to replace roots with 9ths and 5ths with 6ths, those don't usually cause too much trouble and are often just as easy or easier.
2. Use color tone chords (Fig 8.). Color tone chords have the 3 and 7 on the bottom and extensions on top. Because of the nature of this approach and the fact that you can't play two notes on the same string, you have to choose between a 9 or a R and an 11, 5, or 13. There are two options for these easy to play and excellent sounding chord shapes. They are 3, 7, 9 (or R), 13 (or 5 or 11) and 7, 3, 13 (or 5 or 11), 9 (or R)

## **Five Note Chords**

Five note chords are fine if we are not moving to another chord any time soon (fig. 9). The problem is that the arranger needs to understand the guitar and how it is played to construct a useful five note chord. For some perspective, if I am playing a trio gig, I rarely play more than three notes at a time, and I would guess that I usually play approximately zero five note chords in an entire night. Even playing duos I stay away from five note chords. They just get too clunky.

## **Six Note Chords**

Yes, the guitar has six strings. No, we don't take you seriously if you try to make us play them all at once. We wonder what sound you were hearing in your head, since the thing you have written on the page has never been played on the guitar before (fig. 10). Again, even if you have written a six note chord that is actually playable, it's unlikely that it will sound the way you imagine it will. Especially if you want us to move to another chord soon.

## **Other Considerations**

Open strings are cool but they sound different than fretted strings. They are generally avoided in jazz but can be used for interesting voicings, especially in open or spacey sounding sections (fig. 11).

As notes get above the staff the guitar can start to sound a bit too harsh. Consider dropping the part an octave, just as you might with a tenor sax, which has a similar range to the guitar. The guitar sounds great down low and most guitarists are comfortable dropping the low E string down to D or even Db if the composer wants the guitar to double a bass line or a trombone part.

As soon as the note is struck it begins to decay. A guitar, like a piano, can not play a crescendo on a single note (fig 12). The guitar is a highly dynamic instrument, however, so we can play crescendos on melodic lines or rhythms.

Hopefully this is helpful information that won't scare you away from writing guitar parts. If you are not sure if your part is playable, just ask a guitarist. We love to talk about guitars!

Fig. 1- THE WRITTEN RANGE OF EACH STRING.  
THE CONCERT RANGE OF THE GUITAR.

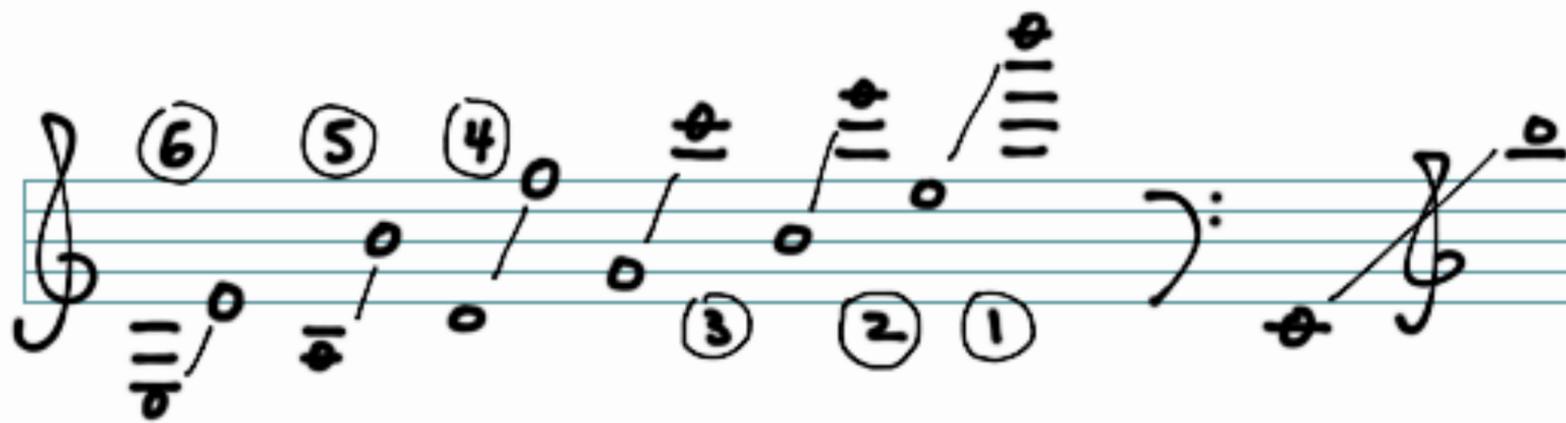


Fig. 2- WRITING HIGH NOTES.

