

# The Best Artificial Fingernail System Yet

By Douglas Niedt

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The best artificial fingernails for guitarists are acrylic nails attached over the real nail with a glue dot — they stay on through the heaviest playing, wear slowly, won't harm the natural nail, and sound good enough for concert work. This tip covers sizing and sourcing the nails, why you should never use super glue, and how to apply and remove them, with video demonstrations.

## The Best Artificial Fingernails

- The very best artificial fingernails for guitarists are acrylic nails that you attach on top of your real nail with a glue dot.
- The acrylic fingernails, which stick on your real nail with a glue dot, won't harm your real nails and are easy to put on and take off.
- Acrylic nails held with glue dots stay on even during the heaviest playing and wear very slowly.
- The tone of acrylic nails is outstanding and absolutely sufficient for concert work.

**WARNING: NEVER use super glue.** Never use any artificial nail system that requires super glue. Super glue is messy, unreliable, and probably not good for your health. The "toxic cycle" of cyanoacrylate glue (Super Glue), nail salon acrylics, gels, wraps, etc. are very bad for your real fingernails long term.

You can read more about artificial fingernails in Richard ("Rico") Stover's book, *The Guitarist's Guide to Fingernails*, from [Mel Bay Publications](#). Stover (also an expert on the guitar music of Agustin Barrios) was the developer of the idea of acrylic nails with glue dots. He called them "RicoNails." Unfortunately, Rico Stover passed away in February 2019, and RicoNails are no longer available.

However, acrylic nails are available from [Strings by Mail](#). They are very similar to the original RicoNails, but just a little thinner. They sound good and are just as easy to work with. Follow the same instructions below to apply the Strings By Mail acrylic nails.

## Reasons to use artificial fingernails:

1. Even if you have good nails, the inevitable will happen—you will break a nail.
2. You have terrible nails and need to use artificial nails all the time.
3. You want to use your real fingernails but can't because of your day job.
4. Fingernails interfere with playing another musical instrument.
5. Temporarily protect your real fingernails . For instance, if you are working on a piece that has lots of scales on the bass strings or that uses a technique that tears up a nail, use acrylic fingernails and let the artificial nail take the abuse during practice so you don't wear down or damage your real nail.
6. They are also excellent for steel-string guitarists. You can actually use them to play the steel-string or go without fingernails entirely for steel-string playing and put the acrylic fingernails on for classical playing.
7. They are an excellent solution for guitarists who want to learn classical but grind down their index fingernail when they flat pick. They can put an artificial nail on their index finger when they want to play classical guitar.

## Getting Started

First, measure the width of your nails. [Strings by Mail](#) carries a kit that includes two nails of these widths: 13/32", 15/32", 16/32", 17/32", 18/32", 19/32." Obviously, you will use a larger size for your thumb than your other fingers. Don't bother with retail outlets for artificial nails—usually they are shaped for cosmetic appeal and come in limited sizes. Also, they usually aren't as tough.

