

How to Reach Difficult Stretches and Nasty Chords, Part 2 of 2.

By Douglas Niedt

Copyright Douglas Niedt. All Rights Reserved. This article may be reprinted, but please be considerate and give credit to Douglas Niedt.

A difficult stretch occurs at the beginning of the theme of *Afro-Cuban Lullaby* as arranged by Jack Marshall and Christopher Parkening (Example #18):

Example #18:

Afro-Cuban Lullaby (arr. Jack Marshall and Christopher Parkening) measures #4-5

The image shows a musical score for measures 4 and 5 of 'Afro-Cuban Lullaby'. The score is written for guitar, with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The time signature is 4/4. The music features a complex stretch in measure 5, which is highlighted by a red box. The stretch involves a sequence of notes: a half note G4 (finger 4), a quarter note A4 (finger 1), a quarter note B4 (finger 4), and a half note C5 (finger 1). The bass line consists of a series of chords and single notes, with fingerings indicated by numbers 0-5. The guitar part includes a 4/4 time signature and a key signature of one sharp. The score is written for guitar, with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The time signature is 4/4. The music features a complex stretch in measure 5, which is highlighted by a red box. The stretch involves a sequence of notes: a half note G4 (finger 4), a quarter note A4 (finger 1), a quarter note B4 (finger 4), and a half note C5 (finger 1). The bass line consists of a series of chords and single notes, with fingerings indicated by numbers 0-5. The guitar part includes a 4/4 time signature and a key signature of one sharp.

Although I would choose to lean my fingers to the right to reach the high B, in this case that does not work for a lot of players. Instead, they choose to rotate the 4th finger side of the hand in very tightly to the neck, placing the fingers in a kind of reverse slant for the pinky to reach the high B.

Watch me demonstrate how this is done in Video #11:



Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #11: Afro-Cuban Lullaby (arr. Marshall) Arched Hand and Wrist

4. Change the Position of the Thumb

Changing the position of the thumb or taking it off the neck entirely can be helpful in reaching difficult stretches and nasty chords.

In the *Afro-Cuban Lullaby* example above, for many players the thumb will assume an unusual position to the left of the index finger:

Watch me demonstrate the position in Video #12:



Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #12: Afro-Cuban Lullaby (arr. Marshall) Thumb Position

Sometimes, difficult stretches are easier to reach with the thumb off the neck. For example, in the *Mazurka Apassionata* by Agustín Barrios Mangoré, we have this difficult stretch in m21 (Example #19):

Example #19:

