

The Material Culture of Thumpicking

Stuff. What is it about stuff that makes it so important? Why do we get it to begin with and does it mean more when someone else gives it to us? Does provenance affect our view of items even if we don't personally know the original owner? Is there a special pride and deeper meaning in having adapted a stock item to perfectly suit one's individual needs? So many questions, all about stuff. While these questions can be applied to most everything humans own, I set out to find the answers to these questions as applied to a specific style of guitar playing—thumpicking. Even more specifically, I wanted to know about the things that matter to a group of players from, or influenced by the music of, the Western Kentucky region of Muhlenberg County. This is a tiny geographical area, but the music cultivated there has spread worldwide and has enjoyed national fame and acclaim. As such, not everyone I will write about has a direct tie to Muhlenberg County, but they can all be traced back to Muhlenberg County through their influences. They also all have thumpicks, as opposed to plectra or flat picks. The common denominators among thumpickers are, as I see them, lineage by either intimation or imitation back to the Muhlenberg County pickers, guitars, amps, long manicured fingernails on their picking hands and, of course, thumpicks. As narrow a field as that seems, I have found that each warrants its own essay and as such I will limit my discussion to the picks, nails and guitars with a nod to lineage as it relates to culture. There is a strong thumpicking presence on the internet, with discussions about modifications to guitars and picks among other things; the internet world of pickers, as so many other subjects connected to thumpicking, warrants its own paper. As part of my

research, I posted a note on an online discussion board for thumpickers called The Chetboard. My post asked players what guitar and pick they played and if they customized either in any way; responses were plentiful. I also attended a special thumpicking event held in the heart of thumpicking country, Drakesboro, KY, where I had first hand access to some of the best and most knowledgeable players. It was a musical, social and spiritual treat.

To understand the materials that make up a culture, you have to first have an understanding of the culture itself. In the case of thumpicking culture, the origins of the music that binds the culture have been contested and written about in many essays and books, some of which I will quote here—none of which do I profess to be truth. I leave that to the scholars of the history and the music. What I will provide here is a general synopsis of the culture so as to put the material culture in some context. According to *The Journal of Country Music* and William E. Lightfoot, the style of playing that is known as thumpicking has a lineage that starts with a fellow named Arnold Schultz who played in a rag/jazzy/bluesy style and passed the torch to Kennedy Jones, which is where the local oral tradition places the beginning of the style and to whom the first use of the thumpick for guitar is attributed. Dr. Erika Brady, herself a member of the National Thumpicking Hall of Fame and the unofficial academic tradition bearer for thumpicking, wrote that the condensed Muhlenberg County version of the story of how the use of the thumpick and the rag/jazzy/bluesy style met up goes like this:

Around 1918, a young Muhlenberg County musician named Kennedy Jones had played his thumb raw, hitting the bass notes on his guitar for hours while playing a dance. The next morning he went down to a Central City music store, and found a box of thumpicks, at that time used exclusively for Hawaiian music, then a fad. As he later recounted to musician and music historian Mike Seeger, Jones told the owner, “Hand me down a guitar. I’m not gonna run off with it.” “So he handed it down to me, and I started pickin’ with it . . . just a thumb and finger, that’s all I used. I couldn’t do a good job with it to start with, but it gave me a good idea that I could. I bought the whole box,

turned the box up, and filled my pockets full with them. "I started pickin', and oh, in about a week or two, I was really rockin'. Oh, I could just do it, and it would talk to you." (Brady nd:1)

Jones, in turn, passed the music to Ike Everly (father of the famous musical duo The Everly Brothers) and to Mose Rager. Rager and Everly were influential on the musical stylings of Merle Travis, who in turn influenced Chet Atkins. Merle Travis and Chet Atkins are the most recognized of the thumbpickers, and for good reasons: timing and skill. The country music industry was breaking open in the 1940s and the world was ready for the music Travis and Atkins had to offer.

Muhlenberg County has embraced the thumbpickers and other musicians in a way that is difficult to grasp from the outside. When the emergency 911 service required all streets to be named, the town of Drakesboro took the opportunity to name the streets after the musicians and the town's history. (Brady 2009: class discussion) As a result, the main cross streets running through the town are Mose Rager Boulevard and John Prine Avenue. Additionally there is Ike Everly Avenue, Kennedy Jones Avenue, Tommy Flint Avenue, Guitar Avenue and as a reminder of the coal history, Mine Street. (Google maps) It stands to reason that as the town expands its naming of roads in the future, 2nd generation pickers like Steve Rector and Eddie Pennington will be honored with their own streets.

Muhlenberg County thumbpicking is a style of guitar picking that requires the use of a special guitar pick made to wrap around the thumb of the picking hand of the player. Think of it as a ring with a short, flat piece sticking out to one side. Not an acceptable piece of jewelry for a black tie event, unless you are providing the entertainment for the evening, but exactly what is needed to allow the thumb to create sound from the

instrument without actually striking the strings with the flesh. Many varieties of picks exist, and most thumbpickers modify their picks to their own liking and style of playing. It should be said early that you cannot be a thumbpicker without a thumbpick. It's right there in the name. Muhlenberg County pickers are so serious about their thumbpicks that I received this anonymous post in response to my question about picks:

A word of warning to travelers passing through Muhlenberg County, Kentucky: If you get pulled over for a traffic violation and you have a *flat* pick in your pocket, the fine is doubled. Carry a thumbpick, though, and you may just get off with a warning. ;-) Happy Trails. (guest, 2009)

The thumbpick has become much more than a way to avoid a sore thumb. It has become the symbol for the thumbpicking way of life. There are even t-shirts with an image of a "flat pick" in the universally-known red circle with a slash through it and the words "No Straight Picks" under. Thumbpicks have come to be used as mementos of certain events such as the annual gathering of the Chet Atkins Appreciation Society (CAAS) with the gathering's logo stamped on the top. They are also often personalized with the player's name or logo and are collected by fans like me. I have in my fledgling collection three Eddie Pennington (one of the foremost thumbpickers in the U.S. and National Heritage Fellowship Award winner) picks and one Janis Ian (a songwriter and friend of the late Chet Atkins) pick.

Thumbpicks have been made of many materials and in many configurations. Will Hoover, in his book on picks states that thumbpicks were the first musical instrument accessory to use the then-new plastic celluloid, predating banjo, mandolin and guitar plectra. (Hoover 1995:88) Celluloid has been known by many names such as Permanite, Pyralin, Fiberloid, Viscoloid and Herculoid. The first plastic that was capable of bending without cracking, it is extremely expensive, is a difficult material to work with

and has been known to burst into flames on occasion. (14-15) Most companies stopped using the material in the 1940s, except for Ping-Pong ball and guitar pick companies. Invented in 1870 by John Wesley Hyatt and common between 1880 and 1945, celluloid is still the only substance of which competition Ping-Pong balls can be made, as no other modern material can match its weight to flexibility and strength ratios. (14-19) Without the elasticity of the celluloid, it is possible that Kennedy Jones would not have liked the sound he got from his pocketful of thumbpicks, and that this paper would be unnecessary. Invention has always been part of the thumbpick's history. The Sears, Roebuck and Co. catalog from 1897 listed thumbpicks in both celluloid and horn, and at least one company has offered celluloid thumbpicks with felt attached to the top. There have been numerous attempts to create a hybrid thumb/flat pick, including one designed as an experiment for Chet Atkins. (88)

There are currently few companies that make thumbpicks. An extensive google search found Herco/Dunlop, Golden Gate, National, Zookies, Deering and a small company run out of the back shed by a husband/wife team: Fred Kelly Picks. In a phone interview with Fred and Helen Kelly, I asked the difference in the two different materials used for their picks: Delrin and Polycarbonate plastics. The Delrin is an extremely durable material that is opaque and impenetrable, making stamping names on them difficult. Polycarbonate makes a slightly less durable pick, a little more prone to breaking at the narrow points. The Polycarbonate is transparent and the colors have a beautiful depth to them. Mr. Kelly also says that the Polycarbonate gives a brighter sound on the strings than the Delrin. (2009: Telephone interview) In the Muhlenberg County circle, Fred Kellys (FK) seem to be the standard. Each picker has his favorite:

