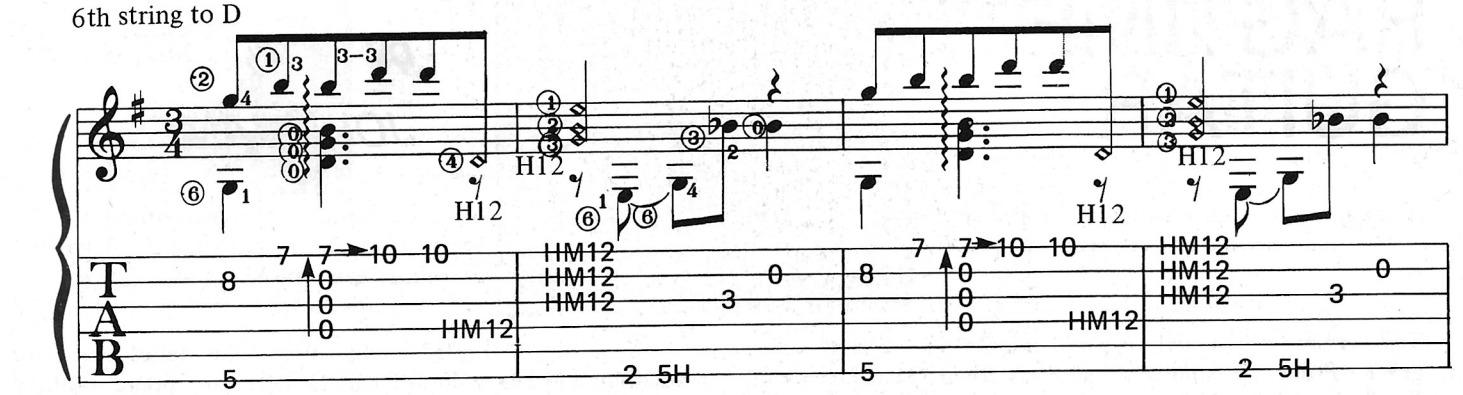
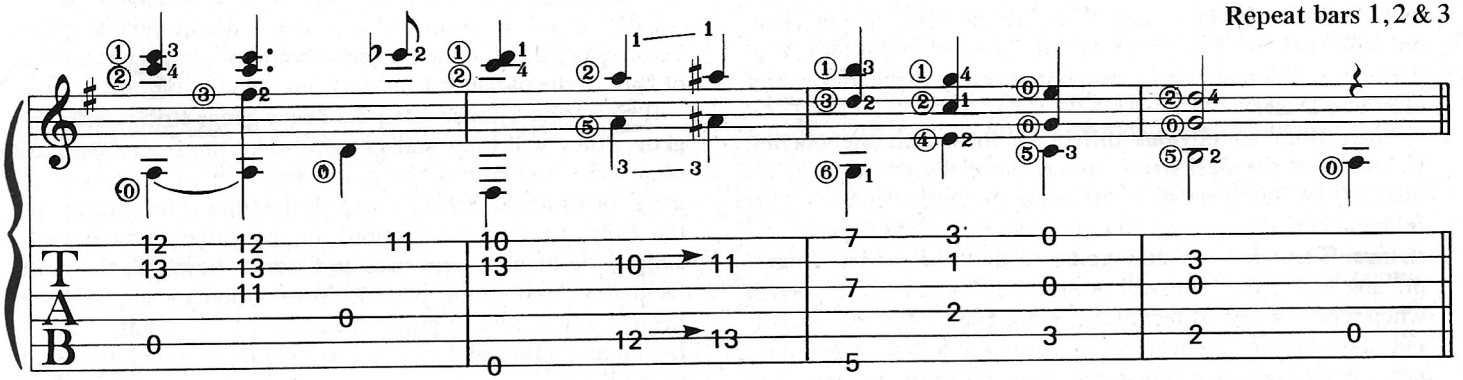
BINKS' WALTZ

