The StringDancer 5-String Banjo Primer

by Jeff Foster

An introductory guide for learning to play the 5-String Banjo in the traditional "Scruggs Style"

Online at www.stringdancer.com/home/articles/music-instruction/fosters-banjo-primer-pdf

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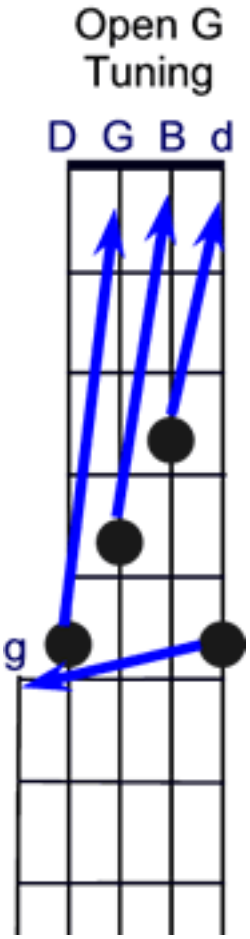
Introduction To The 5-String Banjo

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. There are many alternative tunings for the banjo, but what's considered standard tuning is an open G chord (see diagram for tuning details).

For Guitarists

The 4th, 3rd and 2nd strings are tuned identically to the guitar in standard tuning, and the 1st string is tuned down a whole-step from a guitar in standard tuning (E to D).

Then there's the unusual 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 handbook), 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 can be found later in this handbook.

The other common banjo picking style goes by various names: "old-timey", "frailing", or the most common, "clawhammer". In the clawhammer style, 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 our focus.

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):

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 ————

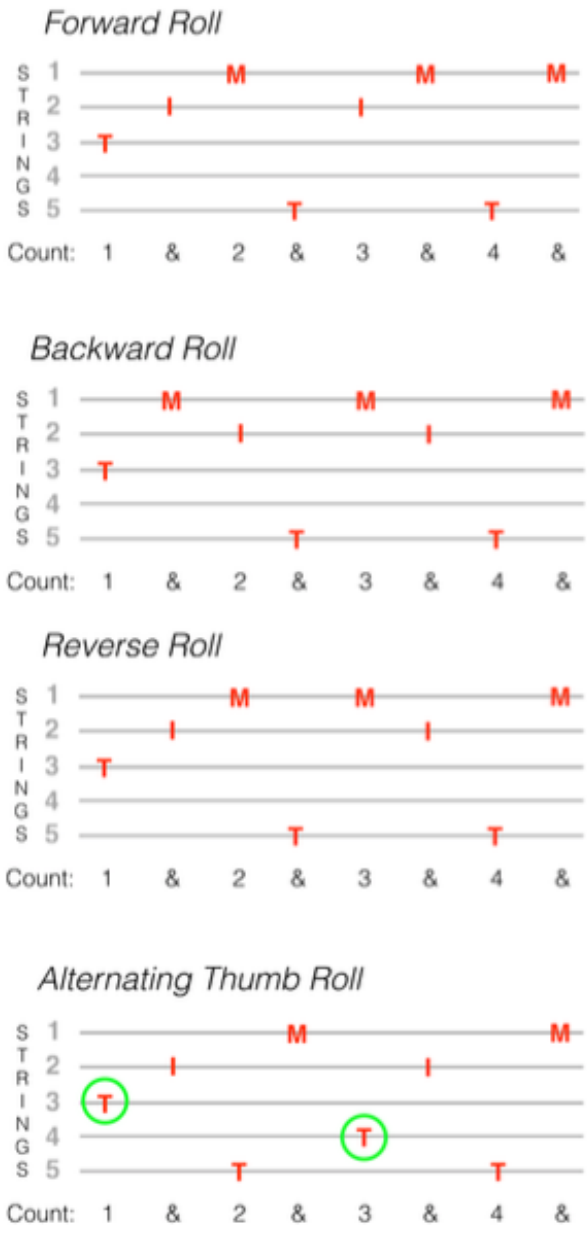
The three basic patterns described on the previous page make up the vast majority of the movements used to make a complete "roll", which we can define as *a sequence of picking patterns put together to fill a 4-count measure, with each note receiving a half-beat (counted " 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & ")*.

