Worship Guitar Acoustic Playing—Strumming

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Introduction—Worship Guitar Playing



In churches today, the guitar has replaced the piano as the most commonly used instrument in worship. Contemporary worship music is usually composed with the guitar, or at least the guitar in mind, and recorded with the guitar as prominent instrument in the mix.

Acoustic guitar is the perfect accompanying instrument to use in worship. The acoustic guitar is a harmonic instrument and functions as a percussion instrument as well. So, with the acoustic guitar you get the harmonic support you need to sing along with and the percussiveness of a strumming pattern that helps to keep the “beat”.

One of the most challenging aspects of playing the acoustic guitar in worship lie in the arena of strumming. A beginning guitarist can play chords easier than they can strum with a consistent and interesting rhythm. Lacking in many acoustic guitar resources is a step-by-step guide to developing a strong and varied strumming technique.

In this book you will learn how to develop a solid foundation in strumming and to vary the basic concepts to create advanced and complex patterns. You will also learn how to maintain a steady pulse, which is more important in worship than a fancy strumming pattern. Keeping a steady beat when leading worship is far more important than how your strumming pattern sounds, as people will not sing along if they cannot find the beat.

To get the most out of this book you will need to do apply a few principles:

1) Practice—20min a day practicing these concepts will make a major difference in the way you play. Practicing is different from playing. When you practice, you are trying to improve at a specific aspect of your guitar playing. In this case, strumming.
2) Metronome—You will need a metronome or drum loop—GarageBand has loops that come with the program—to provide a steady beat for you to strum along with.
3) Patience—Rome wasn’t built in a day, and neither will your guitar ability. The goal is consist practice aimed toward a specific goal.
4) Song—It is a good idea to use one song that you feel comfortable chording along with. We will be focusing on the strumming hand in this text, not the fretting hand.

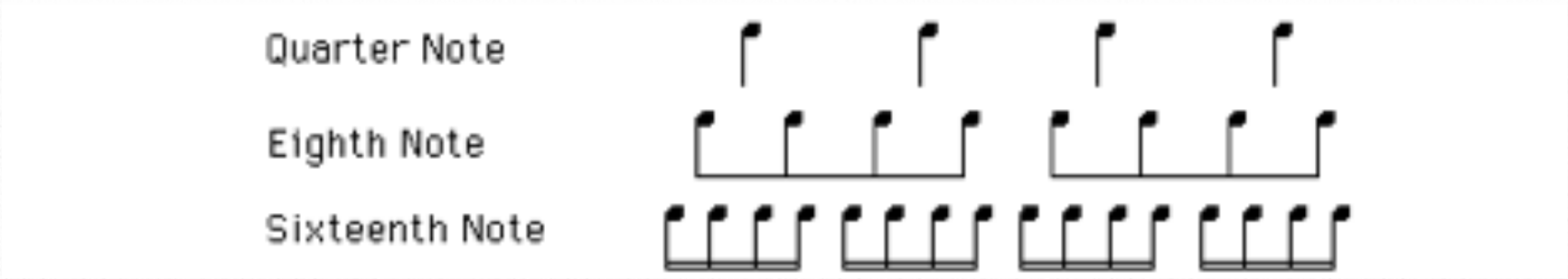
Let’s jump in. The videos in the text are to help you grasp and apply the concepts. You do not need to know how to read music to be successful with this book.

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Subdivide for Success



Subdividing is the concept of breaking down a unit into smaller parts. If you subdivide a dollar, for example, you could break it down into four quarters, ten dimes, etc. In music, subdivision means breaking the beat down into smaller units. For example, breaking a quarter note into eighth notes or sixteenth notes.



A quarter note gets one beat, an eighth note gets 1/2 a beat, and a sixteenth notes gets 1/4 of a beat. Therefore, it takes two eighth notes to equal one quarter note, and so on.

Playing and singing along with smaller rhythmic units gives you more information to play from. If you are playing at a slow tempo and the only point of reference you have is a quarter note, you might be early or late. If you are playing at a slow tempo but are referencing your playing on smaller rhythmic units, such as sixteenth notes, you are more likely to play on beat. Whenever I do studio work I always ask to play along with a shaker track, sounding sixteenth notes. I prefer this to a click track, sounding quarter notes, because I have more information to base what I am playing off of. This helps me better play “in time”.

