

Introduction to the 5-string Banjo



by
Jeff Foster

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Introduction to the 5-String Banjo

The 5-string banjo, often called the only authentically American stringed instrument, is a very fun instrument to play. It's seemingly impossible to play a song on a banjo that doesn't sound "happy". And if you happen to play a little guitar (especially if you're a fingerstylist used to picking with fingers), there are sufficient similarities in the tuning and general layout of the banjo that make it a fairly easy instrument to pick up.

This handbook is intended to provide a brief introduction to the 5-string banjo and how to play it in the traditional 3-finger, bluegrass "Scruggs Style".

Tuning

The 5-string has an unusual fretboard design, with four full-length strings and a shorter high drone string which joins the other four strings at the 5th fret. Standard tuning for a banjo is an open G chord:

1-D

2-B

3-G

4-D

5-G (an octave above the 3rd string)

The 4th, 3rd and 2nd strings are tuned identically to the guitar in standard tuning, and the 1st string is like a guitar tuned down a whole-step, and then there's the high 5th string (AKA a reentry string) located next to the lowest string. It might seem ungainly (at least quirky) at first sight, but this unique arrangement of 5 strings, combined with three fingers picking them, is the secret to the distinctive Scruggs-style banjo sound.

Ways to Pick a Banjo

In Scruggs-style banjo (the focus of this course), the thumb approaches the strings in a downward motion, while the fingers pick in an upward motion. A thumbpick and two fingerpicks for the index and middle fingers are typically utilized to facilitate speed and to give a loud, penetrating tone to the music... but you can also practice with your bare fingers, especially when starting out and speed isn't so much the focus of your practice.

An off-shoot of the traditional Scruggs-style is the Melodic Style, and a brief introduction and examples of this approach to the banjo will also be touched upon in this handbook.

The other fundamental picking style of banjo goes by various names: "clawhammer", "old-timey" or "frailing". In Clawhammer, both the fingernail of the index finger and the thumb are used, approaching the strings in a downward motion. Plectra (thumb and finger picks) are not utilized. Clawhammer is a lovely style of banjo playing, but is not presented in this course in any depth.

Basic Picking Patterns

The secret to the 3-finger style Scruggs style is in the picking hand.

The fretting hand, by contrast, can be fairly simple, especially when compared to the guitar. It's the quick right-hand picking that creates that distinctly "rolling" sound of the banjo. Incredible arpeggios interwoven with the melody of the tune fly gracefully from the fingers when a good banjo picker really gets it going. It's very intricate stuff, so be patient as you practice and master the moves.

In essence, when approaching five strings with three fingers, we can identify three basic picking patterns: the forward pattern, the backward pattern, and the alternating thumb pattern.

Following are tabs of the three patterns in their simplest form. The horizontal lines represent the 5 strings, and you read the picking from left to right. Picking is done using the thumb (T), the index finger (I), and the middle finger (M):

Basic Picking Patterns (con't)

Forward Pattern (TIM)

1 -----M-
2 ----I-----
3 -T-----
4 -----
5 -----

Backward Pattern (TMI)

1 ----M-----
2 -----I-
3 -T-----
4 -----
5 -----

Alternating Pattern (TITM)

1 -----M-
2 ----I-----
3 -T-----
4 -----
5 -----T----

The three basic patterns described above make up the vast majority of the movements used to make a complete "roll", which we can define as a sequence of picking patterns put together to fill a 4-count measure, with each note receiving a half-beat (counted " 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & ").

The traditional Scruggs rolls are shown on the next two pages.