The Four Scruggs Banjo Rolls

Earl Scruggs broke down the essential movements of his picking style into four basic rolls, utilizing the three basic patterns mentioned above. In practice, as you finish the roll, immediately play it again, creating a looping, steady stream of notes. **Count the measures "1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and..."**

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.



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

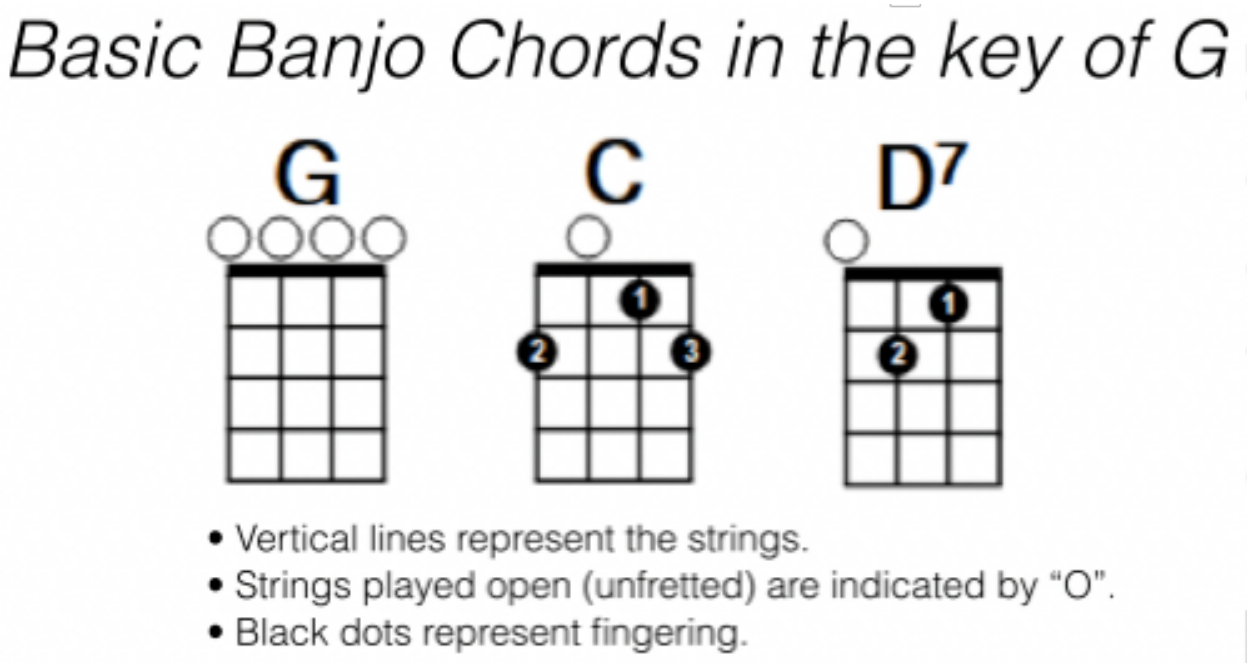
Generally speaking, which finger plays which string can be broken down this way:

1st string —— M
2nd string ——- I or T
3rd string ——- T or I
4th string ——- T
5th string ——- T

While there will be always 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:



Exercise: Combining Rolls & Chords

Practice each of the four rolls on page 6, along with the three basic banjo chords on page 7, to the following chord progression:

||: G | C | G | D7 | G | C | D7 | G :||

(The **||:** and **:||** signs mean to repeat the measures between them)

Practice Tips

1. Play the entire progression using only *one* of the rolls, repeating the progression several times (four cycles is good). Make sure that you play only the one roll, and not accidentally slip into one of the other rolls. This helps you master your playing.