Mazurka Apassionata (Agustín Barrios Mangoré) measures #20-21

X^③

20

21

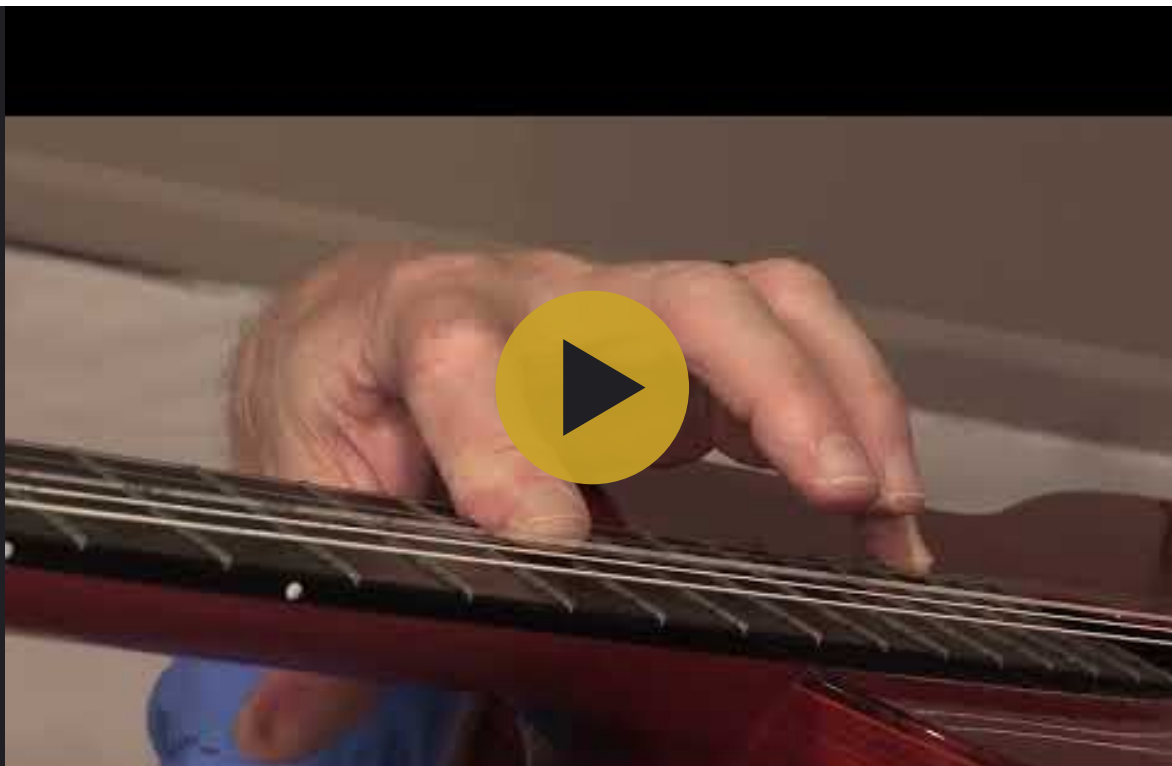
T 3/4 10 10 17 10 15 13 12

A 3/4 12 12 0 10 10

B 3/4 0 11 11 0

For most players, taking the thumb off the neck makes it much easier to play the measure. When you are faced with a difficult stretch, try playing it with the thumb on the neck and off the neck. Use the technique that works best for you.

Watch me in Video #13:



Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #13: Mazurka Appassionata (Barrios) Thumb Position

A player with smaller hands will sometimes have to place the thumb far under the neck to reach difficult stretches (Example #20):

Example #20:

Study No. 16 (as numbered by Segovia) *Op. 29, No. 23* (Fernando Sor) measure #1

The image shows a musical score for a guitar piece. The top staff is in treble clef, and the bottom two staves are in alto and bass clefs. The time signature is 2/4. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The first measure is highlighted with a red box. Above the first measure, there is a dashed line labeled 'III'. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and fingerings (1, 2, 3, 4, 5).

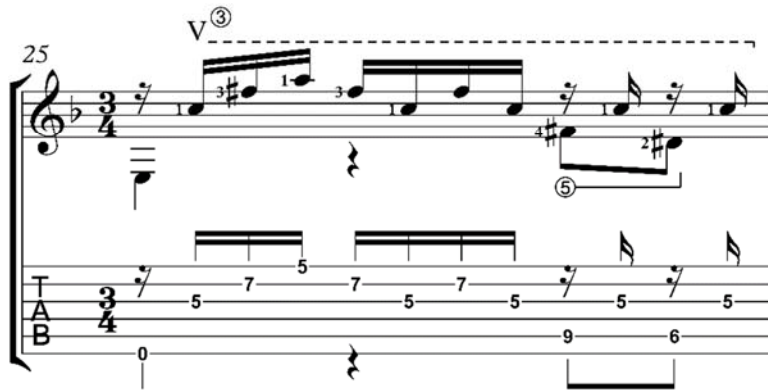
5. Allow the 1st Finger Tip Joint to Hyperextend on Half Bars and Partial Bars

A standard flat bar usually works fine for most bar chords. But when you encounter a nasty chord that requires a half bar (a bar covering three strings) with the first finger, hyperextending the tip joint of the first finger (allowing the tip joint to collapse and bend backward) can make a big difference in the ease and success of playing the chord. The usefulness of this technique is dependent upon how much one's index finger is able to hyperextend.

