

# HOLE NOTES

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## COTTEN PICKING

The fingerpicking style of folk-blues legend Elizabeth Cotten

### FOLK-BLUES/RAGTIME GUITARIST

Elizabeth Cotten lived from 1895 to 1987, but by age 12 she had already written the tune that would make her a legend: "Freight Train." It would take another 55 years before she would achieve status as a legend. Her long road toward that rank was as unique as her unusual left-handed approach to playing the guitar.

Before reaching her teen years, Cotten helped make ends meet by working as a maid. She married at 15 and retired from playing music to raise a family. By 1947, Cotten was divorced and working as a housekeeper for the musicologist/folk-singer Seeger family, which included children Peggy and Mike (folk legend Pete Seeger was their half-brother). Immersed in the family's musical surroundings, Cotten began relearning to play the guitar as she approached the age of 60.

By 1957, her playing was back in shape, and Mike Seeger began to make reel-to-reel home recordings of Cotten playing her old songs, including "Freight Train." The following year, he released these recordings under Cotten's name on the album *Folksongs and Instrumentals with Guitar*. ("Freight Train" has since been covered by Peter, Paul and Mary, Joan Baez, Doc Watson, Chet Atkins, Lenny Breau, Tommy Emmanuel, Jerry Garcia and Taj Majal, among others.) The timing was ideal: the folk music revival was going strong, and by the dawn of the Sixties, Cotten, then 67, was finally able to experience her first live public performances. By the time she hit the stage at the Newport Folk Festival in 1964, she was a living legend.

When Cotten passed away at age 92, she left behind a hugely influential guitar style. Completely self-taught, Cotten was left handed, but played a right-handed guitar, turned upside down, using her thumb to pluck melody notes on the G, B and high E strings, and her index and middle fingers to pull out bass notes from the low E, A and D strings. In addition, she often tuned all six strings down one whole step.

FIGURES 1a–c illustrate three variations on an open C chord that are similar to moves Cotten picks in "Freight Train." For the first pair of figures, grab the chord in standard fashion, jumping your fret-hand ring finger

All examples played fingerstyle: p = thumb i = index finger m = middle finger a = ring finger

**FIG. 1a** C C/G  
let ring  
T A B  
0 2 0 2  
3 3  
p i p m p i p m

**FIG. 1b** C C/G  
let ring  
T A B  
0 2 0 2  
3 3  
p a p m p i p m

**FIG. 1c** N.C.(C)  
let ring  
T A B  
0 0 0 0  
3 3  
p i p i p i p i

**FIG. 2a** E7  
T A B  
0 3 0 3  
2 2  
a p i p m p

**FIG. 2b** E7  
T A B  
0 3 0 3  
2 2  
m i p m p i p

**FIG. 2c** E7  
T A B  
0 1 2 0  
3 3  
i p a p m p a p i

**FIG. 3a** F  
T A B  
1 1 (1) 0 2 3  
\*T 1 1  
m p m p i p

**FIG. 3b** F  
T A B  
0 2 2 (2) 3 (3) 1  
\*T 1 1 3 2 (2) 3 0  
i p m p i p m p m p i p m p i

**FIG. 4** C C/G C C/G F 1/2  
T A B  
0 1 (1) 0 2 0 1 0 1 (1) 1 1 (1) 2 (2) 3 (3) 1 0 2 1  
3 3 3 2 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3  
a m p i p m i p m p m p m p p i p m p m p i p m p

**FIG. 4** G7 C N.C.(C) C  
T A B  
0 3 (3) 1 (1) 3 0 0 3 0 2 0 2 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0  
3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3  
m p a p a p p i p i p p i p m p i p i p i p p

back and forth between the fifth and sixth strings' third fret to play alternating bass notes. FIGURES 2a–c depict E7 patterns similar to what you'll hear in Cotten's classic song. Note that FIGURE 2c contains a tricky maneuver (at least initially) whereby, on beat one, the open sixth-string bass note is plucked at the precise moment of a G# hammer-on (G string, first fret). A similar phenomenon occurs

in FIGURES 3a and 3b, where a thumb voicing of F is used. (Note the tricky "pinky bend" near the end of FIGURE 3b's first bar, which is true to "Freight Train" form.)

FIGURE 4 combines some earlier "Cotten picking" moves, along with a few extras—like the hammer-on/pull-off ornament in bar 1, and interesting G7 voicing in bars 5 and 6—for an extended "Freight Train"-flavored passage.

Musician's Institute instructor and author/transcriber DALE TURNER played all the instruments/voices on his latest CD, *Mannerisms Magnified* (intimateaudio.com).