2. Do this for *each* of the four rolls.

3. Repeat the exercise, but alternate each measure between two rolls… for instance, using the Forward Roll (FR), and the Backward Roll (BR), or maybe the Reverse Roll (RR), and the Alternating Thumb Roll (ATR)

||: G | C | G | D7 | G | C | D7 | G :||

FR BR FR BR FR BR FR BR

4. Expand on #3 by alternating among all four rolls as you play the progression, eg:

||: G | C | G | D7 | G | C | D7 | G :||

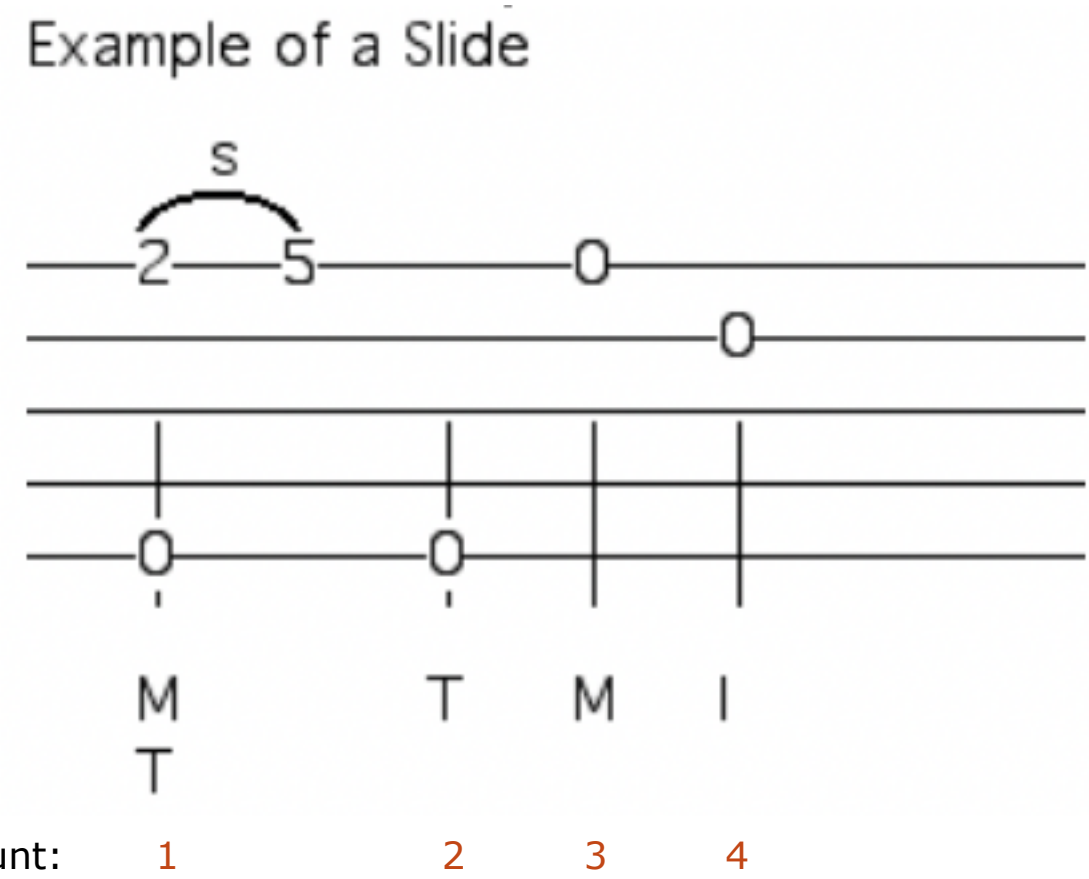
FR BR RR ATR FR BR RR ATR

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 string 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.

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.

