

# Examining proper down/up Picking Technique part I and “Little Liza Jane”

by Mickey Abraham

Thanks for all your great feedback on my last online lesson “bluegrass soloing with G runs.” It is my goal to continue to bring you the coolest tunes, most useful licks, and most essential techniques that an aspiring flatpicker could ever want!

This month we are going to look at one of the most important aspects of flatpicking – alternate pick stroke theory. I feel some people are introduced to this technique in a way that is not fully explained. I have met people that try to alternate all their strokes when in fact not all strokes should be alternate! Only the eighth notes should be alternated. This month is only part I of my lesson and does not include slides, hammer-on’s, triplets, or any other ornamentations.

Pick direction is one of the things that I am very strict about when teaching my private students. I feel proper pick direction is essential to successful flatpicking and bluegrass soloing. Bad picking habits can be almost impossible to break which is why I hope I am catching you early. If not, I urge you to take the time to look at and practice my tab examples. Use these to help you break out of your years of incorrect right hand technique. Once you “feel” these examples I know you will not only be a better picker but also a better musician because you will be feeling the internal pulse of a tune.

As with all creative art forms, there are exceptions to the picking rule. All great players have their own way of getting their music out. Tony Rice’s cross-picking is not an exact science. But, if you are one of those players who feels you have neglected to fully work out your right hand technique, you may want to follow this lesson exactly. What I’m saying is don’t break the rules until you know the rules and have surveyed the “correct” options.

Here’s how it works:

Almost all flatpicking songs have four beats in one measure –

1      2      3      4  
Down Down Down Down

Now look at the first measure of the tab. Try playing the second fret of the G string four times evenly with four downstrokes. Down, Down, Down, Down. These are called quarter notes. You can even say out loud “Down, Down, Down, Down” as you strike these four notes!

Notice that every time you get ready for another downstroke your hand has to come back up (it’s actually impossible to play consecutive downstrokes on the same string without your hand coming back up in the process). If we were to play that same note on the way back up we would have something like this –

1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &  
D U D U D U D U

We still have four beats in this measure but we call these notes eighth notes because we can fit eight of them in one measure. One great exercise is to play four quarter notes followed by eight eighth notes over and over again. First “Down, Down, Down, Down” and then, “Down/Up Down/Up Down/Up Down/Up.” To be effective you must do this without speeding up or slowing down.

Now, what if we did not hit the note on the way down but did hit it on the way up? We would have something unusual like this –

1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &  
U U U U

When playing real songs you will encounter many different rhythms. Play each of my examples eight times to feel the groove and pick direction of these sample rhythms. Every melody you encounter will have a unique order of notes but the pick stroke theory will remain the same – you will be going down on beats 1,2,3, and 4 and going back up if the note lands on one of the &'s. I have included tabs to the great old-time tune, “Little Liza Jane” so you can practice pick theory in a real song situation.

Once again I encourage you to email with any questions, comments, and concerns about this lesson, past lessons, or offer suggestions regarding lessons you'd like to see in the future. My email is [michabraham@comcast.net](mailto:michabraham@comcast.net)

# Pick Direction Exercises

1

4/4

TAB

2 2 2 2 | 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 | 7 2 7 2 7 2 7 2

4

2 2 2 2 2 2 | 2 2 2 2 2 2 | 2 2 2 2 2 2

7

2 2 2 2 2 2 | 2 2 2 2 2 2 | 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2

10

2 2 2 2 2 2 | 2 2 2 | 2 2 2 2

# Little Liza Jane

1 **D**

Musical notation for measures 1-4. The key signature is D major (two sharps) and the time signature is 4/4. The melody consists of quarter notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. The guitar tablature below shows the fretting for each measure: Measure 1: 4 0 2 0; Measure 2: 4 0 2 0; Measure 3: 4 2 4; Measure 4: 2.

5 **A D**

Musical notation for measures 5-8. The melody continues with quarter notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. The guitar tablature below shows the fretting for each measure: Measure 5: 4 0 2 0; Measure 6: 4 0 2 0; Measure 7: 4 4 2; Measure 8: 0.

9

Musical notation for measures 9-12. The melody features eighth-note pairs: D4-E4, F#4-G4, A4-B4, C5-B4, A4-G4, F#4-E4, D4. The guitar tablature below shows the fretting for each measure: Measure 9: 4 0 0 2 0 0; Measure 10: 4 0 0 2 0 0; Measure 11: 4 2 2 2 4; Measure 12: 2.

13 **A D**

Musical notation for measures 13-16. The melody continues with eighth-note pairs: D4-E4, F#4-G4, A4-B4, C5-B4, A4-G4, F#4-E4, D4. The guitar tablature below shows the fretting for each measure: Measure 13: 4 0 0 2 0 0; Measure 14: 4 0 0 2 0 0; Measure 15: 4 4 4 4 2; Measure 16: 0.

17 **G D**

Musical notation for measures 17-20. The melody consists of quarter notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. The guitar tablature below shows the fretting for each measure: Measure 17: 3 2; Measure 18: 4 2; Measure 19: 4 2 4; Measure 20: 2.

21 **G D A D**

Fingering: 3 2 4 2 4 4 2 0

25 **G D**

Fingering: 3 3 3 3 4 2 4 4 4 2 4 2 2 2 4 2

29 **G D A D**

Fingering: 3 3 3 3 4 2 4 4 4 2 4 4 4 4 2 0