

WAYNE HENDERSON'S GUITAR STYLE

Origins and Influences

Wayne Henderson uses a thumbpick and two fingerpicks to play the guitar in a clean, driving, melodic style. Like most fingerstyle players, he can play in the alternating-thumb style most popularly associated with Merle Travis and Chet Atkins (in which the thumb bounces between bass strings to provide the bass and rhythm, while the fingers play the melody). He also uses the thumbpick, augmented with his right index finger, to play very strong rhythm guitar accompaniment for singers and instrumentalists.

However, what really distinguishes Wayne from other fingerpickers is his ability to play the melodies of fiddle, old-time, and popular tunes by alternately striking down with his thumb and up with his index finger. Using this technique, he can play bluegrass and old-time tunes in the style of flatpickers Clarence White, Tony Rice, Dan Crary, Don Reno and others. While some players notable for their flatpicking prowess, such as Doc Watson and Norman Blake, can put down their flatpicks and also skillfully play fingerstyle tunes, Wayne is able to use both styles within a single tune. And his using fingerpicks to play fiddle tunes isn't just a novelty—he does it well enough to have won the annual guitar contest at the Old Fiddlers Convention in Galax, VA more than a dozen times. He has also taken home the Best Overall Performer prize at Galax at least twice.

At a young age in the hills of rural southwestern Virginia, Wayne began playing rhythm guitar behind local musicians, including his father Walt, who was a fiddler. Growing up with access only to a few 78 rpm records of the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers and to radio broadcasts of live country music shows, Wayne was more heavily influenced by local guitar players than national recording and performance artists. He cites neighbors and relatives Estil (E.C.) Ball and Katherine Reedy, both of whom played in the thumb-and-fingers style that Wayne adopted, as having a particularly strong influence on his guitar style.

Mrs. Reedy played in the style of Mother Maybelle Carter and, according to Wayne, was very patient and helpful in showing him chords and the “thumb-lead” technique of Carter-style guitar playing. Nearly fifty years later, Wayne still enjoys playing a medley of Carter family songs in his concerts and he recorded two Carter family tunes on *Made & Played*.

With a weekly radio program, Mr. Ball was a talented and well-known performer in the region of southwest Virginia near North Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky. Alan Lomax recorded Mr. Ball and his wife Orna in 1937 and the two made several additional recordings over the years. (Two fine compilations of E.C. and Orna Ball's music are still in print and available on the Rounder and Copper Creek labels.) Wayne still recalls how the radio speaker rattled when Mr. Ball slowly ran his thumbpick down the strings of an open E chord on his D-28 at

the end of his show's theme song, "When the Saints Go Marching In." Mr. Ball primarily used the guitar to accompany the country Gospel tunes that he and Orna sang, but he also played and recorded some self-penned fingerstyle instrumentals in which one can hear elements of what became Wayne's playing style. It was E.C. Ball who advised Wayne, "If you want to be a guitar player, son, you'd best get yourself some fingerpicks."

In the 60's, Wayne finally had the chance to see and hear others who were playing fiddle tunes on the guitar. He recalls meeting and learning from a guitarist named Don Blevins who had seen Don Reno flatpick. It was also in the mid-sixties that he bought his first Doc Watson record, *Southbound*, and enlisted his mother to move the phonograph needle up and down on the vinyl so that he could figure out how Doc played tunes like "Sweet Georgia Brown," "Nothing To It," and "Nashville Pickin." He later met and played with Doc and they've become friends.

In this section, we'll briefly explore the major elements of Wayne's guitar style, using examples from tunes in the book. (See the Appendix for tips on reading guitar tablature.)

Repertoire and Arranging Techniques

Although his playing is steeped in traditional guitar styles, Wayne chooses a wide variety of material to play. These include traditional fiddle tunes and bluegrass standards, traditional country and folk songs, jazz standards, and pop tunes of past decades.

Wayne uses a number of techniques, some quite subtle and some more bold, to provide variety and interest in his guitar arrangements. For example, he will frequently play the melody on the lower frets of the treble strings the first time through the "A" section of a tune, play it an octave lower the second time through, then play it on the treble strings again, but with the melody changed at least slightly so that it's not identical to the first pass through the A section.