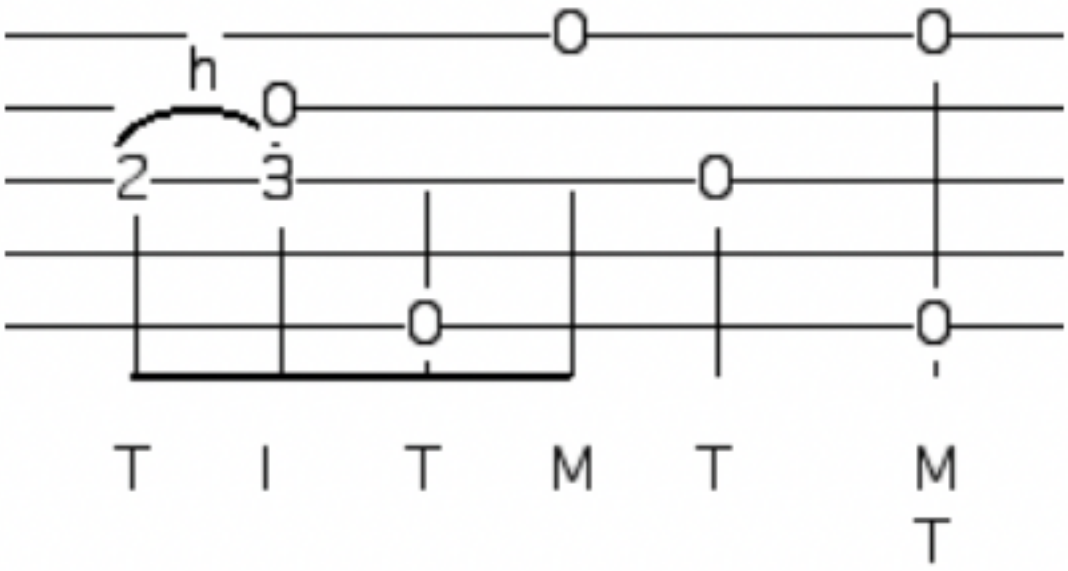


Slurs (continued)

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.

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.

Example of a Hammer-on

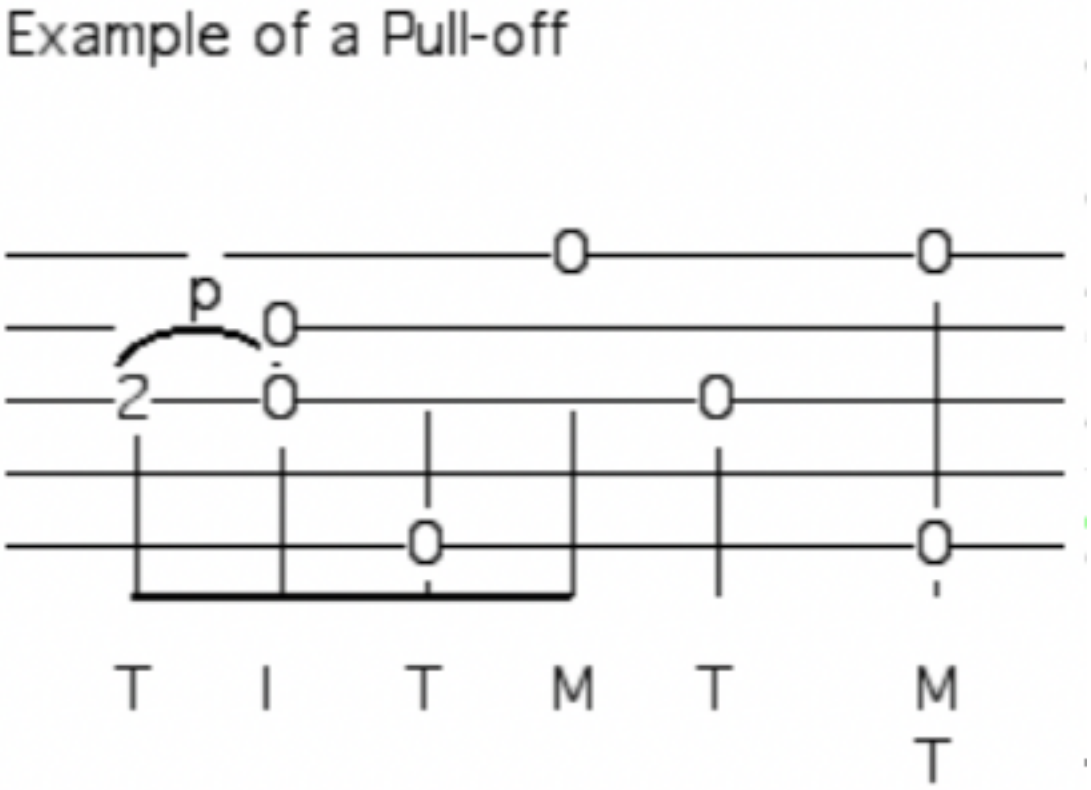


Count: 1 & 2 & 3 4

Slurs (continued)

