

# Fingerpicking The Guitar

a basic guide

## Will Fly



Oreham Common Press



**Fingerpicking The Guitar**  
**A basic guide**  
**By Will Fly**

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## Preface

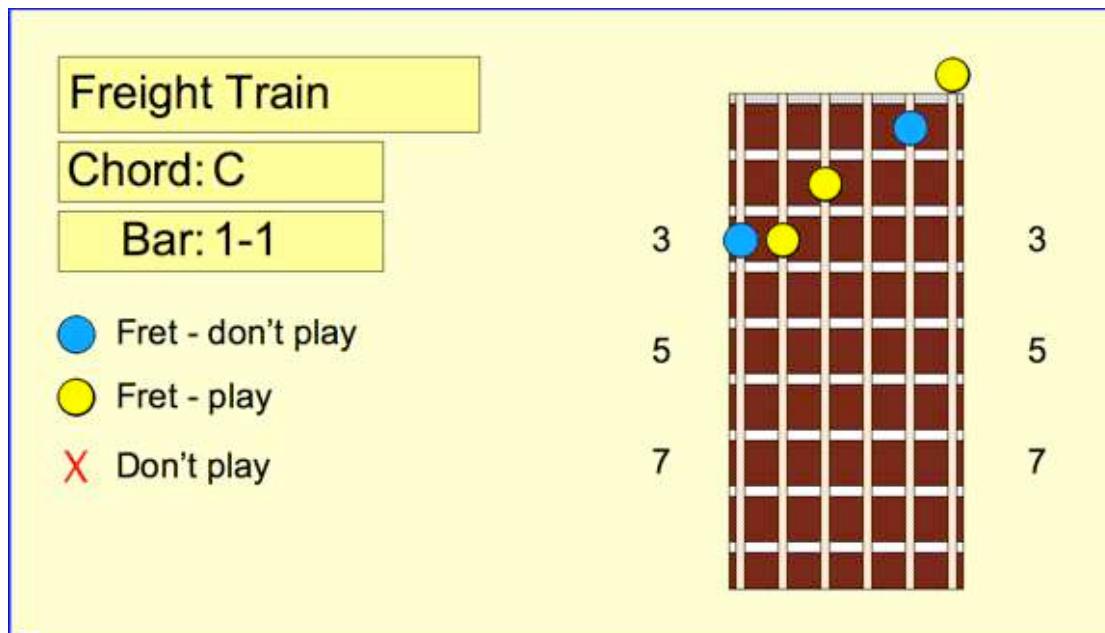
I've been playing a steel strung guitar with both pick and fingers for over 45 years. The purpose of this little book is to pass on to the beginning guitar player some of the fingerpicking techniques I've learned during this time. When I started playing the guitar in 1964, I listened to a wide variety of players with very different styles: to Merle Travis and Django Reinhardt; to Big Bill Broonzy and Segovia; to Hank Marvin and Leadbelly. Every one of these players - and many others – had something to offer to the budding guitarist. Of course, I heard these people on the radio and on record, and never met any of them in the flesh. However, I was also lucky enough to make friends with and play with other, more experienced guitarists in the places in the north-west where I lived. Each of them taught me something in their own way. After a while, like many another before me, I got the itch to perform. While some friends formed bands or joined bands, I was attracted to solo performance and found the world of the folk clubs to be an ideal place where a beginner like me could start to learn the arts of playing and performing to an audience. After moving down to London in 1968, I also joined a band – a jug band, as it happened – and, over the following years, went on from folk, blues and ragtime to play 1920s dance music, jazz, rock'n roll, Memphis soul – and ceilidh music! I still enjoy playing all these types of music in various ways and in various places. And, whatever style I play, I keep the fingers picking away at those steel strings. I hope this book inspires you to do the same.

**Will Fly. 2011**

## Introduction

Diagrams form a major part of this book, so some preliminary explanation of how they look and what they mean is in order here.

Here is a typical diagram showing the fretboard of the guitar:



In this book, the conventions are as follows:

1. The title of the song or part of the song being demonstrated is shown in the box on the top left of the diagram.
2. Below the title box is the chord shape box showing what chord is being fretted.
3. Below the chord box is a box showing the bar and in which beat of the bar the chord is being played.
4. Blue circles indicate notes which are fingered but *not* played; yellow circles indicate notes which are fingered *and* played; a red X at the top of the fretboard means “don’t play this string”.
5. Some diagrams also include bars showing barred and half-barred chords.

Other diagrams contain music and tablature. They look like this:

The image shows a musical score for a six-string guitar. The top part is standard musical notation with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp, and a 4/4 time signature. The bottom part is tablature, showing the strings and frets for each measure. The tablature is as follows:

String	Measure 1 (G)	Measure 2 (Em)	Measure 3 (C)	Measure 4 (D7)
6th String (Low E)	3	0	1	3
5th String (B)	0	3	0	2
4th String (G)	0	0	0	3
3rd String (D)	2	2	2	0
2nd String (A)	3	0	3	2
1st String (E)	2	0	2	0

Below the tablature, the underlying chords are indicated: G, Em, C, and D7.

Notes with the stems pointing down are played with the thumb; notes with the stems pointing upwards are played with the fingers. The musical notation gives a clear indication of the duration of the notes and the tablature numbers show the strings and frets which make the notes sound on the fretboard. Underlying chords to a tune are shown below the tablature staff.

The book does not contain information or instructions on how to hold the guitar or on the playing of basic chord shapes – it assumes that the reader has some knowledge of these things already. However, I do have one piece of advice regarding the little finger of the picking hand. Many fingerpicking guitarists – some very well known ones - rest that finger on the face of the guitar as a kind of anchor. My view on this is that it restricts the movement of the picking hand and puts it into an unnatural position. Start by resting the picking fingers on the strings as described in Chapter 1 and there will be no restriction on the most complex picking.

Most of the examples in the first chapters of the book use a simple C major chord on which to play the fingerpicking patterns, and the patterns themselves utilise the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> strings of the guitar – played by the thumb – and the top 3 strings of the guitar – played by the first three fingers of the second hand. However, Chapter 9 and the chapters following take you into more complex territory, so do make sure that you feel comfortable with the contents of Chapters 1 to 8 before going further.

