

# **Picking Mechanics For Blues Guitar**

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## **Introduction: How To Free The Music Inside Of You By Overcoming Your Guitar Technique Limitations**

As a blues guitarist you want to express your feelings through your guitar. Before you can free the music in yourself, you need to clear the roadblock that is holding you back from expressing the music freely.

Many guitar students struggle with their freedom of expression when playing blues solos, mainly because they believe that 'blues is an easy style' and because of this they never focus on blues guitar technique. This mistake causes the student to only get partial results when improvising and lays also at the root of why many struggle to play blues guitar solos effortlessly.

### **How To Take Your Mind Of Guitar Technique**

Guitar technique should be practiced in order to take your mind of technique. Once you focused on the right exercises then you will find yourself in a place where you don't have to actively think about technique anymore (even when playing the most challenging passages, licks, riffs or solos). In this way technique should be looked at is if it where something that needed to be improved in order to remove the 'roadblock' that is standing between you and the music.

Look at this as music would come 'falling from the sky' and you are nothing more but the receptor of the music. If your body isn't trained to make the music appear (which is the main goal of guitar technique training), then no matter what you hear in your head you will never get the music out.

### **Becoming The Doorway For Music**

Many master musicians have talked about becoming the doorway for music to find it's way into our physical reality. In this regard, music is considered a divine energy that is brought into our world by the musician. Developing your guitar technique is the most important thing you can do to sharpen the skill of being the 'receptor' of music.

As you will find over time, your creativity, improvisation and self-expression will improve because of removing this roadblock that stands between you and the music.

### **Isn't Blues An Easy Style To Play?**

This guide is intended to give you an overview of the different picking techniques used in blues guitar solos. Many believe blues is an easy style, but over the years it developed with players such as Joe Bonamassa, Eric Johnson, Gary Moore and many more, pushing the boundaries of the instrument and style on areas such as picking technique.

We will only focus on a very small topic in respect to blues guitar technique; i.e. picking mechanics. It's important to realize that while we are only looking

at one part of the whole topic of guitar technique, this part is equally important as all other parts. Also, the topic of fingerpicking will not be covered in this guide since stylistically and technique-wise it would fit better in a separate course.

### **Get To The Core Of Your Technique**

A great way of looking at the idea of guitar technique is seeing it as if it were an onion. Each layer of the onion represents an area that should be 'peeled' in a way to get to the core of the onion. When you are practicing your guitar technique (in a correct way) then you are 'peeling of the layers' of guitar technique in order to get to the core of pure self-expressiveness.

In this guide we will start peeling of one of the layers of the entire guitar technique subject. So let's get practicing!

## I. Downstrokes Only

### A. When To Use


Throughout this guide you will be presented different ways of using your guitar pick. As you will learn, this is important because different musical passages require different picking patterns. In order to focus our attention fully on the picking hand, the left hand fingering stays the same throughout all of the exercises. So first learn and memorize the left hand fingering for the lick below that we will use in this guide.


### B. Example

The image shows a musical example of a blues lick. It consists of a treble clef staff in 4/4 time, starting with a '1' above the staff. The melody is written as eighth notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4. Below the staff is a guitar tablature with three lines labeled T, A, and B. The fret numbers are: 8, 7, 5, 8, 7, 5, 8, 7, 5, 7. A 'T' is written on the top string, and 'A' and 'B' are written on the middle strings. Wavy lines above and below the staff indicate vibrato.



Use your pinky finger on the eight fret, your ring finger on the seventh fret and your index finger on the fifth fret. In case you're not familiar with it, this is

the tab symbol for a downstroke:  Which means you need to pick the string in a downward motion (from ceiling to ground). Further in this guide

you will also come across the symbol for the upstroke:  (pick the string using an upward motion from floor to ceiling when this symbol is used).

This lick can be found in many blues (and even country-inspired) blues solos while at the same time forms a great exercise for two-hand synchronization. For now, as the tab above shows, we will pick this lick using only downstrokes. When using downstrokes we're making the most use of gravity, which makes our attack on the strings more straightforward and aggressive. Most of the time the approach where you are playing only downstrokes will be alternated with other approaches such as alternate picking or economy picking.

### C. Famous Players Using This Technique

As stated above, most of the time guitarists will not play using downstrokes all of the time, but only on some passages in their solos. Guitar techniques such as the doublestop are an example of such passages where a lot of guitarists will choose the downstrokes only approach. Countless blues guitarists such as B.B. King, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Buddy Guy, etc. have all experimented with this picking approach.

## II. Alternate Picking

### A. When To Use

Alternate picking is the most common way of picking on the guitar. Since it is so common many people only make use of alternate picking (along with using downstrokes) and as a result stop progressing as guitar players.

Nevertheless, it is a very important guitar technique that should be learned in the beginning of your guitar education. Once mastered, it's a good idea to go on to more advanced ways of picking, as we will discuss in the remainder of this guide.

### B. Example

As you can see in the lick below, the left hand fingering stays the same, but we are now using alternate picking. This is a great exercise for synchronizing both hands.

The musical notation consists of two staves. The top staff is a single treble clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains a sequence of ten notes: G4, A4, B4, C#5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. The first three notes (G, A, B) are grouped by a bracket with a '3' above it. The next three notes (C#, B, A) are grouped by a bracket with a '3' above it. The final four notes (G, F#, E, D) are grouped by a bracket with a '3' above it. The bottom staff is a six-line staff representing the guitar fretboard. It shows the left-hand fingering for the notes: 8-7-5 for G, A, B; 8-7-5 for C#, B, A; 8-7-5 for G, F#, E; and 7 for D. Below the bottom staff are ten picking symbols: a square for downstroke and a 'V' for upstroke, alternating for each note.

