

Clawhammer Guitar Basics

Adapted from a handout distributed at clawhammer guitar workshops offered by Michael Stadler.

To hear examples, you can get a copy of Solid Air Records' "Clawhammer Guitar: The Collection" which features [Steve Baughman](#), [Jody Stecher](#) and [Alec Stone Sweet](#), as well as [Michael Stadler](#), from Michael by [emailing](#) Michael.

What is it? Simply put, clawhammer guitar is an old time banjo style applied to the guitar. It's the style you'll hear most often accompanying American fiddle tunes, that galloping, "Rock of the Thirties" style that drives cloggers and square dancers.

Here's the basic beat in standard music notation.



I'm told that many British people confuse this style with Travis picking. They are not the same.

Though it's usually defined in terms of how the picking hand is used, clawhammer is an ambidextrous technique. I think of the claw as being the picking hand. It's fairly fixed in shape, somewhat fist like and slightly opened. The hammer, I think, may be so named from one of the major fret hand techniques, the hammer-on. (More on that later.)

Tuning

For this demonstration we'll use G modal tuning, which is (from low to high) D – G – D – G – C – D. It's a very flexible tuning as it has no third (or mi) note as an open string; it can easily be either Major or minor. From standard tuning, lower the 6th string two frets from E to D; lower the 5th from A to G; lower the 1st from E to D; raise the B to C.

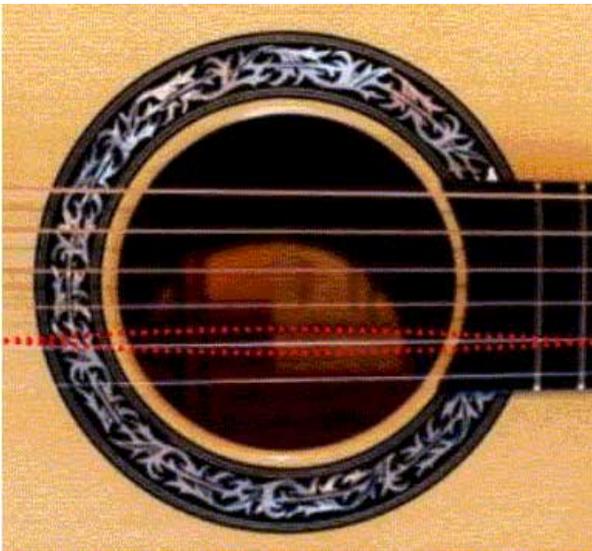
There are many tunings available to you to work with. To limit the scope of this workshop, however, we'll use only G modal.

Picking hand

There are two main components in the picking hand technique; thumb and finger(s).

Fingers

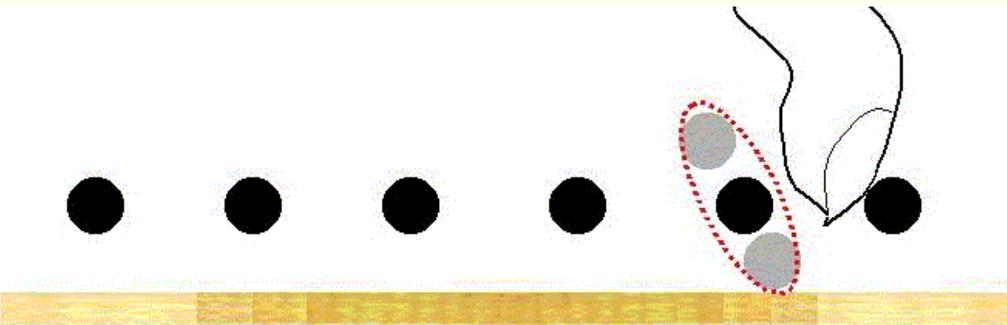
As mentioned above, all picked notes are in a "downward" direction. This means using the back of nail. Strike the top of the string with the tip of the nail for good tone and smooth playing. It's good to have strong, well-shaped nails for clawhammer techniques. I put "downward" in quotes since the stroke is actually more "in" toward the top of the guitar, like a rest stroke played with the back of the nail.



(Image from [Pertman guitars](#))

Most fingerstyle guitar relies heavily on what's called a "free stroke." This is a picking technique wherein the string is moved in a direction parallel to the guitar's top.

Clawhammer guitar moves the string in the other orientation, toward and away from the top, which sets it in motion more vigorously. The volume increases.