Strumming 101

In order to subdivide for strumming success, we need to look at a good strumming stroke.

Quickly
To properly execute a downstroke strumming pattern the RH (I’m using the right hand to simplify explanation) needs to move quickly across the strings, giving the impression that all of the notes of the chord are being sounded together—this creates a chord. If the pick moves too slowly across the strings we will hear the notes of the chord individually, making what we are playing an arpeggio, not a chord (an arpeggio is playing a chord one note at a time; a chord is sound two or more notes simultaneously).

Parallel

The RH also must move parallel to the top of the guitar. The top of the hand is what you would reference to see if this is occurring in your strumming stroke. If the top of the RH does not move parallel to the top of the guitar, you will be moving in an arc. An arc movement will not properly sound all of the notes of a chord. Or, worse, it could case you to get "stuck" on the lower or upper strings, thus confusing the steady rhythm.

Relax

When strumming the guitar you want to maintain a relaxed right hand and wrist. The primary movement in a good strumming stroke is from the wrist. Movement in the arm needs to be minimized. Pretend you stuck your hand in a bowl of oatmeal. You would probably shake your wrist to get the oatmeal off of your hand. The same way you would "throw" your wrist in a downward motion is what we need for a relaxed strumming stroke. There does need to be a bit more control in the strumming motion. The wrist needs to be relaxed and the primary point of movement.

Easy

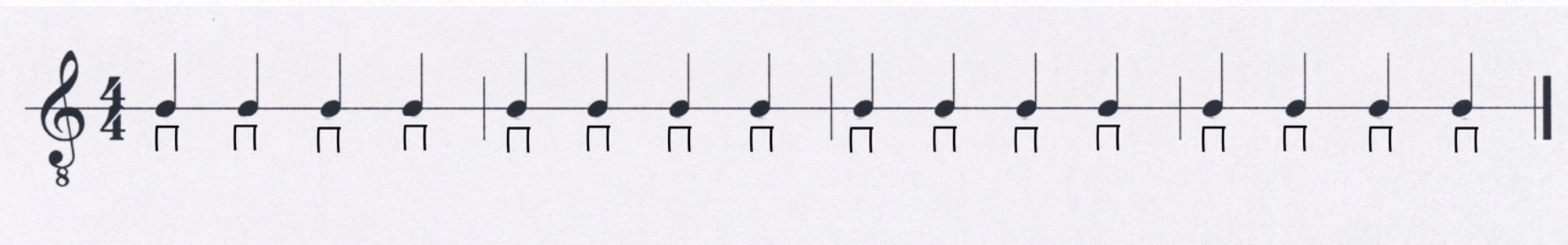
Each guitar has a top-end volume. It does not matter if you strum more aggressively, your guitar will not give you more volume. A good strumming stroke is an easy one, meaning not aggressive. Maintain an easy feel and intensity, as this will insure an even stroke.

See Video: Intro to Strumming

How to Subdivide a Strumming Stroke

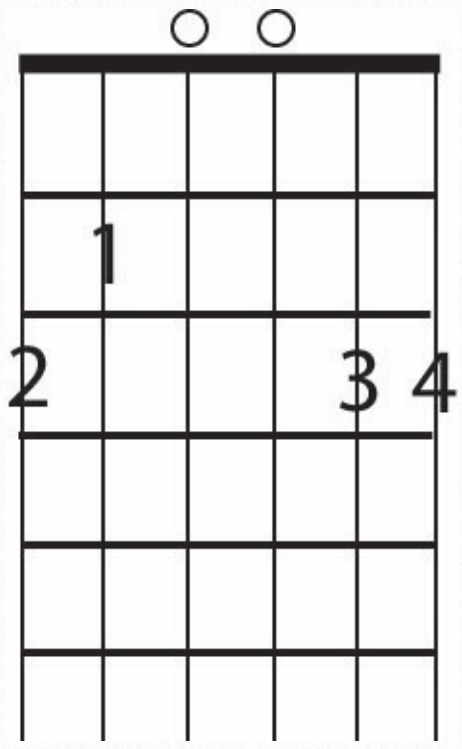
The initial concept of subdividing a strumming stroke is easy to comprehend. If you play a downstroke only strumming pattern you will automatically subdivide. Let me explain. After you have played one downstroke, to play another downstroke your hand my move upward. This movement upward is the subdivision. When playing a downstroke quarter note strumming pattern, your upward motion will be the eighth note.

