

# **The Strumstick® Playing Instructions and Owner's Manual**

**by Bob McNally**



**Instructions for the G (Standard) Strumstick,  
the D (Grand) Strumstick.**

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## Table of Contents

<b>A Quick Start</b> .....	<b>4</b>
Quick Start .....	4
Identifying Your Strumstick.....	4
Need to Tune your Strumstick? .....	4
<b>Lesson 1: Holding, Fretting, Strumming</b> .....	<b>5</b>
1. Holding.....	5
2. Fretting .....	6
3. Strumming .....	7
4. Moving to Another Fret.....	7
<b>Solutions to Possible Problems</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>The “Extra” Fret</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Lesson 2: Strumming Different Rhythms</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Lesson 3: Changing Notes While Strumming Rhythms</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Lesson 4: Songlets</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>Lesson 5: EasyTuning</b> .....	<b>13</b>
1. Tuning using the Instruction CD .....	13
2. Tuning with Electronic Tuners .....	13
3. Tuning using the Instruction DVD .....	13
4. Tuning Strumstick with Itself.....	14
5. Tuning to Other Instruments .....	15
<b>Lesson 6: Playing Songs</b> .....	<b>15</b>
How to Play Songs .....	15
Seven Easy Songs .....	28

<b>Lesson 7: Care and Feeding</b> .....	<b>17</b>
Strings .....	17
The Bridge .....	18
Cleaning .....	18
<b>Accessories</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b>Other Strumsticks</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b>Amplifying your Strumstick</b> .....	<b>20</b>
Strumsticks with Built-in Acoustic Pickup .....	20
Stick-on Pickup .....	20
Amplifier .....	20
Electric Strumsticks .....	20
<b>Capo and Alternate Tunings</b> .....	<b>21</b>
Capo .....	21
Alternate Tunings .....	21
<b>Chord Diagrams</b> .....	<b>23</b>
Chords for G Strumstick .....	23
Chords for D Strumstick .....	25
<b>Note Fingering Charts</b> .....	<b>27</b>
<b>Seven Easy Songs</b> .....	<b>28</b>

# A Quick Start

For the G (Standard), the D (Grand) Strumsticks. May also be used with the C (Alto) Strumstick.

## Quick Start:

1. Use the strap (over your head and put right arm through).
2. Squeeze the bottom string (the thin one, closest to the ground), Keep the tip of your finger just to the left of any of the metal frets.
3. Strum all three strings with the pick.
4. Smile, and repeat.



*See next page for more detailed instructions.*

**Identifying Your Strumstick:** The G Strumstick is approx. 29” long. The D Strumstick is approx. 32” long. The C (Alto) Strumstick is approx. 24” long. Each genuine McNally Strumstick has a label with the model and tuning on it, viewable through the soundhole, and is signed and numbered by Bob McNally.

## Need to Tune your Strumstick?

Complete tuning instructions (including tuning from the instruction CD or DVD, electronic tuners, the Strumstick Website, or tuning with itself) can be found in Lesson 5: p 13.

# Lesson 1: Holding, Fretting, Strumming

## 1. Holding

Please use the strap, it is much easier that way.

- The strap goes over your head, and your right arm goes through the strap.
- You can slide the slip-knot on the strap to obtain a comfortable length.
- **It really helps to have the big end of the Strumstick rest against the inside of your forearm** (a few inches from your elbow, see Fig.1). Pressure against the end of the Strumstick with your forearm, against your body, will keep the Strumstick from slipping to the right while you play it.

You don't need to hold the Strumstick up with your left hand; let it hang from the strap.



