

# Pickin'

## Objective

Your objective for this module is to develop your fingerpicking skills. If you've never played fingerstyle before it's likely to feel a little clumsy at first, like the first time you rode a bike.

These skills can only be learned one step at a time. This module builds those skills in sequence so that you are at the same time reinforcing everything you've already learned and preparing for the next challenge. You'll start by getting your thumb to play solid downbeats on the bass string, with your hand relaxed and in a good position. From there we move on to exercises for the fingers and then the thumb and fingers together. More advanced combinations are examined only after these basic skills are bedded down, all the while gradually building on skills that are solid. The alternative, rushing through and consolidating unhelpful techniques, should not appeal to anyone.

## Resources

Throughout this module you'll need

- The Pickin' video
- The Skills Map
- The web site
- This worksheet, your guitar, slide etc.

## The Skills Map

1. Stage I - Time. The first and most important thing is to play a steady beat with your thumb.
2. Stage II - Pickin'. Can you pick the top string with your fingers using a few different picking patterns?
3. Stage III - More Pickin'. Can you play picking patterns that involve the thumb and fingers?
4. Stage IV - Independent Thumb - Can you play more advanced picking patterns in which the thumb and fingers play different rhythms?

## Assessments

There's no exam at the end of this, the only assessment that matters is how you feel about your playing and whether you're enjoying yourself. You are however embarking on this journey essentially by yourself, you are both teacher and student, so you need to be able to decide when to move on and when to consolidate. Most activities contain an assessment task with specific guidelines to help you gauge your progress. If you feel that you've met the criteria for these tasks then move on.

Remember too that the activities in this module are progressive. You will get the most benefit from each of them if you have nailed the one before it. If you find that a particular task is still beyond you simply go back to the previous one, spend some time consolidating those skills and then move on. Sometimes it just takes time.

## How to use this worksheet

Your starter pack contains a number of related resources, including this worksheet. The layout of the worksheets will help you connect the various resources while remaining focused on the task at hand.

### Learning Tasks

These get you involved in your learning, they are activities that build the skills you need to play your instrument. They will often refer to a section of the web site such as a movie.

- ▶ *Watch the section of the video, from about 6:00, that demonstrates how to pick with your thumb. Don't be too concerned about the palm muting for now but try to get your hand as close to the position in the video as you can.*
- ▶ *Repeat the exercise that you just did in the listening task but this time you'll be playing the bass string on your guitar with your thumb instead of tapping your foot.*

### Get this:

These worksheets focus on the practical side of making music. Sometimes however you'll need to kick your brain into a higher gear and investigate how some of the theory fits in as well. Sometimes it's impossible to separate the two so there are plenty of resources on the site to help you out. When they come together you'll see one of these:

**Don't make excuses for having a slide on your finger!**

### Practice Tips:

When you are practicing you don't want to be thinking too much so the essentials are boiled down in the Practice Tips so you can focus on one thing at a time. They look like this:

**Don't make excuses for having a slide on your finger!**

### Self-Assessment

So that you know how you're traveling and when you should move to the next task these sections give you specific guidelines to gauge your progress. They look like this:

**Don't make excuses for having a slide on your finger!**

## Stage 1 - Time

The most important skill you can have as a musician is the ability to play in time. If you are in time you will sound musical, no matter how simple your playing is, if you're not you'll sound like a mess, guaranteed. The effort you make now to train yourself to play in time will pay enormous dividends down the track.

### LISTENING TASK

- ▶ *Find a familiar piece of music, one that is not too fast or too slow. Listen closely and as you do identify the beat, tap your foot along with it.*
- ▶ *Stop the music but keep your foot tapping (or hands clapping or whatever other movement you prefer).*
- ▶ *After 20 seconds or so and with your foot still tapping start the music again. Were you able to keep time when the song had stopped? If you could then do it again to make sure it wasn't a fluke.*
- ▶ *If you can do it twice then increase the time before you bring the song back in. If your time got faster or slower then try again with a shorter break.*
- ▶ *Record how long you were able to keep time without the music. If you can manage for a full minute then you've completed the first listening task.*

### PERFORMANCE TASK 1.1

- ▶ *The video in The Pickin module, from about 6:00, demonstrates how to pick with your thumb, as does that in lesson 1 on the site. Don't be too concerned about the palm muting for now but try to get your hand as close to the position in the video as you can.*
- ▶ *Repeat the exercise that you just did in the listening task but this time you'll be playing the bass string on your guitar with your thumb instead of tapping your foot.*

### SELF ASSESSMENT

**Record how long you were able to keep time without the music. If you can manage for a full minute then you've completed the first performance task and can move on to Stage 2.**

Don't think that now you can play in time and your work here is done, far from it. You know that you can do it but you need to reinforce this important skill every time you play so that it becomes automatic. Whatever you play from now on make sure that you can do it in time!!!!

## Stage 2 - Pickin'

So while your thumb is keeping a steady time your fingers will be picking out more complex rhythms on the top and middle strings. In order to do this you need to gain some dexterity in the index and middle fingers of your picking hand. Again we'll start with simple exercises and slowly work up to more complex ones.

