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DEMYSTIFYING THE FRETBOARD

FOR FILLS, SOLOS & PLAYING YOUR CHORDS IN NEW PLACES

By Nikki O'Neill

I remember early in my guitar playing journey when I'd hear the twangy intro riff to "Only a Fool" (The Black Crowes) or the soulful fills and solo licks in "The Wind Cries Mary" (Jimi Hendrix). I was always wondering: how do they find these licks so easily? I experienced the same dilemma with reggae or soul tunes, where the chord changes often are played on just the top three strings: how do you know which fret or shape...? Until I found out, I felt like I was kept out of some secret that every guitarist knew.

The guitar fretboard has a design, and there are different ways that people have figured it out and explained it, depending a little bit on what genre they play. For players of roots styles like Americana, soul, country, bluegrass, gospel, blues, or jazz, and

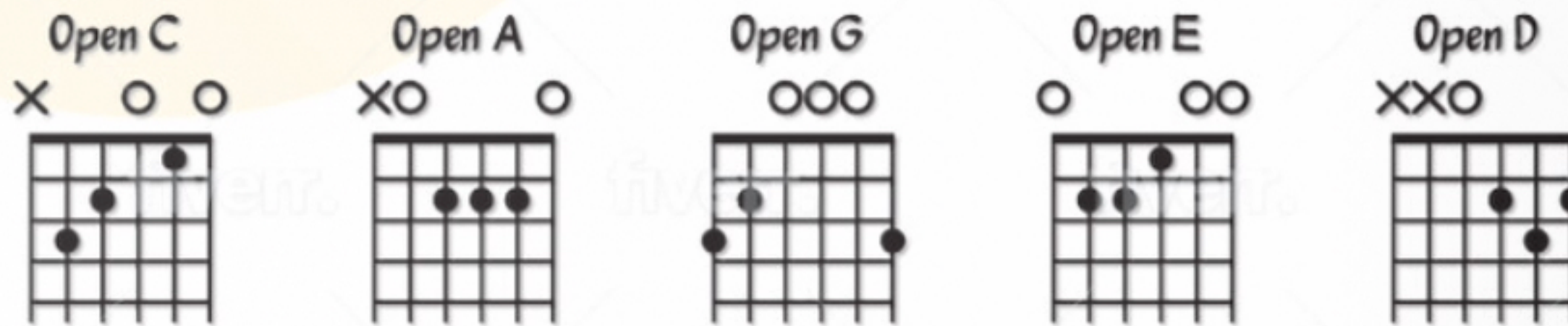
even the classic rock and pop that sprung out of them, soloing, and playing fills around chord shapes is a very common approach. It also gives us insight into the fretboard.

If you're a songwriter, you (and your bandmates) probably deal with guitar parts as you try to create the best possible arrangements for your songs. For this, it's great to know how to play your chord changes on different parts of the neck, so you can create subtle differences when you play verse #2 compared to verse #1. This is known as playing chords with different voicings.

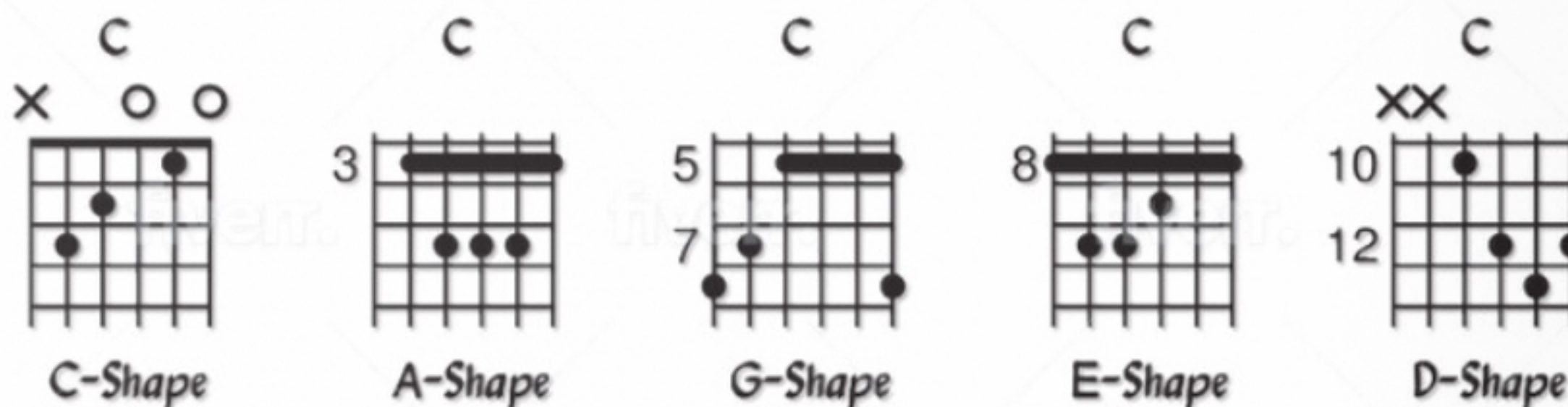
In this two-part lesson, you'll learn about all of these things through one approach.