The Four Scruggs Banjo Rolls

Earl Scruggs broke down the essential movements of his picking style into four basic rolls, one for each of our three basic patterns mentioned above, plus a fourth comprised of a combination of the forward pattern and the backwards pattern. In practice, as you finish the roll, immediately play it again, creating a looping, steady stream of notes. **Count the following measures "1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and..."**

Forward Roll

Diagram illustrating the Forward Roll on a five-string banjo. The strings are numbered 1 to 5 from top to bottom. The notes are indicated by red letters: M (Major) on string 1, I (Intermediate) on string 2, T (Trio) on string 3, M (Major) on string 4, and T (Trio) on string 5. The count is: 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &

Backward Roll

Diagram illustrating the Backward Roll on a five-string banjo. The strings are numbered 1 to 5 from top to bottom. The notes are indicated by red letters: M (Major) on string 1, I (Intermediate) on string 2, T (Trio) on string 3, M (Major) on string 4, and T (Trio) on string 5. The count is: 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &

The Four Scruggs Banjo Rolls (con't)

Reverse Roll

S
T
R
I
N
G
S

1 2 3 4 5

Diagram of the Reverse Roll on a five-string banjo. The strings are numbered 1 to 5 from top to bottom. The roll consists of: String 1 (M), String 2 (I), String 3 (T), String 5 (T), and String 1 (M). The count is 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &.

Count: 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &

Alternating Thumb Roll

S
T
R
I
N
G
S

1 2 3 4 5

Diagram of the Alternating Thumb Roll on a five-string banjo. The strings are numbered 1 to 5 from top to bottom. The roll consists of: String 1 (M), String 2 (I), String 3 (T), String 4 (T), and String 5 (T). The thumb (T) alternates between the 3rd and 4th strings on counts 1 and 3. The count is 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &.

Count: 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &

*On the Alternating Roll, notice how the thumb alternates between the 3rd and 4th strings **on counts 1 and 3.***



Mastering these four rolls is a prerequisite for playing "Scruggs Style" banjo. These aptly-named rolls, and variations of them, are strung together in various combinations to create the melodies and riffs of the style. An experienced banjo player knows intuitively how to arrange the rolls on the fly to make a banjo solo that'll bring down the house.

Generally speaking, which finger plays which string can be broken down this way:

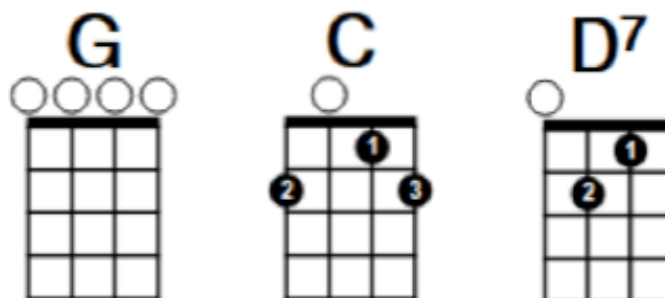
1. _____ M
2. _____ I or T
3. _____ T or I
4. _____ T
5. _____ T

While there will be exceptions to the rule, the finger-to-string suggestions above will generally hold true.

Basic Chords

Bluegrass, being a folk music, makes maximum use of a minimum of chords. Here are the first three chords you want to learn:

Basic Banjo Chords in the key of G



- Vertical lines represent the strings.
- Strings played open (unfretted) are indicated by "O".
- Black dots represent fingering.

A Little Music Theory

For those so inclined: in terms of standard music theory, these three chords are rooted on 'the one', or I (first tone of the major scale, in our case the key of G), the IV and the V (fourth and fifth tones of the G major scale, respectively).

Major Scale Intervals:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
G Major Scale:	G	A	B	C	D	E	F#
Chords in Key of G:	G	Am	Bm	C	D7	Em	F#dim
Primary Chords:	I			IV	V		