## Index

Chapter 1: Getting started – alternating thumb & fingers	1
Chapter 2: An arpeggio played up the chord	6
Chapter 3: An arpeggio played down the chord	10
Chapter 4: An arpeggio played up and down the chord	13
Chapter 5: Alternating treble strings – 3 <sup>rd</sup> with 2 <sup>nd</sup> +1 <sup>st</sup>	17
Chapter 7: Travis style picking	20
Chapter 8: Picking different chord shapes	22
Chapter 9: Patterns played over chord sequences (1)	24
Chapter 10: Patterns played over chord sequences (2)	26
Chapter 11: Picking tune no. 1	28
Chapter 12: Picking tune no. 2	31

## Chapter 1: Getting started – alternating thumb and fingers

The first thing that the budding fingerpicking guitarist should get to grips with is feeling comfortable with the picking fingers on the guitar strings. To get started, follow these picking hand instructions:

1. Rest the thumb on the 5<sup>th</sup> (A) string.
2. Rest the index (1<sup>st</sup>) finger on the 3<sup>rd</sup> (G) string
3. Rest the middle (2<sup>nd</sup>) finger on the 2<sup>nd</sup> (B) string
4. Rest the ring (3<sup>rd</sup>) finger on the 1<sup>st</sup> (E) string

Many fingerpicking practice and playing patterns can be kicked off from this basic position. Now, with these fingers resting on the strings, hold down a C chord with the fretting hand. The notes being fretted should be as in Illustration 1 below. (The circles above the nut indicate open strings).

**Exercise**

**Chord: C**

**Bar: 1-1**

● Fret - don't play

● Fret - play

✗ Don't play

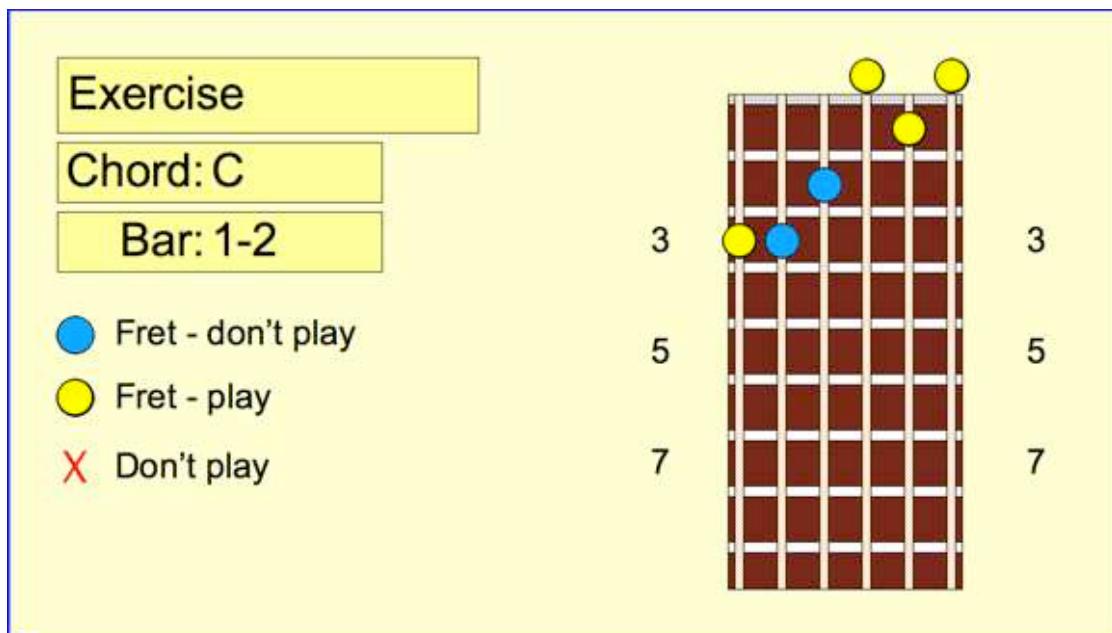
3 3

5 5

7 7

**Illustration 1**

If you now pluck the strings on which your plucking fingers are resting, the yellow notes in the diagram above will be played. Keep your fretting fingers in the same position on the C chord and move the thumb on your plucking hand so that it rests on the 6<sup>th</sup> string. The notes being fretted should look like this:

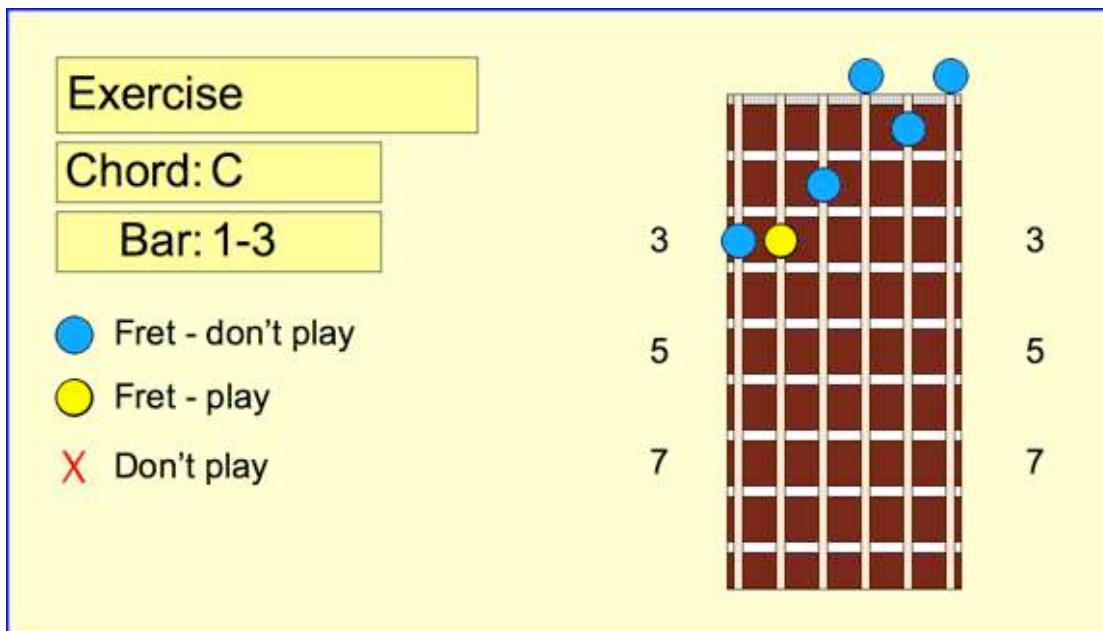


**Diagram 2**

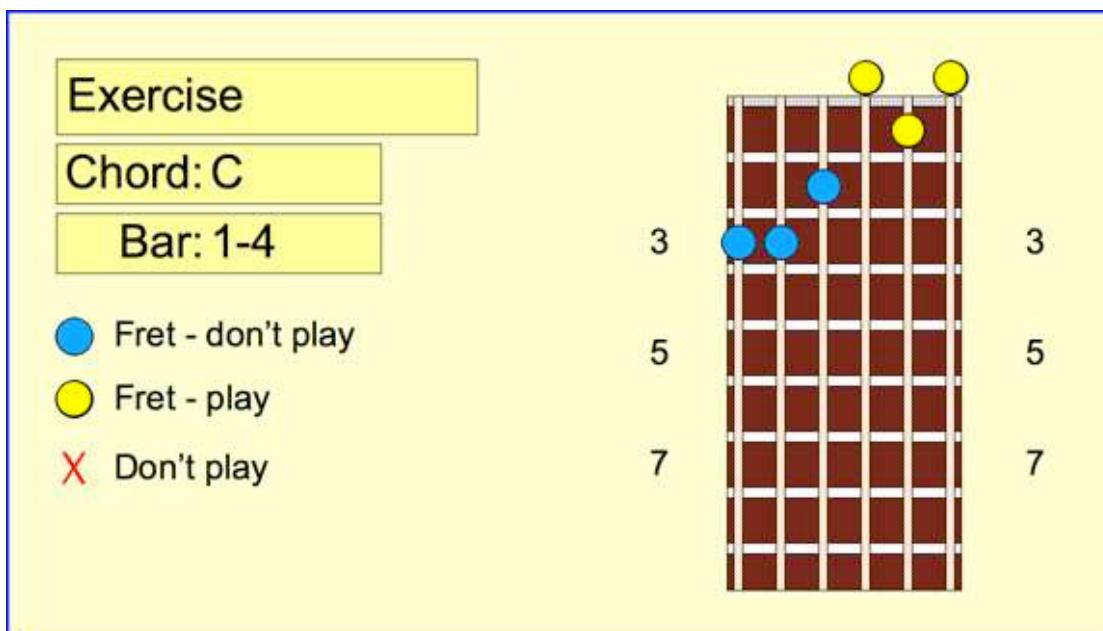
This is a C chord, just like the previous chord you played, but with a different bass note to it. In the first chord you played the notes C, G, C and E; in the second chord you played the notes G, G, C and E. In both cases the bottom note was plucked by the thumb and the top three notes by the three fingers of the picking hand.

What you're going to do now is to create a simple rhythm by separating the thumb from the other three fingers. Go back to Diagram 1 on page 1 and place your picking fingers on the 5<sup>th</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> strings. However, instead of plucking all four strings at the

same time, pluck the 5<sup>th</sup> string with the thumb and then the top three strings separately. In diagrammatic terms, the two separate actions are as in Diagrams 3 and 4 below:



**Diagram 3**



**Diagram 4**

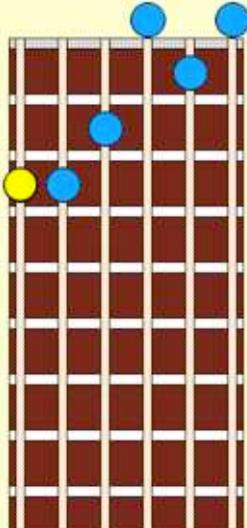
Now go to the finger placement in Diagram 2 and do a similar exercise, i.e. play the 6<sup>th</sup> string with the thumb and then the top 3 strings as a separate beat – as in Diagrams 5 and 6 below:

**Exercise**

**Chord: C**

**Bar: 2-1**

● Fret - don't play  
● Fret - play  
✗ Don't play



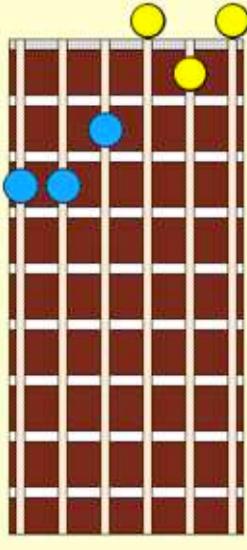
**Diagram 5**

**Exercise**

**Chord: C**

**Bar: 2-2**

● Fret - don't play  
● Fret - play  
✗ Don't play



**Diagram 6**

The music and tablature in Diagram 7 shows exactly what you've just played in Diagrams 3-6:

The diagram shows a musical score and tablature for fingerpicking guitar. The score includes a treble clef, a 4/4 time signature, and two measures of music. The tablature below shows a six-string guitar neck with frets 0, 1, 0, 0, 3, and 3 marked. The strings are numbered 6 (top) to 1 (bottom). The first measure shows a bass note on the 4th string followed by an open 6th string. The second measure shows a bass note on the 4th string followed by an open 6th string.

**Diagram 7**

This is the beginning of fingerpicking guitar. Repeat this pattern until you can get a steady rhythm between the thumb and the three fingers of the picking hand and the alternating thumb of the fretting hand.

## Chapter 2: An arpeggio played up the chord

An arpeggio is a group of notes which are played one after the other, either going up or going down the notes of a chord. Executing an arpeggio requires the player to play the notes of a chord individually to differentiate them. Here's the arpeggio we're going to play on a C chord - shown in the music and tablature in Diagram 8 below:

**Diagram 8**

Place your picking fingers as they were in Diagram 1 (page 1) and pick the strings as follows:

1. Pick the 5<sup>th</sup> string with the thumb
2. Pick the 3<sup>rd</sup> string with the 1<sup>st</sup> (index) finger
3. Pick the 2<sup>nd</sup> string with the 2<sup>nd</sup> (middle) finger
4. Pick the 1<sup>st</sup> string with the 3<sup>rd</sup> (ring) finger

Repeat the exercise from the position in Diagram 2 (page 2), i.e. pick the 6<sup>th</sup> string with the thumb and then the top three strings as in instructions 2-4 above. Diagrams 9 – 12 below show the first bar, note by note.

**Exercise**

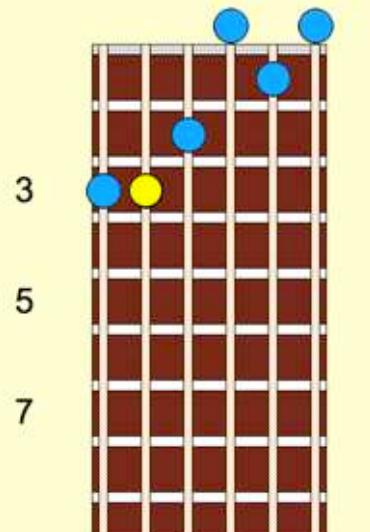
**Chord: C**

**Bar: 3-1**

● Fret - don't play

● Fret - play

✗ Don't play



**Diagram 9**

The note above – low C – is played with the thumb.

**Exercise**

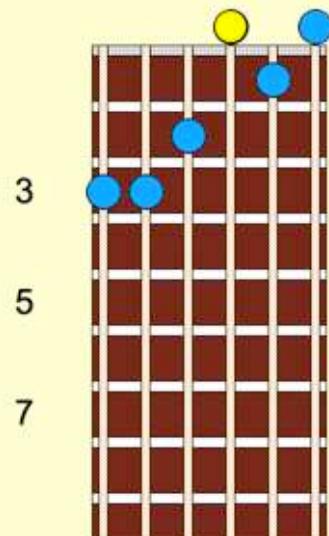
**Chord: C**

**Bar: 3-2**

● Fret - don't play

● Fret - play

✗ Don't play



**Diagram 10**

The note above – G – is played with the 1<sup>st</sup> (index) finger.