SCOTT JOPLIN
arranged by John James

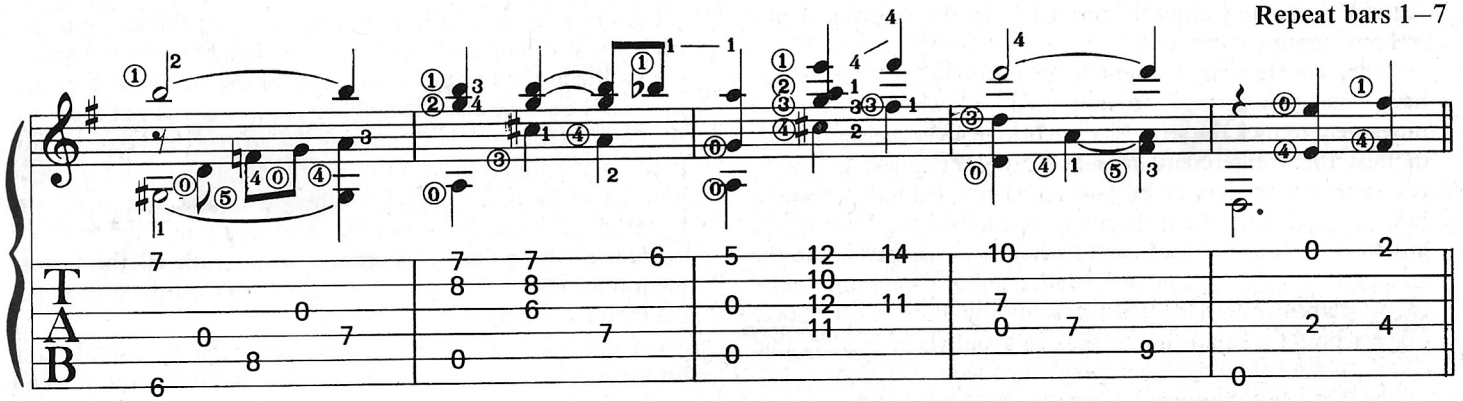
6th string to D

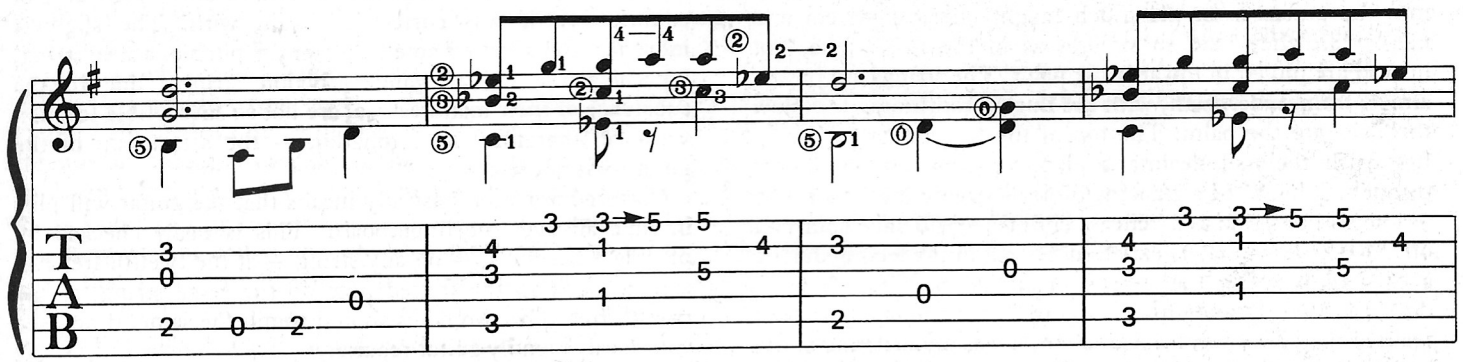


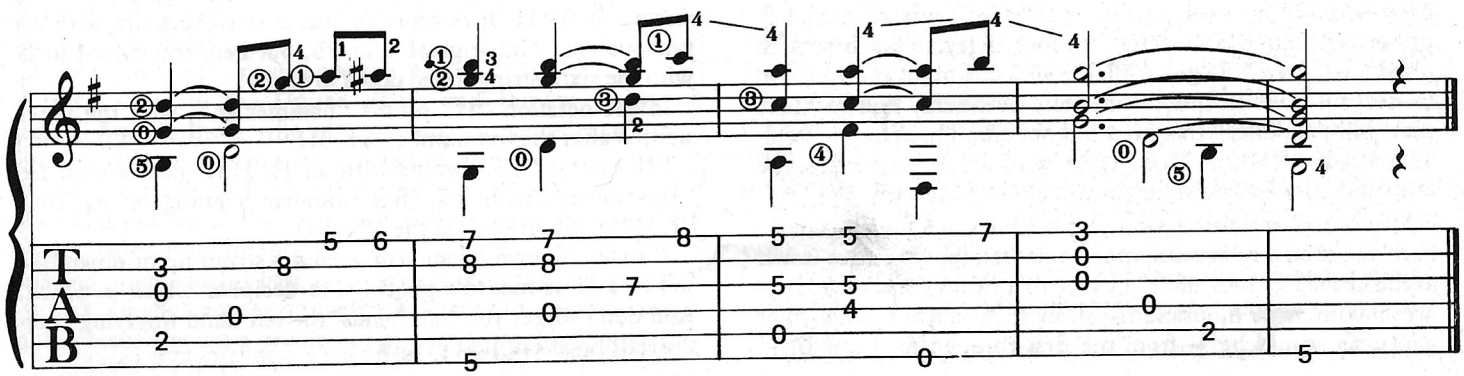
Repeat bars 1, 2 & 3



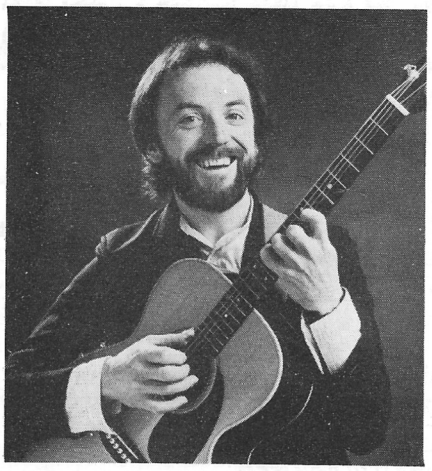
Repeat bars 1–7







RAGTIME GUITAR



by

JOHN JAMES

The ragtime guitar style evolved mainly on the steel string guitar. From the innovators such as Revd Gary Davis and Mississippi John Hurt to the modern day revivalists, who include David Jailsman and Tom Van Bergeyk, they all play on steel strings, though there are notable exceptions who prefer the nylon string instrument, namely Duck Baker and Guy Van Duser.