Ex. 1 (Quarter Note Strumming Pattern)

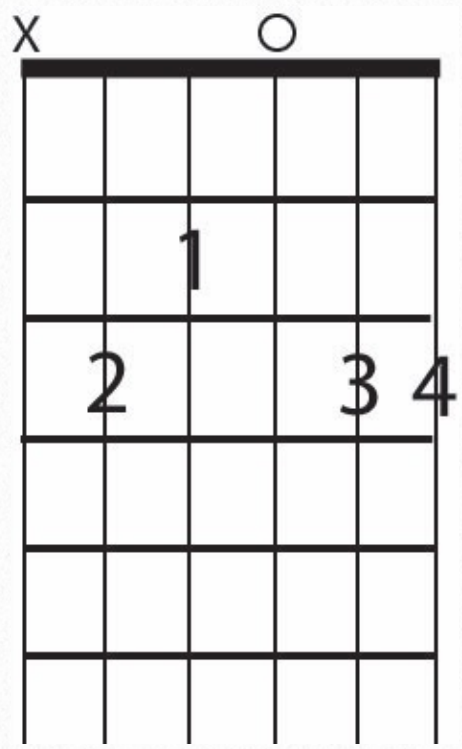


Chord Diagrams: G, C, D, Em7

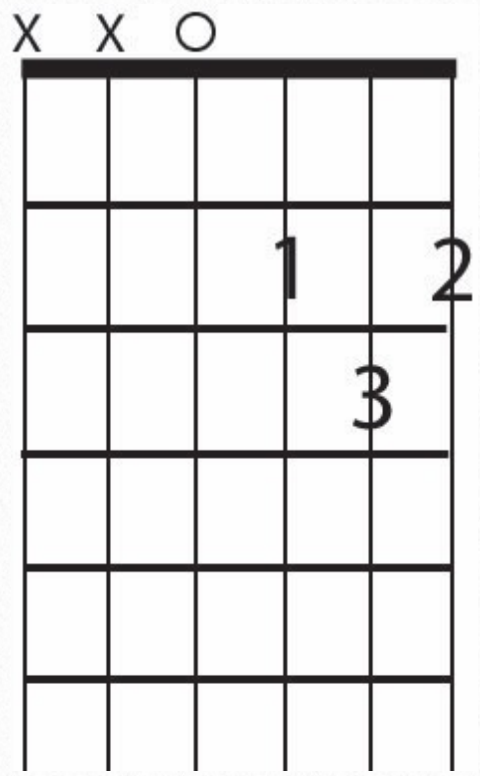
G



C



D



3

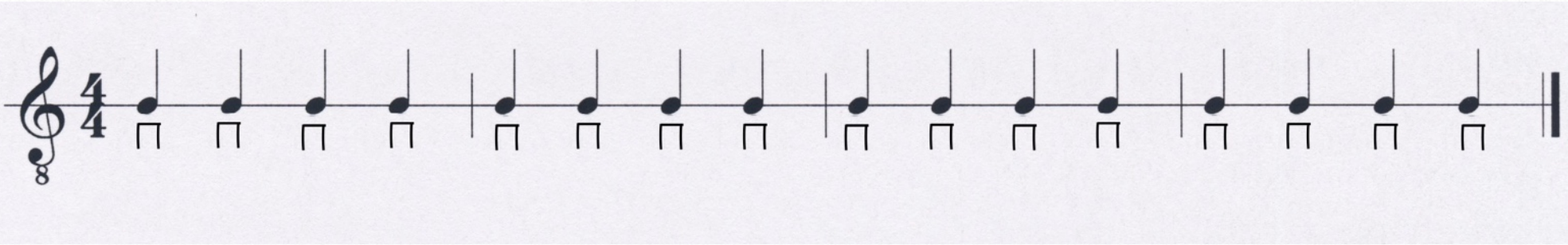
Strumming Pattern Basics
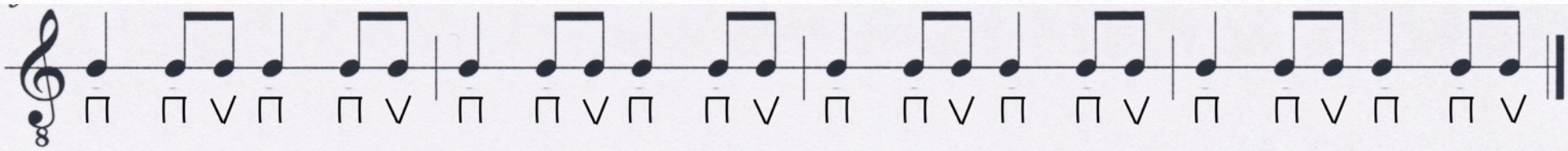


