Flatpicking the Acoustic Guitar

A SHORT PRIMER

By John Cadley

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“Shut up and play your guitar.”

—Frank Zappa

Introduction:

Very little of what follows is original with me. I have learned it from listening to and/or observing many great players. They come mostly from the world of acoustic bluegrass flatpicking and Telecaster-style electric playing. They include Clarence White, Tony Rice, Wyatt Rice, Dan Crary, Norman Blake, Doc Watson, Jeff White, David Grier, Robert Shaffer, Steve Kaufman, Russ Barenberg, Scott Nygaard, John Carlini, Peter Rowan, Albert Lee, James Burton, Jim Messina, Don Rich, Vince Gill, Ray Flacke, Jimmy Olander, Robin Bullock, Beppe Gambetta, Mark Cosgrove, Dave Dillon, Jimmy Martin, Lester Flatt, Marty Stuart, George Shuffler, and many, many more. Seek out recordings by any of these musicians and you will hear sounds that are, well, music to any guitar players ears. I have tried—and failed—to play like all of them, and that process of “trying and failing” has been *my* teacher over the years, showing me what I can and can’t do (and consequently leading me to compensate in ways that have become my personal style). It is my hope that, while I can’t teach you to play the guitar (see the Bad News/Good News section which follows), I can show you some of the methods I have found to be effective in teaching yourself.

The Bad News/Good News of Guitar Playing

The bad news: I can't teach you to play the guitar.
The good news: You can teach yourself.

Guitar playing is a complex interplay of the physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual. Those forces work differently in every human being. So I can't teach you how to play the guitar because there's no right way to teach. What I can do is show you ideas and techniques, which you can then *make your own*. Try what I have showed you and you'll find your body and mind automatically making many small adjustments to execute what you've learned within your own abilities. That is *you* teaching *yourself* the guitar. There's only one rule than makes any sense. It comes from the great bluegrass fiddle player, Richard Green: "If it's hard you're doing it wrong."

The bad news: You will never, never, EVER learn it all.
The good news: The possibilities for improvement are endless.

So you want to play guitar. What kind? Acoustic or electric? Nylon string or steel string? Classical, rock, jazz, country, bluegrass, folk, celtic, or zeidico? Finger picking or flatpicking? Standard tuning or open tunings? Which open tunings? DADGAD, drop D, open G? Teach yourself? Learn from books, CDs, a teacher? Subscribe to guitar magazines? Learn to read music or just learn tablature? Surf the internet for "guitar instruction" and sift through thousands of hits?

And so on. Every choice in guitar playing leads to many more choices, all good, all worthwhile, all challenging and rewarding. And if you could devote 12 hours a day to the guitar, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for, say, 1,000 years, you just might learn a good half of it. But you can't. That's OK. If you are committed and consistent, if you work hard for a set time every day, if you follow your instincts and trust your own inner voice, you will learn all the guitar you need to learn. You eat the elephant one bite at a time.

The bad news: You will never play like your guitar hero.
The good news: You will play like yourself

It's good to copy your heroes. It's good to be inspired by them, to aspire to their level of expertise. That will constitute a big part of your musical journey. *But you will fail to play exactly like them because you are not them. And in failing to play like them you will succeed in learning how to play like you.* What you may capture is the spirit of what they did, the concept of it, and then create your own variations on it. Eric Clapton learned from Robert Johnson and Chuck Berry. Albert Lee learned from James Burton and Clarence White and Cliff Gallup. George Benson learned from Wes Montgomery and Charlie Christian. Yet all these guys have their unique personal style. The great jazz guitarist Jim Hall said that the day he realized he would never play like his heroes was the day he started to really grow as a musician. Be a sponge. Look, listen, learn, then process it through your own unique skills and talents and make it your own. To say, "I can't play like Chet Atkins so I'm not a good guitar player" is not only self-defeating; it's just plain wrong. A "good guitar" player is someone who makes pleasing sounds with a guitar. Nothing more, nothing less. If you can play "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" with good tone and good time, you are a good guitar player. (Trust me, it's not as easy as it sounds.)

The bad news: You will always wish you could play better.
The good news: You will always have a strong incentive to improve.

I've heard monster, killer guitar players say they're embarrassed to listen to their recordings. I've heard them say they "fake it" a lot, that they don't really know what they're doing, that there are so many guitar players better than they. And they're telling the truth. If you already play and you've had that sinking, discouraging feeling that you should be a lot better than you are, that if you had any "real talent" you would be better, rest assured: your guitar hero has the same feelings. Think of a high school football game on a small, muddy field in some little out-of-the-way town in the middle of nowhere. Then think of an NFL team of world-class athletes playing in a giant stadium in a major city with millions of people watching. Though the playing field is different, the basic human emotions, "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat," are exactly the same.