J.S. Bach's *Prelude in Dm* BWV 999 contains several of these chords. One of the more difficult examples is in measure #25 (Example #21):

Example #21:

Prelude in Dm BWV 999 (J.S. Bach) measure #25



The reach of the 4th finger can be extended by hyperextending the tip joint of the first finger. Assistance can also be provided by dipping the left shoulder, leaning the 3rd finger to the right and rotating the 4th finger side of the hand into the neck.

I will show you these techniques in Video #14:



Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #14: Prelude in Dm (Bach) Joint Hyperextension

Or, one could use this common alternate fingering, but the break in the sound on beat #3 is not as musical (Example #22):

Example #22:

Prelude in Dm BWV 999 (J.S. Bach) measure #25

Alternate fingering for measure #26:

25

V^③

26

4 3 5

3 4 5

0 5 7 5 7 5 5 4 5 5 6

Hyperextension of the index finger on a partial bar is very useful in playing this F major chord in Francisco Tárrega's *Capricho Árabe* (Example #23):

Example #23:

Capricho Árabe (Francisco Tárrega) measure #35

While many players can play the chord using a conventional full flat bar, for others it is not an easy chord to play clearly. Using hyperextension of the bar finger with assistance from an arched wrist provides additional reach for the 4th finger and more efficient use of hand strength for the bar.

Watch me demonstrate in Video #15:



Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #15: Capricho Arabe (Tarrega) Joint Hyperextension

6. Push a String Out of the Way

Some nasty chords may not contain wide stretches but may be difficult to play due to string clearance issues. The solution is to push a string out of the way to provide extra clearance.

A well-known example of this is in *Prelude 1* by Heitor Villa-Lobos (Example #24):

Example #24:

Prelude No. 1 (Heitor Villa-Lobos) measures #33-34

The 3rd finger will tend to touch and damp the open 2nd string or cause it to buzz. To prevent that, push the 3rd string upward slightly to give extra clearance behind the 3rd finger for the open 2nd string to ring freely.

Watch how the technique is done in Video #16:



Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #16: Prelude No. 1 (Villa-Lobos) Pushing Strings Away

A similar problem occurs in Julian Bream's transcription for guitar of Maurice Ravel's *Pavane for a Dead Princess* (Example #25):

Example #25:

Pavane for a Dead Princess (Maurice Ravel, arr. Julian Bream) measures #11-12

VI ③④⑤ only

12 ②

Here, there is a high probability that the 4th finger will touch and therefore damp the open 1st-string E. By pushing the 2nd string upward with the 4th finger, additional clearance is produced behind the finger so the open E rings freely.

Watch me play the passage in Video #17:



Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #17: Pavane (Ravel) Pushing Strings Away

7. Change the Position of the Guitar and/or Body

Some guitar instructors teach that the guitar should be held in one ideal, perfect position all the time. I don't believe in a static sitting position. I believe the player's body position should change according to the needs of the passage to be played.

For any given difficult stretch or chord, I always recommend experimenting with the position of the guitar and the position of the player's body.

Simple adjustments of the position of the guitar can make a huge difference in playing a stretch or chord clearly. Try moving the head of the guitar forward. Try moving the head of the guitar back. Try positioning the neck of the guitar more horizontally or at a steeper vertical angle. Try different combinations of all of these.

Changing the position of the left elbow can be especially helpful in reaching difficult stretches and playing nasty chords. Winging the elbow outward, tucking it into your side, or moving it forward is usually done in combination with other techniques such as changing the position of the hand or wrist and leaning the fingers to the left or right.

Watch me demonstrate these changes of the position of the body, guitar, and elbow in Video #18:



Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #18: Position of the Elbow and the Guitar

For some difficult reaches and chords, and especially for passages in high positions on the fretboard, it can be helpful to dip the left shoulder and/or lean the body forward. Check out the next three passages (Examples #26-28).