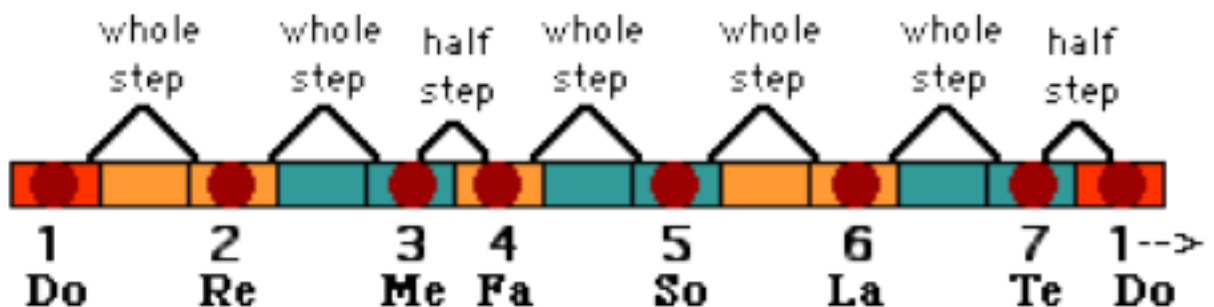
Not unique to banjo music, these three primary chords, the I, the IV and the V, are the most commonly used chords in virtually every style and genre of music.

About The Major Scale

The Major Scale is fundamental to all forms of music, and is used to define intervals (the distance between one note and another), chord structure and progressions, and virtually every other aspect of music theory. When you hear musicians "talk in numbers", they are referencing the Major Scale and its intervals. The terms **do re me fa so la te do** is also based on the Major Scale.

In a nutshell, music is made utilizing a 12-tone musical system, meaning all octaves (notes of different registers which have the same name) are divided into 12 equal increments, or intervals. Each of these increments is called a *half-step*, or *half-tone*. Two half-steps, obviously, are called a *whole-step*.

To construct a Major Scale in our 12-tone system, we choose a note (the name of which is taken as the name of the key in which we're playing), and proceed upwards in pitch using the following formula:

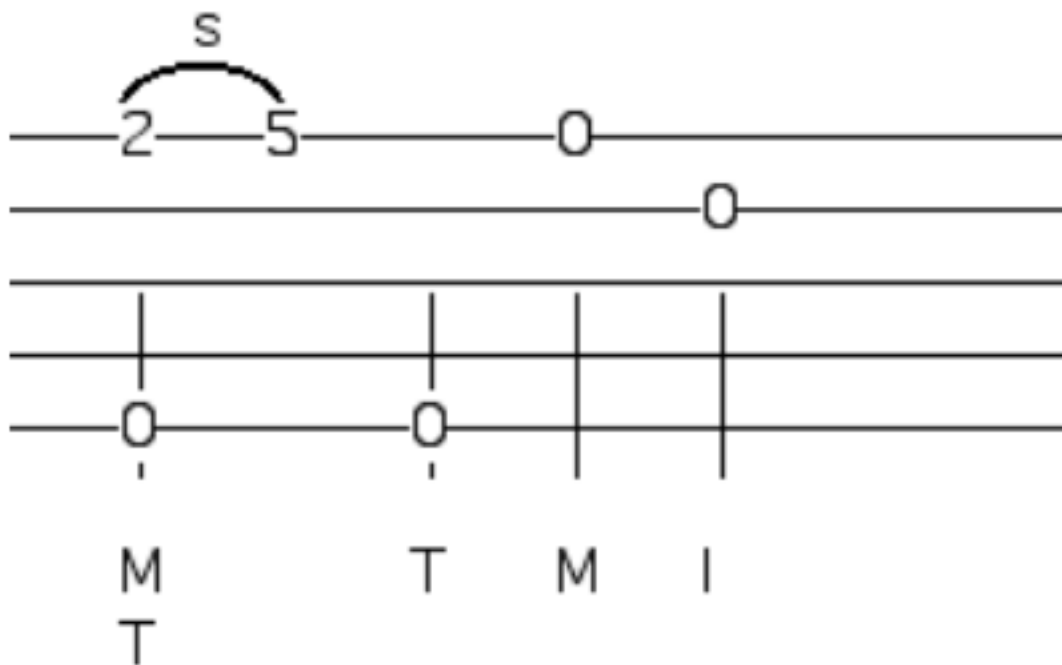


Basic Fretting (left-hand) Techniques - SLURS

Slurs are often-used techniques performed with the left (fretting) hand. A slur is a technique whereby a note is produced by the fretting hand, and NOT by actually picking the note with the right. There are three fundamental ways to slur a note: slides, hammer-ons, and pull-offs.