The bad news: There is no magic secret to playing the guitar.
The good news: There is no magic secret to playing the guitar.

Someone once asked Dave Bromberg how he learned to play jazz. He said, "I learned one jazz song. Then I learned another one." No magic there. He applied seat of pants to seat of chair and dug it out. Duh.

I am often disturbed when people see me playing and say wistfully, "I wish I could play the guitar," as if I just happened to be in the vicinity when the Angel of Guitar Playing threw out some fairy dust. I feel like saying, "Well if you put in the thousands and thousand of hours that I have, maybe you could." (A great violinist once commented ruefully, "I practice eight hours a day for 37 years and they call me a genius.") There's no secret, there's no magic. Yes, there are prodigies. You're not one of them. Neither am I. Neither are 99.9% of the players out there. When you see someone who plays like a genius, rest assured they've worked like a dog.

NOISE, SOUND… AND MUSIC

It is reported that Artie Shaw, the great jazz clarinetist, once compared himself to Benny Goodman by saying, "He plays the clarinet, I play music." My take on that is that Mr. Shaw believed he was using the clarinet as a means to an end, while he perceived Mr.Goodman to be playing the instrument as an end in itself.

Being a big Benny Goodman fan I hesitate to concur, but it's a distinction worth considering. The lesson we should learn is that even though we're playing the guitar, the objective is to *make music*. We must be careful with this wooden sound chamber strung with steel wires that we hold in our hands. Its physical make-up invites mechanical pyrotechnics, with the left hand flying up and down the fingerboard while the right hand picks furiously away; with scales, arpeggios and licks spitting out like machine-gun fire; with four- and five-fret stretches that seem to defy the anatomy of the human hand.

That's all fine. But is it music? Is it pleasing to the ear? Is it in tune and in time? Does it fit the song? Does it evoke a response in the listener? Does the audience tap its feet? Does the music evoke *feeling* rather than amazement?

You can play a lot of notes and never make music. Dave Bromberg once said he tried to wring every bit of *music* out of every note he played. That makes me think of each note as a music-filled capsule with a permeable membrane. Your job is to play in such a way—through your technique, your awareness, your love of the music—that the membrane is broken and the music flows out. If you don't, the music stays locked inside and the notes fall like stones.

My point is this: you can play the guitar for all kinds of reasons—to get girls (or boys), to become rich and famous, to rebel, to live out a fantasy, to escape from any number of painful and/or stressful life situations, to soothe yourself, to occupy your hands while you're watching television or waiting for your wife to get ready….

I have played for all those reasons, and they're all valid. Not a bad reason in the bunch. Ultimately, however, the idea is to *make music*. I believe music really is the language of the gods, because it crosses all boundaries, all cultures, all peoples. I can run into a guy from Japan, take out my guitar and jam for hours without ever speaking a word, and by the end we'll have made a truly soulful connection.

I would remind you, too, of something the father of Winton and Branford Marsallis told his boys: “If you play for applause, applause is all you’ll get.”

Translation: the making of music offers far richer rewards than any you can gain from the mere approval of others. Ultimately, you play the guitar *for the music*.

PRACTICE—GENERALLY SPEAKING

ASPIRING MUSICIAN: I’d give anything to play like you.
MASTER MUSICIAN: I *did* give everything to play like me.

Perhaps you’ve heard it said: “Practice makes perfect, but only if you practice perfectly.” Very true. If you play what you already know over and over, stumbling at the same places every time, your mind only half engaged, you are not practicing. You are repeating. Practice is not mere repetition. Practice is working for the purpose of making each repetition an improvement over the last. Dan Crary says the goal of practice is to become a little bit better today than you were yesterday, and not quite as good as you’ll be tomorrow. Good advice.

Practice is important. It doesn’t mean you have to practice eight hours a day, although if you have that kind of time and you want to, knock yourself out. It can’t hurt. Steve Vai practiced 10 hours a day for years and it seems to have improved his playing ever so slightly. Generally, however, practice will be effective if you keep a few simple things in mind:

1. **Be consistent**. Practice every day. Make it part of your routine. If it’s only 15 minutes, and if you’re *totally focused* for those 15 minutes, and if you practice that way *every day*—you will make more progress than you ever thought you could make in just 15 minutes a day. More is better, but 15 minutes, faithfully observed, is not bad.
2. **Practice one thing at a time**. The ego is a hungry monster. It wants it all and it wants it now. Not gonna happen. Sorry. Remember the elephant: One bite at a time. Do one thing well. Master one thing. The good news is that when you master one thing, you will have mastered it in every song in which it appears. So in effect you really are practicing a lot more material than you might think. (See Kenny Werner’s book *Effortless Mastery: Liberating the Musician Within*. Much good stuff there about getting your ego out of the way when you play.)
3. **Use your head**.
4. Another way to say that is “trust your instincts.” John McGann says that any technical difficulty can be overcome with patient analysis and persistent effort (or something to that effect). That means *think*. Fifty percent of good musicianship is just common sense (thank you, Tony Rice). If something isn’t working, figure out why. Don’t just keep bashing away at it hoping dogged persistence will win the day. And don’t keep doing it one way because some book or teacher told you to do it that way. Give it a decent amount of time to

work the way you've learned. If it's not working, and if a little voice inside is saying, "This doesn't work for me"—*listen*. You're probably right.