Below are the opening phrases of the A section of "Sally Anne," followed by the first few measures of each of four variations that Wayne plays on the melody. (The letter "B" with an arrow indicates that the strings are "brushed" or strummed by the thumb or index finger in the direction of the arrow, rather than plucked simultaneously with the thumb and fingers.)

The image displays three systems of musical notation for guitar, each consisting of a treble clef staff with a melody and a six-string guitar staff with chords and fingerings. The first system is labeled "Section A" and "Sec. A, Variation 1". The second system is labeled "Sec. A, Variation 2" and "Sec. A, Variation 3". The third system is labeled "Sec. A, Variation 4". Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5 on the strings, and techniques like "H" (hammer-on) and "SI" (slide) are noted.

Right-hand Techniques

As mentioned above, Wayne always plays with a plastic thumbpick and two metal fingerpicks, worn on his index and middle fingers. His fingerpicks were custom forged by a friend of his, but are similar to commercial models made by Dunlop, National, and others. His thumbpick is a blue Herco that has a rather long, soft blade, which helps balance the tone and volume between his thumb and fingers and makes it easier to play rhythm. Here are descriptions and examples of the right-hand playing styles and techniques he uses on different tunes.

Single-string melody

Wayne is perhaps the only fingerstyle player who can play fiddle, jazz, and pop tunes, in what is essentially a bluegrass flatpicking style, on a par with the best modern and traditional flatpickers. Fourteen of the nineteen tunes on *Made & Played*, plus the bonus tune, “Lime Rock,” are played in this style. These tunes can be played very successfully with either a flatpick or the fingerpicking technique that Wayne uses.

This is the style of playing that Wayne uses when playing with bluegrass or old-time bands. In different settings, such as solo, duo, or trios, where a fuller sound is more important than soloing or cutting through the other instruments, he more often uses the more traditional fingerstyle techniques described below.

Note that Wayne gives his thumb and index finger very clear assignments during these single-note passages. He plays notes that fall on the quarter-note beats with his thumb (and only with his thumb) and notes on the off-beats with his index finger (unless they are sounded via a slide, hammer-on, or pull-off). If there are two quarter notes in a row, he'll play both of them with his thumb (as seen in the last measure of the example below). Here is an excerpt from the old tune “John Hardy” that illustrates Wayne’s single-string playing technique (T=thumb, I=index finger):

The image shows a musical score for a single-string melody in 4/4 time, key of G major. The melody is written on a treble clef staff. Below the staff is a guitar chord diagram with six strings (E, B, G, D, A, E) and fret numbers. The diagram is divided into two sections: C (Chord) and G (Chord). The C section covers measures 1-4, and the G section covers measures 5-8. The notation includes fingerings (0-1, 1-1, 1-0, 3-1-0-3-1-0, 3-0-3-0, 3-0-3-4, 0-0, 2-0) and finger assignments (T, I, T, I, T, I, T, I, T, I, T, I, T, T, I, T, T). A slide is indicated in measure 7. The finger assignments are: T, T I T, T I, T I T I T I T, T I T I T I T, T T I T T, T T I T T.

Thumb/finger rolls

The vast majority of the time, whether playing single-string fiddle tunes or alternating thumb style, Wayne uses only his thumb and index finger. However, he makes great use of his middle finger when a tune calls for rapid playing across three strings, in which case he does three-finger (actually thumb-and-two-finger) rolls similar to a style used by Scruggs-style banjo players. The excerpt below from the Texas fiddle tune “Lime Rock” illustrates Wayne’s use of rolls with his thumb and fingers (T=thumb, I=index finger, M=middle finger).

Alternating thumb fingerpicking

Wayne plays many tunes in a traditional alternating-thumb style, similar to that of Sam McGee, Elizabeth Cotton, Doc Watson (who, though better known for his incredible flatpicking, is also a strong fingerpicker), and others. Wayne befriended and played with McGee when he spent time in Nashville working in the repair shop at Gruhn Guitars. On a previous CD, Wayne recorded McGee's "Buckdancer's Choice" and included on *Made & Played* is McGee's tune, "Wheels." Wayne also recorded the Carter family tune "Cannonball Blues" and the traditional Banks of the Ohio in alternating thumb style. Here is an excerpt from "Banks of the Ohio":

Carter-Style Fingerpicking

The CD also contains Wayne's arrangement of the A.P. Carter tune "Little Moses," played in the "thumb-lead" style of Maybelle Carter. Note that rather than the thumb playing the quarter-note rhythm and bass line as in "Banks of the Ohio," in this tune the thumb plays the melody on the bass strings, with the fingers picking or strumming the treble strings to provide chordal accompaniment:

Backup strumming

As mentioned above, Wayne began playing guitar backing up fiddle players and he still makes great use of a strong strumming style. On *Made & Played*, this can be heard in the introduction to some songs, most notably “Jerusalem Ridge,” and also in the chordal strumming that Wayne does between phrases of single-string melodies.

