

Intro to "Sawtoothing"

If you can picture the jagged profile of a sawblade in your mind, you shouldn't have any trouble imagining the sort of melodic line the term *sawtoothing* refers to. When sawtoothing, the melody consists of alternating notes, one of which is staying constant as the other changes. In the example below, the moving line is on the 3rd string while the C on the 2nd string is constant.

C7

T
A 0 1 2 1 3 2 1 0 1
B

.

In the example above, the sawtoothing is played on adjacent strings, and this is a common approach. But you can also sawtooth on a single string. In the example below, the melody to *Old Joe Clark* (which is expressed by the fretted notes) is embellished by returning repeatedly to the open G string. The open G could be articulated each time with the pick or you could use a pull-off from the higher note for a slightly different effect.

G

T
A 7 0 9 0 10 0 9 0 7 0 5 0 4
B

.

Sawtoothing is a handy device for composing, arranging or improvising melodic lines. The secret to its utility is that it enables you to craft a complex-sounding melodic line from the much simpler one at its core. Again, *Old Joe Clark* (above) offers a good example. The melody to the tune is expressed by the quarter notes that fall on the beat. By supplementing that simple line with the open G on the & of every beat you've got an instant variation.

Usually, the note that remains constant in a sawtoothed line is a chord tone. In both the examples above, that note is the root of the chord (C in the top example and G in the next.) But other chord tones work as well. The melodic phrase below is similar to the C7 example at the top of the page in that the moving line is made up of the scale degrees 5, 6, and b7. But now the note that remains constant is the 3rd of the chord (B) rather than the root (G).

G7

T
A 3 4 5 4 6 4 5 4 3 3
B

.

This last example reminds us of another insight that would be valuable to keep in mind as you work up a vocabulary of sawtooth riffs. Since that melodic line doesn't use any open strings, it is mobile—which is to say, easily transposed to other chords. If you have worked on the CAGED System at all you may recognize that this line is constructed around the *E shape* voicing of a G chord. Having noticed that, you can now use the same sawtooth riff over any E shape chord up and down the fingerboard.