Steve Rector plays a Fred Kelly Slick Pick, Joe Hudson uses a Fred Kelly Regular, Gerald Johnson wears a Fred Kelly Speed Pick and Eddie Pennington uses all of the Fred Kellys at different points. (personal observation) In fact, Eddie had a batch of the Fred Kelly Delrin picks created with his name on them; some were Speed Picks and some were Slick Picks. All the pickers I saw using the FK picks at the 2009 Mose Rager Day in Drakesboro, KY were using the Delrin variety. Perhaps brightness on the strings is more important to the Travis and Chet style pickers than a jewel-tone pick. The only other pick I saw being used at all was the blue Herco/Dunlop that is a very inexpensive pick and was available in piles around the room. The more established players all came with their own picks; they were all Fred Kelly picks. Even the picks distributed at the CAAS are Fred Kelly Picks.

Mr. Kelly is a thumbpicker himself and came to this vocation out of necessity. He was listening to Merle Travis' *Folk Songs from the Hills* and was so impressed with the guitar work that he tried to replicate the sound. When he realized he had to have a thumbpick to get the sound right, he bought the only version available in his hometown in Michigan. Unsatisfied with the results, he set out to create a thumbpick from modern materials that would work well with his Merle Travis-inspired style. Kelly cut a piece of plastic to the correct shape, wrapped a piece of metal around it to hold the curve needed for the thumb, poured Plaster of Paris around it and baked it in the oven. The first try was unsuccessful, but the second effort resulted in a mold that Kelly was able to pour melted plastic into to form a pick made completely out of plastic. The result was the Speed Pick, a thumbpick with a small tip instead of the standard wide tip. The first pick came out of the mold in 1976 and the company has been in existence ever since. Mr.

Kelly is now 76 years old and is looking forward to retiring. They are currently looking for someone or some company to purchase the company and the molds and other equipment used in the manufacturing process. (Kelly 2009) Until that day comes, though, the Kellys remain committed to supplying the pickers with their picks. They still make the trip Nashville every year for CAAS and still personally man their own booth at the event. During our phone conversation, Mr. Kelly played his guitar for me using his own Fred Kelly Bumblebee Pick.

Interestingly, the original name of the Speed Pick was to be the Flying Eagle Pick due to the eagle being a symbol of strength and speed. The gentleman helping them to patent the pick felt that there were too many items available with the word eagle in the name, so he recommended the name Speed Pick. Though the Kellys reluctantly agreed to the name change, they are strong believers in faith, signs and divine guidance. When the first successful mold came out of the oven, Fred saw the words “eagle approved” on the inside of the mold, presumably left there as an imprint from the metal used to hold the plastic. The Kellys took this as a sign that the pick would be a success and that the name change had been the proper decision for the business. Other signs and divine guidance have played a part in the history of the Fred Kelly picks as well. The Kelly’s son had two dreams in which he saw the future of the company: in one, picks rained down from the sky and in another, brown trucks (interpreted by the Kellys as UPS trucks) were making daily runs in and out of the family driveway. The Kellys truly believe they were put here to make picks for the players and believe that the signs have led them along the way. In 1994, both Fred and Helen underwent open heart surgery. During Fred’s surgery, he had what he describes as a near death experience during which he heard music he had never

heard before and had the opportunity to talk to God. Fred remembers asking God if he could go back and do a little more work for him, after which he was aware of being in the recovery room. The Kellys saw this as a sign that they needed to force their business forward and reach more people with their picks. This began a push that has taken the company to its current position as described by the Kelly's website:

Due to the overwhelming positive response the Speed Pick received from fellow guitar players, Fred Kelly designed more custom picks, leading up to the 58 different styles of picks Fred Kelly Picks offers today. Because of his interest in guitar and the inspiration taken from incredible performers like Merle Travis, Fred Kelly now offers the largest variety of pick styles on the market. Fred Kelly has over 60 years playing guitar and understands the importance of musical signature. He has been producing custom guitar picks for over 25 years, and offers very competitive prices for all styles of picks and thumbpicks. Fred Kelly Picks is today distributed nationally throughout the U.S. and internationally throughout the world. (Kelly website, 2009)

The Kellys eventually created an injection mold system that allows the raw material to be heated until liquid and then forced into a mold. The entire process takes about eighteen seconds, making mass production possible and easier than the flat, die cut, heat wrapped process of the past. However, the invention process continues for the pick industry and for Fred Kelly Picks. Hoover states that the Herco bugablu pick is the only thumbpick ever created out of nylon.(1995:91) He is correct, for now, but Mr. Kelly is planning a nylon pick. He feels that the bugablu is too "flimsy" and is planning to introduce small amounts of glass into his composition to stiffen the pick.

