

# Videos

## A CRASH COURSE IN OPEN TUNINGS FOR GUITAR

taught by Mary Flower  
Homespun DVD-FLW-GT21 (2007)

Mary Flower is a well-respected fingerstyle blues guitarist. More importantly for this video, she's also a thoughtful, clear, and well-organized teacher, relaxed about what she knows and ready to share. She begins with a basic example of open tuning, dropping the low E string to D, for the song "I'll Fly Away," which begins to get your ear attuned to the possibilities of how open tunings sound. Flower progresses through more complex tunings — actually it's the chording that takes more attention, rather than so much the tunings themselves — including open G, G6, D, and D minor, on familiar songs such as "John Henry" and "Jesus Is on the Main Line." It should be noted, as Flower readily says, that she's not a Celtic guitar specialist, so those in search of in-depth information on DADGAD will be better served by other programs, but there's a lot of information here of use to guitarists of all musical styles, including material on playing bass and melody lines, how and when to do hammer-ons and pull-offs, and the like. It's a 75-minute lesson from which almost any guitar player and guitar teacher could pick up some useful tips.

— Kerry Dexter (Tallahassee, FL)

## THE BYRDS UNDER REVIEW: A DOCUMENTARY FILM

Sexy Intellectual SIDVD524 (2007), 2-DVD

For those who like to dig deep into the treasure trove of rock 'n' roll history, this two-disc DVD set on the Byrds, one of the most influential and revered rock groups of the 60s and 70s, is full of sparkling gems. Granted, there are no interviews with the original members of the group: Roger McGuinn, Chris Hillman, Gene Clark, and Michael Clarke, and only a few sound bites from David Crosby. But before you start to throw down your shovel, there are some great surprises in this documentary film, which make this essential viewing for Byrds' fans and lovers of country-rock. First off, there are detailed interviews with musicians who knew the

group well and played with them, including Van Dyke Parks, Jerry Cole, Byron Berline, Vern Gosdin, John York, and Gene Parsons. There is also a panel of Byrds experts: Johnny Rogan, Nigel Williamson, Richie Unterberger, and Anthony DeCurtis, who walk you through the history of the group, giving you plenty of insights that only a rock 'n' roll writer would know. Live and studio recordings of the Byrds' biggest hits — "Mr. Tambourine Man," "Turn Turn Turn," "Eight Miles High," and a dozen other signature Byrds songs — complete the soundtrack behind the documentary. The musicians and rock writers take you through the early days of the group as it struggled to find its sound at the Troubadour in Los Angeles to the days when they filled arenas and toured the world. Extra features on the DVD also worth exploring are Gene Parsons demonstrating his "Stringbender" guitar invention, Jerry Cole (ex-Wrecking Crew member and studio session guitar wizard) discussing Phil Spector and Charles Manson, and a section devoted to the music and career of ex-Byrd, John York.

— T.J. McGrath (Woodbridge, CT)

## BOB DYLAN: THE GOLDEN YEARS 1962-1978

Chrome Dreams DVDIS006 (2006), 2-DVD

If you're a Dylan completist, you'll no doubt want these two documentaries produced in the United Kingdom. Otherwise, they share some drawbacks, the first being that there is no music by Dylan in the first program and very little — just really short segments from television performances and from the movie *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* — in the second program. Whether they couldn't get licenses to use the music or it was beyond their budget, it's not the first time a documentary has been made about a musician without using his or her music. Still, that leads to both programs being almost exclusively talking-heads shows: people evaluating Dylan's music or talking about their memories of him.