Example: some flatpickers will swear that the only way to crosspick is with a down-down-up pattern. The very man who pioneered crosspicking on the guitar, George Shuffler, played that way. So did Clarence White. So does Tony Rice. Guess that cinches it. Who could be better than those guys? But wait a minute! Russ Barenberg, Steve Kaufman, and David Grier all use a down-up-down pattern. Hmmm. They're not too shabby, either. What to do? *Find out for yourself!* Try it both ways, plus any other way you can think of. Who knows? Maybe you'll be the person to come up with a new crosspicking pattern, like Brad Davis did for flatpicking. He couldn't get the speed other players got playing straight down-up-down-up, so he invented his own unique down-down-up technique and is a killer player. Good thing he didn't stick with the "right way." They say Charlie Christian played all those beautifully fast, fluid lines with *just his thumb using all downstrokes*. Guess he didn't read the book that says you're not supposed to do that. And let's not forget the blind Puerto Rican kid, Jose Feliciano, who plays a nylon string guitar with a *pick* using all *upstrokes*. Never has such a wrong way to play sounded so totally right. 'Nuff said.

5. **Be patient**. It is common to feel like you're getting nowhere. It's called a plateau. Going onward but not *upward*. Well, in guitar playing, if you're really practicing the right way, onward *is* upward. It might not happen as fast as you would like, but it will happen. One day you'll do something you couldn't do before and it will seem effortless—thanks to all your "wasted" effort.

6. **You gotta love it.** If practice is such a drag you just don't want to do it…well, I'm not sure what to say. Most players I know like to practice because it means they get to have a guitar in their hands, which for them is what they live for, anyway. Chet Atkins said if you really love something you're going to want to do it a lot, and doing it a lot is going to make you better at doing it. So…you really do have to love it. The sound that comes from a plastic pick vibrating a steel string strung across a big ol' wooden box with a hole in the middle has to be the most beautiful sound on God's green earth to you. If it is, you'll practice.

PRACTICING—as it specifically relates to bluegrass flatpicking

Keeping in mind that there are no rules and that whatever works is "right," the following information seems to work best for a majority of bluegrass players.

THE FLATPICK.

A "hard," or "heavy" pick seems to work best in drawing the deep, rich, woody tone out of an acoustic guitar. Many players feel it helps them sound more smooth, or "legato," as well, because the pick has no "give" and thus doesn't "slap" on the strings as it bends back and forth. That being said, “heavy” encompasses a range of gauges, some heavier, or thicker, than others. Some of them can be 2 mm and more in thickness, feeling more like a pebble than a pick. I find that to be a bit much. For what it’s worth, my own preference is for 1.4 mm thickness. That “feels” right to me. I use a Wegen TF140. It’s made by Michel Wegen in Holland (www.wegenpicks.com) from a polymer that produces a great tone for acoustic guitar. I think he actually developed the material himself. The TF140 is a slightly larger “tri-corner”-style pick which I like because I get a little more pick to hold onto and thus a little more feeling of control. Wegen makes a classic “teardrop” shape bluegrass pick as well from the same material, plus lots of other styles. They’re not cheap ($15 for two of the TF140s, but they wear like iron). But when you consider that your pick determines a lot of your tone—and your tone is EVERYTHING—it’s worth the investment.

And again—this is what works for me, which I only discovered after much experimentation. It might be all wrong for you. One of the best flatpickers on the planet, Steve Kaufman, uses a “medium” pick, which most other flatpickers shun, and no one would argue that it doesn’t work for him—the only guy to win the Winfield Flatpicking Championship three times.

One other thing—a good many guitar and mandolin players use the rounded corner of a teardrop pick instead of the point, claiming it gives them more speed and smoothness. Try it and compare it to the sound you get with the pointed corner.

STRINGS

If you’re just playing by yourself or with another guitar player, you can use light gauge strings. They’re easier to play than mediums and have a sweet, clear sound. However, since bluegrass is typically a group effort involving banjo, fiddle, mandolin, and bass, volume is important, especially since everything but the bass is louder than the guitar. Most, if not all, bluegrass musicians playing regularly in a band use medium-gauge strings. They give you more volume and power, more substance, more oomph, and you need it. Bluegrass is not mood music. It’s high-octane stuff and you need to generate power when you play. Light-gauge is just a little too thin. So my recommendation is medium-gauge. They’re a little harder to play but you’ll get used to it, and you’ll find they draw out the full sound of your guitar much better, especially the big dreadnought-size body, which is what I recommend for bluegrass playing.

