

TAKE YOUR PICK

Whilst pondering and researching the ups and downs and ins and outs of guitar pickin', up surfaced these comments from Robert Fripp in an old GUITAR PLAYER magazine (Miller Freeman Publications) feature written by Jas Obrecht from Sept. of '79:

"Little attention is paid to either the pick or picking... the act of picking is, in general, a shambles."

By coincidence, a recent collaboration onstage and in the studio with Steve Morse, gave ample proof of a guitar player who, among many other musical, artistic, and technical talents, can also quite easily ***pick your brains out***, pick them right back up off the floor, and then carefully picking his spot, plunk 'em right back into your head pretty well exactly where he wants.

Anyway, this combination of circumstances sends us on the fly to the guitar reference library to re-examine picking, this most basic component of guitar playing, and to address two questions:

1 Whatever one's style of pick (or "ill-designed plectra," as Mr. Fripp might have it), just how should one hold it?

2 Once you've got a grip on your choice of a little piece of plastic, nylon, stainless steel graphite, agate, coin, washer, or Sharkfin, just what the hell are you going to do with it in order to avoid creating a "shambles"?

Answer to the first question: Get a grip on yourself. Conventional general wisdom says to curve all your fingers in toward the palm and lay the pick on the side of your 1st finger. Then press your thumb down, allowing just the tip of the pick to extend beyond your 1st finger's nail. Don't squeeze. Just relax. Try to let the whole right hand "float" above the

strings as you pick or strum (**Fig. 1**). Try it. If it works for you, great.

But wait. Here, in the reference library, there's an old, dusty manual from Joseph M. Estella and George Roberts, "Guitar Chords Made Easy For Everyone" (Wm. J. Smith Co., Inc.), which contains this statement:

"The little finger should rest on the guard plate of the sound box and the pick held in a slanting position."

Fig. 2



"I hold my pick in two ways; with my thumb and middle finger (Fig. 3) and with my thumb, index and middle (the same as Morse in Fig. 2). Remember that most players don't pick the way I do, so what works for me might not work for you."

Hmmm again. Perhaps we should go back to the erudite teacher (and critic) of guitar craft, Robert Fripp, for another very telling comment:

"My position is an awkward one. The only authority I can present for my approach to the right hand is my own."

Fig. 1



Fig. 3



Technique as Idiosyncrasy

Well, there you have it, then. We can definitely draw a conclusion from these observations. “The act of picking” only appears to be a shambles because it is a physical act of individual personal expression, and therefore will not submit to consensus or conform to any specific general standard. As we are all students of our art and craft, we must continue to experiment with our techniques and challenge conventional accepted wisdom when we feel it does not fulfill our personal needs. So, if you’re unhappy or unsure of your choice of pick, and the way you’re using it, try lots of different types of picks, and give them all a conscientious effort, with varied technical approaches. Eventually you should find or develop something that suits you. Perhaps you’ll discover, as I did, a simple eloquent truth in this statement of Al Hendrickson:

*“I have always used
DIFFERENT PICKS
for different
PURPOSES
and
SOUNDS.”*

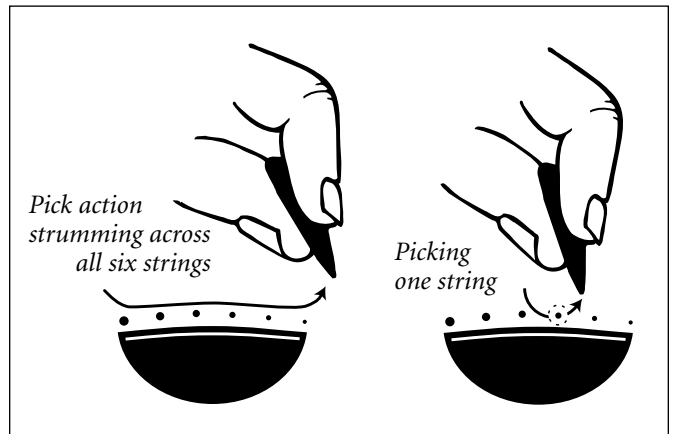


In answer to the question of what to do with it once you’ve got a grip: get it goin’, out of the shambles, on the edge of a diagonal inside a circle. Like Messrs. Van Halen and Fripp, or anyone else who momentarily engages in this line of work (i.e., teacher of technique), one is only really qualified to demonstrate their own way of doing things, with the disclaimer that it is neither right nor wrong, but merely that it seems to work for them most of the time. *A teacher’s suggestions should only form a part of the equation that leads you to self-discovery.*