These can be played in a normal sitting position. But, for myself and many others, adjusting the position of the shoulder and body can make them much easier to play with less stress on the wrist. *Note that any change of shoulder or body position should be made as the passage is approached, not at the start of the passage itself. Anticipate!*

Example #26:

"Allegro Solemne" from *La Catedral* (Agustín Barrios Mangoré) measures #85-89

In the next video, watch Jennifer Kim play this passage. Notice at the beginning of measure #85 in 4th position, that her head is up and shoulders horizontal. As she plays the next chord in 7th position, her left shoulder dips and her head comes down. At measure #87 her head lowers more and as she executes the last shift in the second half of measure #87, her chin is resting on the guitar and her left shoulder makes one last adjustment downward. As she plays the final two chords, her body resumes its normal playing position. This is an excellent demonstration of how to adjust one's body position to facilitate reaching difficult stretches, chords, and shifts.

Watch Jennifer Kim play the ending of *La Catedral* in Video #19:



Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #19: La Catedral (Barrios) Jennifer Kim, guitarist

Example #27:

Etude No. 7 (Heitor Villa-Lobos) measures #28-30

28

29

30

tied

Example #28:

The Miller's Dance (Manuel de Falla) ending

The image displays a musical score for the ending of 'The Miller's Dance' by Manuel de Falla. It consists of two staves. The top staff is a standard musical notation in treble clef, featuring a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 3/4 time signature. It includes a triplet of eighth notes, a series of sixteenth-note chords, and a final measure with a quarter rest. The bottom staff is a guitar tablature, with strings labeled T (treble), A (middle), and B (bass). It shows fret numbers (0, 2, 3, 12, 17) and includes a circled '5' indicating a barre. The tablature also shows a triplet of eighth notes and a final measure with a quarter rest.

Watch as I demonstrate how I use changes of body position to play the ending of Manuel de Falla's *The Miller's Dance* in Video #20:



Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #20: The Miller's Dance (de Falla) Positioning of the Body

8. Use a Bar or Change the Number of Strings that You Bar

Sometimes the music will specify that a certain number of strings is to be barred to play a chord. But sometimes, the chord may be played by barring fewer strings than indicated. Often, the chord may be played by barring *more* strings than indicated. Do not assume that a chord will be easier to play by barring fewer strings. Many times, a chord will sound clearer with less effort by actually barring more strings. You must experiment.

For example, in measure #14 of Matteo Carcassi's *Estudio Op. 60, No. 3*, we have a nasty chord that is difficult for many guitarists to sound clearly without buzzes or damped notes (Example #29):

Example #29:

Estudio Op. 60, No. 3 (Matteo Carcassi) measures #13-14

Although only three strings are required by the music to be barred, many guitarists find that the chord comes out best if *more* strings are barred. In general, barring additional strings can work wonders for making bar chords come out more clearly.

Sometimes adding a bar where none is required can make a stretch easier and add consistency to the execution of a tricky chord change. In the well-known *Romanza* (or *Romance*, *Romance de Amor*) measure #27 can be played without any bar (Example #30):

Example #30

Romanza (Anonymous) measures #25-28

But it is a difficult shift and stretch coming from measure #26. Adding a half bar makes the shift far more dependable and the stretch easier (Example #31):

Example #31:

Romanza (Anonymous) measures #25-28

Fingered with added half-bar in measure #27

Measure #51 of Fernando Sor's *Study No. 16* (as numbered by Segovia) *Op. 29, No. 23* presents a difficult stretch even for me (Example #32):

Example #32:

Study #16 (as numbered by Segovia) *Op. 29, No. 23* (Fernando Sor) measures #50-51

The musical score for measures 50-51 of Fernando Sor's *Op. 29, No. 23* is shown. The score is in 2/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). Measure 50 shows a treble staff with a sequence of chords and a bass staff with a single note. Measure 51 shows a treble staff with a sequence of chords and a bass staff with a single note. A red box highlights the second beat of measure 51, with a red dashed line and the text "Add Bar III" above it. A red dashed line and the text "V" are also present above the first beat of measure 51.

The only way I can play the chord on the second beat of measure #51 is to slide the bar from the 5th fret on beat #1 to the 3rd fret on beat #2.

9. Use a Capo

A capo can be used to make a piece filled with difficult stretches and nasty chords easier to play. The capo shifts everything upward where the distance between frets is shorter. Christopher Parkening used a capo at the first fret to play his transcription of *Prelude No. 1* from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*.