RHYTHM

OK, now we get serious. You’re probably not learning to play bluegrass guitar so you can play rhythm. You want to play lead and take solos. Fine. What happens when it’s somebody else’s turn to solo? What will you do then? If you don’t know how to play rhythm you can’t do for the soloist what he or she did for you when *you* were soloing, which was to lay down a solid, steady beat for you to play against. If they were playing good rhythm they were *helping you play better.* How will you return the favor?

The point is: unless you plan to be the only soloist in the band, and to solo constantly, even when the singer is singing, you better learn to play rhythm and play it well. In your musical life it's what you'll be playing 90% of the time.

In addition, rhythm just happens to be the heart and soul of all music, and certainly bluegrass. "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing." Until the advent of George Shuffler and Don Reno, and then perhaps Doc Watson and Clarence White, the guitar wasn't even thought of as a lead instrument in bluegrass. It was there strictly to lay down a shot-from-guns rhythm for the banjo, fiddle, and mandolin. The "great" bluegrass guitar players of the 40's and 50's were all rhythm players—Lester Flatt, Jimmy Martin, Charlie Waller, Joe Stuart, and even into the 60's with Peter Rowan and Dave Dillon. In fact, long after bluegrass lead guitar playing was a regular feature in many bands, you never heard it in the band run by the father of bluegrass himself, Bill Monroe. Strictly rhythm, thank you very much.

Here's the deal. Rhythm is what really gets people going, gets them "feeling" the music. It's what makes them judge a concert as "good" or "not good," even though they can't explain why. A lot of hot playing with no rhythmic underpinning is actually irritating, and you'll know it when you hear it. The reason why you love the sound of the great lead players like Tony Rice and David Grier is because they're so *rhythmic* when they solo. They're right "in the pocket," perfectly in sync with the rhythm. Even when they're playing completely solo (as in David Grier's exquisite CD "I've Got the House to Myself") the rhythm is *implied*. You still want to tap your foot. It's all there. They pick you up and carry you with them.

And by the way, all the great lead players are great rhythm players, too. Believe me, that's how they kept their jobs. Listen to Clarence White with the Kentucky Colonels backing up his brother, Roland, on the mandolin, or Tony Rice playing behind J.D. Crowe on the banjo, or Peter Rowan behind Bill Monroe—and you'll realize how much that guitar is creating the *drive* that makes the music so powerful.

Trust me: If you get the reputation as a rock-solid rhythm player, a lot of people will want to play with you. Conversely, if you get the reputation as a hot lead player who can't play rhythm, start developing a solo act.

THE METRONOME

The reason to use a metronome is to develop your internal sense of time so you can keep a steady beat and not drag or rush. Rushing can be a particular problem in bluegrass. The tempos are often quick, creating a "play-fast" mentality that can lead you to play even faster than the tempo. It's called speeding up, and you'll know it's happening when you start a song at a comfortable speed and finish it struggling to keep up. You've sped up.

A metronome can help here. Set it at a tempo where you can play something comfortably. Then keep bumping it up one notch at a time, gradually, so it's just a little beyond what you're comfortable with. This is how you build speed (actually, it's one way to build speed—more on that later). It's also how you program yourself to be aware that you're not just playing the guitar; you're playing music, and that means playing notes within the context of a tempo, of which you must be continually mindful. Trust me: If you screw up but manage to keep the tempo, people won't notice; if you screw up and the tempo falters, everybody will look to see what's wrong. Let the metronome be the dictator. *You* play along with *it*.

A metronome is marked with numbers, generally going from 40 to 208. Those numbers refer to beats per minute, or BPM—in other words, the metronome is calibrated to click that many times per minute. Assuming you're in the common time signature of 4/4, that means the metronome clicks 4 times for every measure. And if you were playing straight quarter notes, you would play one note—or in guitar terms, one down-stroke—per click.

Try it. Get a metronome and set it to 120. Take a melody you know and play one note for every click. Does it seem kind of slow for bluegrass? Double it to 220 and….wait a minute, there is no 220. It only goes up to 208. Now what? Stay at 120 and play *two notes* per click. If you were playing straight eighth notes, as many fiddle tunes are played, that would mean a down-up picking motion on every click. If that *still* seems a little slow… well, now you're getting into the reality of bluegrass tempos. In actuality, to play a tune at a real-world bluegrass tempo you would be playing *four* notes per click at 120. At four beats to the bar that means you're playing 16th notes.

EXAMPLE:

CLICK (1)	CLICK (2)	CLICK (3)	CLICK (4)
d-u-d-u-	d-u-d-u-	d-u-d-u-	d-u-d-u-

To get the feel of this, put the metronome at, say 80, and play "Blackberry Blossom" or "Turkey in the Straw." That should be slow enough for you to play in time and still get the feeling of four "picks per click."