The Two Basic Pick Strokes

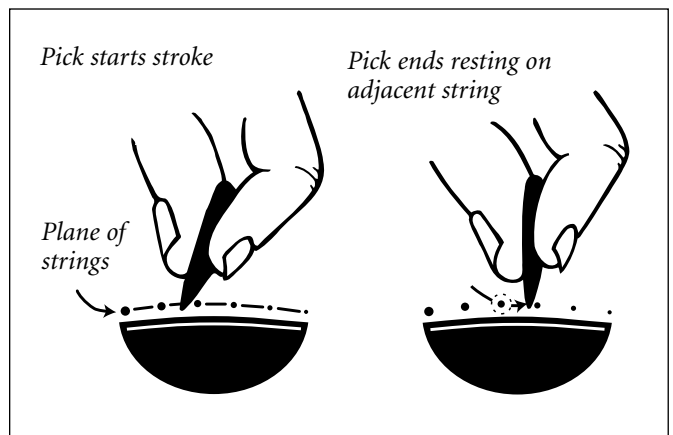
There are two basic types of pick strokes: the free stroke and the rest stroke. The free stroke starts above the string(s), flows across, and lifts away at the end. (see diagram - Fig. 9)

Fig. 9 *Free Stroke*



The rest stroke starts inside the plane of the strings, and ends “resting” against an adjacent string. (see diagram - Fig. 10)

Fig. 10 *Rest Stroke*



Continued

Flat Pick Techniques

CIRCLE PICKING

Much early and often seemingly aimless experimentations with a flat-pick for the purposes of executing single-note licks and lines jelled in the fall of '81 through a series of Guitar Player magazine columns by Jimmy Stewart:

"Oscillated picking, which is also known as circle picking, uses a small circular movement produced by the thumb and index finger. The use of oscillated picking can give you a variation in sound because of the changing angle of the pick as it strikes the string; by angling your pick in different directions, you can achieve rounder sounds. It also enables you to keep the pick 'in the strings' continuously. By using the pressure point between the pick and the index finger, you can also create a lot of tone color."

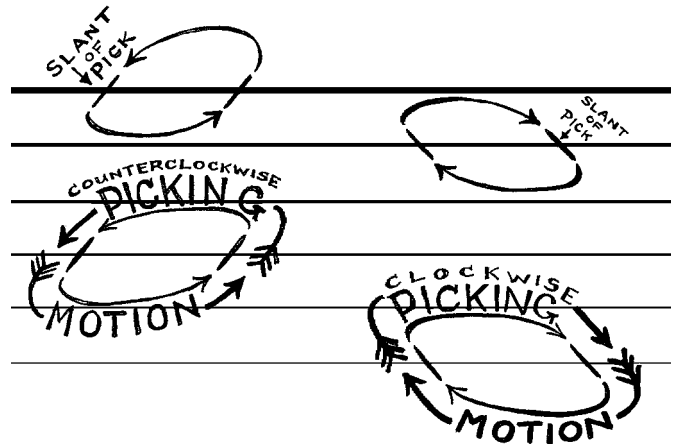
Sept. '81

"The first joint of the thumb is not locking in place as it draws a half-circle from left to right. This changes the angle of the pick, utilizing its blunt edge rather than the tip."

Nov. '81

Jimmy went on to explain his theory that this technique of picking was very similar to handwriting, like drawing little round circles in a clockwise motion. This made perfect sense, and helped to explain much of what had been a blind struggle. Still, this only serves as a departure point, and one must continue to modify the technique to personally suit oneself.

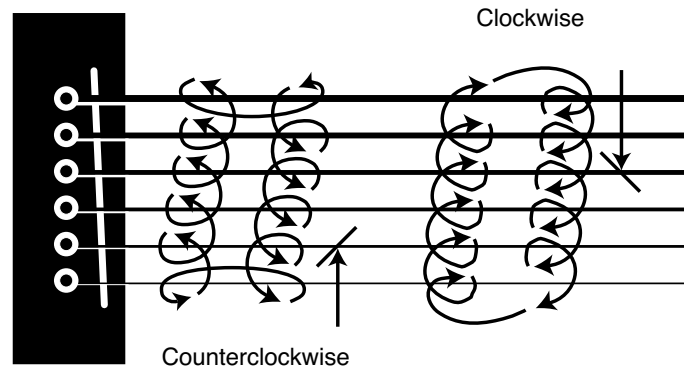
Fig. 4A



VARIATION - #1

For example, Jimmy described a clockwise motion. Perhaps because I'm naturally left-handed (author's note: so is Steve Morse) and therefore brain-reversed to the majority of the population (I can't speak for Steve), I tend to think counterclockwise moving through the strings (Fig. 4A and 4B). Hence, the circular aspect of the technique becomes modified more towards an angled slash of the string.