***YES!*** Big end tucked against inside of forearm.  
Fig.1 ***Stable!***

Fig.2

***NO!*** Arm resting on top of side, unstable left and right.



## If You are Left-Handed:

You can play the Strumstick just as it is, with the neck pointed left. Strumstick requires skills with both hands. Or, you can play it with the neck pointed right, reaching across the neck to fret the thin string. You can also play it pointed right with the string order reversed so the thin string is closest to the ground, and the bridge slanted in the opposite direction. *Our recommendation for all beginners is to point the neck left. Both hands have things to learn, whichever way you hold it.*

## 2. Fretting

- To start with, squeeze only the 1st string (bottom string, closest to ground, thinnest). Yes, you can fret the other strings later.

- **Keep your finger just to the left of any fret** (frets are the silver pieces that go across the neck). Squeeze firmly with the tip of your finger. See Fig. 3

- Place your thumb **behind** the neck- just your finger tip and thumb should touch the neck. Keep a little space between your palm and the neck. If you squish your whole palm up against the neck like you are holding on for dear life, playing will be harder. Do be comfortable! The object is to have your thumb **behind** the neck, opposite your finger, like a Lobster claw.

Fig. 3 **YES!**



Fig. 4 **NO!** *finger between frets*



Fig. 5 **NO!** *finger on top of fret*

### 3. Strumming

- Hold the pick between your thumb and first finger (right hand), the **pointed end goes towards the strings**.

- Strum somewhere between the soundhole and the end of the fingerboard, wherever feels comfortable. **You do not need to strum directly over the soundhole.**

- Strum down across all the strings with the pick. Lift your arm, and use a sharp downward motion (and a twist of the wrist). The tip of the pick should move parallel to the face of the Strumstick. You do not want the strum to slant in, hitting the wood with the pick.

- Continue strumming for a while until it feels comfortable. Try to make the pick run smoothly and briskly across all three strings.

### 4. Moving to Another Fret

Move your finger to another fret on the first string, and strum a few more times. Remember to keep your finger just to the left of the fret, not halfway in between two frets. **Strum several times for each note.**

**Important! Do not move the left hand *while* you strum!**

That will muffle the notes. Squeeze when strumming, move when you are not strumming.

### 5. Enjoy the Sounds You are Making

It is simple, but it sounds OK, doesn't it? Play around with what you have just done for at least 5 minutes or longer. We have a saying for learning the Strumstick, which is **Enjoy The Noise!** Appreciate the basic sounds you are making - you will have more fun, be more patient, and learn faster!

*You get a nice sound whichever fret you use on the first string - experiment. Finger a note, strum a few times, then move to another fret and strum some more.*



See  
It!  
Hear  
It!

Hear *Getting Started* and *Basic Playing* on the Instruction CD (included), or see it in the optional Instruction DVD available from [www.strumstick.com](http://www.strumstick.com). You can also access video and audio clips on the website in the *Instructions* area.

## Solutions to Possible Problems

1. If you hear a buzz, or the note is muffled, be sure your fingertip is pressing firmly, close to (but not on top of) the fret, and on the left side of the fret. *See Fig. 3 on p. 6.* You will feel some pressure on your fingertip, but you do not have to squeeze so hard that it hurts. Your fingertips will get tougher over a week or two and you will not even notice the pressure. Be sure another finger is not touching another string causing it to be muffled.

2. If the Strumstick is moving around as you strum or move your finger, review how to hold it in the previous section - big end tucked against the inside of your forearm, strap over your head, right arm through the strap. *See Fig. 1*

3. Do not move your finger while you are strumming; squeeze, strum, relax and MOVE, then squeeze again before strumming again. You have to be squeezing when you strum to get a clear sound.

4. If the pick slips from your hand, squeeze it more tightly, but not in a death-grip. Use the pointed end to hit the strings.

5. Remember the strap is adjustable - slide the slip knot up and down to find a comfortable height where the strumstick rests securely. Just at the top of the belly is often a good fit.

## The “Extra” Fret (fret 6)

The frets are numbered 0, 1, 2, 3 etc. 0 is the fret the strings are resting on without any fingers (the open string). Play 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and you might notice that fret 6 sounds a “bluesy” note, not in the major scale. This



extra note is the flatted seventh of the scale, and it's a very useful note for some songs, blues, and some chords. Just skip it if you don't need it.