Kelly's desire for continual improvement is not, however, unique in the thumbpicking world. The customization of picks is a common practice among the more established players and has been for many years. During my online research, I was regaled with stories of Chet Atkins' thumbpick made of a toothbrush handle more than once, and found several references to homemade thumbpicks even in this day of thumbpicks aplenty. I also received an email from a gentleman who had a special

situation for a guitar player; he played lefthanded before lefty thumbpicks came on the scene. Serious about playing with a thumbpick after seeing Chet Atkins play, he turned to his own creativity for an answer.

My name is Roger Chevrier and I live in Sudbury Ontario Canada. You were asking about making your own thumbpicks. I first saw Chet on The Tommy Hunter Show in the early 70's . That was a Canadian show, but it may have been broadcast in the states also, I don't know. After seeing him I knew I had to try thumbpicking. I went to all the music stores in Sudbury, but none of them could get me left-handed thumbpicks. (I'm a lefty.) So what I did for many years was buy 50 or so right handed thumb picks, boil some water in a frying pan, and throw them all in. Some kept their original shape so I threw them out, but a bunch of them would straighten out. I would then take two needle nose pliers and bend them roughly into a left handed shape. Now for the painful part. I would take one out of the boiling water, with a plier, wrap the pick around my left hand thumb and quickly shove them under the running cold water tap. It was a very hit and miss effort, but for every 50 picks I'd end up with maybe 5 usable ones. Of course they were brittle and would break prematurely, and after a month or so I'd have to start the whole procedure again. I think I did that for about ten years or so before lefty picks were available up here. My wife still laughs about those evenings and hearing me yell out in pain. I still have a few of those picks left as a reminder.

Luckily Roger only has picks and memories as reminders when it could have been scars.

Many others shared their custom pick stories with me and an overwhelming majority of the tales involved sanding or filing the tip of the pick to the right length, width and thickness. One of the reasons commonly offered for the customization was that the tip of the pick was too long and hit either the face of the guitar or the pickup (a device that picks up the sound from an acoustic guitar and sends the sound to an amplifier, producing more volume) making a tapping sound that the player didn't like. Other common reasons offered were that the picks were too stiff, didn't have the right bevel angle for the individual player's style or the pick was too wide at the tip. Norm van Maastricht sent me this email describing his experience with customization of picks:

What one finds, playing electric guitars with unaltered thumbpicks is that the tip of the pick clacks irritatingly against the top of the pickup nearest the fingerboard. I gave this some thought and one day took up a flatpick and played a few notes. I looked carefully to see just how far the pick stuck out from the edge of my thumb and had my Great Awakening. This showed me how much pick I actually needed to play properly and the amount of pick showing was way less than the length of the new thumbpick blades. So I trimmed the blades and rounded the tips... smoothed out the edges. I ended up with something I could keep pretty consistent and also a unit that did not click on my pickup....I was one of many who sought to make the 'ideal' pick which would be a snug

fitting thing with a shank or blade thin enough to use as a flatpick. I tried sanding them which not only was inconsistent but also left an easily broken product. Next thing was to trim the shank and glue a flat pick to that. This resulted in either a glue that weakened the plastic by chemically melting the plastic a little and causing it to break or a glue that just would not adhere to the plastic. That was part of the problem. Trying to find a pick that not only worked but that would be easy to make a consistent design so I wouldn't have to get used to a new pick every time one broke. I finally gave up on the idea of combining two picks and by that time the boutique picks started coming out... your Jim Dunlops, and branded picks, Gibson etc. (van Maastricht, personal email 2009)

Van Maastricht's story is a common theme among thumbpickers. He has been on the hunt for the perfect pick since he started playing, and has been actively attempting to create what he could not find on a shelf.

