

My Soapbox: Pick Direction – Are You Doing It Right?

By Joe Carr

In 30 years of playing and teaching, I have found that correct pick direction is the “secret” to good professional mandolin playing. Even if you think you have got it right, it is worth a few minutes to check and make sure.

Solid alternating picking is the cornerstone of every good mandolin player’s picking hand. Although some techniques require different patterns, the basic “down, up, down, up” pattern is one you must master. Here are the basics:

Downstrokes on downbeats, upstrokes on upbeats.

Simple enough, right?

In a measure of 4/4 music with four quarter notes (ex 1), each note is played with a downstroke.

Example 1: A musical staff in treble clef with a common time signature (C). The staff contains four quarter notes, each with a small square pick direction marker above it. Below the staff is a tablature line with four circles, each containing the number 0, representing open strings. The tablature line is labeled with 'T', 'A', and 'B' on the left side.

With all eighth notes (ex 2), begin with a downstroke and alternate down and up until you play the last note (up).

Example 2: A musical staff in treble clef with a common time signature (C). The staff contains eight eighth notes. The first note has a square pick direction marker above it. The second note has a 'V' marker above it, indicating an upstroke. This pattern of alternating square and 'V' markers continues for all eight notes. Below the staff is a tablature line with eight circles, each containing the number 0, representing open strings. The tablature line is labeled with 'T', 'A', and 'B' on the left side.

Moving from string to string (as tunes do) makes alternation more difficult. The following exercises isolate different string crossings. Play each measure slowly with a metronome until it is smooth and effortless. In Ex 3, we isolate the situation in which a downstroke is followed by an upstroke on a different string.

Once you are comfortable with this exercise, move on to Ex 4 in which an upstroke is followed by a downstroke on a different string. Exercise 5 isolates two more common string changing situations.

Now let's use alternating picking in a melody. Here is the "A" part of a hornpipe entitled Harvest Home. This arrangement is designed to be a good alternate picking and string changing exercise. Use the first and last note in each measure as a checking point. Make sure you are picking as indicated. If not, go back, play slowly and find where you are playing two ups or two downs in a row.

In the next issue we will continue our pick direction studies with mixed note values.