



Travis Picking

This is an introductory lesson into the classic acoustic guitar technique of Travis picking, which was made famous by the legendary country guitar picker Merle Travis.

Chet Atkins took it and added to it, then Tommy Emmanuel added more to it after Chet. What makes Travis style different from regular finger-picking is the use of alternating or descending bass patterns played by the thumb, while the fingers play little melodies from the top part of the chord. There are variations to this style that are too numerous to go over here, but I will give you a couple of the basic patterns to get your right hand fingers around.

Many think that because Merle Travis was a country picker this is necessarily all about a country style, but that is far from the truth. You

will hear this technique in all styles of music these days. Some well known songs that use this style of picking include You Were Meant For Me by Jewel, Julia by John Lennon, Dear Prudence by The Beatles and Can't Find My Way Home by Blind Faith, which also uses the descending bassline technique.

There are many other great songs that use the Travis picking style, which is one of the reasons I suggest you learn it, so that when the opportunity arises you will be ready.

Now to the technique itself. It is not easy and will require a bit of practice to get used to, especially if you are not used to finger-picking. You will see the letters p, i, m, a, underneath some of the notes. These indicate the picking hand fingers and are notated by 'p' meaning

thumb, 'i' meaning index finger, 'm', middle finger, and 'a' ring finger. Keep your eye on the correct fingering as it will make a big difference to how the songs will sound when you do get to apply this technique.

In Exercise 1, the basic Travis style, you just hold down a C chord all the way through the first two bars, and then hold down a G chord for the next two bars. You keep repeating this pattern to give the picking hand fingers the required practice to move onto more complicated patterns. Let all the notes ring into each other. Obviously the most difficult part is the picking hand, so start off practising this very slow at first. The picking hand fingering in bar 1 is the same throughout the exercise.

Exercise 2, is a Travis picking variation where the bass on strings 5 and 6 are alternating, creating a bass line. If you make the bass line prominent it will give the listener the impression that a bass player is accompanying you. This exercise takes a bit more getting used to than Ex. 1 so take it easy to begin. Again the picking hand fingering in bar 1 is the same throughout the exercise.

Exercise 3 is a common chord progression with another Travis type variation that is very common in modern finger-picked songs. Travis picking can be easy enough when the chords aren't changing very quickly, but in this one you get a chord change in every bar, making it a bit tougher than the previous two exercises. You might need to begin this one extra slow.

Once you have this style of picking under your fingers you will find there are many other styles you can play with a good finger-picking technique. Also, if you can double on both electric and acoustic guitar styles with ease you will definitely be in more demand as a guitar player. Have fun with this and see you online or in the next edition of N.Z.M.

Kevin Downing is a professional guitarist, teacher and author. His contact details, along with many other articles and freebies, are on his website at www.guitar.co.nz

Ex 1. C G

m p p i p m p i
let ring throughout
m p p i p m p i

Ex 2. C G

m p p i p a p i
let ring throughout
m p p i p a p i

Ex 3. G Em C D7