

Travis Picking

Travis Picking, named after Merle Travis, involves playing a steady bass pattern with the thumb and filling out some syncopated rhythms with the fingers of the right hand (assuming a right handed guitarist). It is a great accompanimental style for folk and ragtime music amongst other styles.

What is its essence?

The essence of the Travis pattern is the steady bass against the syncopated figure played with the fingers. The use of the term "syncopated" is perhaps stretching it a bit. This term refers to a rhythm that is "off beat" with reference to the basic pulse. In this case the overall rhythm of the Travis pattern is not syncopated, however when you break the pattern down into its two elements, one part (played with the thumb) is on the beat, and the other part (played with the fingers) is sometimes in between the beat, hence the term syncopated. It is important to understand however, that when both thumb and finger are working together this should not produce a off beat jerky rhythm but instead a lively yet comfortable feeling groove with a steady pulse.

Make the thumb the time keeper!

1. First things First

Get that steady bass going. The Travis picking pattern depends on the thumb laying down a steady pulse, over and over. This example uses a D chord. The Bass is alternating between the Fourth and Third strings. Practice the bass by itself over and over and over and over. The notation shows a repeat sign indicating that you should practice each step many times. The sound files do not play the repeats.

2. Next add a pinch

The middle finger plays at the same time as the downbeat (along with the thumb). This is sometime referred to as a "pinch".

The musical notation shows a steady bass line in G major (one sharp) and common time. The treble staff contains a steady bass line alternating between the 4th and 3rd strings, with a repeat sign. The bass staff shows a steady bass line with a 'pinch' (middle finger) on the downbeat. A guitar chord diagram for D major is shown above the first measure. The notation is divided into two sections, labeled 1 and 2.

3. Can't wait to syncopate

The next element is adding the syncopation on the "and of two" played with the index finger. This stroke falls in between the steady bass pulse of the thumb. In the notation you will see two eighth notes played during the second beat. The thumb play the one on the beat and the index finger play the second eighth. Although the music seems to imply that there are two different "a" notes being played on the second count (an eighth note with stem up and a quarter note with stem down), there is just one and it is played by the thumb. This style of notation is used to show the "between the beat" nature of the notes being played with the fingers.

4. Syncopate again

Next you add the middle finger on the "and of three". You could leave it at that. That's a decent Travis Pattern, perhaps THE basic pattern. But lets add one more common variation.

5. One more syncopation

The last element to add is a syncopation with the index on the "and of Four".

The image displays three guitar patterns, labeled 3, 4, and 5, in the key of D major (one sharp). Each pattern is shown in two systems: a treble clef staff for the melody and a bass clef staff for the bass line. Pattern 3 and 4 are shown in two systems each, while pattern 5 is shown in one system. The bass line notation includes fingerings (1-3) and fret numbers (0, 2, 3) for the strings. Pattern 3 and 4 show a syncopated rhythm with a triplet of eighth notes on the 'and of three' and a quarter note on the 'and of four'. Pattern 5 adds a syncopation with the index finger on the 'and of four'.

It may take months to feel secure and confident at this speed. Have patience, use a metronome set to as slow as needed and play this pattern for 5 minutes no-stop. Then move the metronome setting up a notch every other day or so. After a few weeks (you didn't think this was going to be easy, did you?) your fingers will finally be trained to move in a manner that you first thought to be impossible. Don't quit on this one. If you get bored with the sound of the D chord, try other chords. For any chord play the first thumb stroke on the string that has the letter name of the chord. example: On a the C chord the R.H. thumb starts on the fifth string (which at the third fret is the note C). The thumb can then alternate between strings five and four.

The key to gaining command of the Travis pattern is the accurate repetition during practice. Don't try to play too fast too soon. Gradually work your way up to the faster speed and you will be secure in your playing, instead of just barely hanging on.

"Solo Finger Picking" by Jerry Snyder is a good book to start with if you want to continue to study this pattern. Once you gain experience in this style you might want to try some more advanced applications of this pattern. I've enjoyed playing out of "Guitar Finger-Picking Styles" by Happy Traum (contains some Blues and Ragtime pieces using Travis style thumpin' bass) and "Classic Ragtime Guitar Solos" by Stefan Grossman (a compilation of several ragtime pieces by various composers and arrangers)