

CHUCK WAYNE'S PICKING STYLE

by Lee Irwin

One of the magical things about the guitar is that there are so many different ways to effectively play it; much magic has been produced by employing the fingers, thumb, pick or some combination thereof. Among those who use a pick for playing single lines, probably the most common method is that of alternate picking: using some variation of alternately picking upstrokes and downstrokes when playing across strings. I learned, however, that this is not the only method of using a pick to play single lines. This article describes the method developed by Chuck Wayne, guitarist for Woody Herman, George Shearing, Tony Bennett and a mainstay of the New York jazz scene until his passing in 1998. It is an alternative approach to playing single lines that may not be as well known as alternate picking, but one which Chuck felt produced a smoother sound. I would like to share Chuck's approach as a means of posthumously thanking him for all he gave to his students. Presenting it is in no way intended to suggest there exists a definitive picking method or to create a "mine is better than yours" divisive atmosphere among players.

It was 1968; I was 21 years old. I can't tell you how excited I was to go to Chuck's house on Staten Island for my first lesson with him. We sat down on his couch, each sitting in a well-worn groove in the cushions that told of the countless hours of teaching that had been conducted there. Chuck smiled and effortlessly played the fastest, yet most clearly articulated two-octave scale I had ever heard. My first lesson would be to learn his picking technique.

Learn to pick? My heart just dropped. I wasn't going to argue with him, but clearly this was very disappointing. Picking? What a drag; I already knew how to pick (or so I thought.) I had studied two years with one of Broadway's top guitarists—he drilled me to death on alternate picking ("Make the guitar ring! Make the guitar ring!") I could do that already—don't teach me picking, teach me jazz. Ah, the ignorance and presumption of youth.

Of course I didn't say any of this to Chuck, but I still remember what he said to me as if it were yesterday. He said he had a different approach to picking—an

approach that would result in a sound he felt was more elegant, clear, and individualized than could be produced by any other method—a sound that would be immediately recognizable to others—even to those who didn't know about the guitar. He said were I to use it I would be easily recognized as being one of his students.



Chuck playing Lee's D'Aquisto

Photo courtesy Lee Irwin

Well, that made me somewhat curious, but I still remained reluctant to become involved in something as boring as picking. Besides, I would now have to unlearn my alternate picking style—a style endorsed by so many greats. And unlearning is so much harder than learning. But then he proposed a challenge I

couldn't ignore: he said that once I became familiar with this method I would begin to change my opinion of how my favorite players played—that I would begin to notice that in many cases their great musical ideas were being diminished by their technique. OK—the gloves were off. Show me.

My first thought upon hearing this, quite frankly, was "Boy, this guy has some ego." But what I learned about Chuck during the ensuing ten years of studying with him was that he never bragged about himself or spoke of his accomplishments without first being asked; he was a very self-effacing and modest man. He was never into self-promotion, and I think this played a big part in why he never got the wider recognition received by other players. But this is a separate issue. I realized after coming to know him that at that time he was merely making a statement for me to consider rather than flexing his ego.

Anyway, here we go: Chuck had several reservations about alternate picking, the chief one arguably being his belief that the upstroke could never sound the same as a downstroke. Chuck wanted a balanced sound—to make the upstroke and the downstroke sound equivalent. He was also concerned that alternate picking might make it difficult to produce a legato, flowing sound. Chuck wanted to sound like a horn player, and felt that alternate picking could never approximate this

sound. Finally, he felt that alternate picking sounded harsh or brash. Chuck would always use the analogy of a Mack truck versus a Cadillac: both could go 80 miles an hour, but which one would you rather sound like?



Photo courtesy Lee Irwin

"Chuck's secret to playing with such speed." Note third hand we stuck under his sweater.

Chuck threw away all the established assumptions of picking and started from scratch—devising a method of picking in which each note sounded like a pearl, with no distinction in sound between an upstroke or downstroke. The inevitable byproduct of this technique was that of graceful speed. He eventually suggested changing the type and position of the pick and pickguard, the method of striking the strings, and the manner in which the hand created an arc as it passed across six strings.

Chuck had always been distressed by the wasted movement involved with alternate picking—having to go up to then go down on selected strings in order to maintain the strict alternate picking style. This wasted movement resulted in a sacrifice in speed when needed, but also made the player sound, in his terms, like a Mack truck. Now this is clearly arguable, but Chuck felt that an upstroke and a downstroke could never sound equivalent because of the physics involved in striking the strings. The upward arc when playing an upstroke would always force the string out of its plane and make it sound thinner in comparison to a downstroke; striking it harder on the upstroke would only contribute to this effect. The downstroke was always stronger—any attempt to make the upstroke equivalent was doomed to sound thinner because of the physical arc made by plucking the string upward and outward. The first thing he asked me to do was to close my eyes, play any note with an upstroke and a downstroke, and try to make them sound equivalent by alternately picking from the wrist. Chuck realized that the best way to make the up and downstrokes equivalent was to attack them in the same physical manner—not striking or plucking the string from two different arcing angles but rather by

Chuck was relentless in devising a new picking technique—it was really extraordinary and was the product of much analytical thinking. Even if you disagree with his approach and would never want to use it, you would still have to be amazed at how he derived the technique.

pushing the string in a perpendicular fashion across the string. In this manner, there really would no difference in how the string was sounded—no real up or downstroke, just the same pushing motion across the string in a perpendicular rather than arc-like manner. Briefly resting the pick on the string and pushing it instead of striking it would make a fatter sound, and since you would be pushing the string regardless of which direction you were traveling (up or down,) all notes had to sound equivalent. The pushing would be done not by swinging the wrist over the strings but by the thumb and forefinger acting as a unit pushing perpendicularly across the strings, anchored by placing the pinky on the pickguard. This was quite different than alternately picking by rotating an unanchored wrist.