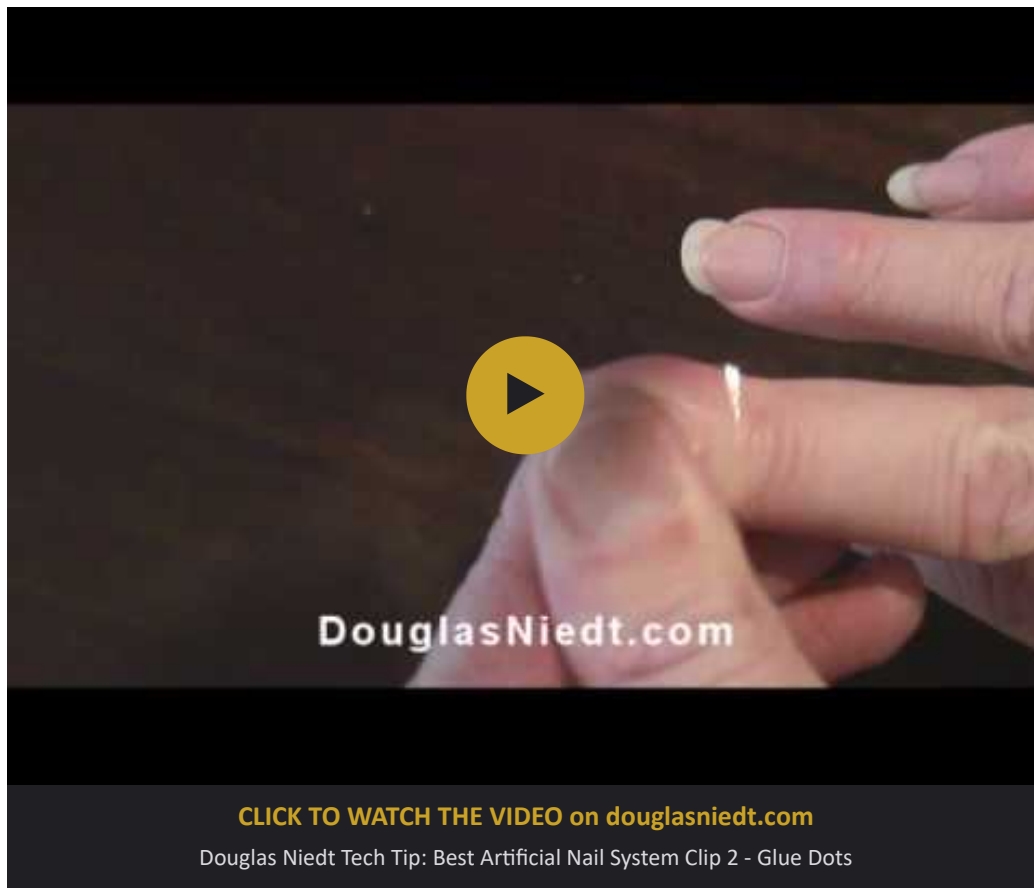
Use Glue Dots as the adhesive. Do you ever receive credit card offers in the mail and they give you a sample card stuck to a piece of paper? They are usually stuck on with a Glue Dot. The Glue Dots you will use are high-strength adhesive (not the usual hobbyist version sold in stores) and large enough to cover the top surface of your nail.

Glue Dots are also available in bulk (and cheaper) at [www.buygluedots.com](http://www.buygluedots.com). They are available in varying degrees of tackiness and come in two sizes: 1/2 or 3/8 inch. Try the [CRAFT glue dots](#) which stick very well but are not permanent. I would order both sizes so you can experiment with how to use them. People with small fingers will probably want the smaller size. But those with larger fingers may want to use one of each for better coverage.

Watch videoclip #1 to get the basic scoop on Glue Dots.



Okay. You are ready to watch this "gripping" video on how the Glue Dots actually work.(Videoclip #2):



## How To Put Them On

When you receive your acrylic nails, you will notice they are very long. Trim and file them (and smooth them) to the length that you need before you put them on. They go over the top of your entire nail from the quick on out to the tip. Be sure the acrylic nail is at least a millimeter longer than your real nail. Otherwise the string will contact your real nail and then click onto the acrylic nail which will feel and sound odd.

Here is what the acrylic nails look like out of the package: (Videoclip#3)



First, swab your real nail AND the acrylic nail with alcohol to remove any oils. **It is essential to swab your nail and the acrylic nail!** The dots don't hold the nail if you omit this step.

I use Alcohol Prep Pads (available in pharmacy departments). They are individually packaged disposable alcohol-soaked pads. They are very cheap and come in boxes of 100 or 200.

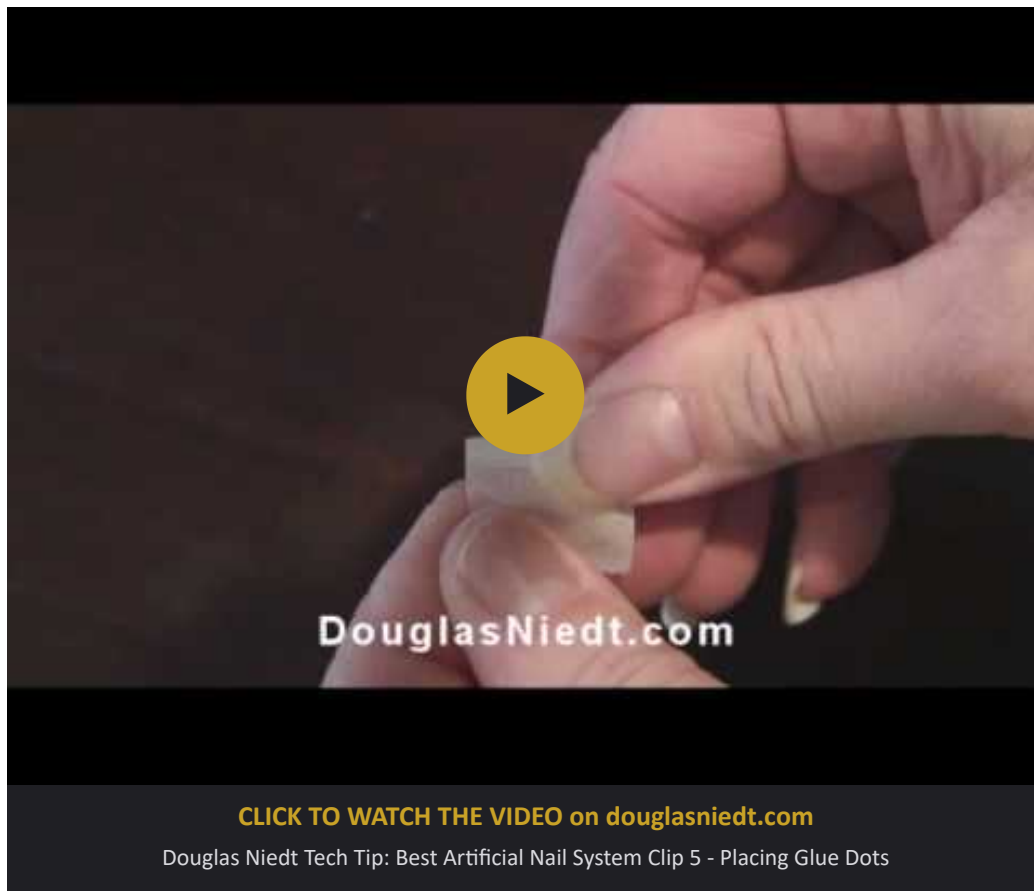
Watch this stunning video demonstration of nail swabbing in videoclip #4:



Allow the alcohol to evaporate from your nail and the artificial nail. Don't wipe them with tissue. Some tissue contains lotion or scents that might affect the adhesion of your glue dot. It takes less than a minute for the nails to dry.

