

Travis pick

---The Perfect Guitarist, Duncan L. Wood, © 2008

The *Travis pick's* most important feature is the alternation of the thumb from one bass string to another. Every time the thumb strikes a bass string, it is followed by a finger plucking a treble string. Assuming that the right hand is in first position, the RH pattern would be **T 1 t 2**, or **T 1 t 3**, if you wish to hear the 1st string. **The first thumb-strike is normally on the root of the chord. The second thumb-strike is on a different string.** It is named for Merle Travis, of country music fame dating back to the 1940's. Chet Atkins, an admirer of Travis early on in his career, is also legendary for his ability to pick in this style. These two players were at the forefront of this style of picking for decades.

The Travis pick is best used in moderate to fast tempos of 4/4 time. Normally, 2 patterns = 1 measure.

Examples of the Travis picking style could include songs like "Blowin' in the Wind" (Bob Dylan), and "Dust in the Wind" (Kansas). To play each of these particular songs completely correctly, variations on the pure Travis pick might be used (to be listed later). Travis picking is a whole lot of fun, once you get it going.

- ◆ The picking hand (usually, the right) would pluck the strings, using the thumb (*T*) and the fingers (*1*, *2*, and *3*) in this order: *T 1 t 2* or *T 1 t 3*, depending on which treble note you wish to hear.
- ◆ The strings that would be plucked would depend on the chord being held by the fretting hand (usually, the left) and the position of the picking hand at that moment.
- ◆ Assuming that the picking hand (PH) is in first position, the fingers of the PH would be aligned, *Thumb*-bass strings, *1st finger*-third string, *2nd finger*-second string, and *3rd finger*-first string. Other PH positions are possible.
- ◆ The thumb (*T*) normally plucks whichever string the root of the chord is on. A small "*t*" represents the thumb striking an alternate bass-string.
- ◆ 2 patterns normally equal 1 measure (also called a *bar*) in 4/4 time.

4/4 time, *Travis pick*

Yellow = root of chord, **Gray** = alternate bass, Vertical lines = *measure lines (bar lines)*.

	<i>(Counting)</i>	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
	<i>(Picking Hand)</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>2</i>
6 th string root, (example, G)		6 th	3 rd	4 th	2 nd	6 th	3 rd	4 th	2 nd
5 th string root, (example, C)		5 th	3 rd	4 th	2 nd	5 th	3 rd	4 th	2 nd
*4 th string root, (example, D)		*4 th	2 nd	3 rd	1 st	4 th	2 nd	3 rd	1 st

**Note:* The asterisk is there to indicate that the right hand (RH) has shifted to 2nd position. That is, the first finger of the right hand is aligned with string #2, the second finger is aligned with string #1, and the thumb is responsible for all other strings (including string #3, which is now acting as a bass string alternate for the thumb).

One example of Travis picking is in the song, “She’ll be Comin’ Round the Mountain When She Comes”. This is a fast-tempo piece in 4/4 time, and this example is in the key of A Major. For this, we would use the chords, A (5th string root), A7 (5th string root), D (4th string root), D7 (4th string root), E and E7 (both 6th string roots). **Continue to hold the chord that is listed for the left (fretting) hand until a new one is listed.**

Version 1, Travis pick: “She’ll be Comin’ ‘Round the Mountain When She Comes”

Yellow = root of chord, **Gray** = alternate bass, **Vertical lines** = measure lines (bar lines).

(Chord)	A	A	A	A	A
(Strings)	5 3 4 2	5 3 4 2	5 3 4 2	5 3 4 2	5 3 4 2
She’ll be	comin’ ‘round the	mountain when she	comes.		
	5 3 4 2	5 3 4 2	5 3 4 2	5 3 4 2	6 3 4 2
She’ll be	comin’ ‘round the	mountain when she	comes.		
E7	A	A7	D		
6 3 4 2	5 3 4 2	5 3 4 2	4 2 3 1	4 2 3 1	
She’ll be	comin’ ‘round the	mountain, she’ll be	comin’ ‘round the		
	5 3 4 2	5 3 4 2	6 3 4 2	5 3 4 2	
D7	A	E	A		
4 2 3 1	5 3 4 2	6 3 4 2	5 3 4 2	5 3 4 2	
mountain, she’ll be	comin’ ‘round the	mountain when she	comes.		

