

GT154

Country Essentials 1

Introduction

In the first part of his Country Essentials Dario Cortese will takes us into the world of chicken picking.

Welcome to this new series dedicated to country music. The aim of this column is to explain some of the country techniques and provide a basic vocabulary to approach this style. You'll also find reference to guitars, amps and effects as well as 'must-known' licks from many famous artists.

During the last 30 years of country music many players have developed unique techniques, sometimes just as signature sounds some other times as result of the attempt to imitate other country instruments as pedal steel, dobro, fiddle, or piano. Most of the times these techniques are related to the picking hand more than fretting hand. In fact most of country guitarists have included, in a way or another, the use of one or more fingers in combination with a flat pick or a thumb-pick (usually called hybrid picking).

There are no rules about which finger you should be using at a specific moment or how to use it. For instance: many country players use pick + middle finger adding the ring finger only for the double stops. This seems to be the standard approach but, for instance, Albert Lee uses pick + middle and pinky (he uses the middle only for double stops) while Brent Mason uses thumb-pick + middle + ring and the index with middle for double stops.

Also, some players (like Brad Paisley) like to use the flesh of the fingers with a little bit of natural nails while others (Brent Mason) prefer to use acrylic nails to get a much even sound. There are lots of combinations and possibilities but the bottom line is that you can do whatever feels natural and right to you as long as you get the desired results.

Hybrid picking is a technique nowadays used by many guitarists in many different styles (just think Dominic Miller, Brett Garsed or our own Guthrie Govan). But is it really the same technique? Is it used in the same way?

Actually there's a tiny difference. Most of the times a fusion or rock players will use the hybrid technique to play rolls (one note per string) and will use legato or normal picking style to play on one string. Instead many country players use the hybrid picking on the same string very often. For instance: instead of doing down-up with the pick, try down with the pick and up with finger. Brent Mason uses down with the thumb-pick, up with the middle finger, down again with the thumb-pick and up with the ring finger. In this way he gets a 'recovery' time for each finger which gives him more ease when playing fast lines.

When playing hybrid on the same string you have two main choices: play quietly or hard. If you play quietly you get a very even tone, especially in combination with acrylic nails. If you play hard you get a very staccato (short) sound that in country music is known as chicken picking because of the sound similarity. This is probably the first and most important sound you need to get on board if you want to play country music as it's such an important part of the genre.

Some country players get the chicken picking sound just by using the pick and releasing the pressure off the finger in the fretting hand, others get the same result just with fingerstyle technique. Again, there's no right or wrong, just ask any country players and you'll probably get a different answer every time! The bottom line is again do whatever is natural to you; if it sounds like a chicken it's correct even if you're using a very unusual approach!

Ex 1: This is the most common country-bluegrass lick ever. Every player seems to have his way to play, his variation. I wrote it in many different positions of the neck and sometimes in different octaves (on the mp3 you'll find only the very first one).

At the end of each lick you'll find the C chord you can associate with the lick. Please note that some of the lick start in one position and end in another. Why I wrote the same like in 6 different positions?

The reason is very simple: in country music the position you're playing in, the finger you use and every detail is very important because will lead you in to something new. For instance, in one position it might be easier to play a hammer-on while in others it'll be easier to play a slide or a bend.

Approach all the licks shown this month in this way. Try to move them in every position available on the guitar and feel free to try different techniques as bending, pre-bending, slide, hammer-on or pull-off. All the examples are in the key of C.

♩ = 120

The first example shows the lick starting at the 3rd fret. The second example starts at the 8th fret. The third example starts at the 10th fret. Each example consists of two measures of the lick followed by a C major chord. The tablature includes techniques such as triplets (e.g., 3 3 0 1 2 0 2 0) and slides (e.g., 6/7, 8/9, 13/14).

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Ex 2: Ex 2 A and 2 B show the idea we were talking about. 2 A is played with a slide while 2 B is played with a pre-bend which would be awkward in 2 A. Also note that in 2 B we finish having three notes ringing together. 2 A is in the style of Ry Cooder and 2 B is in the style of Jerry Donahue.

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Ex 3: Ex 3 is a typical chicken picking lick. Very simple for the fretting hand so you can focus on the picking hand only. Listen carefully to the audio example. I recorded with thumb-pick and acrylic nails digging in the strings. Experiment also with just the pick and releasing the pressure off the note in the fretting hand.

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Ex 4: Probably the most common chicken picking lick ever. This is in the style of Don Rich (Buck Owens and the Buckaroos) and can easily be moved and found and other sets of strings.

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Ex 5: This example is in the style of Keith Urban. Keith often plays this lick using the pick and middle finger only. The unusual thing is that to get the 'chicken-staccato' sound with this lick you need to play the pick on the B string (2nd) and the finger on the G (3rd) instead of the much more natural other way round.