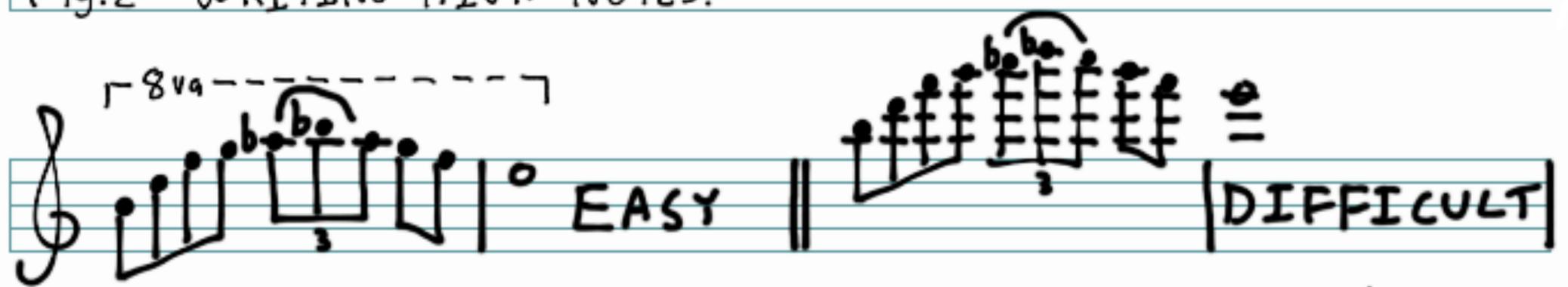


Fig. 3- DOUBLE STOPS ON "SEVEN STEPS TO HEAVEN."

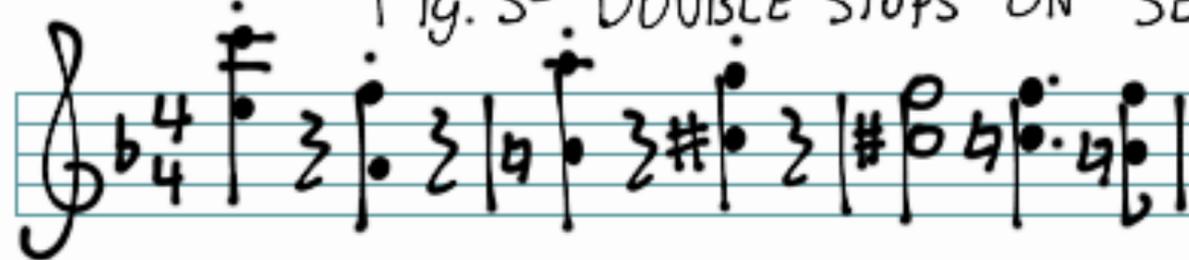


Fig. 4- THREE NOTE CHORDS. INTRO TO "RECORDAME."

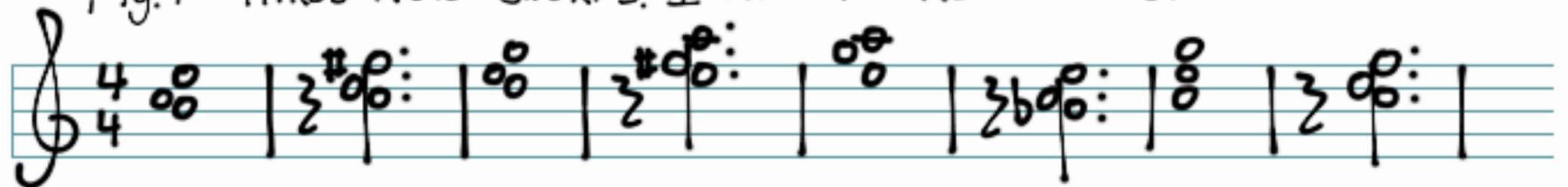


Fig. 5- "STOLEN MOMENTS"