### C. Famous Players Using This Technique

Since alternate picking is one of the most used picking techniques in blues guitar, countless blues players make use of this technique.

### III. Economy Picking

#### A. Why Use Economy Picking?

Economy picking was made popular in the eighties by fusion guitarist Frank Gambale. Because the approach is more efficient in terms of picking motions than alternate picking (hence the name 'economy' picking), it inspired countless guitarists to adopt this picking technique in their playing. Economy picking involves using alternate picking except when changing strings, as you will see in the example below.

#### B. Example

The example shows a musical staff with a 4/4 time signature. The melody consists of eighth notes on the 4th, 3rd, 2nd, and 1st strings. The first three strings are played in triplets. The fret numbers for the notes are 8, 7, 5, 8, 7, 5, 8, 7, 5, 7. The picking symbols are: V, ▣, V, V, ▣, V, V, ▣, V, V.

Study the picking symbols under the tab, you will notice that we use two uppicks in a row each time we're switching to a lower string.

The aim of economy picking is to minimize movement in the right hand, and avoid the motion of "jumping" over a string prior to picking it, as often occurs in alternate picking. When practiced correctly, this technique will not only bring you more speed, but will also deliver greater control in your overall guitar playing.

#### C. Famous Players Using This Technique

Gary Moore, Les Paul, Eric Johnson, Chet Atkins, Zakk Wylde, etc.

## IV. Legato Technique

### A. When To Use

The term 'legato' means to play fluently. That's why on guitar the term 'legato technique' is often used to indicate the use of hammer-ons and pull-offs, which is used to play a series of connected notes smoothly.

### B. Example

The image shows two musical staves. The top staff is on a single string (6th string) and contains three triplets of notes, each indicated by a bracket labeled '3'. Slurs are placed above each triplet. The bottom staff is on a single string (8th string) and contains three pull-off techniques, each indicated by a slur and a bracket labeled '8-7-5'. Below the staves, four small square icons represent the fret positions for the notes.

Applying legato technique to our original example is done by using the pull-off technique on each set of three notes that are played on the same string. The slur (curved line) above the notes indicates these are all played using a pull-off.

### C. Famous Players Using This Technique

Legato technique is very common in blues guitar. Lots of guitar players embraced legato technique because of its fluent sound, including Stevie Ray Vaughan, Allan Holdsworth, Scott Henderson, etc.



## V. Sweep Picking

### A. When To Use

Sweep picking is another 'high-efficiency' guitar technique, which is often used on fast licks and passages by guitarists such as Joe Bonamassa,

The idea behind sweep picking is that you're going to play notes that are on strings next to each other with one fluent stroke in the direction where the pick is going. The next example will clarify this.

### B. Example

Here we are combining sweep picking with legato technique.

Note how the pick is moving upwards (towards the ceiling) on all four strings. To perform a successful sweep, you should be able to not let the pick stop in between strings but rather perform a continuous stroke.

### C. Famous Players Using This Technique

Sweep picking is a technique that is used across a lot of music styles, but only recently made its entrance in the blues world because of virtuoso guitar players such as Joe Bonamassa.

## VI. Important Considerations

There are two very important considerations that you should be aware of:

- 1) The presented examples are all great exercises to synchronize both hands. It's important to realize that although we are using the same left hand fingering on each of the presented licks, since the right hand motions are different each exercise will benefit your hands in another way when practiced separately.
- 2) When discussing the topic of guitar technique, it is crucial to understand that everything is related to the musical situation that we are in.

There is one very important point that I want to drive home in this guide, regarding the interplay between musical situation and technique. Understanding this will greatly benefit your technical progress!

Go back and watch how the rhythms change from technique to technique in the licks presented throughout this guide. Do you see how they change from technique to technique? The lick where we used downpicks is notated in an eight-note rhythm (2 notes per beat), where the lick using alternate picking uses a triplet rhythm (3 notes per beat). The examples using economy picking, sweep picking and legato picking all use a sextuplet rhythm (6 notes per beat).

This is not to say that we can't use legato technique on an eight-note lick, but it's important to see how the techniques change when the rhythm of the licks change. The main reason why I wanted you to try out these exercises is to make you aware of one important point that is often overlooked on the subject of guitar technique; musical situation dictates technique (not the other way around).

### How Great Guitarists Think About Technique

Not one technique is superior in itself over another technique. It's the music that is important, not the technique (although we need technique in order to let the music appear, as explained in the introduction of this guide).

Great guitarist may use alternate picking on a medium-speed passage, use downstrokes only on a slow speed passage where they need 'extra bite' in their pick attack and use economy picking, sweep picking or legato on a fast lick.

If you for instance would study a Gary Moore (or any other technically developed blues guitarist for that matter) solo, you would come exactly to the conclusion that the picking techniques he uses are all 'dictated' by the sort of passage in the music he plays. This is exactly what great guitarists do; they make their guitar technique follow the musical situation they are in.

## **Technical Training Will Lead You To Freedom Of Expression**

One last point that you need to understand in order to make the most out of this information is that even if you don't want to play fast guitar solos, these exercises are still very relevant. In blues, we don't always need great speed, but it's better to have it to your disposal, because you might need it someday.

Like a sportsman training in the gym you want to focus on different exercises. Depending on your level on the guitar, it might for instance prove beneficial to practice sweep picking on a legato lick or alternate picking on a doublestop lick. This will lead you to more control over your technique.

What will happen by focussing on different 'real life' scenarios, is that over time you will have to focus less and less on your technique when playing. This will lead you to freedom of expression when improvising (or playing existing songs and solos)!

Learn About [Improving Your Blues Guitar Soloing](#)

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