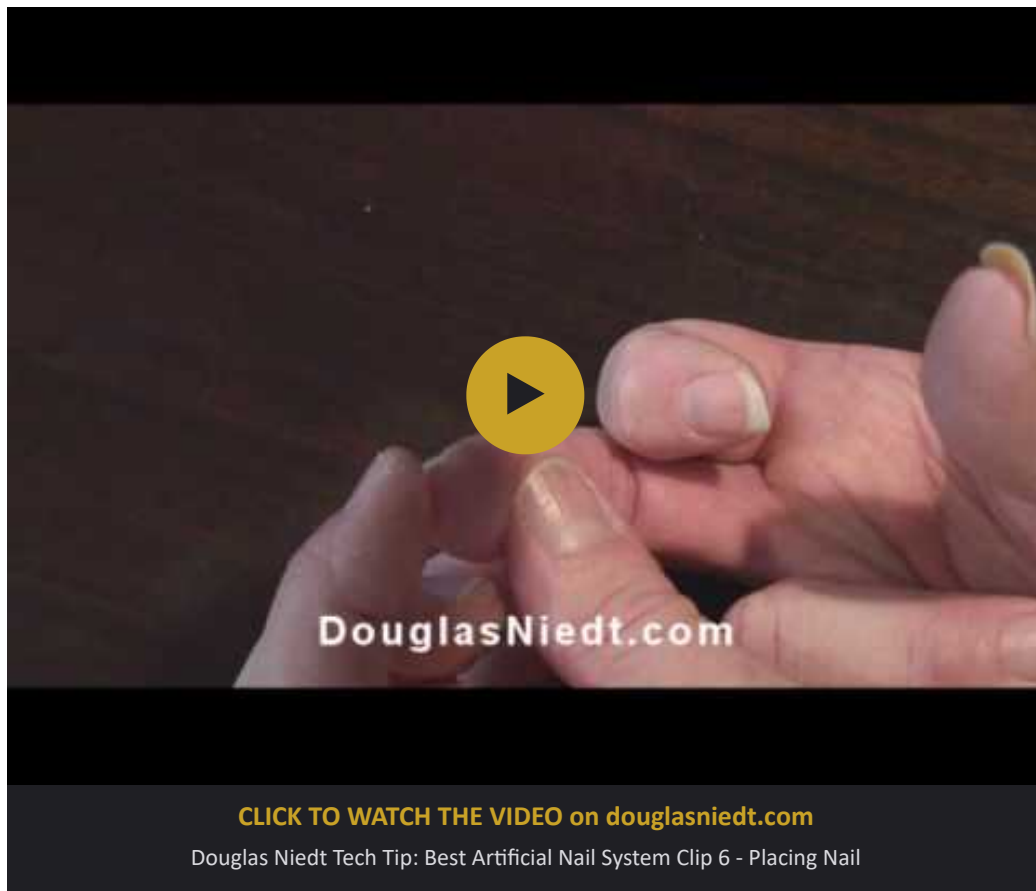
You apply the Glue Dot to your real nail. How you use the glue dots will depend on which fingernail you are replacing (the larger thumbnail may require two dots), how large your fingers are, and how your real nails are shaped. The dots can be placed vertically or horizontally. Place them however you get the most coverage of your real nail.

Watch videoclip #5 as I follow the OSHA regulations on proper glue dot placement:



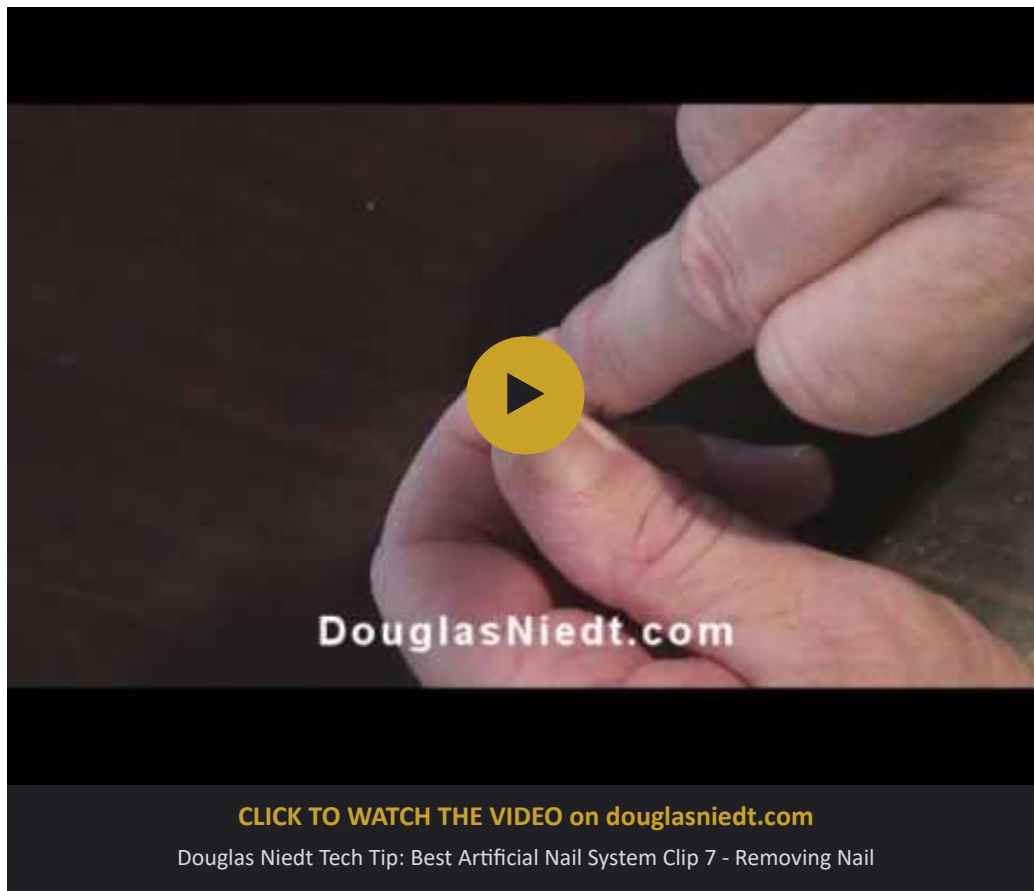
Then stick the acrylic nail on to the dot. Press it into the dot at the tip first (instead of center or at the base). It may stick up some at the base, but that's okay. You want flush adhesion with the tip of your nail where the string is. If there is a gap at the tip between the acrylic nail and your real nail, the artificial nail won't feel like it's part of your natural nail. It will feel foreign and throw off your touch.