A "rest stroke" in fingerstyle guitar is usually thought of as an upstroke. In clawhammer, it's the opposite. The hand is somewhat curled inward. As the hand moves toward the string, the fingertip moves through the string and comes to rest on the next adjacent string physically below it. Don't rest for long; you'll be using it again. It is this technique that gives the style a strong voice, a well-supported volume.

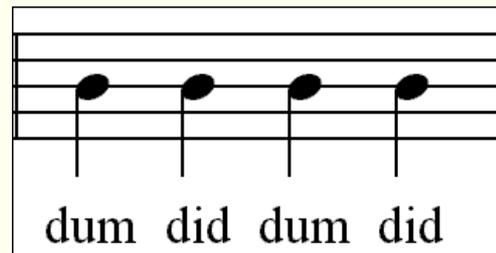
Which finger(s) to use is up to you. Generally, I use the middle, as I like the mellower tone it produces. I use the index when I want a more trebly tone with a bit more volume. In practice, I use both fingers at different times. If your hands are on the small side, it may be easier to reach across the strings using the middle finger.



The motion is a bit like knocking on a door or lightly rapping a table top. The hand's trajectory is both down across the target string(s) and in toward the instrument's top, coming to rest against the next string.

Try this movement on the open second string.

Use only down strokes on down beats, 1 – 2 – 3 – 4. For now, don't use your picking thumb at all. Try it now, using the rhythmic phrase "dum did dum did" instead of counting.

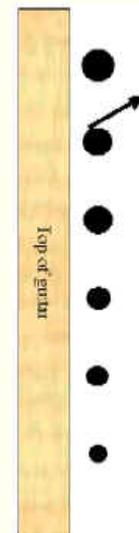


Backbeat Driver

When the above becomes comfortable and rhythmic, it's time to introduce the picking thumb. This digit gives the style much of its force.

The trick to using your picking thumb is that, while it's technically a down stroke, the fleshy part of the thumb makes the sound by catching the string - fifth string, in our case - during the upward trajectory of the hand, using a very subtle twisting motion. The twist creates the opposite of the finger technique as shown here.

In effect, the string is lightly caught by the flesh and released on the backbeat when the picking hand has moved far enough to cause its release, a point of no return. If you're familiar with the *popping* the funk bassists do - ever watched the television show *Seinfeld*? - it's quite similar. Again, string motion is somewhat perpendicular to the top of the guitar.



The use of the thumb in clawhammer departs from the norm by being used on the second half of backbeat. (When counting 1 - 2 - 3 - 4, beats 2 and 4 are backbeats; beats 1 and 3 are downbeats.) In most fingerpicking styles the thumb is used on the downbeat. The thumbed note is the "-dy" syllable of the rhythmic phrase "dum did-dy dum did-dy." Try saying this phrase and tapping the upper side of your guitar with your thumb each time the "-dy" comes around. For now, leave the fingers out of it.

Pretty weird, huh? It won't be. Play

the "dum did dum did" rhythm in the previous section, very slowly, and add the thumb backbeat "-dy" to the movement.

Combining these two moves is awkward for everyone who first tries it. It soon becomes fairly fluid for most players.

Driving on the Left Side

No, this is not British roadway custom, nor angst for Joe McCarthy. (Apologies to left-handers.) Much of the thrust of clawhammer style is created by fretting hand techniques. As with all styles, the direct approach is to fret a note at the same time it's picked.

Driving Indirections

There are a few indirect ways to produce notes on plucked string instruments.

Hammer-on: This is a note produced by bringing a fretting finger down on a note **AFTER** a string has been plucked. You must bring the finger down quickly and firmly; too slowly and you've damped its vibration and silenced it.

In G Modal tuning, described on the first page, pick the open 2nd string with either the index or middle finger (try each for tonal variation and to learn which is your preference).

While the note still sounds strongly, "hammer" onto its 2nd fret.

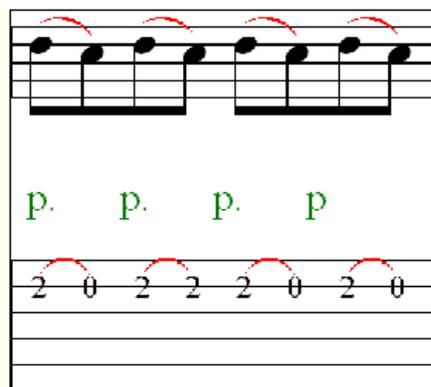
(The "h." stand for hammer-on; sometimes "h.o." is used.)