Many players told me that they used different picks with different guitars and/or different picks with the same guitar to achieve a different sound. Many reasons were offered for the switching of accessories, among them was curved vs. flat top guitars, steel strings vs. nylon and pickup location on the guitar. Terry Tolley sent me this information, "I carry one unmodified one and one trimmed one to get the sharper sound on the strings. I play on the Gretsch Nashville Classic, and this length allows me to avoid hitting the pickup case with the pick tip. I also play the nylon stringed, Gibson CE. On the Gretsch, I use both picks, depending on whether I will need a mellow tone, as I get with the unmodified pick, or a sharper tone from the narrower tip." (Tolley 2009:personal email) The pickers also have favorite picks that they hold onto for as long as possible.

Gary Smith sent me a great tale of the loss of his special pick:

In 2000, I played a part in the Marty Robbins memorial here in Phoenix. That night I lost one of my favorite picks on stage and was devastated. When I got home late that night, I told my wife that I was going to go back to the stage early in the morning, when it was just light enough to see, and try to find my pick. She was very understanding and just went along with my obsession. When I got there, the security guard was looking at me very suspiciously, I walked all over the stage and finally found that pick in between some tiles on the floor. There is something about a good pick that feels great when worn on the thumb, it fits perfectly, it plays well and that is hard to come by. That was a 20 mile round trip for a pick!!!

A pick collected from a special player can hold real value to its owner. Dr. Erika Brady has the pick Eddie Pennington used at the concert for winners of the 2001 National

Heritage Awards. (Brady 8) Joe Hudson, Executive Director of the National Thumbpickers Hall of Fame, holds dear a pink pick given to him by his mentor and friend, Steve Rector. I received an email from a thumbpicker in Louisiana who has a pick owned by Chet Atkins mounted in a shadowbox on his wall; the pick was given to him by Chet's sister as a reward for teaching her granddaughter a particularly difficult tune. (Hood, email communication) When Fred Kelly hand delivered 2 bags of personalized picks to Chet Atkins, Kelly asked for one back after Chet had touched it. It remains in his collection. (Kelly 2009: telephone interview) The picks have value to the players and fans of the Travis-style, even when the maker is the collector.

While these fellows really are quite serious about their picks, many are just as serious about their fingernails. Most of the thumbpickers have long nails on one hand, and to hear them discuss their fingernails was at first a bit odd. Many of the pickers discussed their manicure habits with me via email. "Talk about ladies and their nails!!, we fingerpickers are more concerned about our nails than most women are about theirs. We are very fussy about the shape, length, hardness of the nail, and how to repair a broken nail brings tons of suggestions from other guitar players. I tend to fuss over my nails daily, adjusting the edge to remove the slightest hint of a stress inducer, a chip or hint of something going wrong." (Smith, email 2009) Paul Mosely's wife pointed his nails out to me and joked that he takes better care of his than she does of hers. Many of the men mentioned having false acrylic nails put on if they had an event coming up and there was a problem with their natural nails. John Knowles went to special lengths to find a nail file that was strong enough and yet fine enough to suit his tastes, settling on a glass file sold at a beauty supply store. (Knowles 2009:tape recorded interview) It should

be mentioned here that Knowles is not, strictly speaking, a thumbpicker. Eddie Pennington described Knowles as “playing in the nude,” meaning Knowles does not use a pick. (Pennington 2009: personal communication) Knowles is accepted as an honorary thumbpicker, however, because of his work with Chet Atkins and his love of the music and style played by the Muhlenberg County pickers. The lack of thumbpick in Knowles’ playing may require an additional bit of attention to fingernails, but he is certainly not alone in his obsession with fingernails. There was an awareness among the pickers that they got strange looks when they went to buy the nail files or have the false nails put on, other than in their hometown where the pickers are revered and it is not unusual for a man to have long nails on one hand.