Usually, if you're counting one-two-three-four with the metronome, the tendency is to accent the downbeat, or the one and the three: *one*-two-*three*-four. However, another way to "swing" with a metronome is to accent the backbeat, or two and the four: one-*two*-three-*four*. That's what the mandolin "chop" does in a bluegrass band, and what the snare drum does in a rock band. This is also what helps create "groove" in a band: the bass is playing the one and three while the mandolin plays the two and four. And the guitar player is free to do both, playing the classic boom-chick, boom-chick rhythm pattern, where the "boom" is the downbeat and "chick" is the backbeat, or offbeat.

RIGHT HAND/LEFT HAND

Precise synchronization of both hands is key to playing fluid, rhythmic bluegrass guitar. When coordination is even a little bit off you get a staccato, choppy, “picky” sound that manages to sound all the notes without really sounding like music. What you want to constantly strive for is to have your hands playing as one, where the right hand picks the string at the precise moment that the left hand is fretting the note, and that the left hand *continues to let the note ring for its full duration*. We may be talking nano-seconds here but the rule still holds—releasing the note before it’s full time value is up, or picking it before it’s solidly fretted, leads to the choppy, “stuttering” sound I spoke of, as if someone is talking without quite finishing each word. Yes, you know what he means but it’s annoying nonetheless.

How do you do this? Mostly by being aware of it and make adjustments according to your own intuition. There are exercises you can do, as in Sal Salvadore’s *Single String Method for the Guitar*. But the real secret is awareness. Listen to yourself as you play. Listen for the smooth, fluid, legato sound of two hands playing as one. The more you listen for it, the more your hands will produce it. As Russ Barenberg says, “Let your ears tell your hands what to do.”

A key concept here is something called sympathetic tension. The phrase is not mine. It comes from Jamie Andreas (check out guitarprinciples.com). You can see what it is from a simple exercise. Take your left hand off the guitar and play a simple cross-picking pattern with your right hand on the open strings.

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   d    u    d   u   d    u  d  u     = down stroke (d) and upstroke (u)

---------------0------------0----------
----------0-------------0----------0--
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Now finger a D-chord with your left hand and raise and lower your pinky on the first string, third fret to alternate between the D and a Dsus4, like this:

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   d    u    d   u   d   u   d  u        d    u     d    u     d     u   d    u

---------------2------------3-----------------2-----------------3------------------2-------
----------3-------------3----------3----------------------3-------------------3------------
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Now, compare how your right hand feels when it's functioning by itself with how it feels when you bring the left hand, however slightly, into play with that D chord, especially when you raise and lower the pinky on the first string, You might notice a slight tensing up of your right hand *in sympathy* with whatever the left hand is doing, even though the right hand is doing *exactly the same thing* it was doing when the left hand was resting. And this is on a very simple left hand movement. As your left hand fingerings get more complex and the tempos get faster, expect that your right hand will tense up even more in sympathy with the left hand. Technically, your right hand shouldn't care what the left hand is doing, but it does. Or, rather, *you* do. So it's up to you to really work on keeping your right hand loose and relaxed no matter what your left hand is doing or how fast it's going. That takes a lot of work, mental and physical, but it's absolutely essential for the smooth, fluid attack and execution that makes this music so satisfying to listen to.

As for the left hand specifically, the main issues here are strength and control. An acoustic guitar, especially one that's been set up for bluegrass (medium gauge strings and medium action) requires some raw physical strength to fret the notes solidly and cleanly. Stringed instrument players have even been referred to as "finger athletes." So you really need to do some work to build up that strength, especially in the left pinky, which I thoroughly recommend you use. Some players get by without it (they "just learned that way"), but seeing as you're just learning, use it. Kenny Smith said when he was learning he was told that if he used his little finder he'd be twice as fast, and Kenny Smith is a hell of a flatpicker.

Concerning control, what you want to avoid is "flying fingers," the tendency of the left-hand fingers to spring up off the fret board when changing positions or playing a quick sequence of notes. It's simple physics: what goes up must come down. And the farther up they go, they farther down they have to come, which means you have to be even *more fast* and *more accurate* to stay with the tempo. On the other hand, by keeping your left-hand fingers close to the fret board *at all times*, you are minimizing the amount of effort you have to exert, shortening the distance between notes, and increasing speed and accuracy by staying very close to the notes you want to play. It's called economy of motion, and if you want to see it demonstrated to a superb degree, watch Tony Rice play some time. It seems as if his left hand glides on a track that's connected to the neck. Steve Kaufman says he taught his fingers to stay down by playing with the neck about a quarter-inch from the door jam. He knew he had it when his fingers stopped hitting the wood. Ouch.