Watch videoclip #6--absolutely riveting!



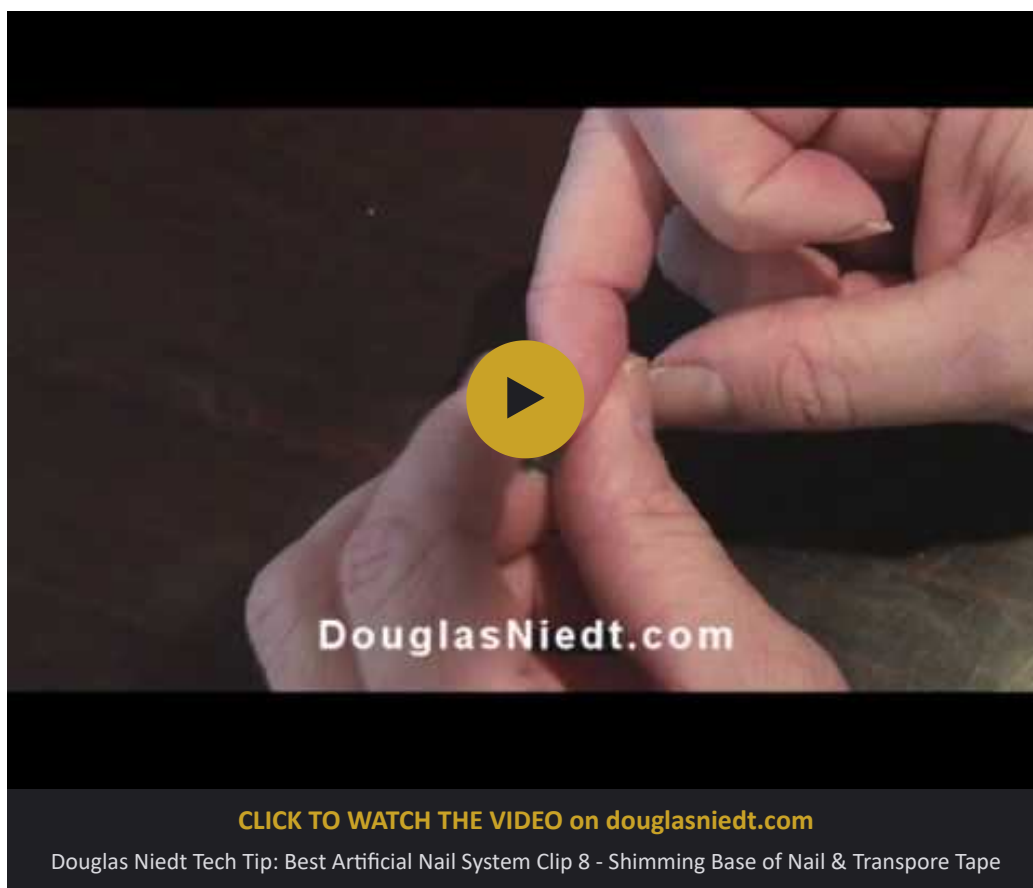
It is that simple. If you don't get the nail on quite right, don't try to move it. TAKE THE NAIL OFF and reapply. The glue dots have "memory" and the nail will just migrate back to its original position in less than a minute. It may take several attempts to get the nail positioned just right.