The thumbpicks and the nails are not the only things that make the well-dressed thumbpicker; there is also the guitars themselves. Most of the players I talked to had more than one guitar, but that has not always been the case. The geographical area where thumbpicking took the deepest roots is the coalfields of Muhlenberg County where entertainment was at a premium and work was hard. When the mines weren’t in operation there simply wasn’t much to do, so the fellows would gather and play the few musical instruments that existed in the area and share their knowledge and love of music with one another. Guitars were extremely valuable, perhaps especially so because of the lack of actual money in the area due to the self-contained coal company economy of scrip and flickers. To loan a guitar was for the lender to trust the borrower completely and for the borrower to owe a debt of allegiance to the lender. The process created a bond between the individuals, almost an apprenticeship or quasi-familial relationship. (Brady, 5)

I have seen this same relationship playing out in recent days. Joe Hudson has a similar relationship with one of the more established pickers, Steve Rector. Steve is his friend and mentor. Three of Hudson's prized possessions are prized primarily due to their connection with his friend. (Hudson 2009:email and personal communication)

Hudson has two guitars that were previously owned by Steve and one pink thumbpick Steve gave him. Hudson regularly plays at least one of the guitars, a custom made 1998 Gallagher that was later used as a model for the Steve Rector Gallagher Guitar that is commercially available. Hudson's pride in the instrument is obvious in an email he sent me:

I actually have two of his guitars, one is electric, and this one [the Rector guitar]. It plays amazing, but I cannot do it justice like he can. Words cannot explain how dear that I hold this guitar, as well as other things that I have acquired from Steve. He is so much more than just an instructor, he is a dear friend. He played the Electric a reasonable amount, and he played the Acoustic a lot. It is almost surreal to play them, as I know that I will never have the sound or touch of Steve, it does inspire me to try to do my best, knowing what has been played on them before. Steve still has a very nice selection of guitars to play, and it is kind of funny that we now have three guitars each that are almost identical. (the Steve Rector Model Gallagher, The Gretsch, and The Gibson Country Gentleman).

During a tape recorded interview held during Mose Rager Day festivities in Drakesboro, KY, Hudson showed off his/Steve's Gallagher. The closeness of the group around him meant that during the interview both Paul Mosely and Gerald Johnson felt comfortable giving the guitar a try. Paul and Gerald are both longtime regulars in the area and were known to Hudson. Both were respectful of the guitar and Gerald seemed excited that it was Steve Rector's guitar (Hudson quickly corrected him by saying "it's mine now").

Dr. Brady tells of a similar situation between herself and Rector, who was trying to cure her of her flatpick affliction. He lent her a guitar and when she offered to buy it, she was told the guitar was not for sale; she was to continue playing it. When she did later purchase the guitar under extenuating circumstances, it was an emotional deal that was

struck and included a complete history of the guitar and the promise that Brady would not sell it without first offering it back to Rector. (Brady 5)

Guitars have both financial and emotional currency. Songs have been written about the guitars upon which they are played and many players have real relationships with their guitars. One such relationship was explained to me in an email by Jim Penson:

...you asked about guitar players and their relationships with their guitars. My favorite guitar is a Japanese Gretsch 6120 that Chet helped to design and endorsed circa 1954. She's big and blonde and for some reason, I just call her "Dolly". Guess that pretty much sums up how I feel about my guitar. She got me through a lot of hard times...a divorce...a heart attack...and many a sleepless night. She never complains and she's always ready to play. Did you ever hear Chet and Jerry pick and sing the song, "Gibson Girl"? Some of the lyrics are, "She was hidin' in the closet when my wife walked out on me...She's been whiskey-stained and stepped on and her body's got some scars...She's been placed behind the backseat of one too many cars...She's my Gibson-Girl".

Clearly, Penson has feelings for his guitar—she has a name, Dolly, and has been beside him through some of the toughest times of his life. Similarly, a guitar previously owned by Mose Rager himself is now in the care of Eddie Pennington and is only brought out for special occasions. (Brady 7) A guitar that once belonged to thumbpicker Odell Martin was buried in a “rage of grief” by Chicken Hawk Murphy after Martin’s death, only to be disinterred later—after all, a guitar is still a guitar. (Brady 7)

