# Irish Guitar *for Beginners*

Learn to Play 40 Session Tunes with Chords, Rhythm and Your Ear

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Navigo Tunes

Navigo Books

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Printed by KDP.

First edition, 2026.

ISBN 978-94-039-6957-2

# Contents

Your free play-along audio ..... 4

Part One · Learning the Music

What This Music Is ..... 6
Jigs, Reels and the Rest ..... 10
How Tunes Move ..... 15
Keys, Modes and Passing Chords ..... 21
Counting and Keeping Your Place ..... 25
Learning by Ear ..... 30
Rhythm and Pacing ..... 35
Standard Tuning ..... 39
Open D Tuning ..... 43
Going to Sessions ..... 49
Getting Started ..... 56
Chord Chart ..... 59

Part Two · The Tunes

Jigs (12) ..... 61
Slip Jigs (2) ..... 76
Reels (15) ..... 79
Hornpipes (5) ..... 95
Polkas and Slides (4) ..... 100
Waltzes (2) ..... 105
Index of Tunes ..... 108

# Your free play-along audio

*Every tune in this book is on the website, free, ready to play along with.*

The website has a player built for learning. For each of the 40 tunes you can:

- slow it down, from full speed to well below half;
- loop it, so a hard bar comes round again and again;
- mute the chords or mute the melody;
- hear the tune on fiddle, flute or whistle.

## How to use it with the book

1. Find the tune in the book and learn the A part with the player at 60 percent. Loop it until it is easy.
2. Switch the chords off, keep the melody playing, and strum the chords yourself. Use the count-in to start together.
3. Raise the speed a little each round until you reach full speed, then do the same with the B part.

**shop.hellonavigo.com/tools/tunes**

SCAN THE SMALL CODE ON ANY TUNE PAGE TO OPEN THAT TUNE.

Part One

# Learning the Music

*What a session is, how the tunes move, and how to back them on guitar.*

# What This Music Is

*Irish traditional dance music in plain terms, where it comes from, and the different jobs of the melody player and the accompanist.*

## Tunes, not songs

When people say "Irish music" they might mean many things: ballads, sean-nós singing, the pop-folk of a thousand pub bands. This book is about one strand of it, the **instrumental dance music**. You will hear it called traditional music, trad, or just "the tunes".

The tunes were made for dancing. A fiddler or accordion player in a kitchen or at a crossroads needed a steady, lively rhythm that a room full of dancers could follow. The melodies are short, repeat a lot, and are built to be played for as long as the dancers want.

There are no lyrics to learn. A tune is a melody with a rhythm. That is why the same tune can be played by a fiddle, a flute, a banjo or an accordion, and why people talk about tunes by name ("do you know Cooley's?") rather than by who sings them.

## Learned by ear

Traditionally, nobody learns this music from a page. You learn a tune by hearing it, often many times, from another player. You pick it up in pieces, a phrase at a time, and then you play it back.

That has a few consequences worth knowing early:

- **There is no single correct version.** Two good players will play the same tune with different notes, different ornaments and different rhythm.
- **Names are slippery.** One tune can have several titles, and one title can belong to several tunes.
- **Written music is a sketch.** Notation (like the ones in this book) gives you the skeleton. The life of the tune is in how it is played.

You do not need to read music to use this book. The chapter on learning by ear (p. 30) shows how to listen your way into a tune. The notation is there to show structure and give you something to follow, and every tune can be played back at any speed.

## Sessions

The social home of the music is the **session**: a group of musicians, usually in a pub, playing tunes together with no rehearsal and no set list. Someone starts a tune, the others who know it join in, and when it finishes someone starts the next one. Players swap tunes, show each other new ones, and talk in between.

Sessions are where most of us meet the music today, so a good part of this book prepares you for one.

## A short history

Dance music was played at house dances and crossroads dances in Ireland long before anyone wrote it down. Collectors began printing tunes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The best known collection is the one gathered by Francis O'Neill, a Cork-born police chief in Chicago, published in 1903.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Irish emigrants in the United States made 78 rpm records, and the playing of fiddlers such as Michael Coleman and James Morrison travelled back to Ireland and shaped what many players aimed for. In 1951 the organisation Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann was founded to promote the music, and its festivals (fleadhanna) and branches still teach thousands of children and adults.

From the 1960s and 1970s, bands such as The Chieftains, Planxty and The Bothy Band took the music to concert halls, and added instruments like the guitar and bouzouki to what had been mostly solo or small-group playing. Today there are sessions in nearly every large city in the world.

## Regional flavours

The music has local accents. A rough sketch:

- **Sliabh Luachra** (the Cork and Kerry border) is famous for polkas and slides, with a bouncy, dancing rhythm.

- **Clare** is known for a relaxed, lilting style, with concertina and flute prominent.
- **Donegal** fiddle playing is fast, driving and heavily bowed.
- **Sligo** style, carried to America by Coleman and others, is ornate and quick.

You do not need to choose one. Over time you will hear which accent you like.

## Why the guitar accompanies

Fiddles, flutes, whistles, pipes and accordions all have a long history in this music. The guitar is a latecomer, and it works differently. It cannot sustain a note the way a fiddle can, and it is hard to play a melody on it at session speed with the ornaments the music uses.