**Exercise**

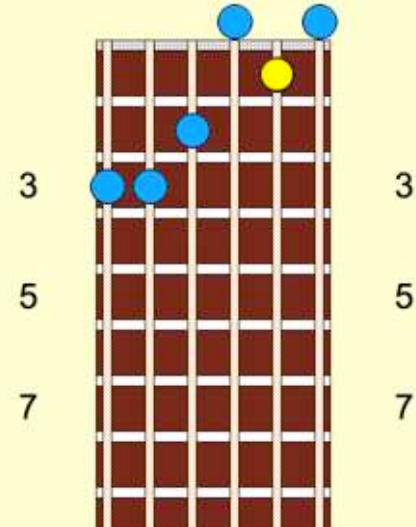
**Chord: C**

**Bar: 3-3**

● Fret - don't play

● Fret - play

✗ Don't play



**Diagram 11**

The note above – a higher C – is played with the 2<sup>nd</sup> (middle) finger.

**Exercise**

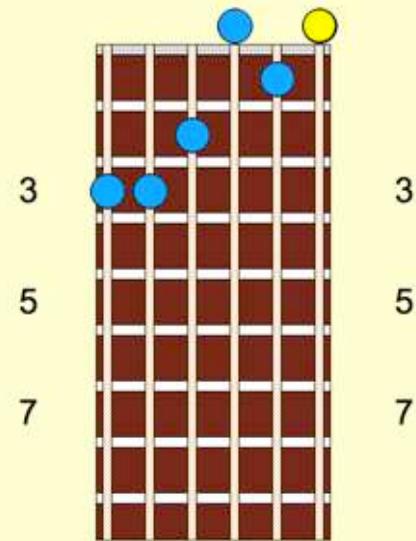
**Chord: C**

**Bar: 3-4**

● Fret - don't play

● Fret - play

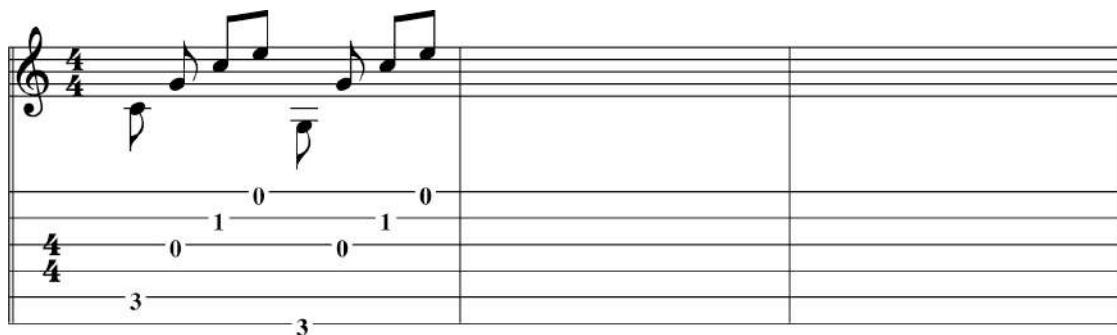
✗ Don't play



**Diagram 12**

The note above – E – is played with the 3<sup>rd</sup> (ring) finger. The second half of the arpeggio is the same as the first half – except that the first

note of the second half is played by the thumb picking the 6<sup>th</sup> string instead of the 5<sup>th</sup> string. Played at the correct tempo, the whole arpeggio fits into one bar and looks like this:



**Diagram 13**

Practice this on a simple C chord with a slight emphasis on the thumb beat to give the rhythm some pulse. Count **one**-two-three-four, **one**-two-three-four while playing, and make the notes as equal as possible.

And here's an important piece of advice which applies to all the patterns in this book: play *slowly* at first, making sure every note sounds equally. When every note sounds equally, then you can start to pick up speed.

### Chapter 3: An arpeggio played down the chord

Arpeggios can go down the notes of a chord as well as up it. In this example, the thumb plays the first note of the 4-note arpeggio – on the 5<sup>th</sup> string, and exactly as in Diagram 9. Then, instead of playing strings 3, 2 and 1 separately with the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> fingers, you play strings 1, 2 and 3 separately with the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> fingers. Diagram 14 below shows the music and tablature, and Diagrams 15 – 18 below show the sequence graphically.

Diagram 14

**Exercise**

**Chord: C**

**Bar: 4-1**

● Fret - don't play

● Fret - play

✗ Don't play

Diagram 15

Play as before with thumb.

**Exercise**

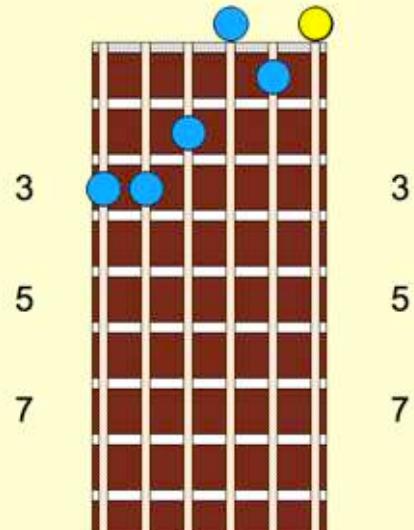
**Chord: C**

**Bar: 4-2**

● Fret - don't play

● Fret - play

✗ Don't play



**Diagram 16**

Play the top E note with the 3<sup>rd</sup> finger of the picking hand.

**Exercise**

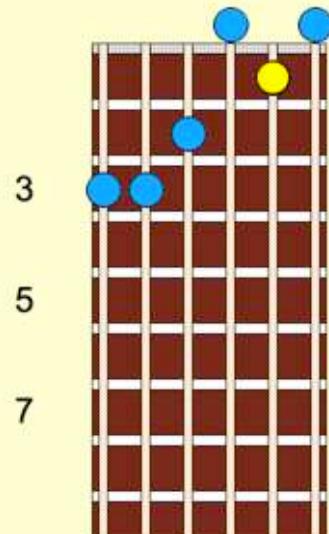
**Chord: C**

**Bar: 4-3**

● Fret - don't play

● Fret - play

✗ Don't play



**Diagram 17**

Play the C note with the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger of the picking hand.

And finally...