And so, no picking—just pushing. The contact point was the outer tip of your index finger, and the player would push the string rather than rotate the wrist and strike the string. Holding your index finger in front of you with the fingernail pointing toward you, the northwest corner of your finger is where the contact must be felt. Chuck used a small pick between the thumb and forefinger. He sought to avoid coming up from under the string on an upstroke by keeping the pick above and perpendicular to the fingerboard and pushing the pick. You would anchor your pinky on the pick guard and move your hand in a fan-like motion across the strings rather than use your wrist in a free-floating manner. You were never to see the fleshy part of your palm/thumb: your palm remained parallel to the strings at all times, with your index finger/thumb acting as a unit, opening your hand and separating itself from the rest of your fingers to arc across the strings, the pick always remaining perpendicular to the strings. If you saw the underside of the thumb/palm you would likely be arcing the string on the upstroke rather than pushing it in a perpendicular manner from side to side. Rather than using the wrist, the fingers opened up like a fan—always perpendicular to the strings. The forefinger and thumb made a unit which sought to “separate” itself from the other fingers as the fingers fanned out, again with the forefinger and thumb always remaining perpendicular to the string. Chuck had to physically hold my hand in place over the strings when I first learned the technique to ensure that my fingers were fanning out and that I wasn’t simply moving my hand/wrist up and down across the strings.

This technique was coupled with consecutive picking, not alternate picking. Quite often he would use two upstrokes in a row or two downstrokes in a row; in this

manner he got tremendous speed with a soft, fat sound. Chuck further devised a variety of different scale and arpeggio patterns to enhance this picking technique, allowing the player to gracefully play across strings, enhancing the legato sound rather than being forced to play too many alternating notes as is often found when using traditional scale patterns.

To ensure the pick was perpendicular to the string he suggested raising the pick guard so you were less likely to come up from under the string and more likely to remain perpendicular, floating across the strings. If you were anchoring your hand on a pickguard which was lower than the strings you would again be more likely to come up from under the string rather than from across the top of strings.

Chuck enhanced this sound even more by varying string gauges: he used a wound second string and (I believe) used a string set of 12's for the 3 higher strings and chose the lower 3 from a set of 10's, so when you played across the strings you had approximately the same string resistance. Chuck had his own brand of strings for a time, made I believe by a German company.

So that's it. Chuck's early words continue to ring true for me as I regularly get compliments on my sound—people always ask: “What are you doing there?” I should also mention that I have continually been kicked out of rock bands over the years because my sound was no longer consistent with a rock sound. So much for the idea of a single picking method being appropriate for all styles of music.

I would strongly suggest you experience the sound firsthand; you can do so by obviously listening to any of Chuck's recordings. But you would really want to see it as well. You could best accomplish this in one of two ways: log on to Peter Prisco's website: www.peter-prisco.com. Peter is a great player in the New York/New Jersey area who has successfully adapted Chuck's system. Peter plays very much in the Chuck Wayne style without sounding like Chuck, although Peter himself agrees that no one will ever have Chuck Wayne's 'economy of motion' principle down better than the master himself. One of Peter's gifts to the guitar community: he has posted several videos of Chuck on YouTube. There you can get to see and hear Chuck playing in this style—you can easily watch his hands and listen to his sound. It's really something.

If you have the time and/or inclination, try this method out and let me know what you think. The greatest obstacle you might encounter: not that of learning the method, but that of unlearning or putting aside your usual way of picking in order to try it. Unlearning is so much harder than learning, but you just might find its application useful. Unless you want to play in a rock band.

The following two photos may help clarify Chuck's thumb-finger unit and how it attempts to “separate itself” from the rest of his fingers in order to remain perpendicular to the strings.

Note that when Chuck is playing on the higher strings his fingers are close together, in an “un-fanned” position. Note the thumb and forefinger unit perpendicular to the strings. The expression on his face resulted from me telling him he played the guitar as well as Jack Benny played the violin. I think he enjoyed the comment but was too modest to thank me.

Notice Chuck playing on the lower strings (strings 4,5 and 6:) in order for the thumb and forefinger to remain perpendicular to those strings, the finger-thumb unit must “separate” from the rest of the fingers, fanning out. Note this unit, not his wrist, is what moves to reach the lower strings.



Photo courtesy Lee Irwin

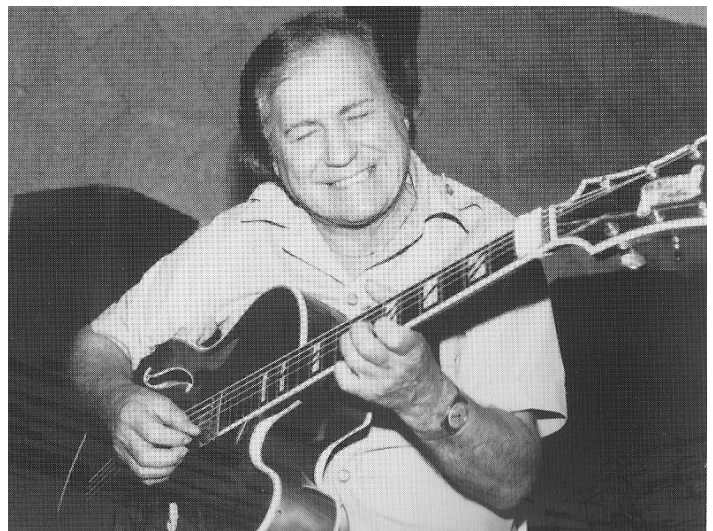


Photo courtesy Lee Irwin

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