Watch how to remove the acrylic nail and glue dot in videoclip #7. It's video clips like this that become legend.



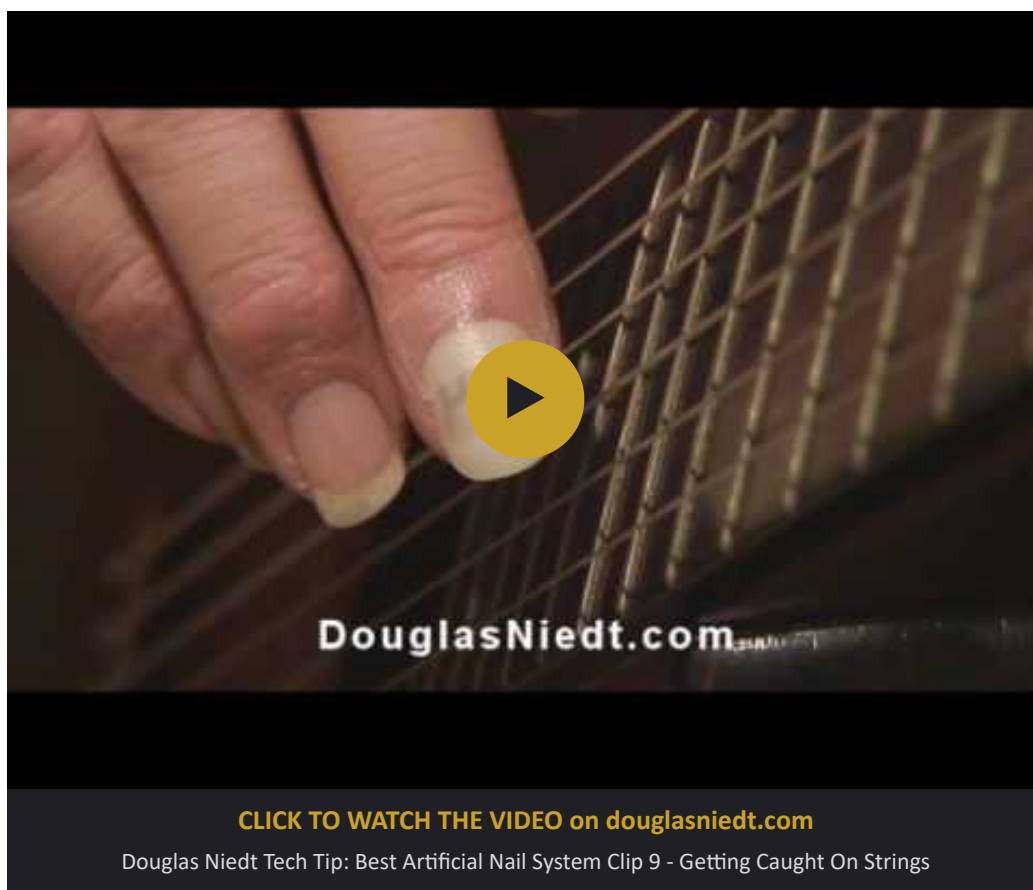
If your real nail curves a lot (arches) from the tip to the quick, you can prevent "rocking" of the acrylic nail by placing one glue dot at the tip and one at the base of your real nail. You can even stick a piece of toothpick under the base of the acrylic nail to shore it up.