Apart from an obvious difference in sound, the playing technique of the steel string guitar, especially the right hand, differs from the nylon string model quite fundamentally. This fundamental difference is in the way the fingers 'pick' the strings. Though I am now going to describe a basic finger-picking technique, you will appreciate that there are players who employ a hybrid technique learnt from different sources; players who have, for instance, adapted the Segovia right hand position for the steel string guitar, but stylistically speaking the ragtime guitar technique is derived from the traditional folk styles of America.

There are three basic right hand positions. The hand can hang over the strings, unsupported, allowing freedom of movement to pick the strings at the bridge, over the sound hole or near the fingerboard to select different tones. It can be rested on the bridge, or be positioned just behind the sound hole supported by the little finger resting on the front of the guitar. The thumb must be held straight and as parellel to the strings as possible to enable a steady, smooth, rhythmic pulse to be played with clean, solid sounding bass notes. Some players prefer a small thumb pick to avoid those blisters that come with every set of heavy gauge brass wound strings!

The right hand fingers do not "push through" the strings into the guitar as in the much taught classical system and neither are they held so straight as in the rest stroke, but instead are pulled in towards the palm. The strings are picked almost from underneath, with the fingers continuing to follow through into the palm. The top of the finger hits the string first with the nail dealing a glancing blow on the follow through. It has to be a glancing blow otherwise the steel string — known in the biz as a "cheese cutter" — will slice your nail off. I have unfortunately experienced that funny feeling during a concert, when in the middle of an uptempo rag, looking down, and seeing something hanging off the end of my finger I realised that, after shrewd deduction, it was my nail, and at the end of the piece the broken appendage was disposed of. To cope with the shock a pint of "painkiller" was immediately prescribed and administered without delay. This brings to mind the story of the guitar player who one night continued to lose all his nails in this manner and eventually had so many pints of "painkiller" that he could not climb back on his stool. When asked by the M.C. if he suffered from vertigo, he replied that he had gone far enough already. Anyway.

Steel string guitarists who play finger style tend to favour light gauge strings because they do not tax the fingers as much as the heavier gauges, and they give that twangy sound. Strings are measured in thousandths of an inch and a typical light gauge set would be — from the first through to the sixth — .012, .016, .024, .032, .042, .052. The definitions light, medium and heavy do differ marginally from brand to brand. For example, the sixth string of a medium set can be .054, .055 or .056. It is always advisable to check the individual gauges before you purchase the set, they should be shown on the front or back of the packet.

If you string a guitar set up for heavy gauge strings with light gauge, they will buzz and rattle all over the fingerboard. To obtain the best results the guitar must be set up to suit the gauge of string you intend using all the time. This setting up is the adjustment of the "action" of the guitar. The action is simply the blanket term used to describe how well the guitar facilitates itself to be played. Most guitarists are guilty of neglect in this area of guitar maintenance, normally spending far too much time and money fussing over coloured woods and inlays.

Factors relevant to the action are namely: the shape of the neck; the width of the fingerboard; the height of the nut and of the saddle at the bridge; the spacing of the strings at both the nut and the saddle also the height, width and shape of the frets. All these factors influence the way the strings can be played, to produce the sounds you want. The most noticeable feature is how all these points affect the height of the strings on the fingerboard. This, alone, is often mistakenly referred to as the "action of the guitar", whereas it is in truth all the factors mentioned above. Strings close to the fingerboard alone do not guarantee a fast action.

On the steel string guitar the intonation is crucial. If a broken string is replaced with one just two thousandths of an inch different in size, the intonation will be out — providing of course, that it was correct to begin with. The slightest movement on a fretted note will alter the pitch of a steel string, especially the lighter gauges. Nylon strings, due to the substance of their manufacture, are not so susceptible to pitch variance; therefore the intonation — the setting up of the guitar — is not so crucial.

Correct intonation basically means that the guitar will play in tune all over the fingerboard. This is easily checked by playing a harmonic — on any string — at the twelfth fret and comparing it to the fretted note on the same string, at the twelfth fret. The two notes should sound the same, if not, see your local, friendly guitar repairer.

This month's piece is the first section of a Scott Joplin tune written in 1906. It is more or less a straight waltz with no syncopation. The original is in Bb, but here transposed to G with the sixth string tuned down to D.

In the notation "H" means "hammer-on", with the letter written after the fret number, i.e. 5H.

"Harmonic" also begins with an H. HM then is used for "Harmonic" with the fret number coming after, thus "HM12" is harmonic at the 12th fret.

A slide is shown by an arrow→and a strum up or down like so ↑ or ↓. The month's puzzle is to decipher which is which. And don't forget you 'tab fiends' the left hand fingering is on the staff notation. Best of luck!