Slide: In a slide, a note is picked, then the finger that is fretting that note is slid quickly up or down the neck (more often up, producing a higher pitch). Slides can be used to raise the pitch only a fret or two, but can just as easily be used for wider slurs of three or more frets.

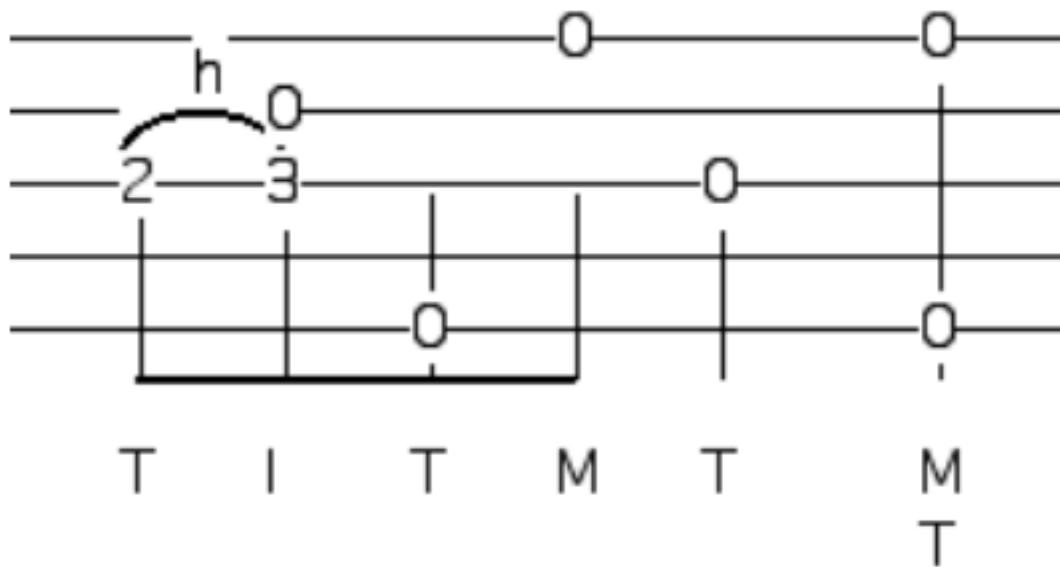
Example of a Slide



Fret the 1st string, 2nd fret with the 2nd finger. Pick both the 1st and 5th strings together, and immediately (and quickly) slide the 2nd finger up to the 5th fret of the 1st string. Consider this entire movement 1 beat.

Hammer-On: In a hammer-on, a note is picked, then an adjacent finger “hammers” down onto the fingerboard above the original note, producing a higher note. Hammer-ons are typically only 1 to 3 frets above the original note.

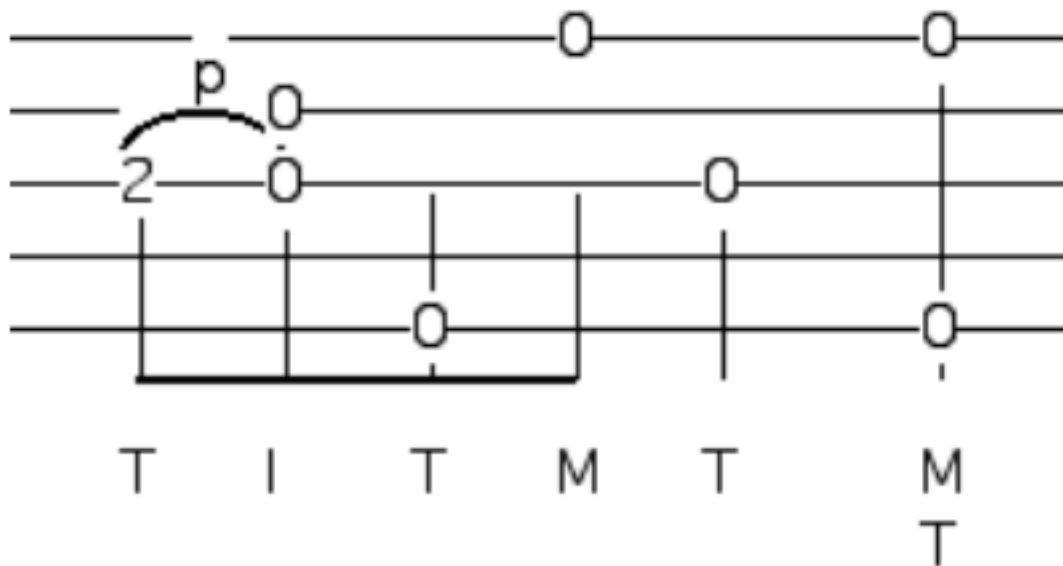
Example of a Hammer-on



Fret the 3rd string, 2nd fret with the 2nd finger. Pick the note, and hammer-on to the 3rd fret using your 3rd finger. Time your hammer-on to sync with the open 2nd string that you pick with the right index.

Pull-Off: In a pull-off, a note is fretted and picked, then the finger holding the note is pulled off the string with a little sideways plucking motion, producing a note lower in pitch. Pull-offs can lead to either an open string or a lower fretted note.

Example of a Pull-off



Fret the 3rd string, 2nd fret with the 2nd finger. Pick the note, and pull-off the 2nd finger to produce a note on the open string. Time your pull-off to sync with the open 2nd string that you pick with the index.

Some folks find they prefer to use push-offs (where instead of pulling the finger toward the palm to pluck the string, they push up against the string and off to pluck the note). Others use both techniques, determined by which feels more comfortable to them at the moment. Experiment in practice to see what works best for you.

All three of these slurring techniques (slides, hammer-ons and pull-offs) are utilized in our first banjo tune, *Cripple Creek*... as well as in just about every banjo break (or lead) you've ever heard. Slurs are part and parcel of how we get that distinctive cascade of notes going on the banjo, so you'll want to practice them diligently.

Verse

Chorus

The image displays three staves of guitar tablature for the song "Dancing Queen" by the band "The Band".

- Staff 1 (G):** This staff is for the G major chord. It consists of four measures. The first three measures each contain a triplet of notes on the 2nd and 3rd strings, with the 2nd string note being a half note and the 3rd string note being a quarter note. The fourth measure contains a triplet of notes on the 2nd and 3rd strings, with the 2nd string note being a half note and the 3rd string note being a quarter note, followed by a whole note on the 1st string.
- Staff 2 (D7):** This staff is for the D7 chord. It consists of four measures. The first measure contains a half note on the 1st string and a quarter note on the 2nd string. The second and third measures each contain a triplet of notes on the 2nd and 3rd strings, with the 2nd string note being a half note and the 3rd string note being a quarter note. The fourth measure contains a triplet of notes on the 2nd and 3rd strings, with the 2nd string note being a half note and the 3rd string note being a quarter note, followed by a whole note on the 1st string.
- Staff 3 (G):** This staff is for the G major chord. It consists of two measures. The first measure contains a triplet of notes on the 2nd and 3rd strings, with the 2nd string note being a half note and the 3rd string note being a quarter note, followed by a whole note on the 1st string. The second measure contains a half note on the 1st string and a quarter note on the 2nd string.

"Comping" - Playing rhythm accompaniment

"Comping" is short for accompaniment, which means playing rhythm while another instrument takes the lead. In a traditional bluegrass band, there are several lead instruments: banjo, fiddle, mandolin, dobro and guitar. While one instrument takes the lead, the others fall back, creating the rhythm bed that keeps the tune moving forward.

In the old days of the Grand Old Opry, there was only one microphone onstage, and every player in a band had to be ready to physically move their instrument closer to the microphone, take their lead break, and then pull back out of the way for the next player to approach the mic. It required a bit of choreography, but everyone soon caught on to the dance.