### PRACTICE TIPS

1. Practice one new movement at a time.
2. Start slowly, stay relaxed and repeat no more than 10 times before pausing for another go. Relaxed repetition is the key.

### PERFORMANCE TASK 2.1

- ▶ *The Pickin video deals with introductory picking from about 7:45 in.*
- ▶ *Repeat the Performance Task from Stage 1 so that your hand is in the correct position.*
- ▶ *As demonstrated in the video start by picking the top string with your index finger and staying in time playing just the one note.*
- ▶ *When you feel comfortable with that do the same thing with your middle finger. This will naturally feel less comfortable than your index finger because you have less fine motor control over the middle and ring fingers. Remember - relaxed repetition.*
- ▶ *Repeat the assessment stage of the previous Performance Task this time using your index and middle fingers. About 30 seconds for each one will be enough for you to move on.*

### SELF ASSESSMENT

**In the same way that you did in Stage 1 make sure that you can play with each finger in time for at least 30 seconds. If it helps to use a metronome or a moderate piece of music then go to town. Once you've done this you can move on to the next exercise in Stage 2.**

## Stage 2 - Continued

In the next part of Stage 2 you'll learn to combine the index and middle fingers on your right hand. Your Performance Task involves using both fingers together.

### PRACTICE TIPS

- 1. Start slowly and don't increase your tempo until you feel comfortable to do so. Don't push it, if you practice playing with tension then that's what you'll learn.**
- 2. You'll rarely find that you can push your tempo too far in one practice session. You build these skills slowly over time.**
- 3. The best way to build these fine motor skills is to practice short amounts every day, remember - relaxed repetitions.**

### PERFORMANCE TASK 2.2

- ▶ *The video demonstrate alternating finger-picking from about 9:20.*
- ▶ *Repeat the earlier Performance Task to warm up and so that your hand is in the correct position.*
- ▶ *As demonstrated in the video pick your top string by alternating between your index and middle fingers.*
- ▶ *This will be more challenging again than previous tasks so it's important to start slowly and gradually pick up the tempo as your picking improves.*

### SELF ASSESSMENT

**You'll be familiar with your assessment strategies by now. See if you can do this one for 30 seconds at a moderate tempo and in time. When you're ready you can move on to Stage 3.**

**This will be an exercise that you can return to later on to increase your speed and dexterity.**

## Palm Muting

Now might be a good time to make a start on palm muting. It's a tricky technique and you'll get a lot more help from the video than reading instructions here.

Just a few tips to remember though

- 1. Make sure that you are comfortable with all of the exercises up to Stage 2. Until then you'll have your hands full just getting used to picking.**
- 2. Make sure that as you experiment with different levels of muting that your hand is still in position and you can still do the basic exercises in Stages 1 and 2,**
- 3. Take it easy on yourself, don't expect to get it right too quickly and don't let it stop you moving on with further picking exercises. It'll come to you slowly if you are aware of the basic technique and try and apply it where ever you can.**

## SELF ASSESSMENT

**You should be able to pick with your thumb and fingers without moving your hand, and have the heel of your palm somewhere near the bridge. Your perfect position will be a way off yet but the closer you can get now the quicker you'll find it down the track.**

Palm muting is a skill that will creep up on you, the main thing for now is that your hand is in a good position and that you can play smoothly without moving your picking hand around.

## Stage 3 - More Pickin'

Now that you can play the bass notes with your thumb and the top notes with both of your fingers it's time to get them all dancing together. Fingerpicking can feel clumsy at first but with practice it becomes second nature.

### PERFORMANCE TASK 3.1

- ▶ *You'll find this exercise about 10:00 into the Pickin video.*
- ▶ *Repeat the Performance Tasks from Stage 1 and 2 as a warm up.*
- ▶ *Again position your hand as close as possible to the one demonstrated in the video. If the palm muting is proving difficult, and I expect it will be, just leave it for now.*
- ▶ *Play the bass string with your thumb and the top string with your index finger and alternate between the two. In the video I'm playing them with a swing feel (can't help myself) but you can play them anyway you like as long as you're in time.*
- ▶ *Next do the same thing with your thumb and middle finger. Remember again that this middle finger will naturally be less comfortable - relaxed repetition.*

### SELF ASSESSMENT

**You'll be familiar enough with the self assessment tasks now and probably won't need a song to play along with. Feel free to use a metronome if it helps.**

### PERFORMANCE TASK 3.2

- ▶ *This pattern is more complex again and involves the thumb and both fingers*
- ▶ *Play the bass string with your thumb and the top string with your index finger; then the bass string again with thumb and the top string this time with your middle finger. Repeat this pattern of four notes, again go to the video (11:30) for clarification if necessary.*

### SELF ASSESSMENT

**Once you can play all of these patterns comfortably and at a reasonable tempo for 30 seconds or so then move on. You will inevitably return to refine them further.**

## Stage 3 - Continued

These exercises will consolidate the strong foundation skills that you've learned already.

