

Now that you have a picture of dynamically relaxed sitting, let's discuss how you can achieve that state in your hand positions.

BALANCING THE RIGHT HAND

Natural Position

As in other aspects of guitar playing, the dynamically relaxed approach to the right-hand position avoids extremes. The position should look and feel as natural and balanced as possible. It should not involve bizarre twisting, bending, or excess tension. Such a position is based on the normal way you use your hand every day, that is, grasping or gripping various items. A good example of normal use is the way you grip the handle of your guitar case when you carry it. The fingers curl around the handle and the wrist is straight with respect to the forearm. People tend to prefer this position because it gives the greatest muscle balance and leverage and thus requires the least effort. All you have to do to prove to yourself that this is the strongest position is to try carrying the guitar case with the wrist bent in any direction away from the straight position. The relative weakness and discomfort should be immediately apparent.

You can apply the basic idea of the natural, straight-wristed grip to the right-hand position of the guitar. Let's start by placing the upper part of the right forearm on the upper bout of the guitar. Then make a fist as in Figure 4-5. Do it as if you are gripping the handle of your guitar case. Figure 4-6 shows the same thing without the guitar.

Figure 4-5 Right-hand position: side view of fist with guitar

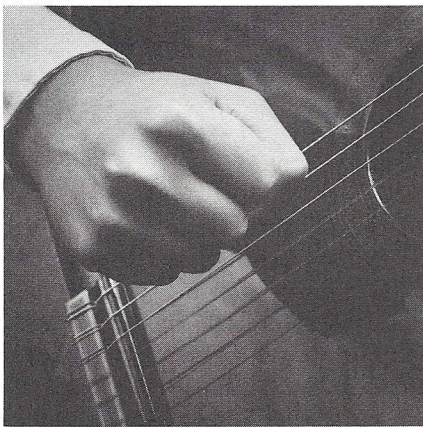
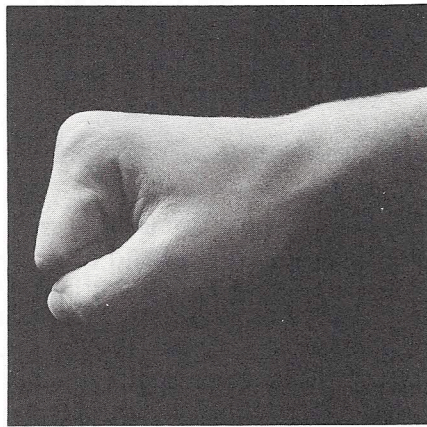


Figure 4-6 Right-hand position: side view of fist without guitar



Notice that when you make a fist without thinking about it too much, you do not bend the wrist and strength is maximum. Notice also that the fingers are very strong in the curled position. However, for guitar playing it does not work well to hold the fingers in such a tightly curled way. Thus we will just use the fist as a natural starting point and then modify it somewhat so that the hand forms a natural position for playing. First, allow the fist to open easily so that the fingers retain a moderate, natural curvature—not too much, not too little—and then put the thumb on the fourth string and the index, middle, and ring fingers on the first three strings as in Figure 4-7. Figure 4-8 shows the position without the guitar from the side. Figure 4-9 shows another view. Notice the gentle, natural curvature of the fingers and the only slightly bent wrist. This position should not be interpreted too rigidly. Although extremes should be avoided, some bending of the wrist may be useful. For example, some players may find that the hand will work better if the wrist is bent slightly to the right; others will find it most comfortable to have a slightly greater arch in the wrist, that is, the hand will bend down somewhat toward the fingerboard.

Figure 4-7 Right-hand position: front view of typical position with guitar



Figure 4-8 Right-hand position: side view of typical position without guitar



Contrary to what is often said, it is not always appropriate to line up the knuckles of the right hand exactly parallel with the strings; the angle of the knuckles in relation to the strings should be adjusted for each person according to the shape of the nails, length of the forearm, and so on. Since most guitarists' fingernails work best when the strokes are made off the left-hand side, the most comfortable position is usually one that is slightly angled to the left as in Figure 4-10.

Figure 4-9 Right-hand position: side view of typical position with guitar

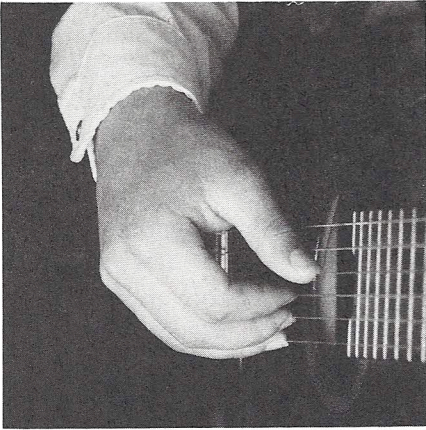
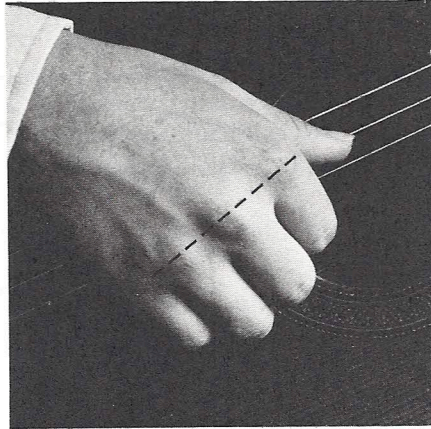


