

Fingerstyle Guitar - Intro

Playing fingerstyle guitar is perhaps one of the more challenging approaches to guitar playing but also one of the most rewarding in the sense that you can become your own accompanist. The thing I love the most about it is playing a melody and then playing either chords or an accompanying bass line on the lower strings. A good fingerstyle player can quite literally be a one man band with just a guitar. A few great example of this are Tommy Emmanuel, Don Ross, and Chet Atkins. There are of course countless others as well (and I'm sure you have your favorites too) but this is really not about those guys – it's about YOU.

While everyone seems to have their own unique style in this vast genre we call fingerstyle guitar, there are a few things that I like to emphasize in order to get people off on the right foot (or finger if you prefer). These include:

- the use of individual fingers for each of the treble strings (strings 1, 2, and 3)
- the use of the thumb for the three bass strings (strings 4, 5, and 6)
- the thumb moved slightly further from the bridge than the fingers



figure 1

This last point is borrowed from the classical technique but is not stressed quite as much in fingerstyle playing. The main reasons for this in my mind (see figure 1) is to keep the thumb and the index finger out of each others' way when playing the fourth string and the third string together and to allow the fingers to strike the string at a more direct angle.

Another place where acoustic fingerstyle differs from the classical style is in the absence of a “rest stroke”. This is where the right hand fingers strike the string and follow through until they rest on the next string (hence, the name). This technique has actually fallen a little out of fashion even with many classical guitarists and so will not be discussed here at all. In acoustic fingerstyle playing the most commonly used plucking technique by far is the free stroke. This will be covered in greater detail in the following pages.

First – The Basics

First of all I feel I must dedicate at least one page to the subject of *hand position*. This subject is of course a highly debated one amongst guitarist of all persuasions but one that still needs to be addressed. By the way, if you don't agree with me on every aspect of this, that's quite alright. I won't be the least bit offended, however I would like you to know at least these two things:

1. every rule I make in this book is there for a specific reason (which I will not keep from you) and,
2. every one of these rules is also made to be broken at certain times and in certain instances.

Let's start with the left hand. There are actually two basic approaches to this that I find acceptable and I use both of them – and a mixture of them – all the time. I'll mention them briefly here and then elaborate on each of them afterward. One is the accepted classical position which looks something like the picture to the right. (see figure 2)



figure 2

The other is the more common position among non-classical players sometimes known as the “baseball bat grip” that could look something like figure 3.

Both of these positions have good things and bad things that can be said about them. Because of this – wait for it – both could be considered correct and very useful in their respective applications. Don't dismiss something before you know all the facts. I'll talk more about this in the video.



figure 3 – “Baseball Grip”

The “Classical” left hand position:

In this position the thumb is behind the neck and opposite the 2nd finger (if the 2nd finger is at the 2nd fret, the thumb is behind the 2nd fret). The thumb is straight and pointing up and sits no higher than the middle of the neck. The wrist is bent forward so that the knuckles are in line (parallel with) the neck and even slightly in front of the neck. This allows the fingers to curve and allows maximum reach for every finger (for those of you that have been playing for awhile, try reaching from the 3rd to the 8th fret with your thumb hooked over the neck). With this kind of a “classical” approach it's not that difficult a move.

The drawback of this classical hand position comes when you realize that it goes hand in hand (no pun intended) with the classical position of the guitar itself – that is, on the left leg rather than the right leg. The beauty of this position is that the guitar is extremely stable when sitting because it is in contact with the body at four points not including the left hand (see figure 4):

1. the left leg (resting on it)
2. the inner right thigh
3. the chest
4. the right arm just below the elbow

Because of this stability very little effort is needed from the left hand to steady the guitar and all that is needed is to fret the strings. When the guitar rests on the right leg as is the preferred style of most non-classical guitarists it is not nearly so stable and therefore needs additional support and steadiness from the left hand. This is the reason for hanging the thumb over the top of the neck. (see figure 3)



*figure 4 – Andres Segovia
The classical position*

Here, the left hand holds onto the neck of the guitar with the thumb resting on top of the neck and sometimes even curled over the top. The nice thing about this position is that you are able to relax the left arm when playing in one particular area of the fretboard and just sort of “hang” it on the neck. Another great thing about this is the added ability to actually fret notes on the 6th and even the 5th string with your thumb. Some players make very liberal use of this technique and there are some chords and passages that are much easier to play from this position.

Because this is a fingerstyle book, the first few lessons will start off working with only the right hand. The left hand will hold a 4 string E minor chord (2nd finger on the 4th string at the 2nd fret, and the strings 1,2, and 3 played open). This doesn't mean you can't play any other chord but this is probably the easiest chord you can play that still sounds good by itself. This way we are able to focus all of our attention on the right hand which is where the vast majority of the work is done.

Now, let's begin...