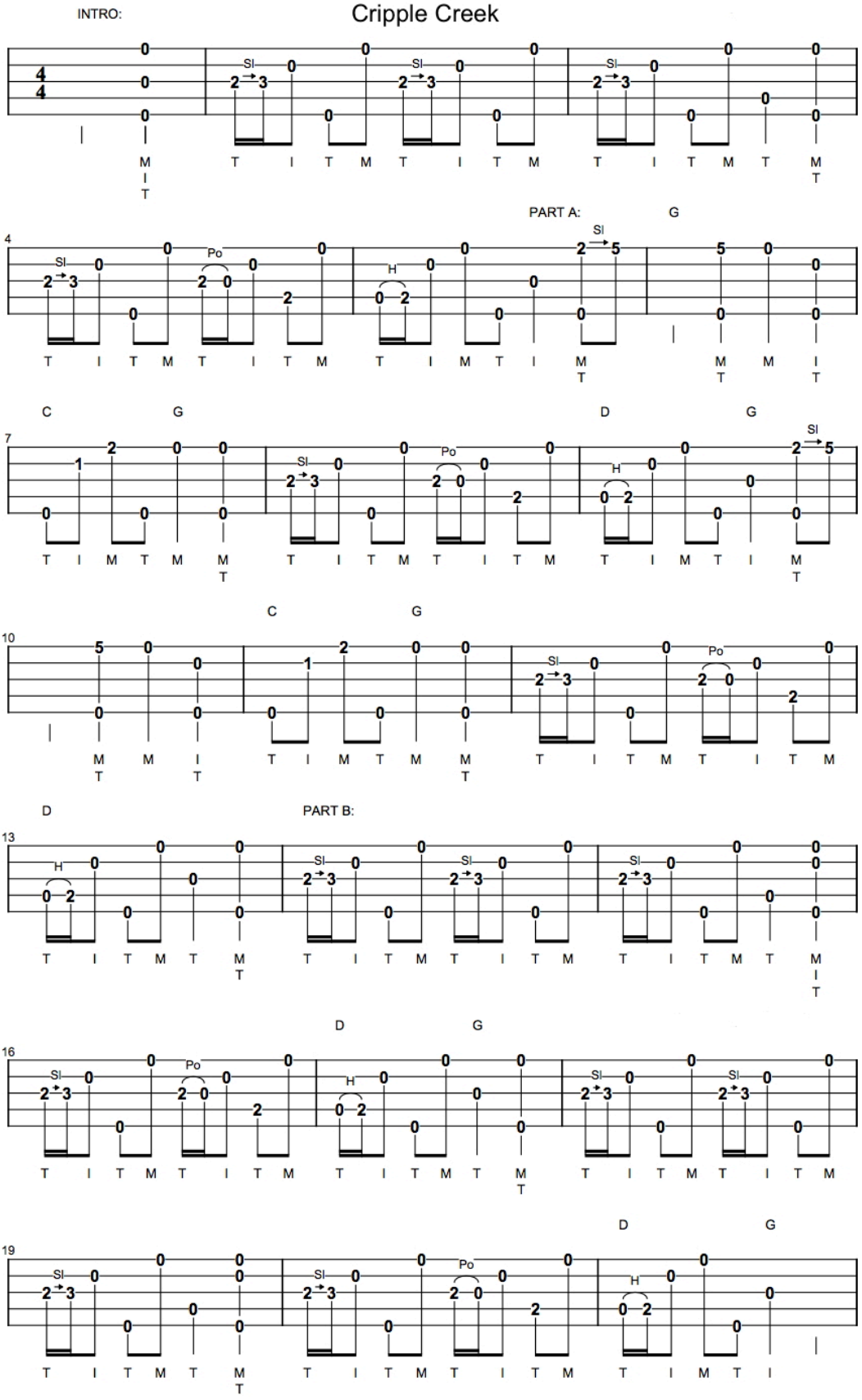
Pull-Off: In a pull-off, a note is fretted and picked, then the finger holding the note is pulled off the string with a little sideways plucking motion, producing a note lower in pitch. Pull-offs can lead to either an open string or a lower fretted note.