Exercise

Chord: C

Bar: 4-4

● Fret - don't play

● Fret - play

✗ Don't play

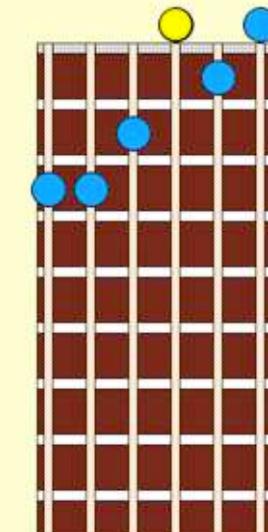
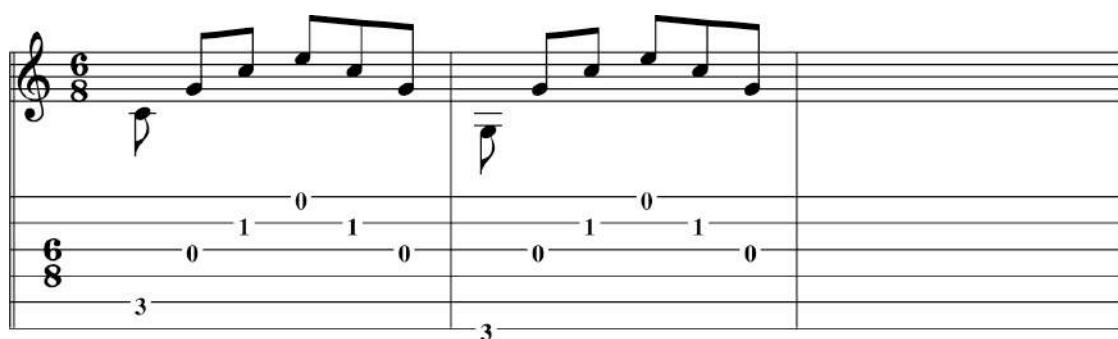


Diagram 18

Play the last note of the arpeggio – G – with the 1<sup>st</sup> finger of the picking hand.

## Chapter 4: An arpeggio played up and down the chord

In this chapter you're going to combine the up arpeggio from Chapter 2 with the down arpeggio from Chapter 3. This isn't quite as simple as it sounds because, by sliding them together, the rhythm shifts from 4 beats in the bar – marked as **4/4** on the staff – to a **6/8** rhythm. **6/8** is counted as “**one**-two-three, **four**-five-six”, and the arpeggio in our exercise looks like this:



**Diagram 19**

As you can see, each of the notes played with the thumb – on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> strings respectively – is followed by five notes played on the top 3 strings by the three fingers of the picking hand. The sequence of strings and fingers after each thumb beat is:

1. 1<sup>st</sup> finger on 3<sup>rd</sup> string
2. 2<sup>nd</sup> finger on 2<sup>nd</sup> string
3. 3<sup>rd</sup> finger on 1<sup>st</sup> string
4. 2<sup>nd</sup> finger on 2<sup>nd</sup> string
5. 1<sup>st</sup> finger on 3<sup>rd</sup> string

The Diagrams overleaf show the pattern.

**Exercise**

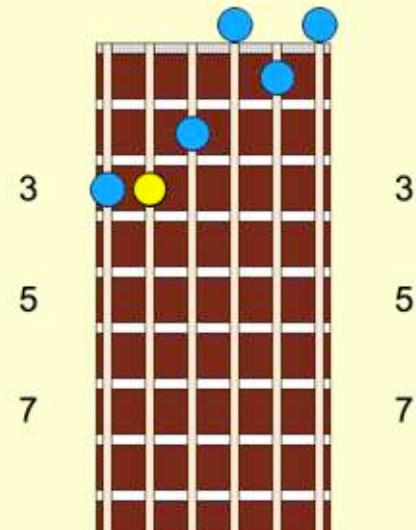
**Chord: C**

**Bar: 5-1**

● Fret - don't play

● Fret - play

✗ Don't play



**Diagram 20**

Play the note above – C – with the thumb as before.

**Exercise**

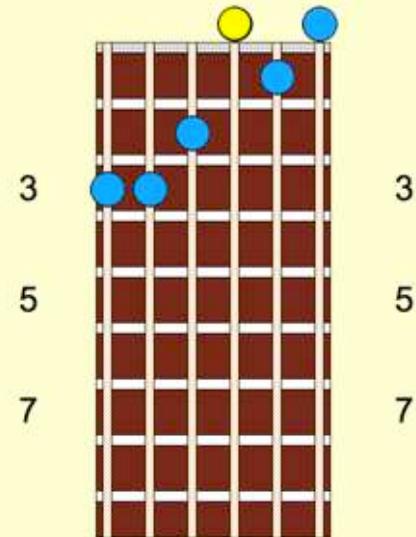
**Chord: C**

**Bar: 5-2**

● Fret - don't play

● Fret - play

✗ Don't play



**Diagram 21**

Play the 2<sup>nd</sup> note of the arpeggio – G – with the 1<sup>st</sup> finger of the picking hand.

**Exercise**

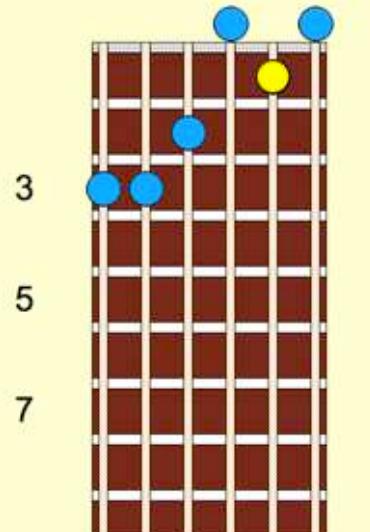
**Chord: C**

**Bar: 5-3**

● Fret - don't play

● Fret - play

✗ Don't play



**Diagram 22**

Play the 3<sup>rd</sup> note of the arpeggio – C – with the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger.

**Exercise**

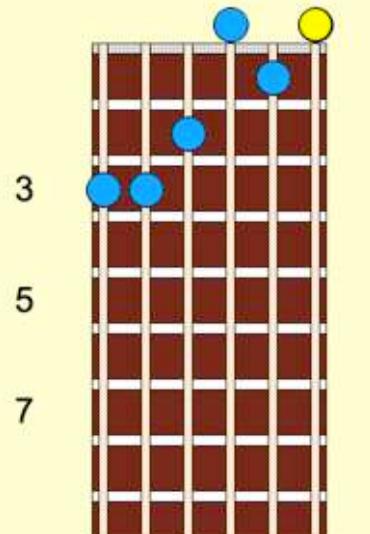
**Chord: C**

**Bar: 5-4**

● Fret - don't play

● Fret - play

✗ Don't play



**Diagram 23**

Play the 4<sup>th</sup> note of the arpeggio – E – with the 1<sup>st</sup> finger of the picking hand. The next two notes complete the descending run.