What a guitar does well is give the tune **a pulse and a harmonic floor**. If you are the guitarist, your job is to play rhythm and chords underneath the melody players: keep time, shape the feel, and make the tune sound bigger without ever covering it. If you play the melody, this is the support you will lean on, so it helps to know what it is doing. Done well, accompaniment is felt more than heard. Done badly, it is the thing that makes a session leader wince.

Be aware that some sessions are lukewarm about guitars, because a loud or clumsy one can spoil a tune. Playing well, quietly and in time is the way to be welcome.

## What this book will and won't teach

This book will teach you:

- the main **tune types** and how to hear which is which
- how tunes are **built**, and how to **count** them, so you know where you are in one
- how to **learn by ear**, which is how this music is passed on
- the **rhythm and pacing** that hold a tune together, whichever part you play
- **your instrument**: chords and strumming for guitar (standard tuning, with Open D as an option), or the hold, tuning, bowing and ornaments for fiddle
- **a collection of classic tunes**, each with notation, chords and a slow-down player

- how to behave at a **session**, and a first month of practice

It will not teach you:

- the full craft of ornamenting and varying a melody, which takes years and is best learned from players
- the whole repertoire. There are thousands of tunes, and the tunes here are a start
- music theory beyond what you need to follow a tune and its chords

Next, we look at the tune types (p. 10), because everything else depends on feeling the difference between a jig and a reel.

# Jigs, Reels and the Rest

*The main dance rhythms (reel, jig, slip jig, hornpipe, polka, slide, waltz), how each one moves, how to say it in words, and a tune to hear it in.*

## Learning to hear the difference

Most of the tunes you will meet in a session fall into a handful of types. Each type is defined by its **time signature** and its **feel**. If you can name the type from the first few notes, you already know how it should move.

Every type below has four things: the feel in words, a **count** you can say out loud, a two-bar example, and one tune in this book to hear it in. If you are reading on the website, press play on each example and listen a few times before you read on. On paper, say the count and tap your foot.

The tempos given are the ones the book's player starts at. Session speeds vary by player, region and mood, and you will practise well below them.

## The big idea: groups of two and groups of three

There are only two kinds of beat in this music.

- **Beats that split into two** (reel, hornpipe, polka): the notes go "one-and, two-and".
- **Beats that split into three** (jig, slip jig, slide): the notes go "one-two-three, one-two-three".

The three-feel types differ only in **how many groups of three fit in a bar**:

- **6/8 (jig):** two groups of three. Think "rolling".
- **9/8 (slip jig):** three groups of three. Think "floating".
- **12/8 (slide):** four groups of three. Think "galloping".

If you can feel one group of three, you can feel all of them. You are just stacking the groups two, three or four high.

## Reel

- **Meter:** 4/4, eight steady eighth notes to a bar.

- **Feel:** smooth, even and flowing. It drives forward and never pauses to breathe.
- **Count:** "ONE and two and THREE and four and". The strong beats are 1 and 3.
- **Hear it in:** Cooley's (p. 81), starting at 112 beats a minute.

*Reel rhythm (Cooley's, bars 1 and 2)*




Reels are the most common tune type in sessions.

## Jig

- **Meter:** 6/8, two groups of three eighth notes per bar.
- **Feel:** rolling and bouncy, with a strong pulse on the first note of each group.
- **Count:** "ONE-two-three TWO-two-three". Or the old joke, "rashers and sausages, rashers and sausages".
- **Hear it in:** The Kesh (p. 68), at 116 groups a minute.

*Jig rhythm (The Kesh, bars 1 and 2)*




Most jigs in sessions are called **double jigs**, which means bars full of runs of eighth notes like the one above. There is also a **single jig**, in the same time signature but with a long-short, long-short lean. You will meet single jigs far less often, so this book uses "jig" for the double kind.

## Slip jig

- **Meter:** 9/8, three groups of three. That is one more group than a jig.
- **Feel:** light, floating and a little dreamy, like a jig that has been given an extra beat.
- **Count:** "ONE-two-three TWO-two-three THREE-two-three".

- **Hear it in:** The Butterfly (p. 76), at 108 groups a minute.

*Slip jig rhythm (The Butterfly, bars 1 and 2)*

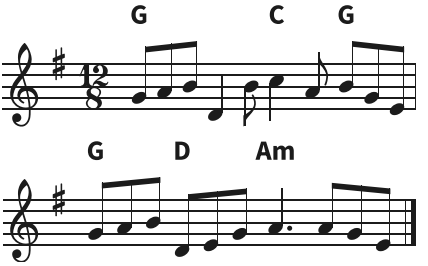



Slip jigs are traditionally danced by women in soft shoes. They are a favourite for a change of mood in a set.

## Slide

- **Meter:** 12/8, four groups of three. That is two more groups than a jig.
- **Feel:** a fast jig with four pulses to the bar. Wild and exciting, and lighter than it looks.
- **Count:** "ONE-two-three TWO-two-three THREE-two-three FOUR-two-three".
- **Hear it in:** Merrily Kiss the Quaker (p. 103), at 140 groups a minute.

*Slide rhythm (Merrily Kiss the Quaker, bars 1 and 2)*




Slides are most common in Cork and Kerry. If you are at a session in those parts, expect them in the set.

## Hornpipe

- **Meter:** 4/4, with four beats to the bar.
- **Feel:** a **dotted, swung** rhythm. The first of each pair of notes is long and the second short, so the tune strolls rather than rushes.
- **Count:** "HUMP-ty DUMP-ty HUMP-ty DUMP-ty". Each "hump-ty" is one beat.