THE REAL MERLE TRAVIS GUITAR

Like Father, Like Son

TAUGHT BY
Thom Bresh
Greetings!

Travis used to say, "I just pick a guitar the way I feel it." That's what made the guitar playing of Merle Travis real.

I was brought up around guitars. As long as I can remember, I have had something to strum. When I was 3 or 4 years old, it was a ukulele. When I was 5 or 6, it was an old (then new) Harmony guitar. My way of learning used to be by watching Merle play and wearing out Chet Atkins albums. This was an informal way of learning but it worked. Watch, listen and try it yourself. When I was about 10 years old, I took steel guitar lessons from Ernie Ball (before he made strings). During junior high and high school, I learned about music theory and how to play a number of wind instruments. When I had finished my half-hour practice session on sax, trumpet or steel guitar, I picked up my first love -- the standard guitar -- and practiced, experimented and enjoyed it until someone made me go to bed and get some sleep. It was just hard to put it down because it felt so good.

Music, to me, is an expression of one's inner feelings through rhythm and melody. Because of that personal factor, no two people can play exactly alike. The people at Homespun Video let me make this instructional tape to show you my father's style the same way he showed me -- watching, listening and trying it yourself. But unlike the way I learned, you can watch the split-screen of my hands, back the tape up and watch and listen to it again, then check it out against the tab for comparison and try it yourself. I think this is a great way to learn. I will show you many of the techniques, chords and licks that my father used. I'll relate some of the feelings and stories we shared. But, in the end, when you've learned everything I have to show you, just close your eyes and be like the Real Merle Travis and pick the guitar the way you FEEL it.

Thom Bresh
Memories Of A Mentor

by Happy Traum

When I was starting to play guitar back in the Fifties, the term “Travis picking” was frequently heard among the fingerpickers who showed their stuff in New York City’s Washington Square Park on sunny Sunday afternoons. The term was used generically, describing a kind of folk pattern picking that was widely played at the time. Many of us had never even heard the originator of the style, and what we were playing bore little resemblance to the real Merle Travis style.

When I first heard his early Capitol collection, “Merle Travis Back Home,” it was obvious that his rhythmic, percussive, jazzy-bluesy sound was far more complex than what most of us were playing. Merle immediately became one of my guitar heroes, and I wore out that record trying to imitate his fabulous sound. What I would have given to have been able to take a lesson from him! In fact, one of my regrets is that, after getting to know Travis a little back in the Seventies, we didn’t yet have the technology to capture his style in a Homespun video lesson.

I finally got to meet Travis in the mid-’70s when I opened two shows for him at McCabe’s Guitar Shop in Santa Monica, CA, a small but prestigious venue that’s a favorite haunt of acoustic guitar players. At first I was pretty intimidated, seeing him standing there with his rhinestone-studded cowboy outfit, ten-gallon hat and the famous Martin guitar with “Merle Travis” inlaid across the fingerboard. His manner was so friendly and generous, though, that I felt instantly at ease, and we spent several hours talking and picking together. Later, Jane and I got to spend some more time with him at the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, KS, and he again made us feel like we had been friends for years. Sadly, that was the last time we saw Merle Travis.

It is with special pleasure, therefore, that we are able to present this lesson with Thom Bresh, who so ably carries on the great guitar tradition of his father.
EX. 4 “Walkin’ The Strings”

Very Fast

even gliss.

let ring throughout

T 2
A 2
B

Am

Gm

1. F

F7/C

Bb

Bdim7

F7/C

D7/A

G#dim7

C7/G

2. F

F7/C

even gliss.

T 2
EX. 5 “I’ll See You In My Dreams”
Moderately Fast

F

\[ \text{Bb}^9/F \]

\( \text{Ton} 6 \)

A

\[ \text{C} \]

\[ \text{Add}^7 \]

\[ \text{C}^6 \]

\( \text{Ton} 5, 6 \)

A

\[ \text{A}^7 \]

\[ \text{D}^9/F^\# \]

\( \text{Ton} 6 \)

15
EX. 6 “Bugle Call Rag”

*Capo at 2nd fret

Very Fast

N.C.

*Notes fretted at 2nd fret played as open strings.
EX. 7 “Farewell My Bluebell”

Moderately Fast (♩ = 72/8)

*Capo at 2nd fret

*C notes fretted at 2nd fret, played as open strings.
EX. 8 "Hangin' With The Girls I Know"
Moderately Fast
\( \text{Tempo} = \frac{7}{8} \)
Transcribed by JESSE GRESS
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