Exercise

Chord: C

Bar: 5-5

● Fret - don't play

● Fret - play

✗ Don't play

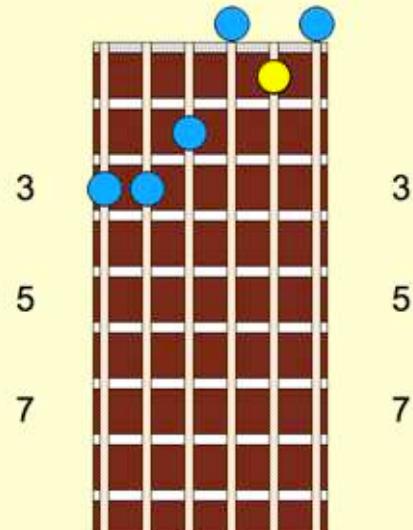


Diagram 24

Play the 5<sup>th</sup> note of the arpeggio – C – with the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger of the picking hand.

Exercise

Chord: C

Bar: 5-6

● Fret - don't play

● Fret - play

✗ Don't play

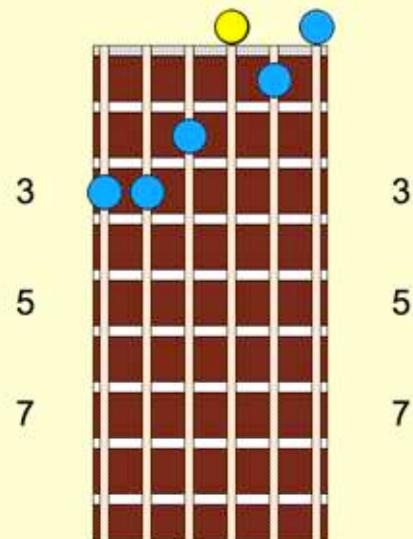


Diagram 25

Complete the arpeggio by playing 6<sup>th</sup> note G with the 1<sup>st</sup> finger.

## Chapter 5: Alternating treble strings – 3<sup>rd</sup> with 2<sup>nd</sup>+1<sup>st</sup>

This picking pattern can, with practice, be played very quickly and gives a very harpsichord-like sound. In music and tablature form, it looks like Diagram 26 below:

**Diagram 26**

In this pattern, the strings are played as follows:

1. The thumb picks the 5<sup>th</sup> string
2. The 1<sup>st</sup> finger picks the 3<sup>rd</sup> string
3. The 2<sup>nd</sup>+3<sup>rd</sup> fingers pick the 2<sup>nd</sup> +1<sup>st</sup> strings
4. The 1<sup>st</sup> finger picks the 3<sup>rd</sup> string

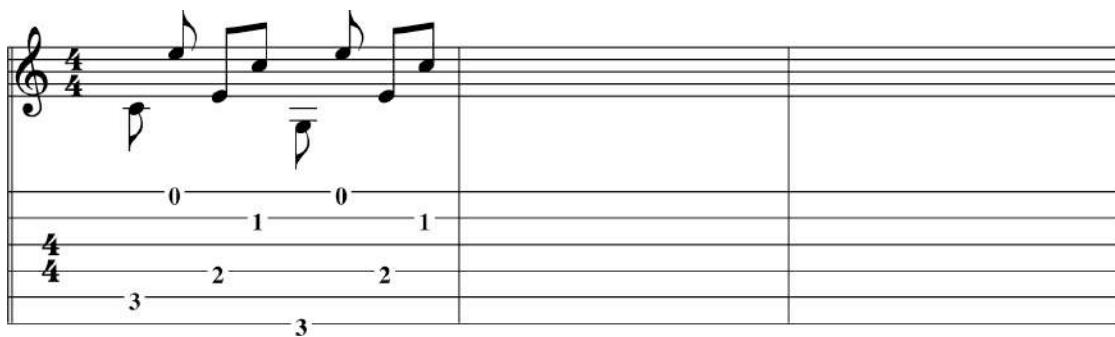
The pattern is repeated again, this time with the thumb picking the 6<sup>th</sup> string.

### Note

From this point onwards in the book, I shall only use the large diagrams to illustrate chord shapes. Picking patterns will be demonstrated using music and tablature diagrams, plus descriptive notes.

## Chapter 6: Alternating bass and treble pattern no. 1

The following sections of the book are going to deal with more complex picking patterns, ones in which the thumb does more than alternate on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> strings and in which the picking of the top three strings also becomes more irregular. We'll start with this one, using a C chord once again:



**Diagram 27**

Start the pattern by resting the thumb on the 5<sup>th</sup> string, the 1<sup>st</sup> (index) finger on the 2<sup>nd</sup> string and the 2<sup>nd</sup> (middle) finger on the top string.

The pattern plays as follows:

1. Pick the 5<sup>th</sup> string with the thumb
2. Pick the top string with the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger
3. Pick the 4<sup>th</sup> string with the thumb
4. Pick the 2<sup>nd</sup> string with the 1<sup>st</sup> finger
5. Pick the 6<sup>th</sup> string with the thumb
6. Pick the top string with the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger
7. Pick the 4<sup>th</sup> string with the thumb
8. Pick the 2<sup>nd</sup> string with the 1<sup>st</sup> finger

That completes this pattern. You can see that, unlike the patterns described in previous chapters, the thumb is not just alternating between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> strings. The thumb plays a 5-4-6-4 string pattern while the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> fingers alternately pick the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> strings respectively.

The whole string sequence for this picking pattern is therefore 5-1-4-2 followed by 6-1-4-2.

## Chapter 7: Travis style picking

In the 1960s this style of picking was mistakenly dubbed in the UK “clawhammer” – which is actually a way of picking a guitar or (more commonly) a 5-string banjo by flicking downwards on the strings with the back of the nails. All the fingerpicking patterns described in the chapters above actually use the alternating bass which was developed by Merle Travis in the 1930s. In this chapter we’ll look at the popular version of this which many players from Chet Atkins onwards used in their playing – and which is frequently employed by folk and blues fingerpickers to this day.

In music and tablature form, the pattern looks like this:

**Diagram 28**

Note the two whole beats in the first half of the bar and the 4 half-beats in the second part of the bar. This gives a characteristic “dum, dum, didee, didee” sound to the rhythm.

To play this Travis style pattern, follow the instructions on the following page.

1. Pick the 5<sup>th</sup> string with the thumb
2. Pick the 4<sup>th</sup> string with the thumb *and* pick the 1<sup>st</sup> string with the 3<sup>rd</sup> finger, at the same time.
3. Pick the 6<sup>th</sup> string with the thumb
4. Pick the 2<sup>nd</sup> string with the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger
5. Pick the 4<sup>th</sup> string with the thumb
6. Pick the 3<sup>rd</sup> string with the 1<sup>st</sup> finger

Steps 3 to 6 are played at double the speed of steps 1 to 2. This may seem complicated at first sight but, after playing slowly to begin with and then picking up speed, the rhythmic pattern will become clear.

