

Charles Sawtelle and “Tennessee Wagoner”



Charles Sawtelle was one of the most interesting and innovative guitar players in the history of bluegrass music. His use of his syncopated, sparse, blues inspired solos caught and held the listener’s ear. He was one of the most highly regarded bluegrass band players of all time. In that regard, he is considered one of the best rhythm guitar players that bluegrass has seen.

Here we present Charles’ lead solo and his rhythm accompaniment to the song “Tennessee Wagoner.” Although Charles spent the majority of his career performing and recording with Hot Rize, this cut comes from John Rossbach’s CD *Never Was Plugged*.

Because Charles was playing a duet here, backing up a mandolin with no other instrumentation, his back-up is very straight with the generous use of bass notes and runs. It is reminiscent of the guitar back-up used by the old “brother duets” from the 1920s and 1930s. It is a great study in the use of bass runs in the key of C.

If you’d like to hear a short clip of this tune, the first mandolin solo is provided on Rossbach’s website. Go to: <http://www.johnrossbach.com/mp3/CRCD102/02.mp3> and you can hear Charles’ back-up. You will not be able to hear Charles’ solo on this clip, however, you can get a feel for the melody of the tune, if you don’t already know it, and get an idea about what tempo they played the tune on the recording. If you’d like to hear Charles play this solo, I recommend that you buy the CD from John’s site.

Charles’ timing on his lead breaks can be a little tricky, however, if you listen to the short clip of the tune on the web and then work through the solo slowly with a metronome, you will be able to get it. If you try for a while and can’t understand it, send me an email (dan@flatpick.com) with the subject line “Sawtelle Tune” and I’ll email you an mp3 of me playing the solo at a slow tempo. It won’t be like hearing it from Charles, but hopefully it will help you get an idea about note placement and timing if you can’t figure it out from the tab.

Shortly before leukemia took Charles Sawtelle’s life *Flatpicking Guitar Magazine* published the book *The Bluegrass Guitar Style of Charles Sawtelle*. If you like what you see here, check out the book, buy some Hot Rize CDs, and expand your guitar player through the study of one of the true heroes of bluegrass guitar.

26 C G

1 2 0 1 0 3 0 1 2 1 2 3 0 0 0 2 3 0 2 0 3

30 C G C

H H S 3 3 5 3 4 0 1 2 0 1

Tennessee Wagoner (rhythm)

arranged by Charles Sawtelle

1 C G C G

8 C C G C

15 G C C G

21 C G C C

27 G C G C

The score is written in 4/4 time and consists of a guitar melody and a guitar accompaniment. The melody is written in treble clef, and the accompaniment is written in bass clef. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The piece is divided into measures, with measure numbers 1, 8, 15, 21, and 27 indicated. Chords are indicated by letters C and G above the staff. The accompaniment includes fret numbers (0, 1, 2, 3) and slash marks indicating string bends or slurs. The piece ends with a double bar line and repeat signs.