## Lesson 2: Strumming Different Rhythms

We do recommend you work on what we just covered in Lesson 1 for a while to get comfortable with that. A good rule of thumb is, if you are not bored, keep doing what you have just learned. If you are bored, move on a step. If you get frustrated or over-challenged, go back a step or two.

By now you should be able to strum down across the strings, while fretting a note with a finger on the left hand.

The next step is to begin to strum up as well as down. If you count in a steady beat 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4, you could strum down at each of those numbers. Notice what your hand does after each downstrum...it comes back up. Try strumming across the strings as you come back up. You may have to pull a little harder as you come up because the strings are catching your pick. You are making sounds twice as fast now; if you count the same beat as before, but add the word "and" in between each number, you have 1+ 2+ 3+ 4+ 1+ 2+ 3+ 4+. The "+" represents the upstrum. Count 1 2 3 4 1+ 2+ 3+ 4+ and strum that. Practice this until you can do the upstrums smoothly and comfortably. It may take a little while before they move as easily as the downstrum.



See  
It!  
Hear  
It!

Hear *Strumming and Rhythms* on the Instruction CD (included), or see it on the optional Instruction DVD available from [www.strumstick.com](http://www.strumstick.com). You can also access video and audio clips on the website in the *Instructions* area.

- Tips: If the upstrum seems too draggy or like the pick is being pulled from your hand, play around with how deeply you hold the pick in your hand, and how far into the strings you are placing the pick as you come up. It always takes a little more force to get a smooth upstrum compared to a downstrum.

Once you can do the upstrum smoothly, try adding it into the downstrum just once in a while instead of every time, like:

1 2 3 4 1 2+ 3 4 or:

1 2 3+ 4+ 1 2 3+ 4+

More advanced instructions will cover more rhythm techniques – leaving out downstrums, accenting, syncopation, etc., but you can make a lot of music using just what you know now.

***NOTE: If you miss the strings or hit them by accident as you do the upstrum, it is not a problem, as long as you are keeping a steady beat with your downstrums.***

## **Lesson 3: Changing Notes While Strumming Different Rhythms**

Now we are going to try changing whatever note you are fretting while you do different rhythms with the right hand. Before trying this you should be able to:

A. Change notes with the left hand.

B. Make the rhythm change by adding in upstrums after every beat, or once in a while.

First, finger the **2nd fret** on the first string. (**Note: The fret that the strings rest on at the top of the fingerboard is the zero fret, also called open**). Squeeze, and hold that note while you strum 1 2 3+ 4+ 1 2 3+ 4+

(that would be: down, down, downup, downup; down, down, downup, downup).

Now stop strumming, move to the **3rd fret** (you can move the finger you are using, or put a different finger down), squeeze, and strum 1 2 3+ 4+ 1 2 3+ 4+ again.

Go back to the **2nd fret**. Strum 1 2 3+ 4+ 1 2 3+ 4+ again. It is starting to sound like a simple song, isn't it? Simply bounce back and forth from **2nd fret** to **3rd fret**, strumming 1 2 3+ 4+ 1 2 3+ 4+ each time, over and over. When that goes smoothly, you are ready for Lesson 4.

## Lesson 4: Songlets

Soon we will go on to playing regular songs. Before then, it would help to be very comfortable with fingering and strumming the Strumstick in general. You can get that experience by playing random notes and strumming, but you can also get it with a fun and useful exercise we call Songlets. These are little bitty song pieces (that you create!) that can even grow up into real songs. They are small enough to be easy, and interesting enough to be really fun!

### Step A:

- Play any fret you like, and strum it three times, 1, 2, 3.
- Then play a different fret and strum it three times, 1, 2, 3.
- Go back to the first note and strum it three times, 1, 2, 3.
- Then play a third, different fret and strum it three times, 1, 2, 3.