The CAGED system

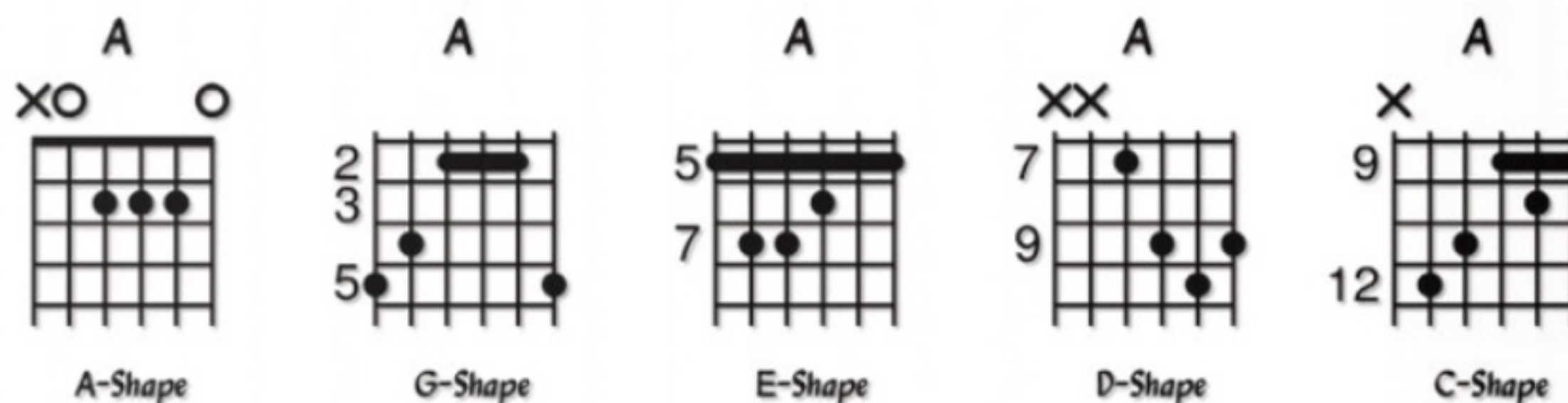
Learning something called the CAGED system helped me profoundly as a songwriter, rhythm guitarist, and improvising soloist. Here's how it works: all major chords can be boiled down to five visual shapes, based on the open chords C, A, G, E, and D.



Let's play a C chord, using these five shapes in order, going up the neck. If you know the open C chord and how to play barre chords, three of these five shapes will already be familiar to you. Notice how these chords overlap each other, like chains on a necklace:



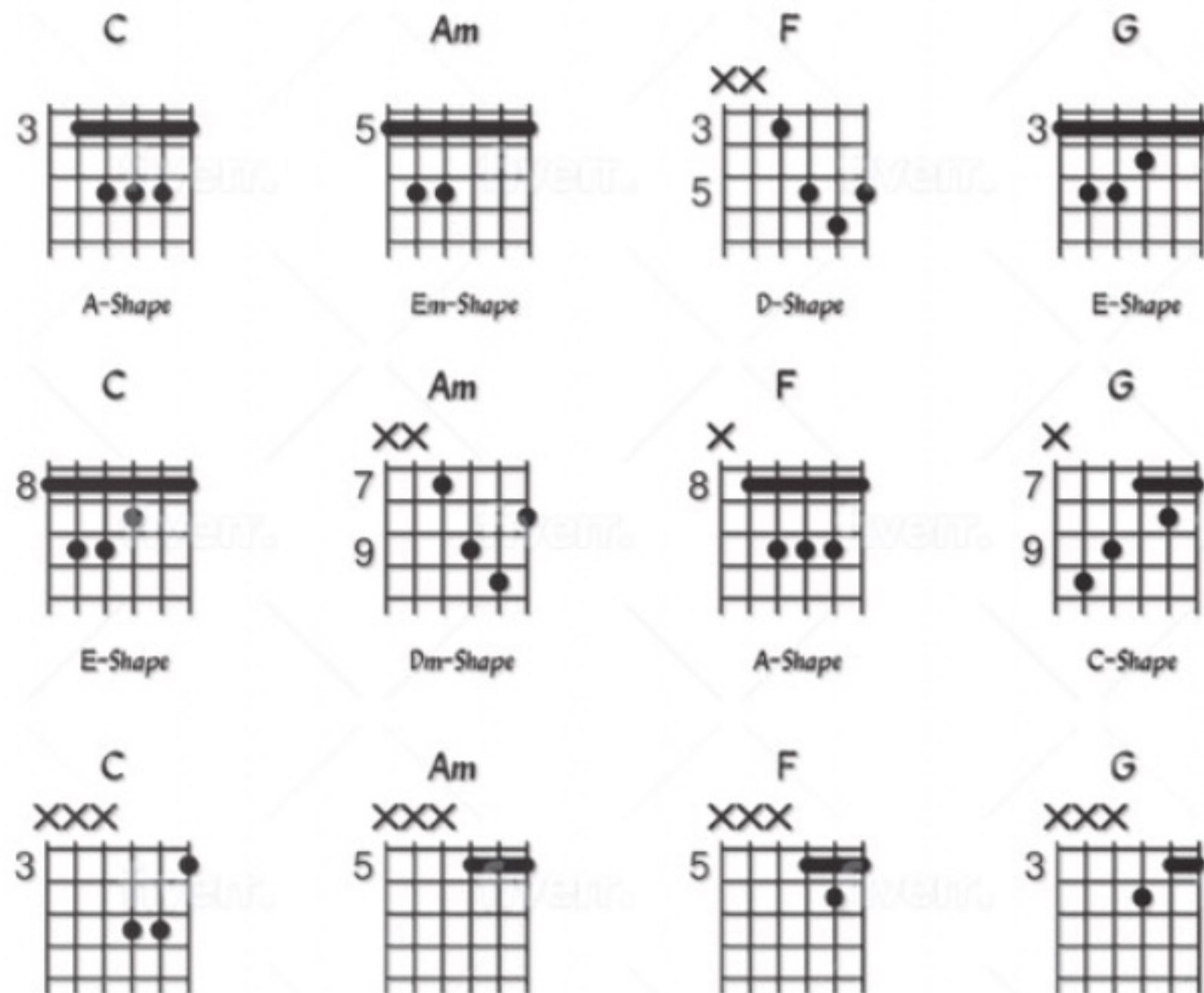
Now let's play an A chord, using the five shapes as we go up the neck. You just start on the second chord shape in the sequence. "CAGED" is simply an acronym for these five open major chord shapes.