## Chapter 8: Picking different chord shapes

So far, all the fingerpicking examples in this book have used a simple, six-string C major chord as the basis for instruction. However, there aren't many tunes which only use a C chord and the purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how the picking patterns are adapted and altered to play through chords which may or may not use all six strings of the guitar.

Here's a typical D major chord:

**Exercise**

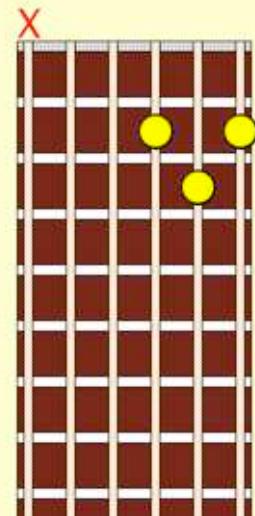
**Chord: D**

**Bar: 6-1**

● Fret - don't play

● Fret - play

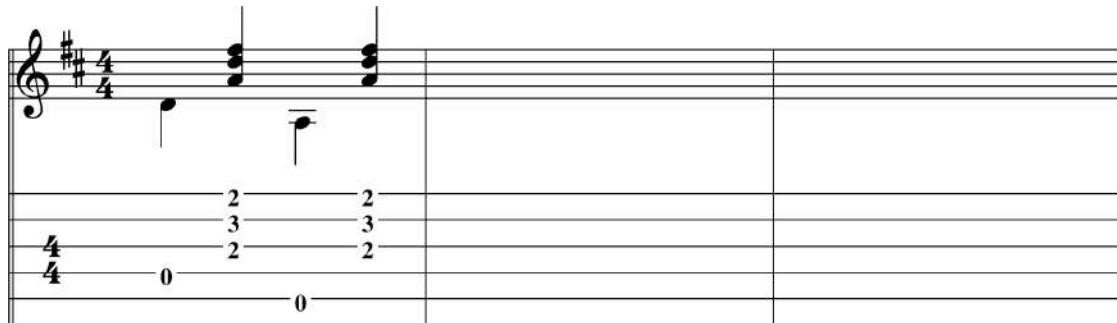
✗ Don't play



3 3  
5 5  
7 7

**Diagram 29**

In this version of the basic D chord, the 6<sup>th</sup> string isn't fretted or played, so the thumb patterns used for the C chord – alternating between 5<sup>th</sup> string and 6<sup>th</sup> string – have to be adapted. In the example below, the thumb alternates between 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> strings while the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> fingers play the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> strings:



**Diagram 30**

This is the alternating thumb/fingers pattern described in Chapter 1 – played on a D chord instead of a C chord.

And here's the arpeggio pattern from Chapter 2 also played on the D major chord:

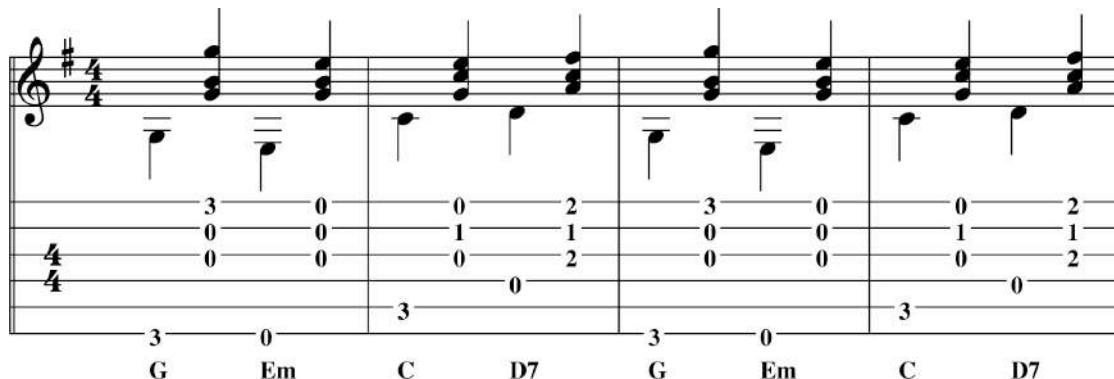


**Diagram 31**

In both these examples, the thumb alternates between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> strings. A simple guide to follow, when playing a chord sequence with any fingerpicking pattern, is to alternate between 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> strings with the thumb on six-string chords – and between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> strings with the thumb on five-string chords. But there are exceptions to this, and the next chapters contain some practice sequences using different patterns over different chords.

## Chapter 9: Patterns played over chord sequences (1)

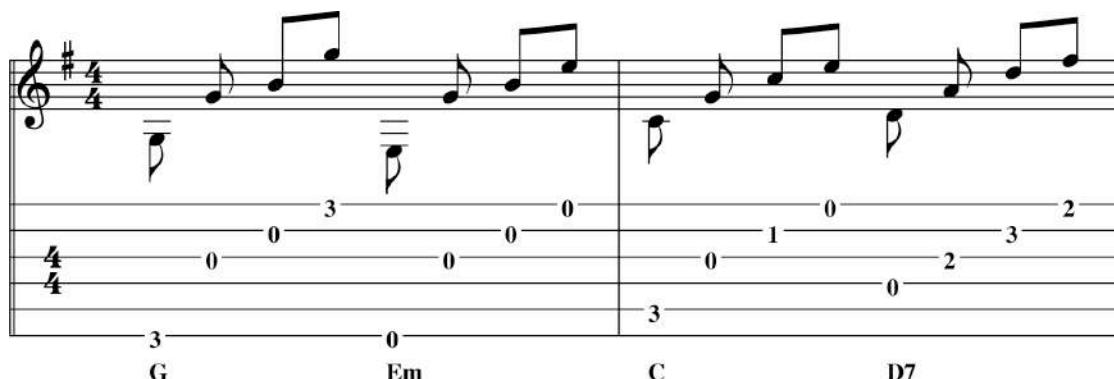
The first practice exercise is in the key of G. It utilises the chords of G, Em, C and D7, and the first example shown uses the simple alternating thumb and three-finger pattern from Chapter 1.



**Diagram 32**

In this exercise you can see that the thumb picks out a bass line which starts on a low G note, goes down to the bottom E note, then up to the C note on the 5<sup>th</sup> string – and then up to the open D note on the 4<sup>th</sup> string.

