

Masters in Mechanics Cascade: Performance Notes SAMPLE

Ah Via Pentatonic

The foundational skill of the Eric Johnson lead style is the ability to play two-note per string passages at high speed. The archetypal example of this in modern guitar playing, and also the cornerstone of Eric's sound, is the pentatonic scale. Starting at the top of the box position, on a downstroke, produces the classic down-up sequence on each string:

pentatonic box - desc.mov

And of course, the ideal mechanical system for playing this is downward pickslanting. Eric is almost exclusively a one-way pickslanter, maintaining a pronounced downward pickslant at nearly all times. This pickslant is more aggressive than Yngwie's, such that it is easily visible even on standard definition concert footage like the classic 1988 Austin City Limits performance that forms the crux of our investigation.

Just as in Yngwie's playing, the downward slant of the pick causes it to break free of the plane of the strings on every upstroke, so that moving to the next string of the pattern incurs functionally zero loss in efficiency or speed. But because Eric's style emphasizes two-note-per-string patterns, string changes happen more rapidly than they do in three-note-per-string diatonic sequences. And it's probably because of the perceived difficulty of switching strings so frequently that players have historically tended to avoid the pentatonic scale for straight-line scale playing.

And as Eric's style so clearly demonstrates, this is a huge missed opportunity. The pentatonic scale is, by its very two-note-per-string design,

perfectly efficient. That most guitarists instead focused their time on the vastly more sophisticated problem of three three-note-per-string fingerings is of course highly ironic. This is especially true considering how few players have ever succeeded in solving it.

Chunking the Box

So if the principal challenge of high-speed 2nps picking isn't speed per se, then what is it? It's hand synchronization. And the answer is the same one we've seen in Yngwie's playing: chunking. In this case, building chunks of metrically divisible units with so few notes per string entails chunking across the strings. If we imagine a simple straight-line pentatonic scale as sixteenth note triplets, then a sensible six-note chunk is the simply the first three strings. And repeating this six-note pentatonic chunk yields a sextuplet figure that is common in Eric's playing:

pentatonic chunk - upper.mov

The fact that the chunk itself encompasses string changes is incidental. Don't think about it. Downward pickslanting has already solved the problem of unnecessary stringhopping to maneuver between the strings. The primary challenge here is simply synchronizing the start time of the chunk, so that the initial downstroke and fretted note coincide.

Matching this upper sextuplet is its lower-octave counterpart:

pentatonic chunk - lower.mov

The landmark notes in both sequences are the initial downstroke. In the upper sextuplet that's the first note on the high E string, commonly fretted with either the pinky or, in Eric's case, the ring finger. And in the lower octave sextuplet, it's first note on the D string, which is the tonic or root if

we're thinking in natural minor as Eric often does. Linking the two sequences, while focusing principally on the landmark notes, produces the full six-string box position pentatonic straight-line scale with the triplet feel intact.

Are we playing a six-string scale? Yes. Are we thinking about six-string scale playing in the process? Not really. We're simply connecting two units together, like images in a flipbook, to produce the illusion of unbroken movement. Practicing the chunks separately, until they're repeatable without overt concentration, is how that fluidity is achieved.

Of course this entire process also works in reverse, for ascending pentatonic scales:

pentatonic box - asc.mov

In this orientation, the sextuplet landmarks are the initial downstroke on the low E string, the initial downstroke on the G string, and if you like, a final landmark downstroke on the first string index finger at the end of the scale.

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