10. Change the Fingerings

Sometimes, simple fingering changes can alleviate or eliminate a difficult stretch or chord.

Earlier we looked at this chord in Fernando Sor's *Introduction and Variations on a Theme by Mozart, Op. 9* (Example #33):

Example #33:

Introduction and Variations on a Theme by Mozart, Op. 9 (Fernando Sor) Coda/Finale

The stretch can be eliminated using this change of fingering (Example #34):

Example #34:

Introduction and Variations on a Theme by Mozart, Op. 9 (Fernando Sor) Coda/Finale
Alternate fingering:

In another example, earlier we examined measures #3 and #4 of Antonio Lauro's *Vals Venezolano No. 4* (Example #35):

Example #35:

Vals Venezolano No. 4 (Antonio Lauro) measures #1-4

1 2 3 4

VIII -----

0 2 8 8 10 3 0 2 7 0 1 0

To play the passage with the original fingering, the wrist must be arched and the hand rotated away from the neck, which can be uncomfortable.

In cases like this, always look for an alternative fingering. In this case, those who can easily execute partial bars would be much better off using this fingering (Example #36):

Example #36:

Vals Venezolano No. 4 (Antonio Lauro) measures #1-4

Alternative fingering for measures #18-19:

16 17 18 19

VIII -----

I ④⑤⑥ only

0 2 8 8 10 3 0 2 7 0 1 0

11. Alter the Music

Changing the notes of a difficult stretch or nasty chord can be an excellent option in transcriptions, i.e. music written for other instruments and arranged for the guitar.

For example, let's look again at the nasty chord in measure #37 of *Leyenda* or *Asturias* by Isaac Albéniz (Example #37):

Example #37:

Leyenda (Asturias) (Isaac Albéniz) measure #37

The image shows a musical score for measure 37 of *Leyenda (Asturias)* by Isaac Albéniz. The score is written for guitar, with a treble clef and a 3/4 time signature. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The measure is labeled '37' and 'VIII'. A red box highlights a difficult chord in the first measure, which is a complex triad with notes G4, B4, and D5. The chord is marked with a '3' above it, indicating a triplet. The guitar tablature below the staff shows the fret numbers for each string: 12, 8, 9, 10, 8. The tablature also includes a '3' above the first measure, indicating a triplet. The score continues with a series of eighth notes and triplets, ending with a measure marked with a '5' above it.

Guitarist John Williams (and others) choose instead to voice the chord as shown in Example #38, with additional changes to the arpeggio that follows:

Example #38:

Leyenda (Asturias) (Isaac Albéniz) measure #37

John Williams' version:

2 is guide finger

37

p i m p i m

TAB 3/4

12 11 12 10 10 0

8 7 8 8 8 0

10 9 10 10 0 0

Or, same chord but different fingering for the arpeggio:

Keep 3 down Squeeze 4 behind 3. It's a tight squeeze! Keep 3 down

37

p i m p i m

or a or a

TAB 3/4

12 11 12 10 10 0

12 12 12 12 12 0

10 12 12 9 10 10

Andrés Segovia used a very different voicing (Example #39):

Example #39:

Leyenda (Asturias) (Isaac Albéniz) measure #37

Andrés Segovia's version:

2 is guide finger

p i m p i m

37

TAB 3/4

0 1 8 0 8 0 8 0 8 0 3 0

10 7 9 10 0

Watch me demonstrate these solutions in Video #21:



Tech Tip Difficult Stretches Video #21: Leyenda (Albeniz) Altering the Notes

In transcriptions and arrangements, usually you will find you have a lot of latitude on note choices to make the music playable on the guitar.

But what about music written for the guitar? Some guitarists might cringe at the idea of changing the notes in a piece originally written for the guitar.