Here's the same chord sequence played with a basic up arpeggio:



**Diagram 33**

The bar lengths have been spaced out and kept to two bars for clarity, but the bass run is exactly the same as in Diagram 32. Now here's the same chord sequence played with a down arpeggio:

**Diagram 34**

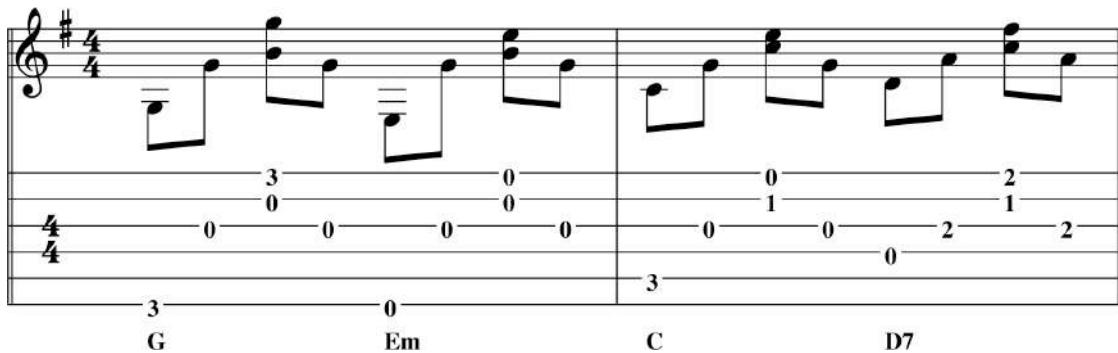
Once again the bass line played with the thumb is exactly the same as in Diagrams 32 and 33 – only the notes sequences are different. The next exercise takes the up-and-down arpeggio in 6/8 time and applies it to the same chord sequence. It looks like this:

**Diagram 35**

This is a very flowing pattern with one chord per bar, as opposed to the two chords per bar in the previous exercises.

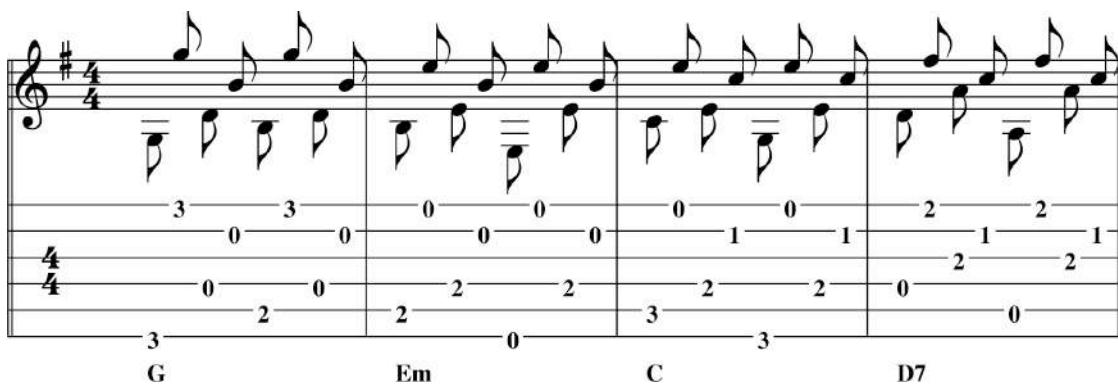
## Chapter 10: Patterns played over chord sequences (2)

This chapter builds on the previous chapter with some more, slightly more complex exercises. Let's start by taking the G-Em-C-D7 chord sequence and utilising the alternating thumb-3-(2+1)-3 pattern as shown below:



**Diagram 36**

Once again the bars have been lengthened for clarity. We'll use this chord sequence yet again for some alternate thumb and finger picking, using the pattern in Chapter 6:



**Diagram 37**

The thumb is picking out four notes per chord, while the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> fingers alternate with the thumb strokes. You can see that, on the D7

chord in the 4<sup>th</sup> bar, the thumb is picking strings 4 and 3 followed by 5 and 3 – while the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> fingers play the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> strings respectively. It looks complex but playing it slowly at first will bring out the picking pattern.

In the next exercise, we'll use the same chord sequence with a Travis-style “clawhammer” pattern:

**Diagram 38**

It's probably becoming obvious by now that these fingerpicking patterns are just guides to playing and not an exact science. Where the thumb and fingers actually play can depend on the chords being fretted and the sound required.

The next chapters consist of a series of chord sequences and different fingerpicking patterns put together in a few combinations, and these are intended to help you feel at ease with fingerpicking the guitar. As always, take them slowly at first and play them over again until the process of playing them becomes more and more natural.

## Chapter 11: Picking tune no. 1

Here's a simple 12-bar blues to get started with:

4/4 time, major key, treble clef.

Chords marked below the staves:

- Staff 1: D, G, D
- Staff 2: D7, G, G
- Staff 3: D
- Staff 4: A7
- Staff 5: G7

### Diagram 39

This simple pattern may not sound too bluesy at first, but playing it consistently and at a regular speed will bring out the typical 12-bar blues sequence. Now try the same pattern on these chords:

Diagram 40 shows a blues-style guitar pattern in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The pattern consists of eighth-note pairs. The first section (measures 1-3) is over G chords. The second section (measures 4-6) is over G7, C, and C chords. The third section (measures 7-9) is over G chords. The fourth section (measures 10-12) is over D7 and G chords. The fifth section (measures 13-15) is over C7, G, and G chords. The pattern ends with a G chord.

Diagram 40

You'll notice that I'm using a slightly different D7 shape for the exercise in Diagram 40. One that looks like this:

**Exercise**

**Chord: D7**

**Bar: 7-1**

● Fret - don't play

● Fret - play

✗ Don't play

3 3  
5 5  
7 7

**Diagram 41**

To fret this chord:

1. Place the 1<sup>st</sup> finger on the 2<sup>nd</sup> string/1<sup>st</sup> fret
2. Place the 2<sup>nd</sup> finger on the 6<sup>th</sup> string/2<sup>nd</sup> fret
3. Place the 3<sup>rd</sup> finger on the 3<sup>rd</sup> string/2<sup>nd</sup> fret

You could also use the thumb on the fretting hand to play the 2<sup>nd</sup> fret on the bottom (6<sup>th</sup>) string. Curl it over to stop the string – it may feel a little uncomfortable at first but you will get used to it. It's a good chord to use in a sequence such as Am – D7 – G because you get a nice bass line up the notes on the bottom G string: E to F# to G.

## Chapter 12: Picking tune no. 2

Here's a different chord sequence, put to the picking pattern – Travis-style – described in Chapter 7:

## Diagram 42

To gain familiarity with the different ways that tunes can be played, take tunes or chord sequences with which you're familiar and then apply the patterns described in this book to those tunes. Listen to how they sound with each pattern – and decide what's appropriate for you. Good luck!