

Dobro Crash Course Part 3: Minor Chords, Keys, and Tunes

It's time for a deep dive into minor chords on the Dobro: how to find and play movable minor chord shapes, how to use them in creating melodic phrases, how to connect minor chord positions, and how to play certain very instructive songs and tunes that will give you a great toolbox of licks and fretboard pockets for the keys of Em, Am, and Bm.

Minor chords have confounded aspiring Dobro players since the invention of G major tuning. How do you make minor chords with a straight bar when the instrument is tuned to a major chord? I'm here to tell you that there's nothing at all about G major tuning or playing our notes with a bar that makes minor chords or keys especially difficult to contend with on Dobro. Once you learn a few concepts, minor chords and keys are GREAT on the Dobro, an instrument that's tailor made for bringing out the emotional content of a lonesome song. After this workshop series, you'll know all about playing minor chords and double stops, and you'll be looking forward to the next time someone plays a song in a minor key in your jam or band.

We'll begin by surveying all the full minor chords in G major tuning that are accessible with a straight bar and open strings. Then we'll learn to recognize minor chord arpeggios and double-stops using a few chord inversion shapes. Next we'll focus on building melodic phrases over the minor chords you're most likely to encounter in bluegrass and folk music, which are the minor chords in the most Dobro-friendly major and minor keys of G & Em, C & Am, and D & Bm. Why these keys? Because the notes of our open strings are in these keys' respective scales, which means the open strings are all "good notes," and we can freely utilize hammer ons, pull offs, and rolls.

I plan to work through the following songs. A few of these have a very high difficulty level up to speed, but we'll take them slowly one phrase at a time, reinforcing along the way how each phrase fits within the chord shapes and scales we'll learn. I recommend listening to each of these songs a couple dozen times before the workshop begins—if you can get the Dobro or sung melody in your head, learning these on your instrument will be a lot easier:

Em: "From Ankara to Ismir" first two solos (Jerry Douglas w/Edgar Meyer and Russ Barenberg)

Em/E modal: "Bright Sunny South" solo (Jerry Douglas with Alison Krauss and Union Station – studio version)

Bm: "Hymn of Ordinary Motion melody (Jerry Douglas w/Edgar Meyer and Russ Barenberg)

Bm: "The Creptid Mule" (one of my tunes from my "Clawhammer and Dobro" CD)

Am: "Poor Wayfaring Stranger" (listen to the Emmy Lou Harris, Johnny Cash, and Tony Rice versions for a good survey of approaches to this song)

Am: "Walk On Boy" (listen to the Doc Watson and Rice Brothers versions)

As with my previous Zoom workshops, recordings of all four classes plus PDFs of all tablature and charts will be provided to participants after each class for you to download, and they'll also be available in perpetuity on a Nashville Acoustic Camps private webpage. Participants who attend live are muted during class, which means it's fine to play along the whole time. There will be homework every week to drill what we learn and get you prepared for the next class, and we'll do a bonus Q&A session (within a week or two after the workshop series concludes) during which everyone will have a chance to unmute and ask any questions. Each class will be in the neighborhood of an hour and a half long. This class is a natural extension of Dobro Crash Course #2, in which we worked up bluegrass solos for the keys of G, C, and D. Dobro Crash Course #2 is still available via the Previous Zoom Workshops page on the Nashville Acoustic Camps website and is a recommended but not required prerequisite. I do recommend that you have at least some experience playing scales and songs in the keys of G, C and D without a capo. This series will be most useful right away for intermediate and advanced players, but everyone of all experience levels is welcome, and you can work through the material at your own pace since classes are recorded. Hope to see you there!