Work on this until the hammered note is about as loud as is the picked note. Pick only on the downbeat, the first of each pair of eighth notes.

Pull-off: This technique is pretty much the opposite of a hammer-on. The fretting finger pulls away **AFTER** a string has been plucked.

Fret string 2 at fret 2. Pluck that note.

While the note still sounds strongly, lift the fretting finger quickly down and away from the fretboard. Too slowly and the note will be damped and silent. This action is like plucking with the fretting finger.

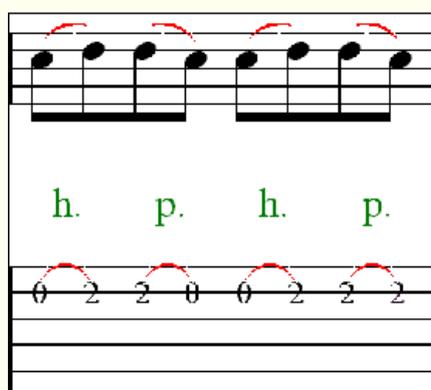


Now practice until the pulled note is about as loud as the picked note. Again, pick only on the downbeat, the first of each pair of eighth notes.

Hammer-on & Pull-off: Now put these two techniques together. Don't worry about including the picking thumb for the time being. Each note is down-picked with the tip of the back of the nail.

Do your best to keep it smooth and rhythmic. Start very slowly and gradually increase your speed.

Pick the downbeat only, as above.

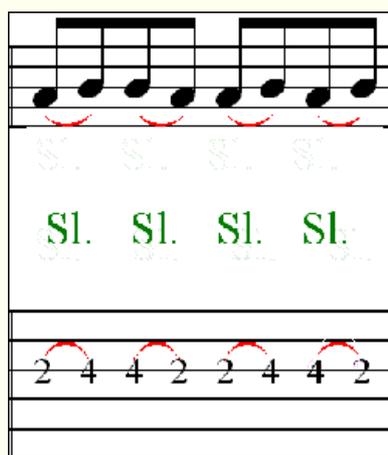


Slide or slur: This one travels in both directions. You can slide up or down from whichever note you've just picked.

Fret string 3 at fret 2. I use my middle finger.

Down-pick the note.

Keeping the finger pressed to the fretboard, slide up to the 4th fret, allowing no break in the sound. Now pick the note and slide down to fret 2.



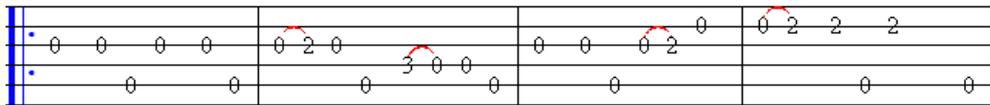
"Sl." indicates a slide.

Here's a simple arrangement of a traditional song which makes extensive use of hammer-ons and pull-offs.

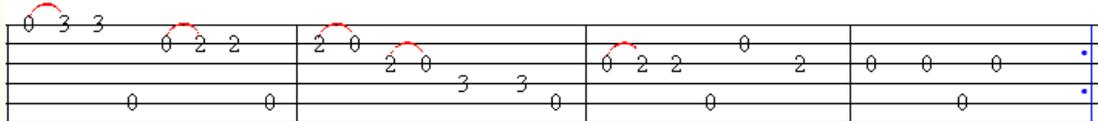
Shady Grove (Capo at fret 2 to be in traditional key of A)



h. p. h. h.



h. h. p. p. h.



[CHORUS]

Shady Grove, my little love,
 Shady grove I say.
 Shady Grove, my little love,
 I'm a-bound to go away.

Cheeks as red as a blooming rose,
 And eyes of the prettiest brown;
 She's the darling of my heart,
 The prettiest little girl in town.

When I went to see my Shady Grove
 She was a-standing in the door.
 Her shoes and stockings in her hand
 And her little bare feet on the floor.

[CHORUS]

I wish I had a glass of wine
 And bread and meat for two;
 I'd set it all on a golden plate
 And give it all to you.

Now when I was a little boy
 I wanted a Barlow knife,
 And now I want little Shady Grove
 to say she'll be my wife.

[CHORUS]

I wish I had me a big fine horse
 And the corn to feed him on,
 Little Shady Grove to stay at home
 And feed him while I'm gone.

A kiss from little Shady Grove
 Is as sweet as brandywine,
 And there ain't no girl in this whole world
 That's prettier than mine.