In measure #51 of Fernando Sor's *Study No. 19* (as numbered by Segovia) *Op. 29, No. 13*, we have this nasty chord (Example #40):

Example #40

Study No. 19 (as numbered by Segovia) *Op. 29, No. 13* (Fernando Sor) measures #50-52

The image shows a musical score for measures 50, 51, and 52 of Fernando Sor's *Study No. 19*, Op. 29, No. 13. The score is written for guitar, with a treble staff and a bass staff. The time signature is 2/4. Measure 51 is highlighted with a red box, indicating a complex chord. The score includes fingerings (1, 2, 3, 4, 5) and a '6' (sixteenth notes) marking. A 'III' (triple) marking is also present. The bass staff shows a sharp sign on the first note of measure 51.

A solution is to transpose the 6th-string F# up an octave placing it on the 4th string (Example #41):

Example #41:

Study No. 19 (as numbered by Segovia) *Op. 29, No. 13* (Fernando Sor) measures #50-52

F#'s in measure #53 transposed up one octave:

The jump in the bass line from the 6th-string G in measure #50 up to the 4th-string F# and then back to the low G in measure #52 could be considered jarring, but I consider this a fairly benign alteration since the harmony/voicing is not changed.

In measure #28 of Antonio Lauro's *Vals Venezolano No. 3* we have a very difficult stretch (Example #42):

Example #42:

Vals Venezolano No. 3 (Antonio Lauro) measures #27-29

Some very fine guitarists let go of the low G to reach the high C which of course results in severely chopping off the low G making it barely an 8th note.

A solution I came up with for my students is to change the written low G to an open 6th-string E (Example #43):

Example #43:

Vals Venezolano No. 3 (Antonio Lauro) measures #27-29

Altered bass note:

The image displays a musical score for measures 30, 31, and 32 of 'Vals Venezolano No. 3' by Antonio Lauro. The score is written for guitar, featuring a treble staff and a bass staff. Measure 31 is highlighted with a red box, indicating a change in the bass note from G to E. The bass staff includes fret numbers and a 3/4 time signature. The treble staff shows various musical notations, including notes, rests, and accidentals.

Some may take exception to changing the note. However, it does not change the harmony, only the inversion (the inversion is determined by what note is on the bottom of a chord). It is still an E minor chord. I personally prefer the low G as written, but only if it is held its full value of two beats. I think the low E sounds much better than a chopped off low G.

Sometimes, it is necessary to consider altering notes even in the music of J.S. Bach. Let's look again at his *Prelude in Dm* BWV 999, this time at measure #15 (Example #44):

Example #44:

Prelude in Dm, BWV 999 (J.S. Bach) measures #14-17

The image displays a musical score for measures 14 through 17 of the *Prelude in Dm*, BWV 999 by J.S. Bach, specifically for guitar. The score is written in 3/4 time and D minor. It consists of a treble clef staff and a guitar-specific staff showing fret numbers. Measure 15 is highlighted with a red box, and a note is labeled 'Bar with 4th finger at 5th fret'. The score is divided into four measures, with measure numbers 14, 15, 16, and 17 indicated at the beginning of each measure.

Measure 14: Treble staff starts with a half note G4 (fret 2), followed by a quarter note A4 (fret 3), a quarter note B4 (fret 4), and a half note C5 (fret 5). The guitar staff shows fret numbers: 0, 2, 1, 0, 1, 2, 1, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2.

Measure 15: Treble staff starts with a half note D5 (fret 7), followed by a quarter note E5 (fret 8), a quarter note F5 (fret 9), and a half note G5 (fret 10). The guitar staff shows fret numbers: 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 2, 1, 1, 1, 1.

Measure 16: Treble staff starts with a half note A5 (fret 12), followed by a quarter note B5 (fret 13), a quarter note C6 (fret 14), and a half note D6 (fret 15). The guitar staff shows fret numbers: 5, 6, 6, 6, 6, 6, 6, 4, 4, 4, 4, 4.

Measure 17: Treble staff starts with a half note E6 (fret 17), followed by a quarter note F6 (fret 18), a quarter note G6 (fret 19), and a half note A6 (fret 20). The guitar staff shows fret numbers: 4, 3, 4, 3, 4, 3, 4, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2.