You are not going to believe this one. Watch videoclip #8:



Next, use a small piece (hardly wider than your nail and about 1/4 to 3/8 inches long) of the Nexcare Transpore tape (it's a type of medical tape available in pharmacy departments) to bridge the gap at the base so it doesn't catch on the strings when strumming and executing rasgueado effects. If your real nail is flat from base to tip, you should still use the Transpore tape for extra security in rasgueado playing but it may not be absolutely necessary. Don't misunderstand—the Transpore tape is not needed to hold the acrylic nail. The Glue Dot does that. The tape is just to smooth any gap at the base of the nail to prevent string snagging on rasgueados.

Watch videoclip #9:



If you have excessive nail arch you may have trouble. You might have to try reshaping the acrylic nail with heat (boiling in water) or search out nails manufactured with greater arch.

### **Your Acrylic Nails In Action**

Once you have the acrylic nail attached, it will stay on several hours. Take it off when you're done practicing, performing, or teaching. Put it back on again the next day or later in the day with a new Glue Dot. Do NOT leave them on all day or overnight. They may or may not stay on that long. You don't want them to come off at critical moments! It is particularly embarrassing to have one come off and fly into the audience. It's also embarrassing when it comes off and falls inside the guitar. Yes, you will have to shake the guitar upside down to get it to fall out the soundhole. You will look like an absolute dork.

Glue Dots don't do well in heat. If you play outdoors on a warm day, the adhesive glue dots soften and lose their grip. The same is true under hot stage lights. I replace them at intermission so I don't have to worry about them.

As you are playing, you may suspect the acrylic nail is pulling slightly away from the natural nail. If the bond seems insecure, try this. Use your right-hand thumb to push the acrylic nail against the natural nail. If the acrylic thumbnail seems to be pulling away, use any right-hand finger to press it against the natural nail.

It's easier to understand if you watch video clip #10:



Keep your fingers absolutely dry. If water seeps into the Glue Dot adhesive, it will weaken very quickly and the artificial nail will begin to pull away from your real nail. But even if it does, no big deal. Just dry everything and put a new Glue Dot on and reattach the nail.(Swab again with alcohol first.)

Unless you are doing heavy duty rasgueado playing or a lot a scale playing on the wound bass strings, the acrylic nails will wear very little and last for weeks. In fact, as you wear the acrylic nail down and you file it shorter, it is still usable. Rather than placing the base of the acrylic nail flush with the quick of your natural nail, place it further away from the quick so it is still long enough to use.

Watch videoclip #11:



And how is the tone? As with real nails, it depends on how well you shape them and smooth them. If you do it right, they sound as good (or close to it) as your real nail.

### **Prepare Yourself for Disaster**

If you are a serious player, you need to be prepared for nail breakage. Don't wait until you break a nail to try the acrylic nails. Order them now and practice putting them on so you are ready when an emergency arises. Although they are actually very easy to use, you don't want to learn to put them on 10 minutes before a performance.

Keep a "Oh my gosh I broke a nail!" emergency response kit in your guitar case at all times. Keep your glue dots, cut and shaped nails (have one for EVERY finger shaped and ready to go) and alcohol prep pads in a little Ziploc plastic bag in your guitar case. Remember, it isn't a question of "if" you break a nail but "when." You will be able to sleep soundly at night knowing you are ready for a fingernail disaster.

Rico Stover probably won't get a posthumous Nobel Prize for scientific achievement with this, but he will receive enduring gratitude from guitarists the world over who will no longer freak out when they break a nail. Not to mention the gratitude of their spouses, significant others, and non-guitarist friends who have to listen to guitarists gripe about their precious fingernails all the time.