A technique called “country-bass” can be used to further emphasize the bass strings when using the Travis pick. It has a characteristic sound of “oom-pah, oom-pah”, and is achieved by changing the pattern of thumb-strikes. **Paul Simon uses this technique in playing his hit song, “The Boxer” (Simon & Garfunkel).** Once again, the first thumb-strike is on the root of the chord, followed by the first finger, then the alternate bass is plucked as described above in the normal Travis pattern. However, the next thumb-strike on beat 3 is on a different bass string. Normally, this would have been a repeat of the root-string, but no longer. Then, of course, it is followed by a finger-strike as per normal procedure. Once again, “She’ll be Comin’ ‘Round the Mountain...” is used as the example so that you can see the difference in string-order with “country-bass”.

4/4 time, Travis pick with country bass

Yellow = root of chord, **Gray** = alternate bass, **Green** = country bass, Vertical lines = *measure lines (bar lines)*.

(Counting)	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
(Picking Hand)	T	1	t	2	T	1	t	2
6 th string root, (example, G)	6 th	3 rd	4 th	2 nd	5 th	3 rd	4 th	2 nd
5 th string root, (example, C)	5 th	3 rd	4 th	2 nd	6 th	3 rd	4 th	2 nd
*4 th string root, (example, D)	*4 th	2 nd	3 rd	1 st	5 th	2 nd	3 rd	1 st

* The asterisk is there to indicate that the right (picking) hand, RH, has shifted to 2nd position. That is, the first finger of the right hand is aligned with string #2, the second finger is aligned with string #1, the thumb is responsible for all other strings (including string #3, which is now acting as an alternate bass string).

Version 2, Travis pick with country bass:

“She’ll be Comin’ ‘Round the Mountain When She Comes” (traditional)

Yellow = root of chord, **Gray** = alternate bass, **Green** = country bass,
Vertical lines = measure lines (bar lines).

(Chord)	A						
(Strings)	5 3 4 2	6 3 4 2	5 3 4 2	6 3 4 2	5 3 4 2	6 3 4 2	5 3 4 2
She’ll be	comin’	‘round the	mountain	when she	comes.		

5 3 4 2	6 3 4 2	5 3 4 2	6 3 4 2	5 3 4 2	6 3 4 2	E	6 3 4 2	5 3 4 2
She’ll be	comin’	‘round the	mountain	when she	comes.			

E7	6 3 4 2	5 3 4 2	A	5 3 4 2	6 3 4 2	A7	5 3 4 2	6 3 4 2	D	4 2 3 1	5 2 3 1
She’ll be	comin’	‘round the	comin’	‘round the	mountain,	she’ll be	comin’	‘round the	comin’	‘round the	

D7	4 2 3 1	5 2 3 1	A	5 3 4 2	6 3 4 2	E	6 3 4 2	5 3 4 2	A	5 3 4 2	6 3 4 2
mountain,	she’ll be	comin’	‘round the	mountain	when she	comes.					

The Travis pick can also produce an “alternating treble” by changing the order of high strings plucked by the fingers of the RH. The **underlined** strings are the alternating trebles. The 4th string has no additional treble to alternate.

4/4 time, **Travis pick** with alternating treble

(Counting)		1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
(Picking Hand)		T	1	t	2	T	1	t	3
(6 th string root)	Strings:	6	3	<u>4</u>	<u>2</u>	6	3	<u>4</u>	<u>1</u>
(5 th string root)	Strings:	5	3	<u>4</u>	<u>2</u>	5	3	<u>4</u>	<u>1</u>
(*4 th string root)	Strings:	4	2	<u>3</u>	<u>1</u>	4	2	<u>3</u>	<u>1</u>

* The asterisk is there to indicate that the right (picking) hand, RH, has shifted to 2nd position. That is, the first finger of the right hand is aligned with string #2, the second finger is aligned with string #1, the thumb is responsible for all other strings (including string #3, which is now acting as an alternate bass string).

4/4 time, **Travis pick with country bass & alternating treble**

Yellow = root of chord, **Gray** = alternate bass, Vertical lines = measure lines (bar lines).

(Counting)		1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
(Picking Hand)		T	1	t	2	T	1	t	2
6 th string root, (example, G)		6th	3 rd	4th	2 nd	5th	3 rd	4th	1 st
5 th string root, (example, C)		5th	3 rd	4th	2 nd	6th	3 rd	4th	1 st
*4 th string root, (example, D)		*4th	2 nd	3 rd	1 st	5th	2 nd	3 rd	1 st

Author’s Note: Alternating treble combined with the country bass is the Travis pick at its fanciest: