

~ Getting Started With Sweep Picking Part 1 ~

This lesson will be an introduction to one of the most common lead guitar techniques that I am asked lots of questions about.

Sweep Picking Defined:

Before we go any further, "sweep picking" is a name for a specific technique used to play arpeggios and/or scale sequences (the word "arpeggio" simply refers to a chord being played one note at a time rather than being strummed).

There are many other possible ways of playing arpeggios, but when playing arpeggios using distortion, the sweep picking technique is most commonly applied. This is a minor point, but the distinction between the terms "sweep picking" and "playing arpeggios" a source of confusion for many players.

The reason why sweep picking is so commonly applied whenever playing electric guitar using distortion, is because it allows you to play each note of the arpeggio cleanly, without having the other notes of the chord ringing. This is critically important because when playing a distorted guitar, notes tend to lose their clarity and definition when played together.

I want you to try the following to hear the difference: First strum a chord (any chord that you know) using a clean channel on your amplifier. Next, turn on the distortion, and strum the same chord again.

You will likely hear a big mess of sloppy noise, instead of a defined chord. Sweep picking (when done properly) will allow you to get around this problem of notes clashing together when playing chords (arpeggios) using distortion.

Before we move on, I would like to establish one fundamental law of sweep picking which is:

"When sweep picking, you should only be able to hear ONE note at a time, and no two notes should ever be heard playing simultaneously."

The technical elements:

The picking hand:

The picking motions of this technique are different than what you have to do while playing scale sequences. When playing scales, you play regular up and down strokes, with your pick stopping in between the strings after playing each note. These rules do not apply when it comes to sweep picking, and in order to master the picking motions of this technique, you must learn to control and move your pick in a new way.

The name "sweep" picking comes from the fact that the picking motion looks like a smooth "sweep" across the strings. This motion happens because you are only picking one note per string when sweep picking and it visually looks as if you are sweeping the strings in one fluid motion (it looks particularly so, when played fast).

Unlike picking regular scales or sequences, your pick must end up touching (or getting ready to push through) the next string as you sweep. DO NOT stop the pick in between the strings.

Notice in the video clip below, how the pick pushes INTO the next string it is about to play after playing the previous string. The pick DOES NOT stop "in between" strings (it comes to rest by touching the next string it is going to play). I am emphasizing this point because it is absolutely critical that you understand and pay attention to this when you practice.

Watch the videos below for examples of good and bad sweep picking motions.

Video 1 (picking motion done correctly, with the pick pushing into the next string it is about to play). Notice that even though a pull off is played on the high E string (as you can see in the notation below), the pick stays pressed against the B string, ready to play it, as the fretting hand completes the pull off (the picking motion is not interrupted)

That being said, notice also that the hand does not move in an uncontrolled raking motion across strings. Each note is heard clearly, but the hand is moving continuously up and down.

Video 2 (picking motion done WRONG, the pick is stopping between strings, interrupting the continuous upward/downward motion). Rather than performing one big "sweeping" downstroke and one "sweeping" upstroke, several small downstrokes and several small upstrokes are played. This is obviously bad and inefficient as emphasized above.

Video 3: Watch me train one of my other students through the process of learning the correct way to sweep pick.

What I want you to do, between now and the next lesson is to practice the following exercise (this is the same thing you saw played in the first 2 video examples above):

4 3 2 1 4 1 2 3 4 3 2 1 4 1 2 3 4 3 2 1 4 1 2 3 4 3 2 1 4 1 2 3

T
A
B

12 11 10 9 12 9 10 11 11 10 9 12 9 10 11

17 16 15 14 17 14 15 16 16 15 14 17 14 15 16

□ □ □ □ V V V V □ □ □ V V V V □ □ □ V V V V □ □ □ V V V

[Hear it](#)

Pay close attention to the picking markings indicated and practice moving your hand in one sweeping downstroke while ascending, and one sweeping upstroke when descending.

I want to focus on just the picking hand for now, in this lesson and save the discussion of the fretting hand until next time. However, when practicing the exercise above, I want you to simply lift (slightly) the fretting hand finger from each note after playing it (we will focus on this more specifically in the next lesson, but this is all you need to know for now in order to play the above arpeggio). If you hear extra string noise from the bass strings, mute them with your thumb.

Please keep in mind that you do NOT need to have this exercise mastered before continuing with the next lesson. As long as you can play it reasonably well at a slow tempo before the next lesson, you will be fine to move on. This exercise in and of itself has little meaning.

The bigger picture of the lessons and how they fit together is what will enable you to make big progress (rather than focusing on a single exercise to the exclusion of everything else). So, practice this exercise as best as you can between now and the next lesson, and as long as you can play it smoothly at least at a slow speed, you will be ready to move on to the next lesson.

This lesson's [Practice Generator](#) category is: Technical Skills (Lead Guitar) > Sweep Picking. Practice this lesson when this category comes up in your schedule.