



by Douglas Baldwin

# Strum It

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## Grateful Dead • Sugar Magnolia

As the '60s drew to a close, the Grateful Dead were in a jam, and it wasn't the one between "Dark Star" and "St. Stephen." Sales of their first three albums (1967's *The Grateful Dead*, 1968's *Anthem of the Sun*, and 1969's *Aoxomoxoa*) had been slow, and the band had managed to rack up a debt of \$10,000 in studio time due to excessive technical experimentation. Rather than become an amusing footnote in the "whatever happened to..." category, they employed a strategy in 1970 that struck pay dirt.

A relatively low-budget live double album was released, the now-classic *Live/Dead*. It sold briskly and secured their reputation as a premiere performing act while displaying their improvisational skills on intricately extended jams. Then, before the smoke had a chance to clear, they put out *Workingman's Dead* and *American Beauty*, a one-two

punch of albums in that same year featuring a collection of concise country- and folk-tinged songs that would fuel their setlists for the remainder of their existence.

"Sugar Magnolia" can be found on *American Beauty*, and it's proved itself again and again as a centerpiece of Dead concerts and one of their most beloved songs.

### CHORD CHEMISTRY

The bulk of "Sugar Magnolia" is based in the key of A major, and the chords don't stray far from this tonality. Note the fingering of the A chord with the first finger barred across three strings. This "rock 'n' roll" fingering allows for some cool slips and slides, which we'll explore in a moment when we discuss the main riff of the song. From this fingering, it's relatively simple to nail the D/A chord by adding your 2nd and 3rd fingers. A couple of full barre chords (C#m and F#m) show up early in the song, and

there's no way around them. If you're new to barre chords, this may be the song to break your hands in with. Most strummers should have the open E, the "four-fingered" open G, and the open D chords under their fingers, and with these seven chords you can play most of the song.

### THE MODULATION

The final verse of "Sugar Magnolia" (marked as the *Coda* on our transcription) begins like all of the previous verses. Then out of the blue, a B major chord arrives followed by a slew of previously unseen chords, and the song moves into a whole new zone. The song has modulated into the key of B major, meaning that we, as listeners, sense a shift in what could be called the "home base" of the song's harmony. Modulations often occur through sly interjections of chords common to two different keys, but "Sugar Magnolia" makes the transition in the

most basic way: Bam! B major! This is referred to as a *chromatic modulation*, while the sneaky approach is either a *diatonic* or an *enharmonic modulation*.

While on the topic of modulation, it could be argued that the bridge modulates to the key of D major by using D's three primary chords (D, G, and A, also known as the I, IV, and V). Since it begins on the D chord common to both A major and D major, this would be a diatonic modulation. It returns back to A major (and another statement of the main guitar riff) via the E chord, a chromatic modulation.

### THE MAIN RIFF

Bob Weir's slinky, lubricated introductory riff is the backbone of the song, the glue that holds it together. To master this phrase, take a look at Fig. 1. Start with the one-fingered A chord one fret lower than normal, and slide it up to its 2nd-fret home. Do this twice and you've got the 1st measure. The three notes of the 2nd measure are easily fingered with the index and ring fingers, and the D/F# has the same fingering as the D/A introduced earlier. Measure 3 opens with that slinky G#-A slide again, and the seven-note line that rolls into the 4th measure is, like the 2nd measure's line, a simple two-fingered affair. Just be sure to give the first note of this new phrase a little goose by sliding into it. ☐

Fig. 1

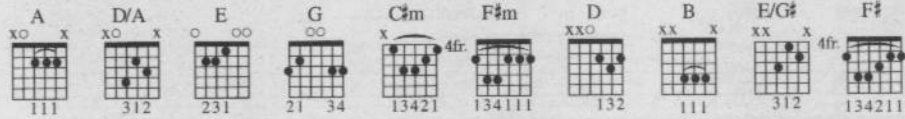
# SUGAR MAGNOLIA

As Recorded by Grateful Dead  
(From the Warner Bros. Recording AMERICAN BEAUTY)