Repeat this same whole pattern several more times. While you play them, listen to the little song they sing. You just made up a musical phrase!

See  
It!  
Hear  
It!

See and hear *Songlets* on the optional Instruction DVD available from [www.strumstick.com](http://www.strumstick.com). You can also access video and audio clips on the website in the *Instructions* area.

## Songlets continued...

### Step B:

- Now make up another phrase, three notes, any three, go up or down the neck, whatever you want. Repeat this second phrase a few times. Listen while you play. Enjoy how this phrase sounds.

### Step C:

- Now do the first phrase (A), followed by the second phrase (B) , and the first phrase (A) again. A Songlet is born, great job!

You could play any or all of the phrases twice in a row if you want... A A B A, or A B B A, or AA BB AA,...you get the idea.

You just created this songlet, a little fragment of a song. You made it up yourself, you figured it out, you learned it (by repeating each phrase), and then you put it together. This is composing, and it is also improvising.

**Learning how to play an instrument is easier when you play in a relaxed way. Add one thing at a time, go slowly, and have fun as you go along.**

**The Songlets are a great way to help you create fun little bits of melody while your strumming and fretting get more and more comfortable.**

# Lesson 5: Easy Tuning

Hear It!

## 1. Tuning using the Instruction CD

The Instruction CD included with your Strumstick has notes to tune the Standard and Grand Strumsticks with. Listen to the notes on the CD, and adjust your corresponding string to match it (instructions are given on the CD). Similar instructions are available on the optional Instruction DVD.

Various tuning audio clips can also be accessed on the website [www.strumstick.com](http://www.strumstick.com), in the *Instructions* area

## 2. Tuning with Electronic Tuners

Electronic tuners are easy and fast, and widely available. We have a good tuner available in the *Catalog, Accessories* section at [www.strumstick.com](http://www.strumstick.com). You play a string, the display indicates what note it is, and a meter shows you if it is too high (sharp), too low (flat) or right on. As you adjust the string, the display changes to show you what is happening.

G Strumstick tunes G D G

D Strumstick tunes D A D

C (Alto) Strumstick tunes C G C



## 3. Tuning using the Instruction DVD

There are notes to tune the D or the G Strumsticks on the instruction DVD, chapters 15 and 16. Online, you can access these videos at this URL:

See It!

[http://www.strumstick.com/html\\_pages/DVD%20Page.htm](http://www.strumstick.com/html_pages/DVD%20Page.htm)  
or go to the *Instructions* area.

## 4. Tuning the Strumstick with Itself.

Tuning the Strumstick with itself is easy, it just requires a little patience and learning what to do. In fact, reading about how to tune is more difficult than actually tuning. If you have an outside reference like a guitar or piano, the notes that the strings should be tuned to are:

G Standard Strumstick (29" long) G D G

D Grand Strumstick (33" long) D A D

C Alto Strumstick (24" long) tunes C G C

The strings are numbered, left to right, "3", "2", "1", with "1" being the thinnest (the bottom one, closest to the ground) and "3" being the thickest (the top one). The frets (the metal pieces on the fingerboard) are numbered 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, etc., with 0 being the fret at the top, which the strings rest on. To tune, follow these instructions:

**Step 1:** Finger the third string at the **4th fret**, and pluck that string with the pick. That sound is the note the second string should be.

**Step 2:** Pluck the second string **open** (open = no left hand fingers), and listen to it. If it sounds like a different note than the third string **4th fret**, it is *out of tune* with the third string. Adjust its tuning key until the second string **open** sounds the same note as third string **4th fret**. Now the second string is *in tune* with the third string. **It may take several tests, and several adjustments to get it right.**

**Step 3:** Now finger the second string at the **3rd fret**. That is the note the first string **open** should be.

**Step 4:** Adjust the 1st string tuning key until first string **open** sounds like second string **3rd fret**. You are done!