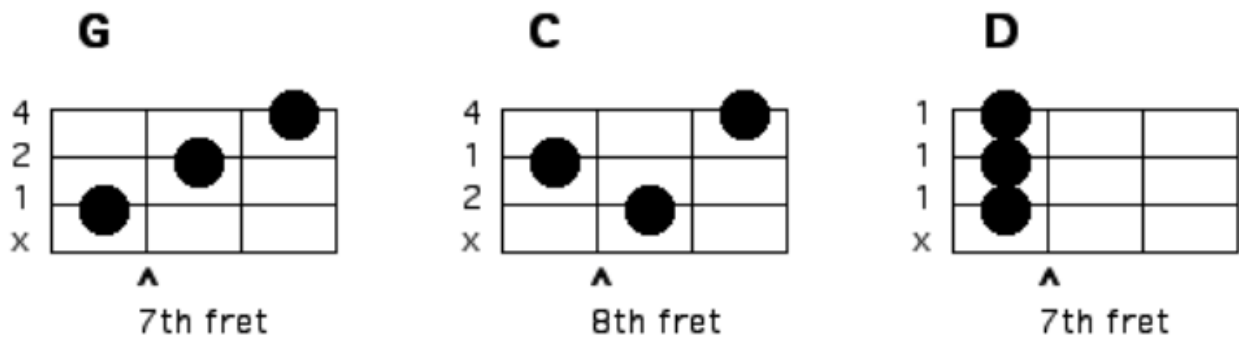
When thinking about good rhythm, consider how a set of drums (which traditionally was NOT part of a bluegrass band) functions. In a typical 4-beat time signature, the bass drum will hit on counts 1 and 3, while the high-pitched snare drum will snap on counts 2 and 4:

"Boom-chuck-boom-chuck"

1 2 3 4

To emulate this natural rhythmic percussion effect using stringed instruments, the bass fiddle and the guitar will typically play a "boom" on the downbeats (counts 1 and 3), while the higher-pitch instruments (banjo, mandolin and fiddle) will typically play a staccato (meaning "very short") chord on the backbeats (counts 2 and 4... the "chucks").

Higher inversions of the chords are often used for comping. Here are the G, C and D chords about mid-way up the neck, a good area to use for comping. The straight D major chord can be used in place of the D7. Notice we're limiting ourselves to simple three-tone chords played on strings 1, 2 and 3:



Use all three right-hand fingers to “pinch” the chords on counts 2 and 4 (the backbeats). Try to make the chords staccato by releasing the pressure of the left-hand fingers immediately after striking the chord while still keeping the fingers on the strings and in position to press down the chord again. It’s a subtle “pumping” of the chord with the left-hand that creates the staccato effect you’re after.

Try comping on this progression in common 4/4 time:

|G|C|G|D|G|C|D|G|

A good comping part on banjo will mostly hit “chucks” on the upbeats during a lyric, and then perhaps rip a cool little lick in between lyrics while the vocalist grabs another breath of air.