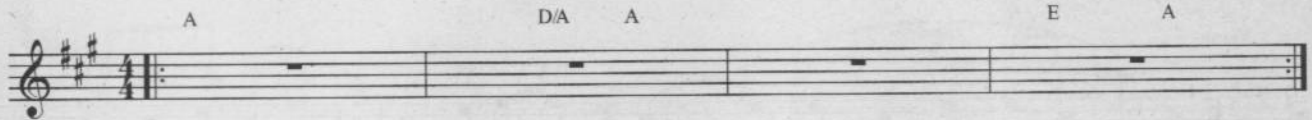
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By Robert Hunter and Bob Weir

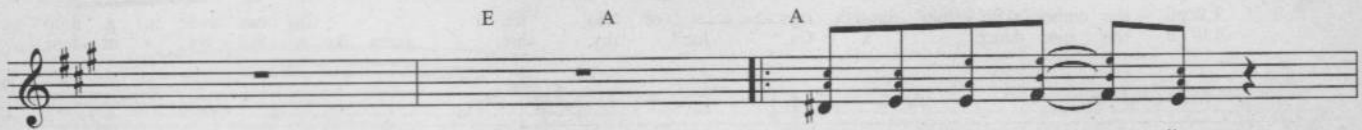
Arranged by Adam Perlmutter



Intro  
Moderately fast Rock ♩ = 160



Verse



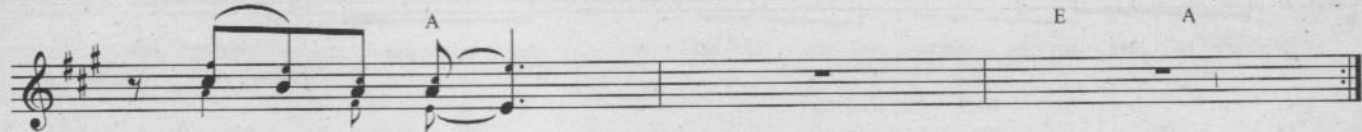
1. Sug - ar Mag - no - lia,  
2. Sweet blos - som, come on



blos - soms bloom - ing, heads all emp - ty and I don't care.  
un - der the wil - low. We can have high times if you'll a - bid.



Saw my ba - by down by the riv - er, knew she'd have to come up  
We can dis - cov - er the won - ders of na - ture, roll - ing in the rush - es down



soon for the air.  
by the riv - er - side.

Bridge



She's got ev - 'ry - thing de - light - ful, she's got ev - 'ry - thing



I need. { 1. Take in the wheel when I'm see - in' dou - ble,  
2. A breeze in the pines and the sun and bright moon - light,

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# Sugar Magnolia

To Coda ⊕

E A E A

pays my tick-et when I speed,  
cra-zy in the sun-light, yes, in-deed.

## Pedal Steel Solo

A D/A A E A E A

## Verse

A D/A A G E

3. Well, she comes skim-min' through rays of vio-let. She can wade in a drop  
4. Well, she can dance a Ca-jun rhy-thm, jump like a Wil-lys in four-

A C#m F#m

of wheel dew. She's a sum-mer love and in the spring, don't fol-low,  
drive. She don't come love in the spring, fall, and win-ter.

E D A E A

waits back-stage while I sing to you.  
She can make hap-py an-y man a-live.

## Chorus

A G D A G D

Sug-ar Mag-no-lia, ring-in' that blue-bell.  
(Doo, doo, doo, doo, doo)

A G D A

doo, doo, doo, doo. Caught up in sun-light, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo.

E G D

go on out sing-in', I'll walk doo, you in the sun-shine. Oo, come on, hon-ey,  
Doo, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo.

D.S. al Coda

A E A

come a-long with me.  
(Doo, doo, doo.)