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.


Cripple Creek
INTRO:
PART A:
G
C
G
D
G
C
G
D
PART B:
D
G
D
G
Sl
Po
H

"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.

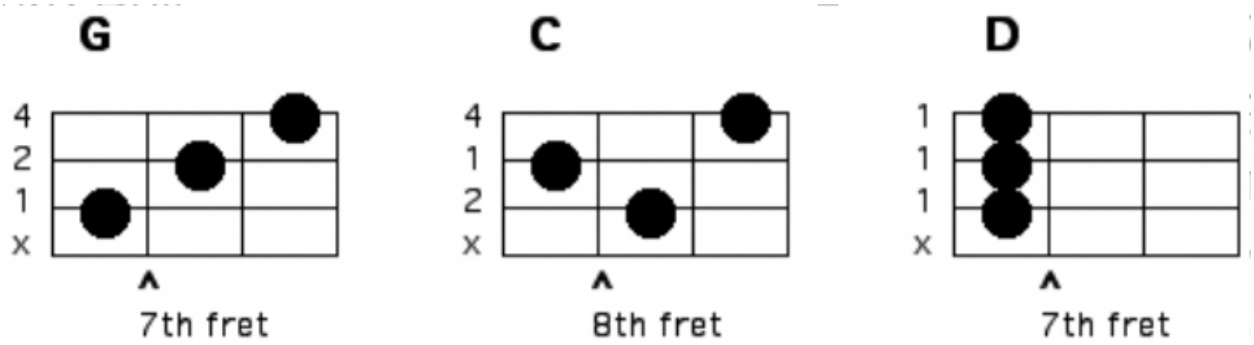
When thinking about good rhythm, consider how a set of drums (which traditionally was NOT part of a bluegrass band) functions. In a typical 4-beat time signature, the bass drum will hit on counts 1 and 3, while the high-pitched snare drum will snap on counts 2 and 4:

"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").

Comping (continued)

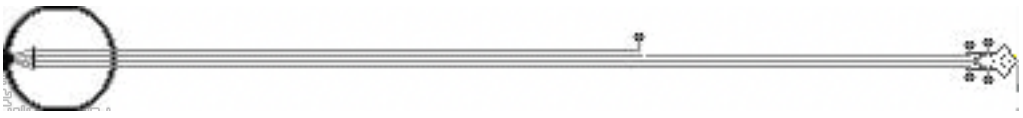
Higher inversions of the chords are very effective and often used for comping. Here are the G, C and D chords about mid-way up the neck, a good area to use for comping. The straight D major chord can be used in place of the D7. Notice we're limiting ourselves to simple three- tone chords played on strings 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* (or short, with a quick attack immediately followed by muting the strings) 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:

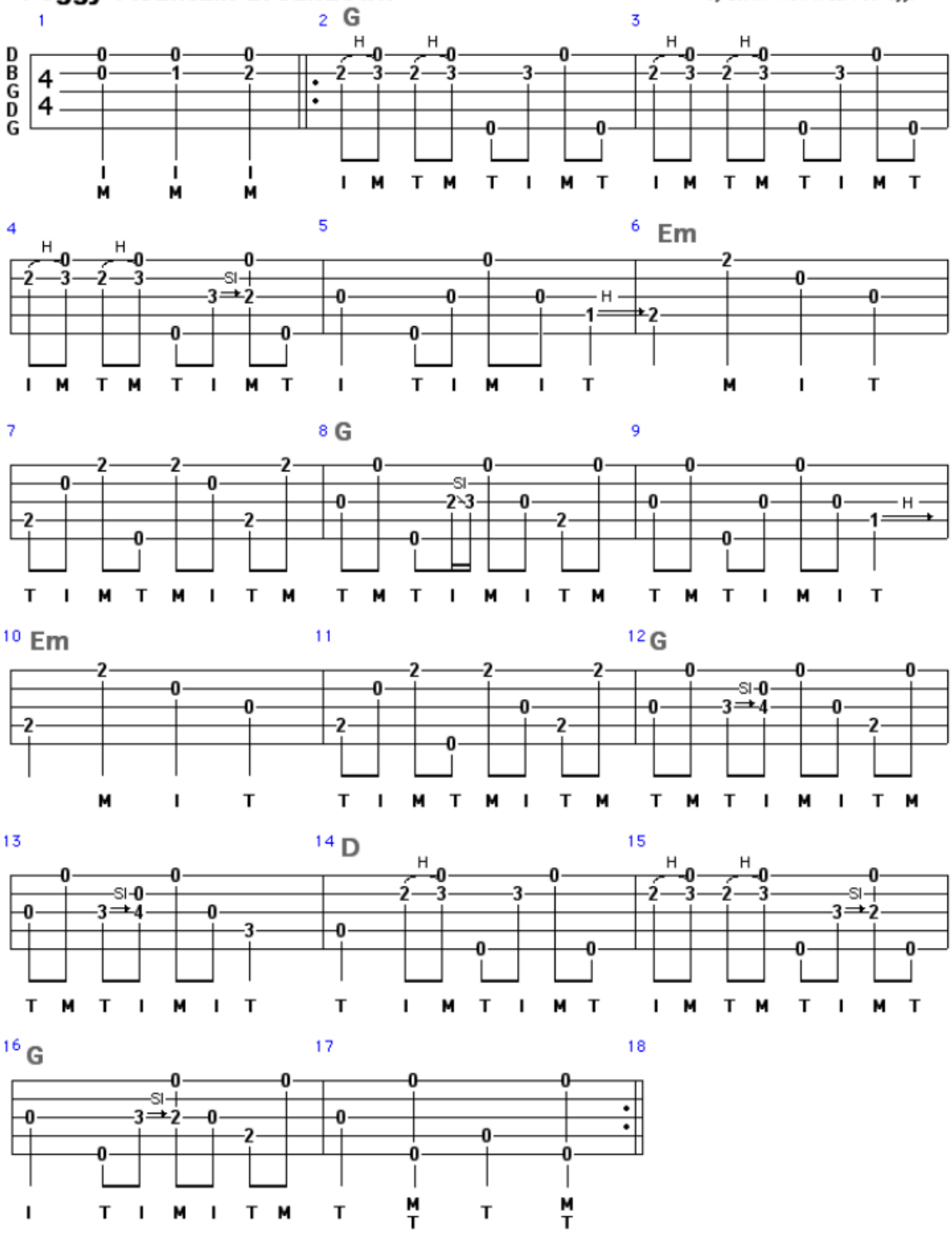
||: G | C | G | D | G | C | D | G :||



On the next page we up our game by tackling arguably the most famous banjo tune ever written, ***Foggy Mountain Breakdown*** by Earl Scruggs.

Foggy Mountain Breakdown

by Lester Flatt & Earl Scruggs



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.

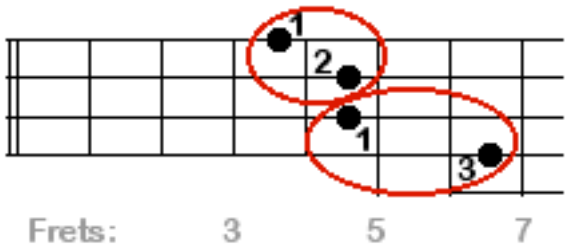
2) Whenever possible, use open strings to play notes. In standard G-tuning, this means the low G, B, D and high G notes should be played as open strings (3rd, 2nd, 1st and 5th strings).