Foggy Mountain Breakdown

by Lester Flatt & Earl Scruggs

1 2 **G** 3

D
B
G
D
G

4 4 4

0 0 0 | 2 3 2 3 3 0 | 2 3 2 3 3 0

H H H

I M I I M T M T I M T I M T M T I M T

4 5 6 **Em**

H H SI 2 0 0 0 1 H 2 0 0

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

I M T M T I M T I T I M I T M I T

7 8 **G** 9

2 2 2 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

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

SI

T I M T M I T M T M T I M I T M T M T I M I T

10 **Em** 11 12 **G**

2 0 0 0 2 2 2 0 0 0 0

2 0 0 2 0 2 0 3 4 0 2

SI

M I T T I M T M I T M T M T I M I T M

13 14 **D** 15

0 0 0 2 3 3 0 2 3 2 3 0

0 3 4 0 3 0 0 0 0 3 2

SI SI

T M T I M I T T I M T I M T I M T M T I M T

16 **G** 17 18

0 0 0 0 0 0

0 3 2 0 2 0 0 0

SI

I T I M I T M T M T T M T

Melodic Style 5-String Banjo

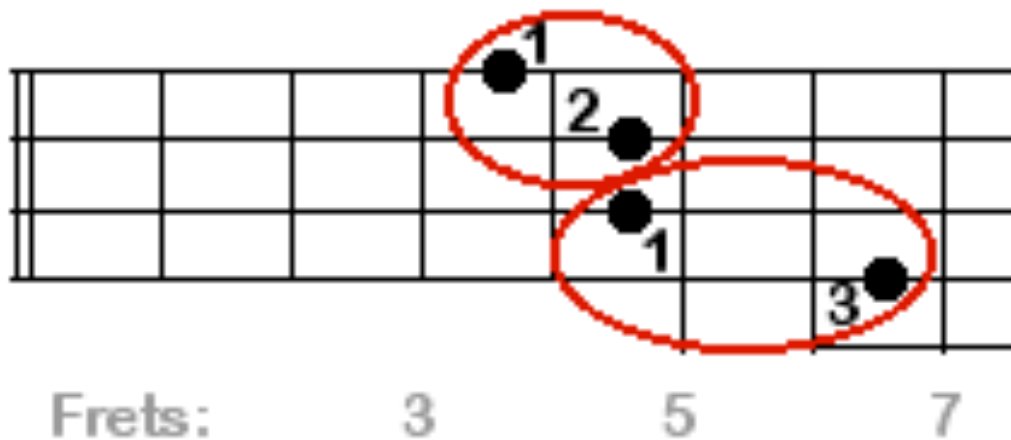
AKA “cross-picking”, this style developed in the 1970s, and is widely attributed to Bobby Thompson and (later) Bill Keith, who played a strong role in developing the style. Larry McNeeley (who replaced John Hartford on the old Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour back in the 70s) was also a major innovator in the Melodic Style.

The Melodic Style of banjo playing takes a slightly different approach than Scruggs Style. The Scruggs style is based on rolling chords with intermittent melody notes mixed in with the chords. In the Melodic Style, every note is considered a melody note, so the idea is to play just the melody of a tune, without interjecting chord tones. This style works very well for Irish melodies, or any tune that has a quick succession of melody notes.

There are a few basic rules we try to follow when playing Melodic Style:

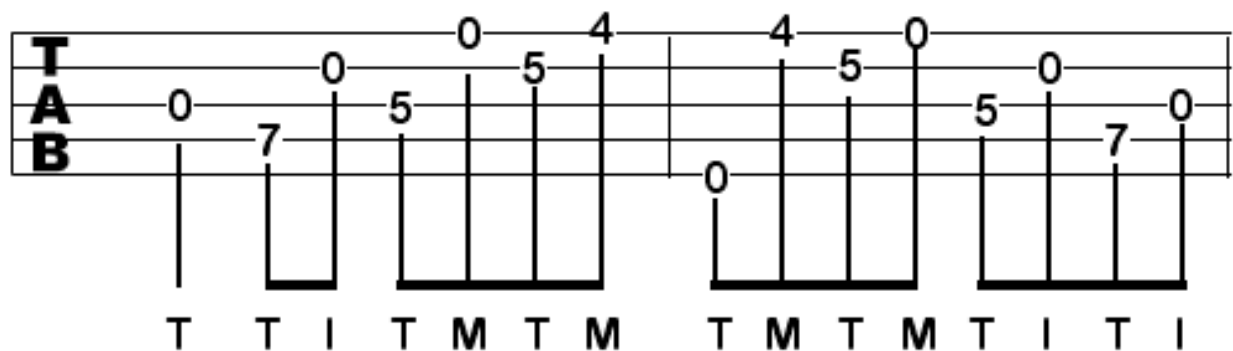
- 1)** A note on one string should be followed by a note on a different string. In other words, try not to play two or more notes in a row on one string. This allows the three picking fingers to play linear melody lines using standard roll technique.
- 2)** Whenever possible, use open strings to play notes. In standard G-tuning, this means the low G, B, D and high G notes should be played as open strings (3rd, 2nd, 1st and 5th strings).
- 3)** Try to grab small 2 or 3-string clusters of notes (similar to how we would play chords), and try to linger as long as possible on basic clusters of fretted notes mixed with open string notes to create a more legato (flowing) sound. In other words, it's good to let notes overlap a bit to reduce the staccato effect of the banjo's timbre.

