Sweep Picking for Ridiculous Speed

glide over the strings and get more notes per stroke

F or many years I devoted myself to perfecting my sweep picking —a technique that can be used in place of (or along with) alternate picking to develop considerable speed. Many players use sweep picking licks without realizing how far this approach can be taken.

The most common flatpicking method uses strict alternate strokes (down, up, down, up); however, some players opt for a less articulated effect, where the picked note is followed by hammer-ons or pull-offs. In sweep picking, the same pick stroke is used to play from two to six notes. Depending on the phrase, some alternate picking may also be required. The economy of sweep picking lets you play a lot of notes with minimal pick movement, making it easier to play at high speeds.

Look at **Ex. 1**, an *A* major scale fingering. Because it has three notes per string, there is a tendency to give it a triplet feel, so be sure to practice it in groups of two or four notes per beat. At first, practice only the ascending

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notes. When you're comfortable with that, work on the descending sequence; many players find ascending sweeps feel more natural.

When sweep picking, remember:

1. Keep the notes as separate as possible—almost staccato (short) at first, especially when crossing strings. Newcomers to sweep picking tend to run the notes together.

2. Make sure your right hand is executing a *single* movement when crossing strings, not two successive strokes.

3. Practice with a metronome or drum machine, and make sure the notes are clean and even. Be critical and honest when evaluating yourself.

4. It's harder to sweep at slower tempos, so start with medium ones: For sixteenth-note patterns, the quarter-note should be set between 60 and 100.

The odd/even rule

Sweep-picking licks require an odd number of notes per string. In Ex. 1, notice that there are three notes per string going up and three notes per string going down. To reverse the direction of the sweep stroke in a line, you need an even number of notes on the string where the reversal takes place. The two consecutive notes on the first string in Ex. 1 facilitate the change of direction.

The sweep pattern in this example is critical, since practically any scale (and its inversions) can be fingered using three notes per string. This vastly simplifies the number of patterns you need to know. More important, it eliminates problem spots in conventional scale patterns, where two notes per string occur in certain places. The ideal scheme features three notes on the E, A, D, G, and B strings, and two notes on the high E, which allows you to reverse pick-stroke direction for a descending sweep.

Ex. 2 is a sweep configuration for an A pentatonic scale; notice that the sweeps cross three strings. The odd/even rule still applies. Since there are only two notes on the sixth

Ex. 1 A major scale

Ex. 2 A minor pentatonic

Ex. 3 Amaj7 arpeggio

Ex. 4 Am7 arpeggio

> The economy of sweep picking lets you play many notes with minimal picking-hand movement.

string, begin with an upstroke so that you can sweep onto the fifth string and set things up for the rest of the scale.

The entire pattern goes: Two notes on the sixth string, three on the fifth, one on the fourth, three on the third, and one on the second. There are two notes on the first string for the direction change. This example requires quite a bit of left-hand stretching; allowing your left-hand thumb and fingers to move freely will help you reach the notes. For example, once you play the fifth-string *D*, release it for the *E*, and then release again for the *G*, and so on—instead of stretching for notes, just move your hand. These left-hand fingerings are very different from conventional scales,

but the right-hand motion is logical, quick, and effortless.

Harp on it

Arpeggio shapes are probably the most exciting aspect of sweep picking—once you get a feel for them, they can be played at mind-boggling speeds. **Ex. 3** is a very useful *Amaj7* arpeggio fingering from which many others can be derived. For example, to convert it to an *A7* pattern, simply lower each *G#* a half-step. For an *Am7* arpeggio, lower the *C#*s and *G#*s a half-step.

The sweeps in **Ex. 4** move across three and four strings. If you count each sweep as a single stroke, then each two-octave arpeggio

requires only six pick strokes—in other words, six strokes are used to articulate 16 notes (compared to 16 strokes for 16 notes with conventional alternate picking). The result? Ridiculous speed with minimal right-hand movement.

The simple triadic arpeggio in **Ex. 5**—difficult with alternate picking, since it quickly moves across the strings—is easily tackled with sweep picking.

Once you've got these patterns solidly under your fingers, tackle "Sweeping Statement," an original exercise that features some of the most extreme possibilities of sweep picking. It's a real challenge, a roller coaster ride over the whole fretboard. ∎

Ex. 5   C arpeggio

Sweeping Statement
By Frank Gambale

Almost any scale can be fingered using three notes per string, which simplifies the number of patterns you need to know.