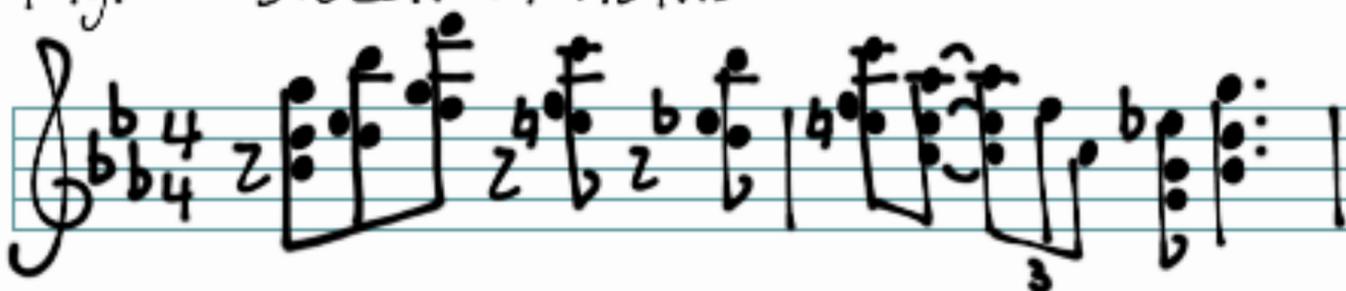


Fig. 6 - IMPOSSIBLE AND POSSIBLE 4 NOTE CHORDS.

NOT POSSIBLE | POSSIBLE →

CLOSE POS.      DROP 2      DROP 3      DROP 2 1/4

Fig. 7 - WRITE THIS AND WE WILL PLAY THIS.

TOP NOTE OF CHORD

$C^{13(\#11)}$   $F7(\#9\#5)$        $C^{\Delta 9(\#11)}$        $D^{-9(13)}$        $G7(b9 b13)$

Fig. 8 - COLOR TONE CHORDS.

Fig. 9 - SOME POSSIBLE FIVE NOTE CHORDS.

$D^{-7(11)}$        $E^b_9(\#11)$        $C7(\#9 b5)$        $B7(\#9\#5)$        $E^{-13}$        $E^b_9(\#5)$

Fig. 10 - IMPOSSIBLE CHORDS FROM REAL SCORES.

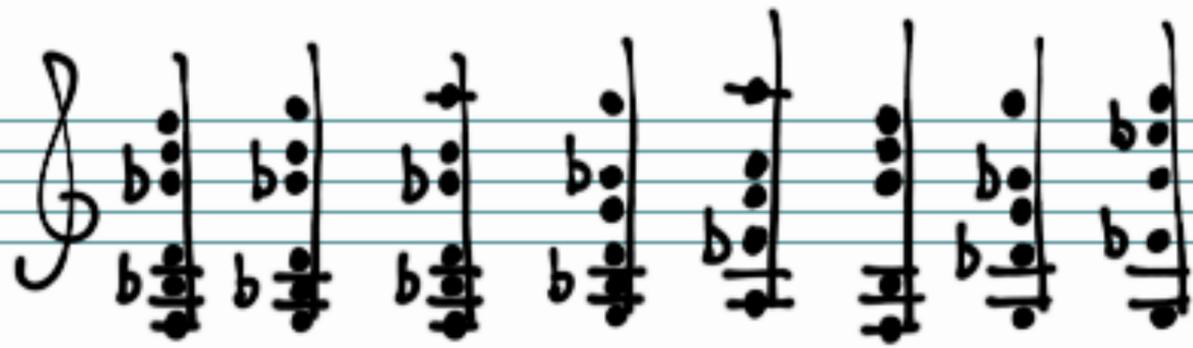


Fig. 11 - USING OPEN STRINGS FOR EFFECT.

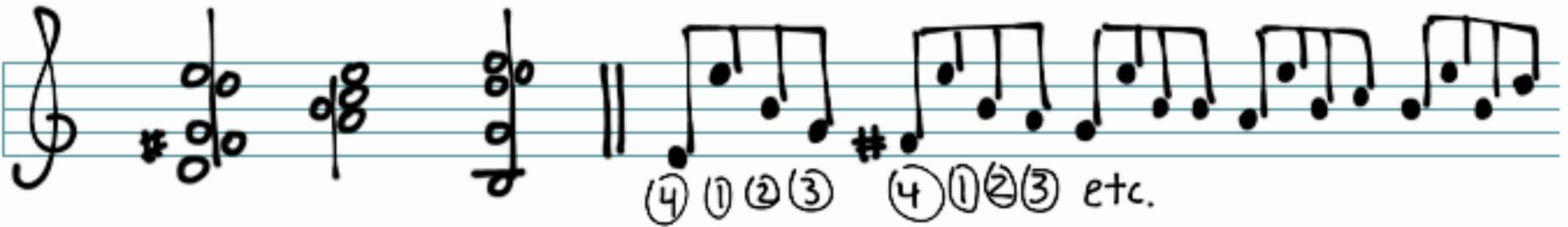


Fig. 12 - NO SINGLE NOTE CRESCENDOS.