Easily three-quarters of the content of each show is of the evaluative sort, from biographers, journalists, and presenters. Several musicians contribute reminiscences, including Bruce Langhorne, Spider John Koerner, Scarlet Rivera, and Kevin Odegard. One would think that having a whole bunch of respected experts talk about the first two decades of the career of

a musician who has shaped and changed pop music (and they do come at it much more from a pop than a folk standpoint) and that gives glimpses of an artist at work, sometimes against his times, would be pretty interesting fare. Unfortunately, it falls flat. Lack of music is, of course, an issue, but these guys (and, except for Rivera, they are all men) are major experts on Dylan. That said, to this reviewer, they didn't seem to have one really thought-provoking or memorable idea among them. Lack of context — musical or historical — is also an issue, as is, perhaps, the attempt at an ethnomusicological approach with a man who is still in the midst of a vibrant career. Not enough distance and too much, at the same time, does not make for an engaging program. Talking heads do not make for engaging video, either.

— Kerry Dexter (Tallahassee, FL)

## JOHNNY CASH: THE MAN, HIS WORLD, HIS MUSIC

Cherry Red Films CRDVD002N (2000)

Narration may have gotten in the way of an intimate, home movie-like portrait. Filmed mostly in the late 1960s, this 90-minute travelogue offers an insider's view of the Man in Black. Twenty-one songs filmed at various locations showcase Cash's country, gospel, and folk music. Duets with June Carter, Bob Dylan, and Carl Perkins reveal his musical flexibility. Segments filmed backstage, on the bus, in recording studios and during visits to prisons and the Wounded Knee Reservation provide a glimpse into Cash's personal life.

— Craig Harris (Chicopee, MA)

## RORY BLOCK TEACHES THE GUITAR OF ROBERT JOHNSON

Homespun DVD-ROR-RJ22 (2007)

In this instructional DVD, the second in which the blues guitarist delves into the guitar technique of the enigmatic Robert Johnson, Rory Block demonstrates how to play three of Johnson's most enduring tunes: "Crossroads Blues," "Hellhound on my Train," and "Ramblin' on my Mind." She goes through each piece slowly, emphasizing Johnson's use of dynamics and alternate phrasing and his very influential slide technique. Block, who recently did an extensive study of Johnson's music for a recording project (*The Lady*

and *Mr. Johnson*), is able to teach Johnson's music from a position of authority, and does a fine job of conveying both the technical and emotional aspects of his playing.

— Michael Parrish (San Jose, CA)

## A RALPH J. GLEASON ROCK CLASSIC: A NIGHT AT THE FAMILY DOG

Eagle Vision EV 30122-9 (2007)

In addition to his regular gig as jazz and rock critic for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, Ralph J. Gleason periodically tried his hand at TV productions of the jazz and rock artists he most admired. This hour-long documentary was recorded on a single night in 1970 at Chet Helms' Family Dog Ballroom out on San Francisco's Great Highway and originally aired on PBS. Although it is hard to fathom in light of today's massive arena shows, this Thursday-night show featured three headliners: Santana, the Grateful Dead, and the Jefferson Airplane. Santana, fresh off of its career-making performance at Woodstock, provides some tasty Latin jazz with "Incident at Neshabur" and a pulse-pounding, percussion-heavy workout on "Soul Sacrifice." The Dead's usual extravagant jams were not conducive to the show's relatively tight time constraints, but the band's original frontman Ron "Pigpen" McKernan is captured at his trash-talking best singing "Hard to Handle," and the group, driven by an atypically animated Jerry Garcia, lopes through a relatively concise medley of "China Cat Sunflower" and "I Know You Rider." The evening's most psychedelic moments are reserved for the Airplane, who churn out "The Ballad of You and Me and Pooneil" and a jaw-dropping version of "Eskimo Blue Day" that features some fiery interplay between Jorma Kaukonen and Jack Casady and a riveting performance by Grace Slick at the height of her powers. Another hallmark of the era was the group jam, and the last quarter of the show is given over to a relatively meandering instrumental noodle featuring all three lead guitarists augmented by others, including Quicksilver's Gary Duncan. *A Night at the Family Dog* does an excellent job of conveying the sights and sounds of an era that is often discussed but rarely portrayed as clearly and vividly as it is here. The disc includes an optional extrapolated DVD 5.1 sound mix.

— Michael Parrish (San Jose, CA)