Concomitant with this is to not press down harder than you have to on the strings. It takes less pressure than you think to fret a note, especially if you're fretting properly (i.e., right up to the back of the next fret, almost touching it). And remember—the more pressure you put on a string, the more effort you need to release it, which can also lead to your fingers flying off the fret board. Avoid a "baseball bat grip" on the neck. Develop a feather-light touch where your fingers "depress" rather than "press." (It's a subtle distinction, but God is in the details, right?)

The right hand is THE most important element in bluegrass guitar playing. Think about it. It affects virtually everything that creates your personal sound—touch, tone, timing, attack, volume, phrasing, dynamics. And unlike electric players, who have a grab bag of effects to enhance their sound, you have…a pick. On the acoustic guitar, your right hand is your voice. Nothing less. So it pays to keep some concepts in mind.

1. **Grip the pick loosely.** David Grier says good musicianship is all about looseness. He was referring to Mike Compton, the mandolin player. "Watch him," David says, "and you wonder why he doesn't drop the pick." Take a lesson from that. Grip the pick so that if your grip were any looser you would drop it. Really. That's how loose you have to be. As the piece you're playing gets more complicated, or gets faster, the natural tendency is to tense up, to pick harder, to dig in, to *try* more. You must reprogram yourself to do just the opposite. The faster it is, the *more* you relax.

As to *how* you should hold the pick, it's up to you. The classic way is between the pad of the thumb and the first joint of the index finger. But some amazing players—Dan Crary, Albert Lee, Eddie van Halen, Carlos Santana—hold it with three fingers (thumb on top and index and middle finger on the bottom). No argument from me. Hold it the way it seems most natural.

2. **Play right at the back of the sound hole.** If you play right over the sound hole or up at the front, toward the neck, you get a mellow, "open" sound. Pretty and sweet, but not the classic bluegrass sound. When you play more toward the bridge, at the back of the sound hole, you get a harder, punchier sound while still capturing the warmth of the wood. It also seems, at least to me, that the strings have more tension behind the hole and less "give," which I find helps the pick to move more smoothly at faster tempos. BUT—this is not to say you should never play over the sound hole or up toward the neck. There are many occasions (a pretty ballad, a waltz, chord-melody arrangement) in which you *want* that sound and you should by all means use it. You may have to make some small adjustments in your technique (I find it requires a slightly different hand position) but that's all part of the learning process.

3. **Yes, anchoring is OK.** Many guitar methods insist that no part of your right hand should ever be touching the face of the guitar while you play. And their reasons make sense. If your hand is not anchored in any way, it has complete freedom to move across the strings. True. And if you can do it, do. Just remember—this is bluegrass guitar. You don't have an amplifier or a volume knob. All your power, drive, volume, and dynamics have to come from your right hand. And to do that, most bluegrass guitarists I've seen,

though by no means all, have some contact with the face of the guitar when they play. It isn't really bracing or anchoring, which implies stiffness and immobility. You DO want your right hand to be free to move. But bluegrass guitar playing does require a bit of "digging in," a bit of force, and giving your right hand a point of reference helps. Tony Rice's pinky and third finger touch the guitar. Steve Kaufman, Russ Barenberg, David Grier, Robin Bullock, Mark Cosgrove, Doc Watson—they all have some contact with the face of the guitar at various times. Dan Crary plants his wrist on the bridge pins and plays from there.

In the end it's whatever works to produce the sound you want to get. But "anchoring" is fine, as long as you're not really planting your hand so the movement is restricted.

4. **Play from the elbow, the forearm, the wrist, or the hand? Yes.** This is one area where every great player seems to be different. Doc Watson plays with a rigid forearm and generates his picking motion from the elbow. Russ Barenberg seems to play with a very fluid wrist motion. Tony Rice and Wyatt Rice use their thumb joint to create a smooth picking sound, so it seems as if their right hand is barely moving. When you're playing rhythm all elements are involved, right up to the shoulder. In lead playing it's whatever helps you get your sound—again, as long as it's loose and relaxed.

SPEED

Yes, you have to have it. People will say you don't have to be a speed-demon to be a good musician. They will say that playing the right notes, in tune and in time, is far more important than being able to execute a blistering string of 16th notes. And they are absolutely, 100% correct. Taste, tone, timing—they are what make music *music*. But you're playing *bluegrass* music and there's no getting around it: this is high-energy music and a lot of it is played at very quick tempos. Speed has to be in your bag of tricks.

