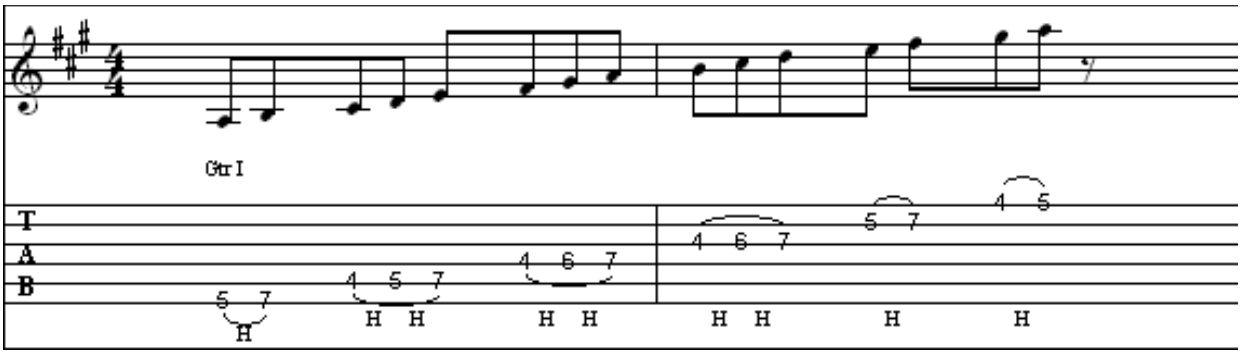
Hammer-Ons and Pull-Offs

Robert Higginbotham

Hammer-Ons and Pull-offs are just two of many tools the guitar player has to embellish melodies expressively.

Hammer-Ons

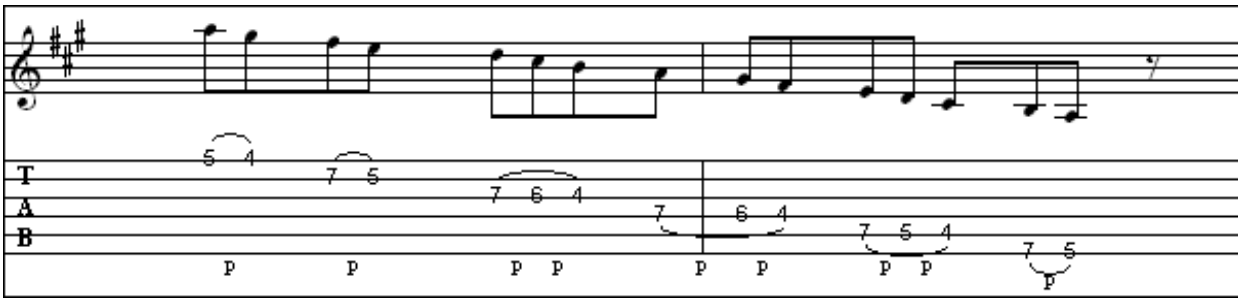
Hammer-Ons involve striking the first (lower) note, then sounding the higher note with another finger by fretting it without picking. Any combination of frets and fingering may be used. Hammer-Ons involving open strings are especially useful. Hammer-Ons may employ more than just two notes. When fretting the higher notes in Hammer-Ons it is important to exercise good technique by fretting the note cleanly and 'with authority'. It is also recommended to be picking gently so there is not a large volume change between the picked note and the hammered-on note. A simple exercise for hammer-ons which involves two and three note groupings is to apply it to a major scale, such as the following A major scale:



The curved line symbol for hammer-ons and pull-offs is identical. Sometimes the tab will indicate hammer-on with an 'h' as in the above example, often it will not. If the notes are going up in pitch then it is a hammer-on, if they are going down in pitch it is a pull-off.

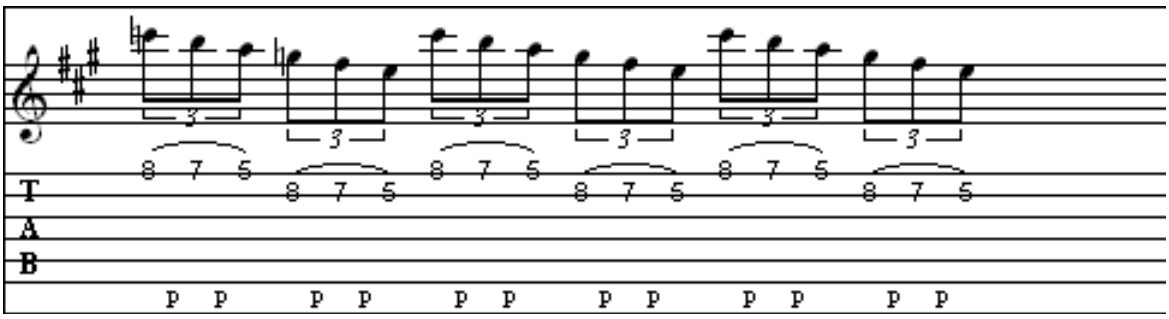
Pull-Offs

Pull-Offs involve placing multiple fingers on the notes to be sounded. Strike the first note and then without picking, pull the finger(s) off to sound the lower note(s). When pulling the finger(s) off, it helps to 'pluck' the string with the tip of your finger as you pull off. Again, picking gently will help keep the picked and pulled off notes from having a large difference in volume. An A major scale played descending with pull offs is a good exercise involving two and three note pull-offs:



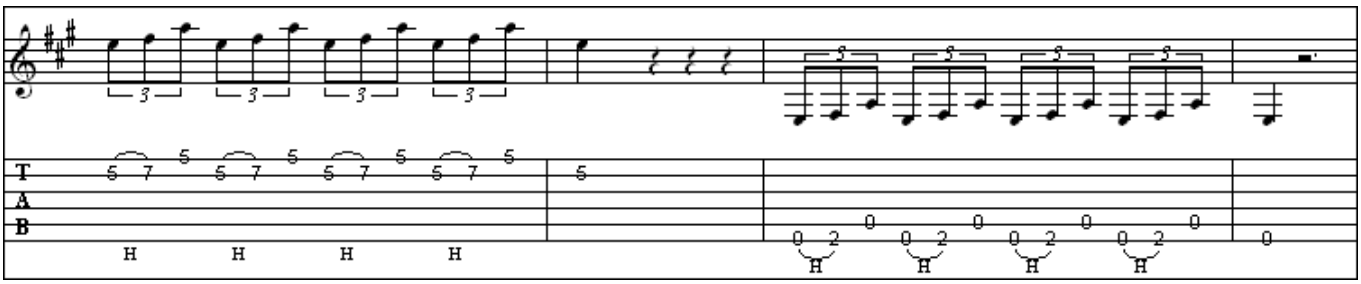
Note how the symbols for hammer-ons and pull-offs are the same. Pull-offs are sometimes indicated with the 'p' but often are not.

This rockabilly pull off riff may sound familiar:



Hammer-on Triplets

Hammer-on Triplets have a distinct sound. As you play them, let the top note ring as you repeat the triplet. The following example is the same triplet – two measures using a movable position, the next two measures two octaves lower employing open strings. This is taken from Chuck Berry's introduction to the classic "Around and Around".

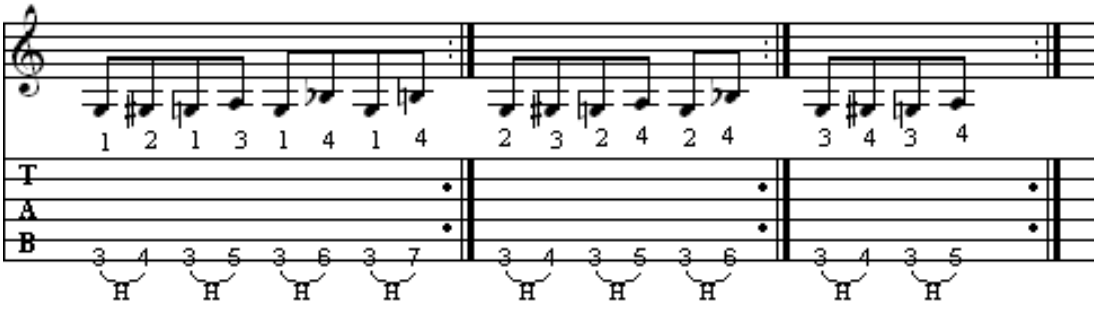


At a slower pace, hammer on triplets are a wonderful embellishment to open chords, or to help move from one open chord to another.

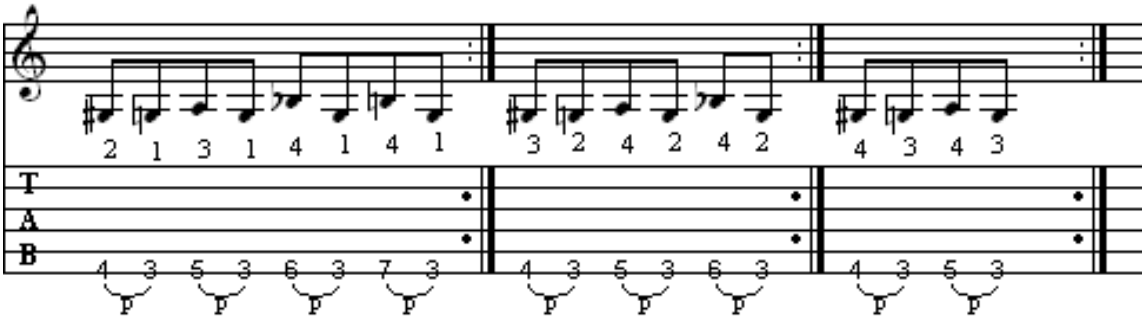
Non Musical Technique Development

Following are some suggested practice routines to develop & maintain good hammer-ons and pull-offs. *These examples should be practiced on all strings and at all positions both low and high on the fret board.*

Hammer-ons:



Pull-offs:



As with all exercises, play these slowly and focus on good tone. Gradually increase speed as long as the tone remains good.

Enjoy !