The Fmaj7 chord in measure #15 is very difficult to play for many players. Some guitarists must chop the low F off as a 16th note in order to hold the 4th-finger bar at the 5th fret. Another solution is to transpose the low F up an octave (Example #45):

Example #45:

Prelude in Dm, BWV 999 (J.S. Bach) measures #14-17

Altered version. Low F in measure #15 transposed up one octave:

The image displays a musical score for measures 14 through 17 of the Prelude in Dm, BWV 999 by J.S. Bach. The score is written for guitar, featuring a treble clef and a 3/4 time signature. Measures 14 and 15 are shown on a single system, while measures 16 and 17 are on a separate system below. A red box highlights measure 15, with a red 'V' above it and the text 'F transposed up one octave' in red. The guitar part is indicated by 'T' (Treble) and 'B' (Bass) on the left. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5. In measure 15, the low F is transposed up one octave, allowing the 4th finger to hold a bar at the 5th fret. The bass line in measure 15 shows a low F (octave 2) and a G (octave 2) in the next measure. The treble line in measure 15 shows a G (octave 3) and an A (octave 3) in the next measure. The bass line in measure 16 shows a G (octave 2) and an A (octave 2) in the next measure. The treble line in measure 16 shows a G (octave 3) and an A (octave 3) in the next measure. The bass line in measure 17 shows a G (octave 2) and an A (octave 2) in the next measure. The treble line in measure 17 shows a G (octave 3) and an A (octave 3) in the next measure.

Some might consider this sacrilege. For others, it enables one to hold the F for a full beat or even all the way through the measure if desired, without changing the harmony.

For one more example, let's revisit the difficult stretch at the beginning of *Afro-Cuban Lullaby*. For some, it is very difficult to produce a clear-sounding chord in measure#5 (Example #46):

Example #46:

Afro-Cuban Lullaby (arr. Jack Marshall and Christopher Parkening) measures #4-5

The musical score for Example #46 shows measures 4 and 5 of *Afro-Cuban Lullaby*. The score is in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). Measure 4 contains a complex chord with notes on the 4th, 3rd, 2nd, and 1st strings. Measure 5 is highlighted with a red box and shows a similar complex chord. The guitar tablature below the staff shows fingerings for each note.

A simple solution is to delete one note. Delete the 2nd-string D on beat #2. This allows one to play the rest of the accompaniment notes as open strings (Example #47):

Example #47:

Afro-Cuban Lullaby (arr. Jack Marshall and Christopher Parkening) measures #4-5

Altered chord:

The musical score for Example #47 shows measures 4 and 5 of *Afro-Cuban Lullaby*. The score is in 4/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). Measure 4 contains a complex chord with notes on the 4th, 3rd, 2nd, and 1st strings. Measure 5 is highlighted with a red box and shows a similar complex chord. The guitar tablature below the staff shows fingerings for each note.

Yes, it is a noticeable change. But, why struggle to play the original version if all the notes sound clearly on only one out of ten attempts? I would rather go with the sure thing. Play the altered version where success is probable on ten out of ten attempts!

My philosophy is to use every technique possible to play a passage as written. But if it is not working, if the success rate is poor, it is time to alter the music to make it playable. Life is too short to keep hoping or thinking, "If I just keep working on it a few more months, I'll get it." If that is what you are thinking, you are in denial. Admit that it is not working, and change the music. Then, you will experience success and you can move on.

Summary

If you have experienced problems with difficult stretches and chords for months or years, a shorter-scale or better-adjusted guitar may be an answer.

When encountering a difficult stretch or nasty chord, test out each of the eleven techniques I covered in this article. You might be able to use more than one technique at the same time. To recap:

1. Place the Fingers in a Different Order
2. Lean the Fingers Left or Right, often with a Change of the Position of the Elbow
3. Change the Position of the Hand and/or Wrist
4. Change the Position of the Thumb
5. Allow the 1st Finger Tip Joint to Hyperextend on Half Bars and Partial Bars
6. Push a String Out of the Way
7. Change the Position of the Guitar and/or Body
8. Use a Bar or Change the Number of Strings that You Bar
9. Use a Capo
10. Change the Fingerings
11. Alter the Music

Remember, do not over-practice stretches and difficult chords.