

Basic Finger Action

It pretty much goes without saying that elementary finger picking is quite easy – you strike one string with the thumb and the following one with a finger, or pluck two or three strings in unison with thumb and finger(s)! Got it ? Now, it's how we apply our thumb and fingers that can generate an interesting effect. Acoustic Blues Pickin' is something else. It's fairly hard to perform blues finger picking easily so that it flows.

It's Best To Follow The Masters

I've seen that a lot of old school guitar masters just used one finger on their right hand – Doc Watson, Reverend Gary Davis, Scrapper Blackwell, Blind Boy Fuller, Floyd Council, Big Bill Broonzy, and the number goes on and on. We are really lucky to have old movie clips of blues men such as Broonzy so we can get an idea how these folks made those fantastic sounds.

The picking hand thumb can move over to the treble strings to help out, which adds to the syncopation. We start to see that the picking thumb is the driving force underlying the very best acoustic blues. It can double the beat to copy a heartbeat, play off-time, pluck two or several strings at a time and produce single string runs if used together with one of the fingers (normally the index.) Reverend Gary Davis was a main exponent of this style of playing .

From The Roots To The Modern

Davis might play with picks or bare fingers, but preferred to use a large plastic thumb pick and one steel steel pick on his index finger. It makes a strong, penetrating effect which allowed his blues sound to rise over traffic din in Harlem when he sang and performed on the streets . His stunningly fast single string runs picked with thumb and finger are really tricky to recreate properly . Davis was broadly respected as a great blues guitar instructor. For the guitarist keen to [learn the blues](#), the Reverend was sent from heaven.

Modern guitarists similar to Doc Watson and Chet Atkins, had a clipped, economical way of playing, but Doc uses a plastic thumb and finger pick, while Chet used a plastic pick for his thumb and bare finger nails. Doc uses one finger of his right hand, and Chet employed three (at least).

Keep The Basics

Where should the student start? Exactly where to uncover an instructor? What technique to follow, delta blues or Piedmont ragtime blues? Modern acoustic blues can be a bit overly complex and it would seem that the formula " Fantastically Complicated = Better" still holds good in a lot of quarters. Fortunately, some guitarists are looking more towards the roots again in recent years and more enthusiasts are searching for the real sound of [acoustic blues](#). That is not to imply that these old blues guys couldn't make some incredibly complex music, but the feeling behind the fingers is what it's really about. Texas blues legend, Lightnin' (Sam) Hopkins usually played a basic picking pattern in E, for example, with a strong monotonic bass stroke. At times he might double up on the beat and the bass note resembled a heart beat.

By contrast, he could move up the neck of the guitar like 'lightnin' and bend the treble strings, making hypnotic notes. The effect was a sound that communicates with your heart and it speaks the real truth – that's [the blues](#)

Looking For The Teacher

In the late fifties and early 60s, youthful guitarists scoured the land for the old blues guitarists and a lot of the old performers started to play their guitars again, either as performers or teachers. As the years pass, they are now few and far between, so it is much tougher to find a real live blues guitar picker who can perform in the original way.

In the previous 5 years, the resources available to the student guitarist wanting to learn how to finger pick the blues are formidable. Unfortunately, this fact can also slow us down a bit.