

An Introduction to The Net of Jewels:

Exploring the Geography of the Guitar Fingerboard—Mark Simos

Overview: *Over the course of three decades of experience as a guitarist, and particularly as an accompanist and teacher of accompaniment for traditional Celtic music, I've developed a way of visualizing the 'geography' of the guitar fingerboard as a "net of jewels" where small chord forms interlock, overlap, mirror and transform. This re-envisioning of the guitar fingerboard encourages the self-directed exploration which leads to true confidence and innovation as a player.*

In the Net of Jewels approach we learn to 'shape-shift' using a core set of major, minor, suspended and "hollow" triads, with inversions, voicings, harmonic and modal progressions that move fluidly across and along the entire fingerboard. In this class we'll work primarily in standard tuning, focusing for the most part on major and minor triads in 'close voicings' (that is, shapes on various sets of three adjacent strings). But the approach extends usefully and naturally to: Drop-D, DADGAD and other tunings; suspended, augmented and diminished chords (less essential for traditional music); and wider voicings (less oriented towards the flat-picking approach most common for traditional accompaniment). Similarly, while the chord patterns and progressions we'll learn form the bedrock of chordal accompaniment for much Celtic and American traditional music, they're equally valuable for accompanying a wide variety of traditional or contemporary music, in exploring alternative tunings, and for songwriters looking to broaden their harmonic ideas and textural possibilities. Extensive hand-outs are provided to aid later self-directed exploration.

Introduction. I've been playing the guitar for more than 35 years. During much of that time I've been an accompanist for traditional Irish dance music. Over the years, I've developed an approach to the 'geography' of the guitar fingerboard that has worked really well for me. The metaphor I use for this way of visualizing the fingerboard is a *net of jewels*—a bright and shining land where small chord forms interlock, overlap, mirror and transform. I suspect some imagery like this is there in the minds and fingers of most accomplished guitarists. And different teaching systems emphasize different pieces of this approach in different ways. I've put it together into a particular sequence of presentation I think can be very helpful, particularly for intermediate guitar players who have learned the basic elements, but not how they all tie together. In this introduction, I'll provide some background about the approach for those interested in learning more. Right now, I present the material in group classes which are the best way of getting access to it. I have hand-outs for those classes, but as of now they are meant to supplement the classes, not to be stand-alone. Eventually, I hope to gather them together into some kind of book with some audio/video component. Until then, this is what I've got.

*“To the small part of ignorance that we arrange and classify
we give the name knowledge.” —Ambrose Bierce*

My Gripes With Standard Guitar Pedagogy. If you’re like me, at various times in your guitar-playing career you’ve perused instruction books and chord books, and found yourself frustrated by the mass of particulars there are to learn. In my experience, the people who do best at music are those willing to explore, to experiment, to be wrong, to make weird sounds in the course of finding out what works— who, quite literally, “play around” in order to learn to “play.” Books that claim to give you “all the chords you’ll ever need,” generally don’t encourage you to learn in this way (except indirectly, by motivating you to outsmart them in reaction to their encyclopedic smugness!). I hate being mystified through the particulars instead of simplifying through finding generative rules. I find myself looking for that ‘skeleton key’ to make all the individual shapes and tricks meld into some greater whole.

I’m interested in what could be called “chord morphology”: that is, paying attention to the actual visual *shapes* that chords make, and understanding how those chords and chord shapes are *transformed* as we move across and along the fingerboard, and even as we change tunings (or move to other instruments). A less scientific name for this could be *shape-shifting*: the ability to move freely through the space of the guitar. That’s what the “Net of Jewels” approach attempts to provide, at least for the basic triads and variations thereof used for much of folk and traditional music and in much contemporary songwriting. It’s the synthesis of my own autodidact theorizing over the years as I’ve found patterns that work for me as an accompanist and as a songwriter.

Theory is Our Friend. The descriptions accompanying this material necessarily involve some music theory jargon. This is not meant to intimidate. I’ve noticed when teaching that as soon as some people hear what I’m saying as “theory” a little alarm bell goes off in their head and they panic. One of the lessons of this class is that theory is something we make for ourselves. Theory is our friend! the natural result of our own curiosity. In particular, I believe the guitar fingerboard, with a little context provided, is a great way of learning to visualize the connections at the core of living and practical music theory.

Theory can be illustrated on Fingerboards as well as Keyboards. In music training, one sometimes gets a sense that harmonic theory is something that requires a keyboard to explain. Even in many instruction books for guitar, when it’s time for the “theory” you’ll find a little drawing of a keyboard, labelled with notes and chords, etc. In a way this seems to say that harmonic ideas are clearer on the keyboard because of its “logical” nature, and by implication obscure on anything else. (I’ve seen this in classes I’ve taught, where students, with a guitar in their hands, will actually play an imaginary “piano keyboard in the air” to verify music theory statements I’ve made.)

This attitude has extended itself to the way chords are presented in chord dictionaries and similar compendia. Even those done by and for guitarists rarely attempt to give basic principles from which a unity can be perceived in all the various chords. This even shows up in the way such books will have 12 chapters for the 12 keys, dutifully taking the same chord shape and moving it up fret by fret, wasting time and paper. (Isn't it easier to explain that any shape, moved up a fret, yields the same chord quality a half-step higher? Or did the publisher pay by the page?)

So—the Net of Jewels approach is a way of understanding theory—using the fingerboard as our direct ‘laboratory for experimentation.’ By understanding some basic concepts of how chords are constructed, and seeing how these *map* onto the guitar fingerboard as triads, we are left far more empowered to explore the fingerboard, and music, than by being showed a series of seemingly disconnected chords.

Some Caveats. First—experienced guitarists will find lots of familiar chords presented here. What we're trying for is a way of re-envisioning the *connections* between different chords, an imaginative transformation by which we can literally ‘morph’ one chord into another. If we can do this with familiar shapes, it will be easier to take the same approach into less familiar terrain and less familiar shapes. I ask for your patience in earlier stages if it all looks very familiar.

Second—I think this approach to teaching chords on the guitar is distinctive (though I've seen hints of it in other methods). But I *certainly* didn't invent this stuff! I believe this way of thinking about chords, their connections and patterns approximates what many great players do when they play. But often this synthetic view comes after the player is deep into the arcane reaches of jazz harmonizations. For example: in a classic guitar instruction book from the 60's, Ted Greenberg's **Chord Chemistry**, the chapter on simple progressions of triads, the approach that has informed my whole style, comes at the *end* of the book, after chapters of bone-twisting jazz voicings far beyond my capacity then or now. (Only recently did I even find this chapter!) Thus, though the material is not new, I hope the way in which it's ordered and unified, and the processes I suggest for learning and internalizing the material, will prove helpful.

Third: There is a tradeoff to learning the fingerboard the Net of Jewels way: the chords I'll show you won't be as immediately useful as “full-strum” chords, that is, chords that sound good if you play all six strings together. Instead, we'll learn a lot of little ‘footprints’ of chords all over the fingerboard, then study ways of connecting and moving between them. For this reason, this might not be the ideal approach for an absolute beginner on the guitar. But I believe, once you've learned a few chords, this is a great way to get comfortable with the whole fingerboard, and in that respect is preferable to getting in the habit of using a few bar chords as your way of moving up the neck.