Fig. 4B



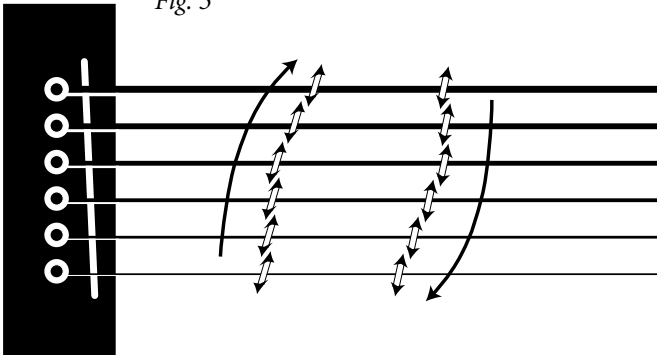
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. TAKE YOUR PICK (Cont'd)

Speaking of angled string slashing, here's a quote from Eric Johnson:

"As you're picking down, instead of going from top to bottom, try to pick at an angle so that you go diagonally from the left horn of the guitar down to the control knobs. On the way back up, do the opposite diagonal. If you were to look at someone doing that real fast, it would be a circular technique." (Fig. 5). Also, "I don't use the pointy end as much as the side of the pick to brush the note."

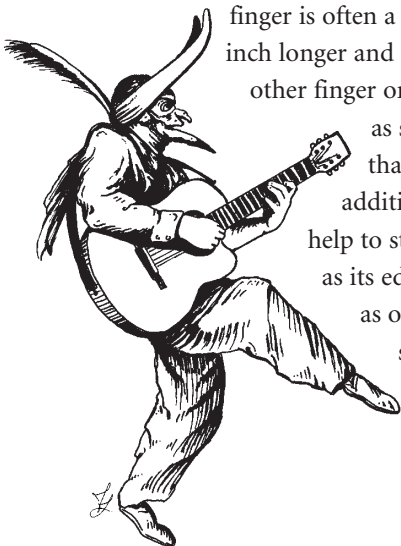
Fig. 5



Bingo! Confirmation from a modern master that this, indeed, is no sham. Take note, readers, that **Figures 4 and 5** are greatly exaggerated for the sake of clarity. The pick and hand motion should actually be minimal and confined.

Now, as for this thing where Steve and Eddie hold the pick between the index/middle and the thumb:

that also makes perfect sense. After all, the middle finger is often a good three-quarters of an inch longer and more warped than any other finger on the hand. And it's just as strong, if not stronger, than the index. Also, an additional finger really does help to stabilize and lock the pick as its edge slices across the string, as opposed to the tip snapping flat through it.



VARIATION #2

Fig. 6

However, most players' technical evolution leads them away from this technique. In the interest of being relaxed and having right-hand balance, some start to pick with the 2nd finger extended out of the way, as opposed to on the pick or curled into the palm (Fig. 6).



Quite often, for intense passages, the ulnar (inner, little finger) side of the hand rests firmly on the bridge, JUST behind the strings, and the 4th finger anchors against the face of the guitar below the strings. Frequently the 3rd finger curls around under the 1st string, and then sometimes the whole right hand rests against and/or slightly off and IN FRONT of the bridge to create a damping effect on strings that are being picked. This "damps" (dulls and cuts) any sustain from the notes produced, and mutes all the rest of the strings at the same time.

Fig. 7

Whereas common conventional descriptions of right-hand pick technique tell us to lay the pick on the side of the first finger, some prefer to rotate the right hand position until the nail of the first finger is angled the way that the pick is in Fig. 5. Then they lay the pick on the thumb side of the distal phalange of the index finger, wedging the pick up into the crease behind the knuckle of the distal and middle phalange (Fig. 7). This facilitates the whole idea of thumb pressure squeezing or relaxing the grip on the pick for variations in tone color.



So, in conclusion, if you were to ask which way one avoids creating a shambles, there's plenty of ready evidence to suggest that you could just about take your pick, and that brings us just about full circle, so let's move on. ●