In the G major scale TAB'd below, there are two note clusters that we play much as we would a chord. One is played on the 3rd and 4th strings, the other one on the 2nd and 1st strings:



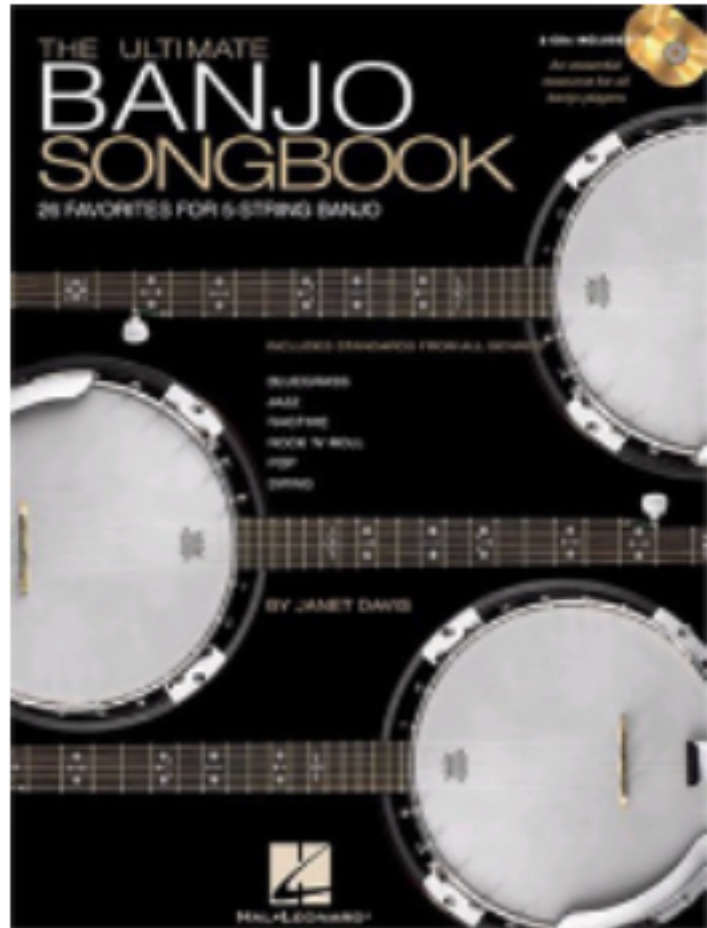
Using the two clusters mixed with open strings, play the following G-Major scale:

G-Major Scale



Now what?

Now that you've completed this introductory course to 5-string banjo, you have learned everything you need to know in order to continue your studies on your own. Virtually all banjo methods, sheet music and song books utilize the tablature approach you have learned in this class, and even the most advanced instruction uses the same basic techniques we have covered.



One book I can highly recommend that I use with my private students is **Janet Davis' Ultimate Banjo Songbook**. It contains material for all levels, beginning to advanced, and covers a wide range of styles. It comes with a 2-CD audio disk set that let's you hear each exercise at reduced tempo to facilitate learning, and also at full speed so you can hear how it should sound in performance.

Here's the description from the Janet Davis website:

The "Ultimate" Tunes every banjo player should know! For Beginning through Advanced Levels - includes: Scruggs style, Melodic Style, Swing & Jazz, Triplet Style, Chromatics, single string and More! For everyone who plays the banjo!

Available online at:
www.jdmc.com/product/B-699565bcd.html