Introduction

There are three basic strumming patterns that can be used to build a solid and interesting strumming pattern. The three strumming patterns should be practiced in isolation with a single chord, a G chord for example, and then with a basic chord progression.
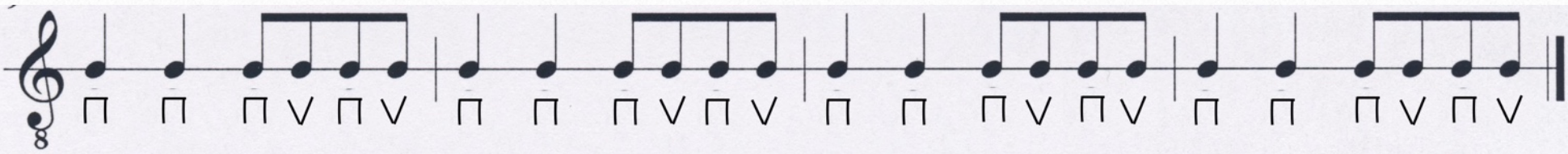
Quarter Note/Down Stroke Only



Quarter & Eighth Note/Down and Up Stroke



Quarter & Eighth Note Pt. 2/Down and Up Stroke



See Video: Introduction to Strumming Patterns

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Advanced Strumming



Simple to Complex

The next step in developing a great strumming technique is to turn simple strumming patterns into complex ones. Diminution—dividing notes into shorter ones—is the first step in this process. In the first strumming pattern in Ch. 3, quarter note only, the diminution process is easy. Instead of executing a quarter note downstroke, we will do the down stroke so that we are playing eighth notes.

Strumming pattern 2 is a bit of a challenge, as we need to keep our down and up strokes on the correct part of the beat. Instead of playing a quarter note followed by two eighth notes we will be playing an eighth note followed by two sixteenths.

The last strumming pattern would have us playing two eighth notes followed by four sixteenth notes.

See Video: Strumming Patterns 1-3 (Diminution)