Playing C - Am - F - G

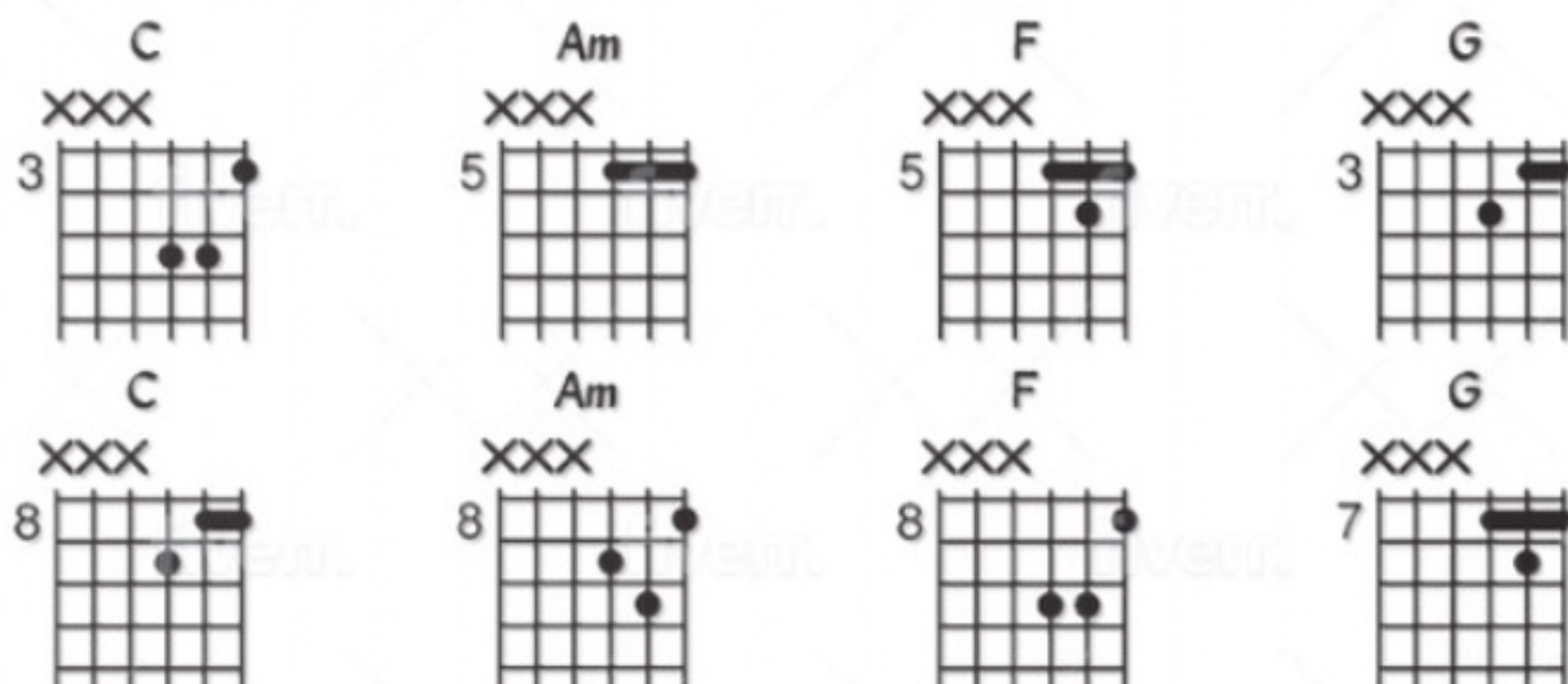
Some combination of the four chords C, F, G, and Am can be heard in hundreds of songs, including "Let It Be," "Dy'er Maker," and "No Woman No Cry." Let's put our new fretboard awareness to use by playing the progression C - Am - F - G. Wait, an Am? The CAGED system can also be applied to minor (and dominant 7th) chords, but it's best to learn it by focusing on the major chords. Some minor chord shapes in CAGED are also very stretchy. But since so many songs feature at least one minor chord, we're including Am in this lesson.

Instead of jumping around the neck, we'll play C - Am - F - G by using the least amount of movement as we go from chord to chord:



Smaller versions of C - Am - F - G

Sometimes, playing the full versions of these chords will clutter up a song arrangement because they'll take up a lot of the frequencies that also are played by the bass, keyboards, and another electric or acoustic guitar. So let's play our chord progression by only using the top three strings:



To memorize these four chords, play as many songs as you can find that feature some combination of them. Here are additional examples (the original versions are not always in the key of C, but you can still sing and play them this way):

"I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" (U2)

"Big Yellow Taxi" (Joni Mitchell)

"Blowing in the Wind" (Bob Dylan)

"The Man" (Taylor Swift)

In part two of this lesson, we'll play fills and solos around these chord shapes.

TIP:

once you've memorized C-Am-F-G on the top three strings, move them up two frets, so you get D-Bm-G-A. Then explore what the C-Am-F-G chord shapes look and sound like on strings 2, 3, and 4. These mellower voicings are common and incredibly useful.