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Ex 6: This lick is in the style of Danny Gatton (RIP) and features one of his trademark double stop lick. This is the type of lick impossible to make sound right without some kind of hybrid technique. Try hybrid and thumb-pick + fingers and choose your favorite.

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Ex 7: This is a very common double stop lick in the style of Albert Lee. Double stops with the fingers while the pick takes care of the D string (4th).

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Ex 8: This is a double stop lick in the style of 'early' Brent Mason. Brent would probably play the double stops with index (without nail) and middle and the D string with thumb-pick and one finger (middle or ring).

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Ex 9: These licks are both in the style of pedal steel genius Paul Franklin and 'kind-of-the-bends' Jerry Donahue and simulate a pedal steel guitar. The common approach is to play an up-stroke only but you can use any picking hand technique you want. Please note that the licks end with all the notes ringing together. For 9B hold the pinky of the fretting hand on the 1st fret of the B string while the other fingers bend the D string behind the nut. (It's highly suggested to avoid this technique with strings thicker than 10s!).

* = Bend Behind The Nut

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Ex 10: Another lick to simulate a pedal steel. The focus for this one is on the bends. Try to play the bend 'mechanically' as much as possible. This line has a flavor of the early years of pedal steel legend Buddy Emmons.

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Ex 14: This example is played with a Jerry Jones Baritone guitar. The Baritone guitar is tuned a 4th below standard tuning, from the bottom to the top: B, E, A, D, F#, B. The example is actually played in the key of F on the baritone but results in the key of C because of the tuning.

The musical notation for Ex 14 consists of a treble clef staff and a baritone guitar staff. The treble staff shows a melodic line starting with a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note G4, an eighth note F#4, and a quarter note E4. The baritone staff shows fret numbers: 12, 13, 14, 13, 10, 8, 10, 8, 6, 7, 5, 6, 5, 3, 5, 4, 3, 1. A double bar line is present after the first measure.

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Ex 15: The triplet run! This is probably be invented by Albert Lee and nowadays is a very standard lick for many players. This line is often played at ridiculous speeds.

The musical notation for Ex 15 consists of a treble clef staff and a baritone guitar staff. The treble staff shows a triplet run starting on G4, moving up to A4, B4, and C5. The baritone staff shows fret numbers: 3, 7, 5, 7, 5, 7, 5, 9, 8, 10, 8. A double bar line is present after the first measure.

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Ex 16: This line is one of those lick Albert Lee can't leave without! He plays this line almost in every solo and it's also part of 'Country Boy's opening intro.

The musical notation for Ex 16 consists of a treble clef staff and a baritone guitar staff. The treble staff shows a lick starting on G4, moving up to A4, B4, and C5, then down to B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4. The baritone staff shows fret numbers: 6, 8, 5, 5, 5, 7, 5, 8, 7, 5, 7, 5, 5. A tempo marking of ♩ = 140 is present above the treble staff.

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Ex 20: Another ‘secret’ lick from Albert Lee’s vocabulary. Albert seems to throw this lick everywhere. Definitely one to get on board!

The musical notation for Ex 20 consists of a treble clef staff with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The melody is written in eighth notes with a descending eighth-note pattern. Below the staff is a guitar tablature with three lines labeled T (Treble), A (Middle), and B (Bass). The fret numbers are: 16, 15, 13, 14, 15, 14, 13, 15, 17, 15, 13, 15, 12, 13, 14, 12, and 13.

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Ex 21: How is it possible to combine the sound of a Pedal Steel with the chicken picking sound? One is ringing out and the other one is very staccato. Well, Brent Mason found a way! This is an example from the most influential country player of the past 20 years.

The musical notation for Ex 21 consists of a treble clef staff with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The melody features a mix of staccato and sustained notes. Below the staff is a guitar tablature with three lines labeled T (Treble), A (Middle), and B (Bass). The fret numbers are: 7, 8, 6, 8, 6, 8, 7, 5, 7, and 3. There are 'full' markings above the 8th fret on the treble and middle strings, and an 'x' marking on the bass string at the 7th fret.

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TONE SETTINGS

Any guitar with single coil and clean valve amp will get you close to the typical country twang but if you’re serious about this music you need to get a Telecaster and a Fender Deluxe Reverb (22 Watts) amp.

You might also want to get a compressor (Keeley, Dynacomp MXR, Boss CS-2 Japan) and some kind of echo (Boss DD-2, Analog Aqua Puss, Line6 DL-4). To record the examples for GT I’ve used 69’ Tele, Music Man Albert Lee, Strat and Jerry Jones Baritone guitar through the Keeley compressor into the Pod XT.