



# GUITAR

## Pickin' on Travis

by Jason Vanselow

Merle Travis (1917-1983) was a country guitar player who found popularity in the 1950s and recorded hits like *Nine Pound Hammer* and *Sixteen Tons* (in which he coined the phrase “another day older and deeper in debt”). While he certainly gained a following through his songwriting skills, the main reason that he is still known today is because of some of the unique guitar playing techniques that he developed.

“Travis Picking,” as it has come to be known as, is a set of patterns played by the right hand that both arpeggiates a given chord, but also plays a defined bass line at the same time. It’s a style of playing that has influenced the likes of Chet Atkins, Paul Simon and Bob Dylan and has been heard in the music of Kansas, Fleetwood Mac, Pearl Jam, Iron and Wine, and even Taylor Swift.

Travis Picking is a worthwhile skill to learn and it’s a great technique to teach to late beginner or early intermediate students who have already done some basic fingerpicking. While it certainly offers a number of challenges to students, particularly at the beginning part of the learning process, there are a number of benefits for the player. This technique develops right hand thumb independence, enforces basic rhythm skills, and once a student has mastered it, it creates a beautiful sound that can be used in any number of songs.

While there are any number of patterns that fall underneath the Travis Picking umbrella, the one that I’d like to present here is closest to the pattern used in Kansas’ 1977 song *Dust in the Wind*:

Example A

While it looks a little complicated at the beginning there are a couple of good ways to break it down in order to teach it effectively. In both, it’s worthwhile to start just playing on open strings and adding chords once the pattern is learned.

One way to start, is by simply have the thumb alternate between fifth and fourth strings, making sure to start on the fifth string for now (see the first measure in Example B). As you can see, this creates a steady quarter note groove. Next, on the “and” of both the second and fourth beats, play the index finger on the third string (see the second measure in Example B). Finally, play the middle finger on the “and” of the third beat to complete the pattern (see the third measure in Example B).

Example B

Another way to approach this is to break the pattern in half and start by playing the last two beats of the pattern on its own (see Example C, first measure). After that becomes comfortable, play the first half of the pattern simply by not playing the middle finger on the “and” of the first beat (see Example C, second measure). Once that has sunk in, combine the two halves (See Example C, third measure).

Example C

After completing the basic pattern you can add the middle finger playing on the first beat on the second string along with the thumb. This creates a little melody on the second string that consistently plays on the downbeat and the “and” of three. You can hear this clearly on the recording of *Dust in the Wind* as well as other songs.

There are a number of challenges for a player when first learning this pattern. The first is simply coordinating the fingers to do everything in the right order at the right time. This is obviously solved by slow practice over the course of time.

But the bigger challenge for students is often a rhythmic one. When the pattern is played correctly, it consists of all eighth notes with the exception of the first beat, which is a quarter note. The tendency for students is to blow right through the quarter note so that the measure ends up being only seven eighth notes long.

Learning the pattern by using the first method from above can often alleviate that challenge earlier in the learning process, but beginning players often struggle with the eighth note exchange between the thumb and index finger in the second beat. Learning the pattern by using the second method from above often avoids that problem as well, but if students become rhythmically lazy or are simply struggling with the pattern anyway, this is one of the most common challenges to present itself.

After it’s comfortable to play, the next step is to add in chords in the left hand. Once you’ve added those in, it is important to remember that the thumb should play the root of the chord on the downbeat of the measure. This may mean shifting the thumb to either the sixth or fourth string for the first and third beats of the pattern. The thumb note that’s played on the second and fourth beat of the pattern can still be played on the fourth string.

Travis Picking is a great technique for advancing right technique beyond basic accompaniment patterns. Once it’s mastered, it has a beautiful sound that can provide both a melody and a bass line, or simply accompany a singer or another instrumentalist.

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