But a guitar doesn’t need to have been owned by someone revered for it to be special. In addition to Rector’s acoustic Gallagher, Hudson also has an electric guitar that he found on an online auction site. It is a Gibson Country Gentleman Chet Atkins 1989 model. The exterior of the case is nothing unusual, but upon lifting the lid, it becomes clear that this is a special guitar. The inside of the case is a hot pink fuzzy material and the guitar is draped with hot pink satin, creating the overall impression of an elaborate casket for the guitar. Many of the players I heard from have multiple guitars. David Elliot sent by email a partial list of the guitars he keeps: “I have quite a few guitars (thirteen, I think) and they include a Gretsch 'Nashville', a Gibson Chet Atkins 'CE'

classic electric, a Gibson Chet Atkins 'Studio Classic' electric, a Gretsch 'Super Axe', (designed by Chet Atkins) a Fender 'Stratocaster', an Ovation 'Celebrity' electric, a very old Gretsch 'flat top', a 'Goya' classical, a Madeira flat top, and a Yairi classical (hand built by the master Kazuo Yairi himself.), two Fender Bass guitars, and a Fender 'Squire.'”

The age of a guitar has an effect on the quality of sound it is capable of producing; the older the instrument, the better the sound. As the wood ages, it becomes denser and more capable of sending the sound out into the atmosphere as less of it is absorbed by the material itself. Hudson reminded me that if he recoated a guitar's cracking finish, it would ruin both the sound and the value of the guitar. (2009:tape recorded interview) The pickers I spoke with often told me the type of guitar they were playing like a car collector would give the type of car they were driving: Year, Make and Model. Gerald Johnson was very proud of the fact that he owns a 1959 354 Stereo Custom Deluxe designed by guitarist Les Paul, Hudson's electric is a 1989 Gibson Country Gentleman. (2009: tape recorded interview) To me, this indicates a real appreciation for the instruments and the vintage. Additionally, guitars are sometimes purchased because an idol was seen playing one like it. For example, Norm van Maastricht wrote in an email, “As I learned how to play I eventually got a couple of Gretsch Chet Atkins model guitars, mainly two 6119 Tennesseans (one got stolen) and eventually a 6122 Country Gentleman made in 1961. I favored those guitars because Chet was my idol and silent mentor.” (2009)

Valuable or not, a guitar is not exempt from a picker's need to customize. John Knowles owned and customized not one, but two guitars made by the Japanese luthier

Khono. He took the guitars, at different points, to California-based guitar maker Kirk Sand to have the necks shaved and the height of the frets altered. Knowles explained this and other customizations as part of the process of finding one's own voice. "In the beginning, all guitar players sound alike and they all sound terrified," Knowles told me. Customizations seem to be a way of individualizing a guitar as well. According to Dr. Brady, when Steve Rector had his custom Gallagher built he asked for very specific things to be part of the design. He sent Gallagher a photo of his grandfather with his guitar so that the headstock on his new guitar would match the one on his grandfather's. He also had a flicker set into the neck of the guitar and matched Merle Travis' mother of pearl fretmarks in the shapes of the suits from a deck of cards. (Brady 8) Hudson drew my attention to the fact that Rector had at least one piece of himself in the guitar as well: he moved the standard 12th fretmark to the 14th position because he "[wanted] it different because [he's] different." Knowles has the letters CGP and his signature on the 12th fretmark of his Sand guitar. CGP (Certified Guitar Picker) is a designation given by Chet Atkins to only four guitar players, Knowles among them. It is something Knowles is very proud of and something he used to display his personality on his guitar.

This paper barely scratches the surface of the material culture of thumbpicking as there are as many stories as there are players. What has become clear is the value that these guitar players place on their history, their culture, their idols and their individuality. The thumbpicks, guitars and manicured nails are badges of honor in this society. They use these items as a means of communicating both individual and group identity and take great pride in being thumbpickers. Under all is a utilitarian ideal; the thumbpicks and nails make the music possible, and guitars are chosen for their sound as well as any other

reasons. The pickers and fans have small collections of things connected with the music and people they adore. They are also very proud of the connection they have with thumbpicking's past and future, even the ones who come to Muhlenberg County via Chet Atkins. Perhaps John Knowles, himself a Nashvillian, said it best when he described Muhlenberg County as "its own little mulchbed of wonderfulness."

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