Figure 4-10 Right-hand position: front view showing angle of knuckles to strings



Stacking

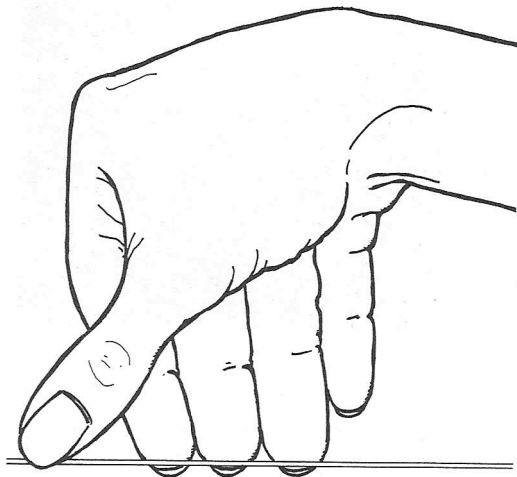
A point that is often overlooked in the hand position is that the fingers tend to work best if, as in the fist, they are stacked very close to each other instead of being separated. In fact, a great deal of the time they can actually touch each other, particularly at the tips. This close-knit operation of the fingers has many advantages. First, it is a natural, relaxed position. When most guitarists hold the hand as in Figure 4-8, the fingers naturally tend to stack together. The fingers tend to be stronger in this position since there is no excess tension. Second, if the fingers are stacked close together at the tips, then it is easy to "plant" (that is, prepare) them accurately as a single unit on the strings before playing arpeggios or chords (see Chapter 5, "Planting the Fingers"). Third, stacked fingers make it easier to play all the notes of a block chord simultaneously. When you try to play block chords with unstacked fingers, the tendency is to inadvertently arpeggiate them. Finally, stacked fingers allow the player to focus his energy on the right hand in exactly the way he wants so that he has more control over musical expression.

Thumb Position

The right-hand thumb position often is a source of problems for the player; therefore, it requires some special consideration. Each player must determine the best position for his thumb, depending on its length, nail shape, and flexibility. Always keep in mind that whatever thumb position is finally chosen, it should not take the hand very far from the dynamically relaxed position we have described. The typical relationship between the thumb and fingers is

illustrated in Figure 4-11, where the thumb and fingers are placed on one string.

Figure 4-11 Right-hand fingers on one string



Note that the thumb is somewhat to the left of the fingers so that thumb and fingers do not get tangled up with each other. Players with long or short thumbs will usually need to vary the position slightly. The distance between the thumb and fingers will tend to be greater if the thumb is longer and less if the thumb is shorter. It is usually best to have a moderate distance between them. Then there is enough room for the thumb to operate independently and yet be close enough to the fingers so that the thumb and fingers can work together as a relaxed, compact unit.

For most playing, the wrist should not be too high or too low—that is, it should be bent only slightly—or it will hinder the efficient use of the thumb. If the wrist is too high, then neither the thumb nor the fingers will work very well because the tendons in the wrist will be strained. If the wrist is too low, then the thumb will be too far from the fingers and will not work so well with them; also the thumbnail will not be in the best position to produce a good tone. The appropriate height for the wrist varies with the player but usually falls in the range of four to five inches measured perpendicularly from the soundboard to the top of the wrist. A certain amount of experimentation is necessary to determine the normal wrist height for each player. It should go without saying that the wrist height may sometimes have to deviate from the normal according to the technique required by the music. (See, for example, the technique described in "Right-Hand Speed" in Chapter 5.)

Common Right-Hand Problems

Now let's consider the most common problems that students have with the right-hand position. They all result from inappropriate tension and/or extreme positions of the wrist or fingers. These positions deviate too far from the dynamically relaxed model just described. They are not comfortable and do not result in good playing. Some of the common difficulties as you would see them from the sitting position described in this chapter are:

1. bending the wrist too far to the right and extending the thumb too far to the left
2. having too much arch in the wrist, that is, holding it too high above the fingerboard
3. separating the fingers from each other, especially at the tips
4. curling up the fingers too much
5. straightening out the fingers too much
6. pressing the forearm too hard against the instrument

These extreme positions usually cause muscle cramps, aching tendons, lack of control of the right-hand strokes, and poor tone quality. Such extremes should be avoided. It is good to check your position for any of these distortions or excess tensions. This can be done by using a mirror. Another way to check is to place the guitar face up on your lap, then put the hand in position and look at it carefully.

If you avoid the extremes of position and apply the ideas we have discussed, you should be able to find a dynamically relaxed position for the right hand. Such a position should not be difficult to find because it is based on the typical, natural way we use our hand when we want to grip something. The exact details of how to position the hand will vary slightly with each individual; thus, the intelligent player will not try to copy the position exactly as described or as shown in the photographs but rather will adapt it to the special configuration of his own hand. Keep in mind that the position should feel comfortable when you play, look relaxed and graceful, and bring you good musical results.

BALANCING THE LEFT HAND

Natural Position

Many players experience considerable left-hand fatigue and usually blame it on "lack of strength." Although it is true that the left hand must be stronger than the right, brute strength is not required. Far more important is to find