Complex Strumming Pattern
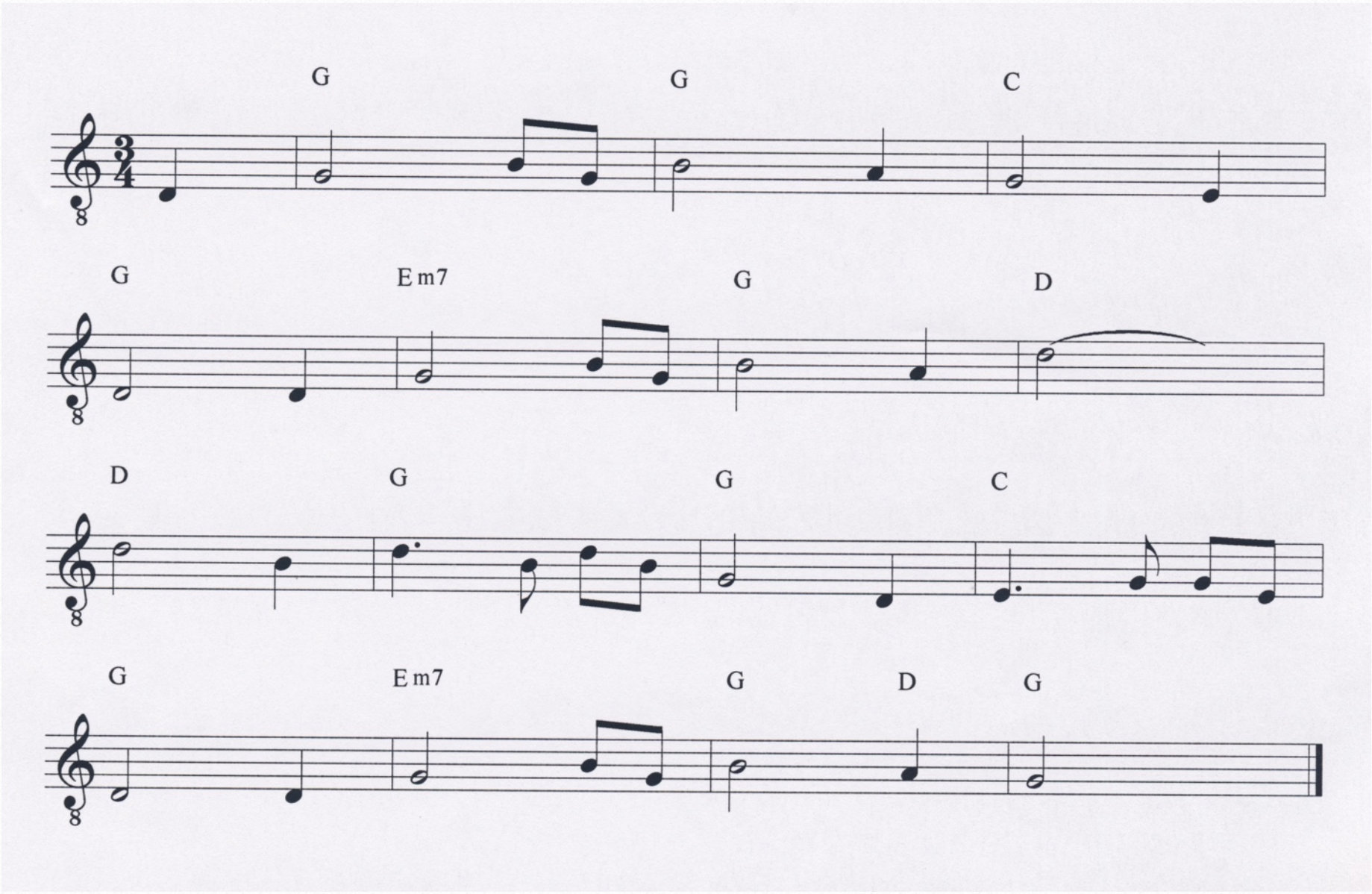
Now that you are comfortable strumming with a consistent subdivided rhythm, and have practiced this concept in basic and diminuted patterns, we can move on to creating your own feel and strumming patterns.

What separates one persons strumming style from another is what they do and do not play. One way of developing your own feel or groove is to add brief moments of silence where you are not playing on either a down or up stroke, or both. To accomplish this, while you are playing the subdivided strumming pattern simply do not play an upstroke occasionally. You can do this randomly to see what the effect is. Now try to eliminate a down stroke. When doing this you still should maintain the down and up subdivided strumming pattern, as this will keep you in time and solid with the chord changes.

See Video: Creating Complex Strumming Patterns

Practicing the Strumming Patterns in a Tune

To better illustrate the strumming patterns, I have included “Amazing Grace” as a tune that you can use to practice the different patterns, as well as create complex ones.



Lance Beaumont is a guitarist, teacher, and author. Lance is an adjunct professor of guitar at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and Music and Worship Associate for the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention. He is the author of the best-selling book, The Capo Chord Book, published by Mel Bay Publications. Lance is endorsed by Shubb Capos and is a Hill Guitar Co. artist. He is a graduate of Texas Christian University, holding a BM and MM in classical guitar performance, and Boston University, holding a DMA in music education.

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