Sonic Snapshot

CHET ATKINS' MELODIC CASCADES

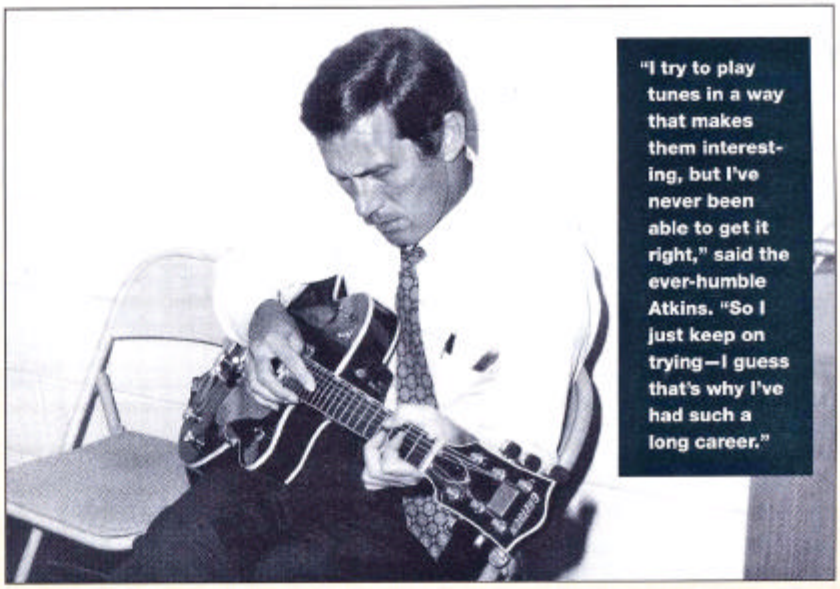
BY JUDE GOLD

You don't need a rack full of gear to generate amazing guitar textures. Just listen to Chet Atkins. With his bare hands, the country boy from Tennessee created more fretboard magic than entire genres of guitarists.

One of Atkins' many gifts was his flawless knack for melodic overlap. By cleverly refingering stock riffs to include open strings and harmonics, Atkins could pass through notes and leave them ringing like bells. It was as if there was a piano sustain pedal built into his guitar.

In the notation for **Ex. 1** you'll find a garden-variety *G* major scale. The tablature, however, may startle you with a jagged, atypical fingering. But this is how Atkins would have brought this run to life. Try it. If you arc your fretting-hand fingers and let each pitch sustain as long as possible, you'll be rewarded with a harp-like Ionian descent that leaves all six strings ringing beautifully.

Ex. 2 shows you how to make natural harmonics overlap in the same manner.

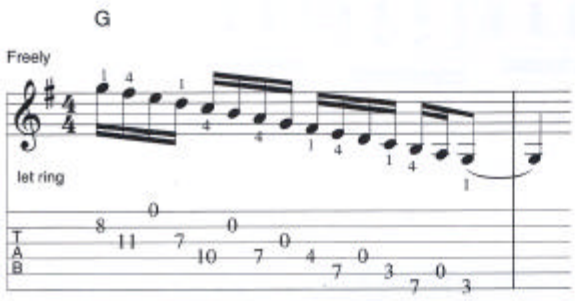


"I try to play tunes in a way that makes them interesting, but I've never been able to get it right," said the ever-humble Atkins. "So I just keep on trying—I guess that's why I've had such a long career."

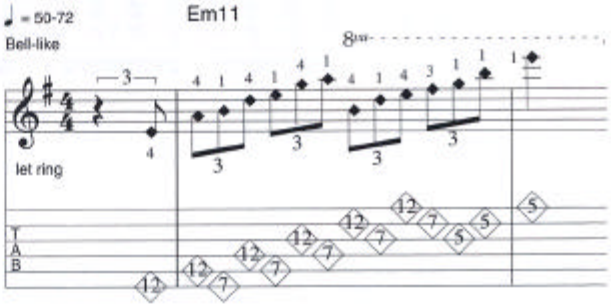
Play this upward cascade correctly, and all six strings will chime *Em11* with sparkly harmonics. Upping the aural ante, **Examples 3a** and **3b** ring for *days* by integrating all three sonic building blocks—fretted notes, open strings, and harmonics.

With this bell-tone technique you can add chime to your own riffs and melodies. Try capos or new tunings when chasing down magical cascades. For extra shimmer, add a touch of delay and compression. An overdrive will bring out juicy overtones. But never forget what Atkins taught us: Our best guitar effects are in our hands.

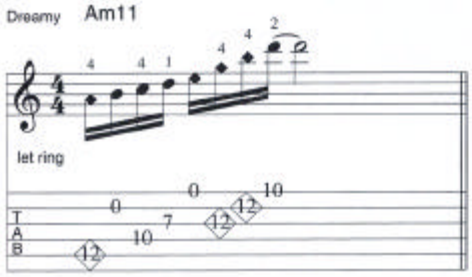
Ex. 1



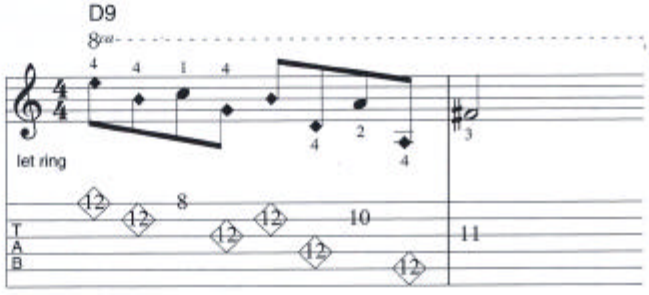
Ex. 2



Ex. 3a



Ex. 3b



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