Typically, Wayne uses his thumb to play bass notes on the first and third beats of the measure and again uses his thumb to strum two or three middle strings on beats two and four. For accent and interest, he uses his index finger to brush up on one or more strings on some of the off beats between thumb strokes, similar to the way flatpickers will use their picks to play some up-strokes when playing rhythm. Below is an excerpt from the introduction to the Bill Monroe song “Jerusalem Ridge.” As in the earlier examples, “T” and “I” below the tablature to indicate how Wayne uses his right-hand thumb and index finger.

This excerpt from “Ghost Riders in the Sky,” played in a thumb-lead style, illustrates how Wayne uses strumming techniques to maintain the song’s rhythmic momentum between melody phrases as well as to signal the underlying chord structure of the tune.

Pull-off's and Hammer-on's

A pull-off is a technique in which the player picks one note and then pulls the left-hand finger off of that note in a sideways direction so that a second note, below the first, will sound without having to be picked with the right hand. To do a hammer-on, the player picks a note and then quickly frets a second note on a higher fret on the same string so that, again, the second note sounds without having to be picked. Many bluegrass players make use of hammer-on's and pull-off's as a way to gain speed for playing up-tempo pieces, but Wayne will generally pick every note in a phrase even on very fast single-string runs, making less use of hammer-on's and pull-off's than most players. He does use hammer-on's and pull-off's to add melodic interest and to add smoothness to parts of some melodic phrases, including in slower pieces.

Below is an excerpt from "Temperance Reel," in which Wayne adds rapid-fire triplets as a variation on the basic melody and chooses to pick all three notes of the triplet rather than use hammer-on's for the second and third of the three, as I believe most other players would do if they had to play these notes at this tempo.

Section A2

G

E B G D A E

0-2-4 0-3-5 0-3-5 3-3-5-3 5-3

T I T I T I T I T I T

Slides

Perhaps because of his extensive experience backing up fiddle players, Wayne frequently uses slides, including double-stop slides, to move smoothly from one note to another without having to pick the second note, as illustrated by this segment from "Sally Anne." In the first measure he fingers the 2nd fret of the 2nd string and the 3rd fret of the third string and quickly slides up one fret on both strings. In the third measure, he employs single-string slides.

Section B

G Am D G

E 0-2 3. 1 0 0 0 1 0 0 0 3.

B 0 3 4 2 0 0 0 2 4 4 2 0 0 0

G 0 3 4 2 0 0 0 2 4 4 2 0 0 0

D 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

A 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

E 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

Detailed description: This musical score shows the guitar part for Section B of 'Buckaroo'. It is in 4/4 time and G major. The melody is written in the treble clef. The guitar part is written in standard tuning (EADBEA). Chords are indicated as G, Am, D, and G. The notation includes various fret numbers, slurs, and slide markings (Sl) indicating a slide from the 2nd fret to the 7th fret and back.

In "Buckaroo," excerpted below, Wayne uses a long single-string slide to move from a D chord form at the 2nd fret to the same chord shape for a G chord at the seventh fret. He then uses a slide down to move back to the D chord.

Section A

D G

E 0 2 3 0 2 2 3 2 0 3 0 7 8 0 7 8 7 0 8 3

B 0 2 3 0 2 2 3 2 0 3 0 7 8 0 7 8 7 0 8 3

G 0 2 3 0 2 2 3 2 0 3 0 7 8 0 7 8 7 0 8 3

D 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

A 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

E 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

Detailed description: This musical score shows the guitar part for Section A of 'Buckaroo'. It is in 4/4 time and G major. The melody is written in the treble clef. The guitar part is written in standard tuning (EADBEA). Chords are indicated as D and G. The notation includes various fret numbers, slurs, and slide markings (Sl) indicating a long slide from the 2nd fret to the 7th fret and back.