

# About Strumming and the Right Hand

We focus on the fretting hand for a while to get the music happening, and it's worth saying some things about the other hand. Even though some of you may be playing guitar left-handed, we will still call the fretting hand the "left hand" and the strumming hand the "right hand."

Contrary to what some say, there is no "correct" way to strum, pick, or pluck a guitar string. Different players use bare fingers and thumbs, fingernails, artificial acrylic nails, flatpicks, fingerpicks and thumbpicks. Wes Montgomery was an important jazz guitarist who used only his thumb. Danny Gatton used a flatpick in conjunction with fingers 2, 3 and 4 and was able to do most of the things that most players do with a thumb and fingers 1-2-3. Most players use bare fingers or nails on a nylon string guitar, but Willie Nelson and Jesse Cook use a flatpick. Flatpicks, thumbpicks and fingerpicks come in many different materials and thicknesses, and all of them are useful for different kinds of sounds. Mother Maybelle Carter was hugely important in the evolution of folk, country and bluegrass guitar, and she used a thumbpick, a fingerpick on her index finger, and a backwards finger pick on her middle finger, something that almost no one else has ever done. Some people use a coin, or a piece of plastic like a bread-tie, or even cardboard, glass or stone. If you want to sound like a particular player, clearly you will have the best success if you use the techniques and tools they do. Some players (like James Taylor) do the downstroke with their thumb and upstrokes with either side of the fingers in a "brushing" motion. Many of us use a variety of right-hand techniques to achieve a variety of different sounds, and none of them is more right or wrong than another.

## ***So what should you do?***

You should follow your instincts, keep an open mind, and listen to the sounds you are making as you try different ways of sounding the strings. You need to keep time with the music, and establish the rhythm of the song using combinations of upstrokes and downstrokes. If you tap your foot along with the music, basically each foot tap is a "*beat*." Most common rhythms involve beat groups of 2, 3 or 4 and sometimes 6 or 8. Start by strumming one for each beat. Songs have natural rhythmic "grooves" that are easy to imitate by watching or listening, and nearly impossible to notate on paper. It's very hard to do what other people do, and each of us has instincts and tendencies toward

certain right-hand skills.

You could try your whole life and you'd never be able to really imitate Bob Marley's reggae rhythm, John Hurt's flowing fingerpicking, Bill Monroe's bluegrass "chop", or Chuck Berry's raucous electric guitar moves. It's good to listen to a lot of music, and then play what you feel. If it feels right, it is right, since there are no rigid rules in home-made music. If you are playing with other people, you'll quickly find out where the problems are with your rhythm, and playing along with recordings is also a great way to develop skills and gather new ideas.

You will probably find that certain songs will steer you toward types of strumming, or make you want to learn some picking patterns to get an *arpeggio* sound.

Both hands also can color your sound in nearly invisible ways. Relaxing your left hand chording fingers will dampen and mute the strings. This can be combined with all sorts of ways to also touch the strings with your right-hand fingers, palm or even the side of your hand to color and damp the strings. You can totally stop a chord from ringing with just the right hand, and good players use all kinds of ways to use these techniques to make bouncier rhythms and "chunky" sounds.

It also makes a big difference where you strike the string, and strumming or plucking right at the bridge, over the soundhole or even up over the fingerboard will all yield different colorations of the sound that are part of playing guitar as much as switching chords or playing notes.

Also keep in mind that it takes a while to learn to hold a pick and use it well. "Pickers" tend to use thicker picks, and they learn to hold them loosely or tightly as needed. Beginners and "strummers" usually do better with thinner picks, since they tend to grip them very tightly, and the pick needs to bend. With time you'll learn to relax your grip on the pick, and let it "flop" across the strings for strumming, and you will likely graduate from a thin to a heavier pick after a while. Some picks even have corners that are different thicknesses so you can rotate the pick as needed.

**Do whatever you can do, and focus on the left hand until you get yourself launched. You can go back and study right-hand techniques later once you have learned how to generate some songs, and once your left hand has learned how to change chords smoothly.**