



Freddie Green's Rhythm Guitar Style Revisited

After the article "Distilling Big Band Guitar: The Essence of Freddie Green" appeared (October 2000), both positive and negative response indicated widespread interest in Freddie Green's guitar technique and musicianship. This led to the creation of an educational, not-for-profit web site, www.freddiegreen.org. The site's objective is to document Green's musical life and his inimitable style of rhythm guitar.

On the site, Green's evolution of technique is illustrated by transcriptions ranging from 1937 recordings to a 1987 performance recorded on video, four days before his death, that's available on DVD (*Diane Schuur & The Count Basie Orchestra*, Image Entertainment). This performance is incredibly important, providing the opportunity to transcribe Green's playing aurally and visually.

The transcribed excerpt above documents Green playing chords consisting of four notes, three notes, two notes and one note. And it clearly shows the fingering and technique he used to create his sound. He would place his fingers to form a common chord form, but then selectively push down on certain strings within the chord form. Measure 7 is a perfect example of using one chord form, but sounding four notes on beat 1, two notes on beat 2, then one note on beat 3 and beat 4. The incredibly high string action on Green's guitar greatly aided this selective sounding of certain strings. The chord tablature illustrates the fingering forms used by Green. Based on the DVD's visual evidence, Green's exact fingerings are known, though at times it's difficult to determine exactly which left-hand finger is used on a string. An "x" indicates that a finger is placed on the string, but the string is not fully pushed down to make contact with the fret. A "black dot" indicates that a finger is placed on the string, and the string is pushed down to make contact with the fret. If there is no "x"

or "black dot," the string is fully damped by a finger of the left hand.

Green's unusual technique explains why many professional guitarists who saw him play reported that he employed standard three-note voicings on the third, fourth and sixth strings. Yet Green's many recordings belie that statement. The notes that Green actually sounded were primarily subsets of common chord forms. This has led many musicians to write books and articles that incorrectly describe Green's rhythm guitar technique.

Dr. Mark Allen's article on the web site, "Dynamic Chords—Muted Notes," put forth the theory that Green played in this manner. With this video/audio transcription, the theory has been proven correct. This DVD transcription also supports the controversial statement from the October 2000 article: "The essence of Green's 1950s style came from playing 'chords' that contained only one clearly sounded note."

Like other innovators, Green took a common technique and made it his own. This approach led to his incomparable rhythm guitar sound. He never shared his playing technique by teaching others or writing an instruction book. Perhaps he didn't want to share the secret that kept him in demand as a guitarist for 50 years, or perhaps he thought that what he did was simply not worth talking about. Whatever the reason, we are fortunate that Green left the visual clues available on the DVD and the aural clues of his numerous recordings, so that his dedicated admirers may finally piece together how he created that glorious sound.

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Guitarist Michael Petterson received a BA in Music from the University of Illinois and performs with big bands and small ensembles throughout the Chicago area.