How do you get speed? There are different schools of thought but the one I recommend (with an exception, as you will see) says that the secret to playing fast is playing slow—very, very, very slow. Your objective should always be good tone and good time, so never play faster than you can play in tempo and without making mistakes. The principle in effect here is that you have to work in concert with the way your neuromuscular system learns. Moving your fingers faster than your brain can absorb the mechanics of what you're doing will not build reliable technique. And reliability is what your after. Technique is not a lottery. It isn't hit or miss. Technique is the mechanical process that sounds the right notes in the right order at the right time—*every time*. It has to be there when you need it, without question. When you step on the accelerator you can't be wondering if the car will respond. So the process has to be thoroughly and indelibly ingrained in the mind-body dynamic that produces precise physical coordination.

And this happens when you play very slowly, with complete attention and awareness, so that everything you do is fully absorbed until it becomes part of your unconscious, until it becomes, dare I say it, easy. The great players make playing fast look easy *because it IS easy for them. They've MADE it easy.*

(And when I say slow, I mean SLOW. Set a metronome at 60 and play one note per click, remaining completely aware of whatever tension you may be feeling and getting rid of it at that tempo. Then move the metronome to 70 and do the same thing. And so on. (Much more on this at Jamie Andreas's website on the principles of correct guitar practice, which REALLY gets into the art and science of practicing.)

My one exception to this is that if you always play at tempos with which you're *completely* comfortable, you're going to reach a point where you've reached the limit of what's comfortable for you. Getting from playing 16th notes at 100 bpm comfortably does not automatically and necessarily translate into playing 16th notes easily at 138 bpm. At least it hasn't for me. What I recommend is this: at some point in your development, when you feel you've acquired solid control, relaxation and *musicality* at tempos that are comfortable for you, start setting the metronome slightly beyond your comfort level. Play at that tempo for a while and see where you're having trouble. Then work on those "fractures" at the slower tempos. Then bump the speed back up again, "test" your work, and continue the process until that new, slightly uncomfortable tempo starts feeling comfortable. And so on.

One other thing you might try: For the last five minutes of your practice, take a tune you know really well and play it crazy fast, way beyond your comfort level, and concentrate on staying relaxed at that level, regardless of what it sounds like. What this does is get you acclimated to quick tempos so they won't completely throw you in a real-world situation. Part of the problem with playing fast is that if you never do it in practice, any time you get in a live playing situation it's going to feel really unfamiliar and beyond your ability, causing you to tense up even more, with all the attendant problems that will ensue. Playing crazy, out-of-your-depth fast *for a small amount of time every day* gradually desensitizes you to the fear of a fast tempo, if nothing else. At least you've been there, it's familiar. And if you keep concentrating on relaxation and not on the mistakes you're making, over time you'll find you're actually hitting some notes at a tempo you thought was way beyond you.

Again—only do this briefly. The vast majority of your time should be spent on slow, steady, gradual progress where you're always trying to make it sound like *music*.

For this reason I also recommend a hierarchy of practice situations, going from most effective to least effective in terms of simulating a real, live performance situation, which, after all, is what you're practicing *for*.

1. Jamming with others comes closest to the real thing. In a sense it *is* a performance, to the extent that you're performing for the other players in the jam. It also puts you in a

band context where you have to be mindful of how your playing meshes with what everyone else is doing. You're also playing at the real tempo, so you get a reality check on what stage you're playing is really at. BUT—it's *not* the "real thing" and you *are* free to experiment and make mistakes in the company of those who are doing the same thing. Nobody's paying you money or expecting you to entertain people and play perfectly, so the pressure is off. Jams are the best laboratory for working on your playing. I can't tell you how many great bluegrass players spent their early years going to bluegrass festivals and jamming for three days straight, week after week, all summer long. If you want to get good fast, that's how to do it.

2. Play along with records. Again, although it's a solitary pursuit you *are* playing with a band and the tempo is real, so at least you're dealing with the elements of a live performance.

3. Play with a practice tape you've made. Play the chords to a tune you want to learn into a tape recorder. Play the rhythm part for as long as you can stand it. Then play it back and solo to it. Again, at least you're being forced to keep your playing in sync with an external element.

4. Play with a metronome. Again, at least there's an element outside of yourself you have to pay attention to.

7. 5. Play by yourself. The least effective but, hey, at least you have a guitar in your hands and you're moving your fingers. (By the way, playing watching TV isn't bad either. You can try to play along with the music from whatever show you're watching. You can even do some ear training by trying to play exactly what you hear, like a show's theme song or some jingle from a commercial. Or, while you're watching a scene you can try to play some music that's appropriate to what's happening—dramatic, romantic, humorous, fast-paced, etc. It all helps.)

SCALES AND EXERCISES: YES? NO? MAYBE?

Scales are the building blocks of music. What reason would there be *not* to learn them? Well, Doc Watson and Norman Blake are good reasons. Both are world-class flatpickers who probably don't know a whole lot about music theory. David Grier is a good reason. He plays—for my money, anyway—the best bluegrass guitar on the planet today, and yet he claims to just be finding "new ways to get from G to C." Robert Shaffer is a good reason. He won the Winfield Flatpicking Championship in 1999 and said in a workshop he "couldn't play a C scale if my life depended on it." I doubt that's really true, but it's clear he doesn't spend a lot of time on theory.