### PERFORMANCE TASK 3.3

- ▶ *The next exercise, at about 12:00 in the video is a variation on the previous one in which you now play the middle string with your first finger*
- ▶ *Repeat the Performance Tasks from Stages 2 and 3 as a warm up.*
- ▶ *Play the bass string with your thumb followed by the middle string with your index finger, then the bass string again with your thumb and finally the top string, this time with your middle finger.*
- ▶ *Again you'll repeat this four note pattern until it becomes comfortable and you can easily locate all of the strings with your picking hand without needing to look at them.*

### SELF ASSESSMENT

**Repeat all of the exercises from Stage 3 at a constant steady tempo, without mistakes for at least 30 seconds and you're ready for Stage 4 - The Independent Thumb.**

## Stage 4 - Simultaneous Picking

Up until now you've been playing patterns in which the thumb and fingers work together. Now it is time to separate them so that you are effectively playing two separate instruments at the same time. Your thumb takes the role of a bass instrument and your fingers play melody lines.

The trickiest part about this is training your thumb and fingers to pick at the same time. Up until now you've only been picking one string at a time, when the thumb and fingers are independent you may want to play them both on the same note occasionally, you don't want your melody to always rely on where the bass note is. The exercises here focus on your learning to play the thumb and fingers together as well as separately.

### PERFORMANCE TASK 4.1

- ▶ *The next exercise, at about 13:30 shows you how to pick with the thumb and finger together. Follow the instructions there and again use relaxed repetition to find a comfortable way to pick them both together.*
- ▶ *Start by picking with the thumb and first finger together. Play a regular rhythm in time, nice and slow, gradually getting faster as you feel more comfortable with it.*
- ▶ *Then you can pick with the thumb and second finger together. Again with a regular rhythm and slowly increasing the tempo.*

### SELF ASSESSMENT

**Pick two notes together and then pick them alternately, without changing your hand position and while staying in time, and you're ready to move on.**

### HAVE A PLAY

Have a play and try to combine the alternate picking that you've learned up until now with this new simultaneous picking. Blues solo 2 in the Song Book is a good place to start.

## Stage 4 - continued - The Independent Thumb

### PERFORMANCE TASK 4.2

- ▶ *The next exercise combines simultaneous and alternate picking. Follow the instructions at about 13:30 on the video and again use relaxed repetition to find a comfortable way to pick them both together.*
- ▶ *Play the bass string with your thumb together with the top string with your index finger, and then play the top string with your middle finger only. Check the video, as always a picture tells a thousand words.*
- ▶ *Finally repeat the last exercise swapping the fingers over: thumb and middle finger together this time alternating with the index finger by itself.*

### SELF ASSESSMENT

**If you can play this exercise, even at a slow tempo, with fluidity and in time then you've certainly come a long way. It represents a solid command of your technique and a strong foundation for your playing.**

### HAVE A PLAY

Have a play and see if you squeeze any tricks in using your new picking skills.

## Vocabulary

Praesent integer leo orci aliquam, nibh a. Diam nobis eget, erat natoque integer fringilla viverra.

### Fingerstyle guitar

**Definition:** A style of guitar playing characterized by the use of the fingers to pick the strings as opposed to the other common method, the use of a flatpick, sometimes called a pick or a plectrum. Fingerstyle guitar differs from classical guitar in certain technical aspects and that fingerstyle players usually use steel string guitars.

**Context:** The great fingerstyle players include John Renbourne, Leo Kottke, Tommy Emmanuel, Chet Atkins, Mississippi John Hurt, Reverend Gary Davies. See also flatpicking,

### bass

**Definition:** In relation to pitch, notes in the bass are those at the lower end of the range. On a cigar box guitar the bass string is the thickest one, located at the top and usually played with the thumb. Despite the fact that it is on top of the other strings we refer to it as the bottom string because its pitch is at the lower end of the range for that instrument.

**Context:** See also pitch

### tempo

**Definition:** The speed of a piece of music, usually described in beats per minute. To 'pick up the tempo' means to play at a faster speed.

**Context:** See also time, metronome

### swing

**Definition:** A style of playing characterized by a particular rhythmic displacement of notes. It is most common in Jazz but vital to the blues and many types of contemporary music as well. It is dealt with in some detail in the Groovin' module.

**Context:** Listen to Count Basie or Muddy Waters

### metronome

**Definition:** A device used by musicians to help them keep a steady tempo. Traditionally they were mechanical devices with geared clockwork mechanisms that delivered a steady clicking sound. Modern metronomes are often electronic devices, a quick google search will also reveal many software programs that emulate a metronome on your computer.

**Context:** See also time, tempo

### time

**Definition:** In a musical context refers to a musician's ability to maintain a steady tempo in their playing.

**Context:** See also time, metronome

### technique

**Definition:** The way that you approach your instrument physically. Factors such as hand position, how you pick a string, hold the slide, move it into position, manipulate the sound with your hands, are all related to your technique.

**Context:** The importance of technique, and different approaches to technique, is often argued amongst players, my own view is that it is crucial to have a solid technique that works for you. Your approach to your instrument may not work for someone else but that is completely irrelevant. If it allows you to be relaxed as you play and navigate your instrument efficiently then it will allow you to play what you hear in your head and importantly to continue to develop your playing.