**There is one real trick to tuning**, and that is *listening!* Pluck the note you are fretting; *listen* to it. Pluck the string you are adjusting; *listen* to it change. Tuning is not done by remembering notes or thinking, it's done by *listening*.

Always listen to the note change when you twist the tuning key. If you will listen, you can tune. If you can hear a note is out of tune, you'll be able to bring it back in tune. If you can't hear that a note is out of tune, it isn't!

## 5. Tuning to Other Instruments

You can get the notes you need from a guitar, piano, keyboard, or other instrument. If you are playing along with other instruments, you will *have* to get a note from them, or give them a note from the Strumstick, so you are all in tune together.

G Standard Strumstick (29" long) G D G

D Grand Strumstick (33" long) D A D

C Alto Strumstick (24" long) tunes C G C

# Lesson 6: Playing Songs

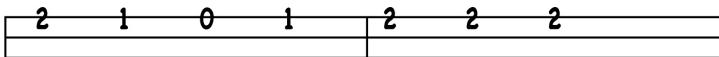
## How to Play Songs

(see songs on page 28; also the available 72 song Songbook, and [www.strumstick.com](http://www.strumstick.com) for online songs)

**Playing songs involves both your brain and your hands.** *It is important to already be comfortable using your hands to do Strumstick things before you do songs, so you are free to pay attention to the thinking part, the brain part, not just to making your hands work.*

A song is just one note after another. To show you a song, we have to say *what fret on what string* for each note of the song. We will use **numbers** for the fret number, and horizontal lines for the strings. The very top fret, the one the strings are resting on, is called **0 (zero)**. If you are not fretting a string with your finger, it is said to be played at the **zero fret**, or **open**. The next fret from the **zero fret** is **1st fret**, the next after that **2nd fret**, etc.

**Illustration:** *The top line is the first string (that's the skinniest one, the highest pitched one, the one closest to the floor as you hold the Strumstick in playing position). The middle line is the middle string (string 2) and the bottom line is string 3, the lowest pitched and thickest string.*



Ma - ry      had    a              lit - tle      lamb

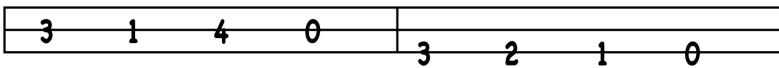
The first note is the **2nd fret** on the first string. The next note is **1st fret** on the first string. The third note is **0 fret** ( or “**open**”) on the first string (you won’t need any finger for that note).

For notes other than “0”, use the finger that feels most comfortable at first. As you play faster, and more complicated melodies, it will make sense to use several fingers in succession, but for now, just use whichever one feels most comfortable.

**Whichever note you are fingering, you will still be strumming all three strings !** This will make a melody note plus two background notes.

### Notes on the other strings:

For notes on strings two or three, the fret number will be written on the line that represents the string the note is on. In the example below, you see



second string **3rd** fret, second string **1st** fret, second string **4th** fret, and second string **open** (0 fret). *Sometimes people are confused by second string 0 fret; it is not a trick, it’s a free note, no finger is needed when a note is open. Since you are strumming all three strings all the time, you are already getting that note, but if that is the melody note at some point in the song, we still need to indicate it.*

**Reminder about fretting:** Squeeze with the tip of your finger, just to the left of the metal fret, not right on it, and definitely not halfway between two frets. The object is to hold the string securely against the fret without muffling the string, and without having to squeeze harder than necessary.

**Play slowly:** The melody of the song appears when you smoothly play one note after the other. Any one strum may sound odd to you, especially on the second and third strings. When you can play each note slowly but steadily in succession, then you will hear the melody. Speed will come naturally as you become more familiar with a song. When you are learning, **speed is not a virtue, it is an obstacle.** ALLOW yourself to go slowly...Enjoy the Noise!

