

There are literally thousands and maybe millions of acoustic guitar players around the world. It's the most popular musical instrument by far, because of its portability and the fact that you can get a basic tune out of it in a couple of weeks. I chose 'acoustic guitar' because this is my main interest and I want to talk about finger picking techniques. Normally, electric guitarists use a plectrum of some kind to pluck the strings in and up down motion. Of course, there are always exceptions, such as Mark Knopfler, who uses his bare fingers to play both electric and acoustic guitars.

His unusual style caused Chet Atkins to say "I don't know how he's doing, but he can sure do it!" You don't have to follow the herd we can make our own rules, but we have to start somewhere. This starting point is generally focussed on previous master players. In the genre of acoustic blues, this means people like Robert Johnson, Lightnin' Hopkins, Doc Watson, Reverend Gary Davis and many others.

Of course there are many variations in style, but pickers can be broadly divided into two categories - those who wear fingerpicks and those that don't. We'll ignore how many picking fingers they used for now. What are the differences in sound and what impact do they have on style? I've seen ragtime blues artists perform competently with up to three finger picks on the right hand, which didn't include the thumb! At the other end of the spectrum, some master pickers only use one, either steel or plastic.

Picks for the fingers.

I favor a steel pick, as they can be bent over so that the tip of the pick corresponds with the contact point of a bare finger striking a string. This means that there's no adjustment necessary for the angle of attack. Plastic finger picks are generally thicker and stick out a little more, so an adjustment in picking style is necessary. This is important if you play some songs that require picks, and some that don't, for example.

Thumb-pick versus bare thumb.

Generally the pick gives a sharper, harder sound and amplifies somewhat. Some striking techniques are easier to achieve in this way, like 'throwing' the thumb onto the string giving a percussive sound. A significant advantage is that it saves the thumb from getting sore. Bare finger players must practice very regularly in order to grow a thick callous so that they can play in comfort. In general, picks are easier to get between the strings, so are great for picking individual strings in quick succession.

Bare fingers style.

A bare thumb can hook behind a string, pull it away from the body of the guitar and let it snap back, producing an accented beat which can be effective in some styles of blues. In general, bare fingers are very accurate and can produce a great bouncy style when playing ragtime music, either Joplin type piano rags or ragtime blues in the style of Blind Blake. The thumb rolls and triplets featured in the latter's music make it very difficult to play with finger picks.

Some of the later stylists, such as Chet Atkins, used strengthened finger nails. I doubt if many older blues guitarists used this technique, but who can say?

Many Texas guitarists favored a plastic thumb pick and bare fingers, often just using one finger of the right hand with amazing dexterity. Blind Blake seemed to have used bare fingers and some older bluesmen recollected that he had a hole in his right thumb, where it was worn away by the bass strings of his guitar.

The mysterious Wille Walker, who only records two sides in the 20s, seemed to be a true master of the ragtime style. His songs feature lightning fast single string runs which seem difficult if using the thumb and index finger alternately hitting the strings. It seems probable that he used a plectrum held between thumb and forefinger, using this to alternate the bass line while picking with one or two fingers.

There are many, many styles of finger picking and we can draw on the example of great guitar masters to help us to develop our own technique.