

Travis Picking

Named after Merle Travis, **Travis picking** was derived from an instrumental style of playing the guitar that was first developed by southern African-American musicians around the turn of the century. Early innovators of the style include Mississippi John Hurt, Blind Blake, Robert Johnson, Mance Lipscomb and Reverend Gary Davis. Merle Travis's exposure on the radio (1930) and as a studio session man in

Hollywood after World War II did much to guide and influence guitarists such as Chet Atkins and Jerry Reed. The primary characteristics of Travis picking are a steady bass pattern played by the thumb and syncopated patterns played with the fingers. Merle called his playing "thumb style." Travis picking is both an accompaniment style and a solo guitar style.

PLAYING POSITION

The right forearm should be placed on the edge of the guitar just above the bridge. The wrist is slightly arched and the fingers are curved. Plant the thumb on the 4th string, the index finger on the 2nd string and the middle finger on the 1st string. The thumb should extend beyond the fingers toward the soundhole. Keep the fingers *bunched* together, fig. 1 and 2.

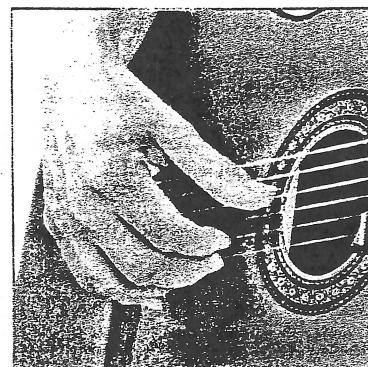


fig. 1 Hand position

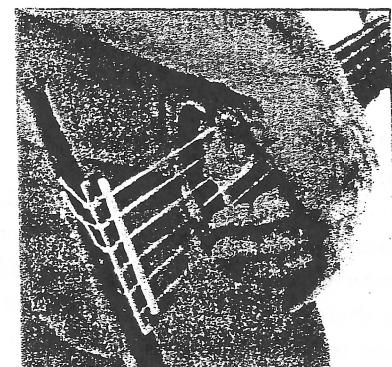


fig. 2 Hand position from underneath

GROOVE THE BASS

While holding an open position D chord, pluck the root of the chord (4th string) with the thumb (*p*) on every downbeat, exercise 64. Use free strokes. Next, practice alternating the thumb between the 4th and 3rd strings, exercise 65.

64

Track 42.1

D

65

Track 42.2

D

ADD THE FINGERS

First, add the index finger to the pattern. Play the 2nd string with the index finger on beat 2*an*. It helps to bring out the syncopation if you stress or accent (>) the upbeat, exercise 66. Next, add the middle finger to the pattern on beat 3*an* and you have a **basic Travis picking pattern**, exercise 67.

66

Track 42.3

D i

67

Track 42.4

D i m

Be patient. It takes some time and practice before this picking pattern becomes routine. The bass notes are the essence of this accompaniment pattern. The repeating bass notes provide the distinctive sound of the Travis picking

patterns. Suggestions for practice include eliminating the *alternate* thumb pattern and staying on the 4th string, practicing the pattern on open strings, and tapping the pattern on the back of the guitar.

The basic Travis picking pattern works on any open string chord. Simply alternate the thumb between the root of the chord and the 3rd string. Try playing the pattern on the following chords.

68

69

70

ADD THE PINCH TECHNIQUE (middle finger & thumb)

Pluck the 1st string with the middle finger as the thumb plucks the root of the chord on beat 1. Use *free strokes* with both the thumb and middle finger. Keep the thumb rigid and extended toward the soundhole in order to avoid a collision course with the middle finger.

71

To play the following exercises, plant the index finger on the 3rd string, the middle finger on the 2nd string and the thumb on the 5th string. The thumb alternates between the 5th and 4th strings.

Track 43.1

72

Track 43.2

73

Here are a few suggested songs that work well with the Travis picking patterns: *Take Me Home Country Roads*, *Leaving on a Jet Plane*, *For the Good Times*, *Me and Bobby McGee*, *Dust in the Wind*, *Don't Think Twice*, *Pack Up Your Sorrows*, *Alice's Restaurant* and *Hesitation Blues*.