*There are Songs To Play starting at page 28.*



## Lesson 7: Care and Feeding

Protect your Strumstick from impacts, especially to the soundboard/bridge area. Also avoid extremes of temperature (very hot/very cold) and very low humidity. Don't put your Strumstick anywhere you would not want to be for an extended period of time (like the trunk of a car on a hot day). Hanging it on the wall (not in the sun or over a heater) is fine, and convenient.

### Strings

Strings can break if over-tightened or well used. You also might want to replace old strings if they are beginning to be rusty or sound dull. You need

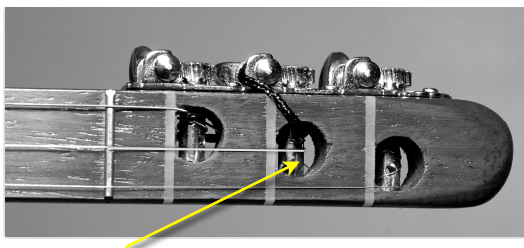


loop end strings (like for banjo or mandolin): .023" wound, .014" plain, .010" plain for G Standard, C Alto, and D Grand Strumsticks. The strings we provide have a chenille wrap to cushion the spot where the string crosses over the end of the instrument. You can get strings

from us by mail, \$12/set ppd. If needed you can unwind the chenille from the old string or use yarn or a pipe cleaner if you get strings without chenille from a store. If necessary, you can use strings .001" larger or smaller (example: the first string, .010" plain, could be .009" or .011"). A light gauge 5-string banjo set will give you 1 of each string you need for the Strumstick.

Hook the loop end over the correct pin at the big end. The free end of the string should go into the hole in the tuning post with about 2 1/2" of slack (the excess sticking out the back can be clipped off).

Then the string can be wound around the post by turning the tuning key. Choose the direction that makes the string wind "over the top" of the post, as shown.



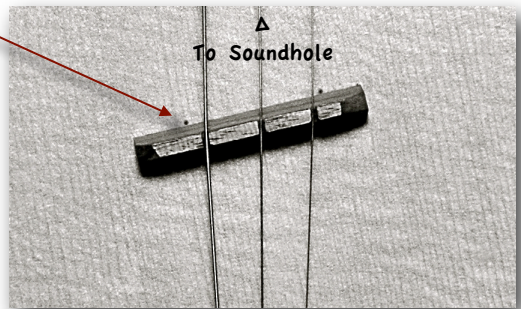
If necessary, you can use guitar strings. They have metal balls instead of loops at the end. Lace the free end of the string through the ball, pull it tight to make a loop, and use it like a loop end string. You will want to provide some padding at the end where the string crosses the wood, like yarn or a pipe cleaner wrapped around the string. *Note: it is normal for the strings to dig into the wood at the end a little bit. They will not saw your instrument in half.*

### **The Bridge** (*note: the bridge is not glued to the soundboard*)

**If the bridge should get moved, the front edge should be lined up with the two marks on the top.**

The front edge of the bridge is sloped, the back edge is straight up and down.

**The bridge is supposed to be on a slight slant. Line it up with the two marks on the top.**



If you lose your bridge we can send a replacement. Let us know which model Strumstick you have. If possible, let us know the exact height of your bridge. Perhaps you could measure it now and write it down. We use several sizes of bridges; 7/32, 1/4, 9/32, 5/16, or 3/8” so measure with 1/32 inch accuracy.

### **Cleaning**

If your Strumstick becomes soiled from use, wipe it gently with a slightly damp (not dripping wet!) cloth; using a trace of detergent if necessary is fine. Wipe it dry with a soft cloth. The finish is lacquer, with a thin coat of paste wax. A few raindrops or a mist will not damage it with brief exposure, but avoid having it stay wet. *No polishes or other finishes are needed or recommended*; you may renew the paste wax coat every few years if you want to. To do that, remove the strings, clean the strumstick with a damp cloth, and rub dry. Then apply a thin coat of paste wax, let that dry for a few minutes, and buff with a soft cloth. Remove any excess wax that the cloth does not rub smooth.