The point: you don’t *need* to know every scale and mode to play bluegrass guitar. If you flatpick a fiddle tune you’re pretty much doing a scale exercise anyway. A lot of fiddle tunes with fast eighth-note runs are that way. (In fact, open a book on guitar technique and they’ll give you fiddle tunes to play as exercises!) Even if you just play the melody to a song, you’re using the scale of the key you’re in. You just don’t know it. So in effect you’re “learning” scales every time you play. (Play “Angeline the Baker” and you’ll be an expert at the pentatonic scale without ever having heard of it.)

If you practice scales and exercises, pick ones that will help you play what you actually play. For instance, a bluegrass player would be better off playing eighth-note scale exercises in major and minor keys than spending weeks learning whole-tone scales and diminished runs, which don’t really come into play in the standard bluegrass repertoire. Even for the major and minor keys, you would probably get more practical use out of those in A, G, D, E, and C than in the flat and sharp keys, seeing as bluegrass players usually avoid those by using a capo. Or practice exercises that build right hand speed and strength, since you can never have too much of that in bluegrass.

Of course, if you want to be a complete musician, than scales, modes, arpeggios and theory are all there to be learned, and they sure can’t hurt. But with limited time, it’s best to practice what will help you with what you’re doing right now.

MUSICIAN 1: Do you read music?
MUSICIAN 2: Not enough to hurt my playing.

INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIAL

You’re living at a time when bluegrass musicians have a wealth of so-called instructional materials to draw from. This was not always the case. When I started playing in 1959 I would learn things by putting a 33 1/3 rpm (revolutions-per-minute) LP (long-playing) vinyl record (remember those?) on a turntable (remember *those*?) and slow it down to 16 rpm, picking up the needle (would you know what it was if I said stylus?) putting it back down again, and repeating the process until (a) I learned the lick, (b) the needle broke, or (c) the grooves had been worn so much the record wouldn’t play any more. Today there are audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and mountains of tablature in the stores, through the mail, and on the Internet. Search the name of the tune and you’ll have the tablature right there in front of you. If you wonder how Tony Rice or Dan Crary execute a certain lick, you don’t have to drive 15 hours to a festival and wait around in the heat or the rain to watch them play. Just order the video.

This is good. It certainly shortens the learning curve. And there’s absolutely nothing wrong with copying your favorite players. It’s how most people learn. So I would recommend them—up to a point.

You have to remember that all these players, though individually great, play with markedly different approaches to the instrument. What if Tony Rice says to cross-pick one way and Russ Barenberg says to do it another? What if Steve Kaufman says to play "Old Joe Clark" using strict alternate picking and David Grier says to use slides, hammer-ons, and pull-offs? And then Brad Davis says you can be even faster and cleaner if you use his double-downstroke approach, which flies in the face of everything you've heard so far?

This goes on and on. Everybody is going to tell you what works for them, which may or may not work for you. Obviously, you have to experiment and see, but the point is: too much information can be even more harmful than not enough. Instructional materials can become addictive, and before you know it you've acquired piles of the stuff that feels more like homework than music. It can seem overwhelming, not to mention confusing when everybody is saying something a little different.

So you have to be discerning. There's nothing wrong with exposing yourself to lots of different players. You can pick up something from each of them, which hopefully will all go into the development of your own style. But you may not want to spend too much time learning everything they show you note for note. Maybe just look at the video and *watch* them play without worrying about the accompanying tablature. I have a David Grier video that I just watch periodically to absorb his *approach* to the instrument. At one point I did learn the tablature but I've forgotten it because *it wasn't me*. If I went back to it I would only learn it so I could adapt it to the way it's comfortable and easy for me to play the tune. This (a) immediately makes me more creative instead of simply taking musical dictation, (b) it makes me dig to find what works for me, and (c) by so doing helps me develop my own style. When I'm done I've made the song *mine*, which is just what David Grier did when he decided to play it the way he's showing you. *That's* the way I can "play like David Grier."

That, I think, is how instructional materials can really work. As Dan 1818 says, in the end it's all about you teaching yourself the guitar. That's the stuff you won't forget because it has grown organically from who you are and what you feel.

Another thought: if you're going to buy instructional material, buy just one or two books or videos and *really master them*. Keep going back to them, rather than just moving on to the next thing that looks interesting. As guitar player s we can be like kids in a candy store: "I want *that*! Oh, *that* looks good too. And how about some of *that*! They all promise to make me a better player. Yes! More, more more!!" That way lies madness, or at the very least a feeling of being completely overwhelmed. Practice starts to feel like homework, which is the ultimate irony because when we started playing as kids, homework is what we blew off so we could play the guitar!!