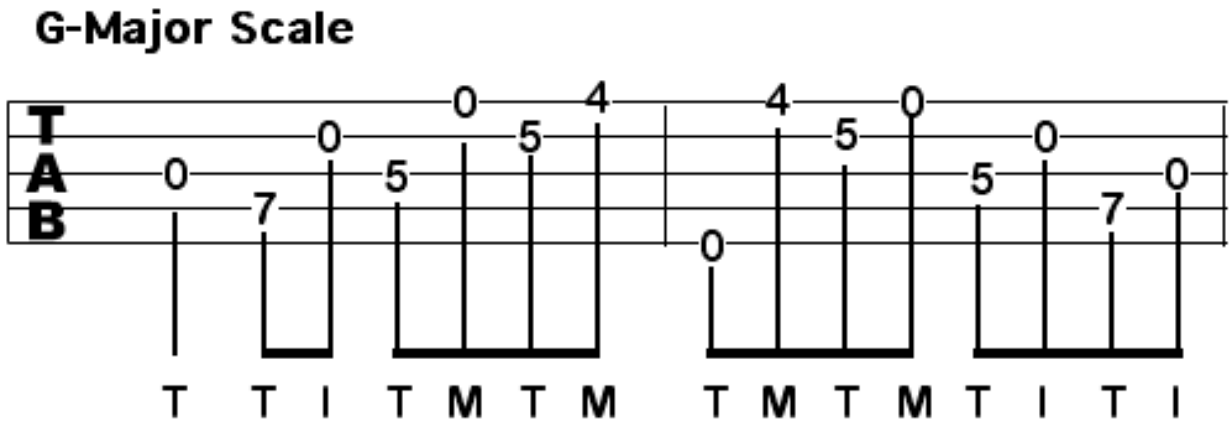
3) Try to grab small 2 or 3-string clusters of notes (similar to how we would play chords), and try to linger as long as possible on basic clusters of fretted notes mixed with open string notes to create a more legato (flowing) sound. In other words, it’s good to let notes overlap a bit to reduce the staccato effect of the banjo’s timbre.

Melodic Style (continued)

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:





A Little Music Theory

Fundamental to all forms of music, the Major Scale 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. *Solfège* (the "do re me fa so la te do" we all learn as kids) is also based on the Major Scale.

We won't go into music theory in any great detail, but in a nutshell, music utilizes a 12-tone musical system, meaning every octave (notes of different registers which have the same name) is divided into 12 equal increments, or *intervals*. Each of these increments is called a *half-step* (also *half-tone* or *semi-tone*). Two half-steps, obviously, are called a *whole-step,* or *whole-tone*.

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 (W stands for whole-step, and H stands for half-step): **W W H W W W H**

Diatonic Chord Structure

In all keys, the Major Scale is a 7-tone scale. Each of the seven tones functions as the *root* of a chord that is indigenous to the key. To extrapolate our chords from the major scale, we pick any of the tones in the scale (which for purposes of chord construction is taken as the root, or tonic, of the chord we're building), and proceed upwards in pitch every other tone in the scale (hence the origin of the word *diatonic*) until we have at least three tones (aka a *triad*), which are the tones comprising our chord.

Then, using the major scale as a sort of musical ruler, we measure the intervallic distance between our chord tones, and make note of any similarities or differences in how the notes align in the chord. For instance, if there's two whole-steps between the root and its 3rd, we call it a "major third" (or simply 3), and the chord's *quality* will be major. If there's 1&½ steps between root and its 3rd, then we call it a "flat 3", or minor 3rd, and the chord's quality will be minor.

To roughly characterize the sound of major and minor chords, we might say that a major chord sounds "happy", while a minor chord sounds "sad".

There's much more to this topic, including the various categories of chords, extensions (continuing the diatonic principle beyond 3-tone triads), and how we use them. Fortunately for bluegrass musicians, chord structure in most tunes is usually very simple, so we can make much of our music using only major and minor chords, with the occasional dominant chord (in our primary chords, what we call "the 5 chord" or V) thrown in occasionally.

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**		

These three primary chords, the I, the IV and the V, are the most commonly used chords in every style and genre of music, including bluegrass, country, blues and rock.

Here's a handy chord chart providing the names of all seven chords in the most commonly used keys encountered in bluegrass music.

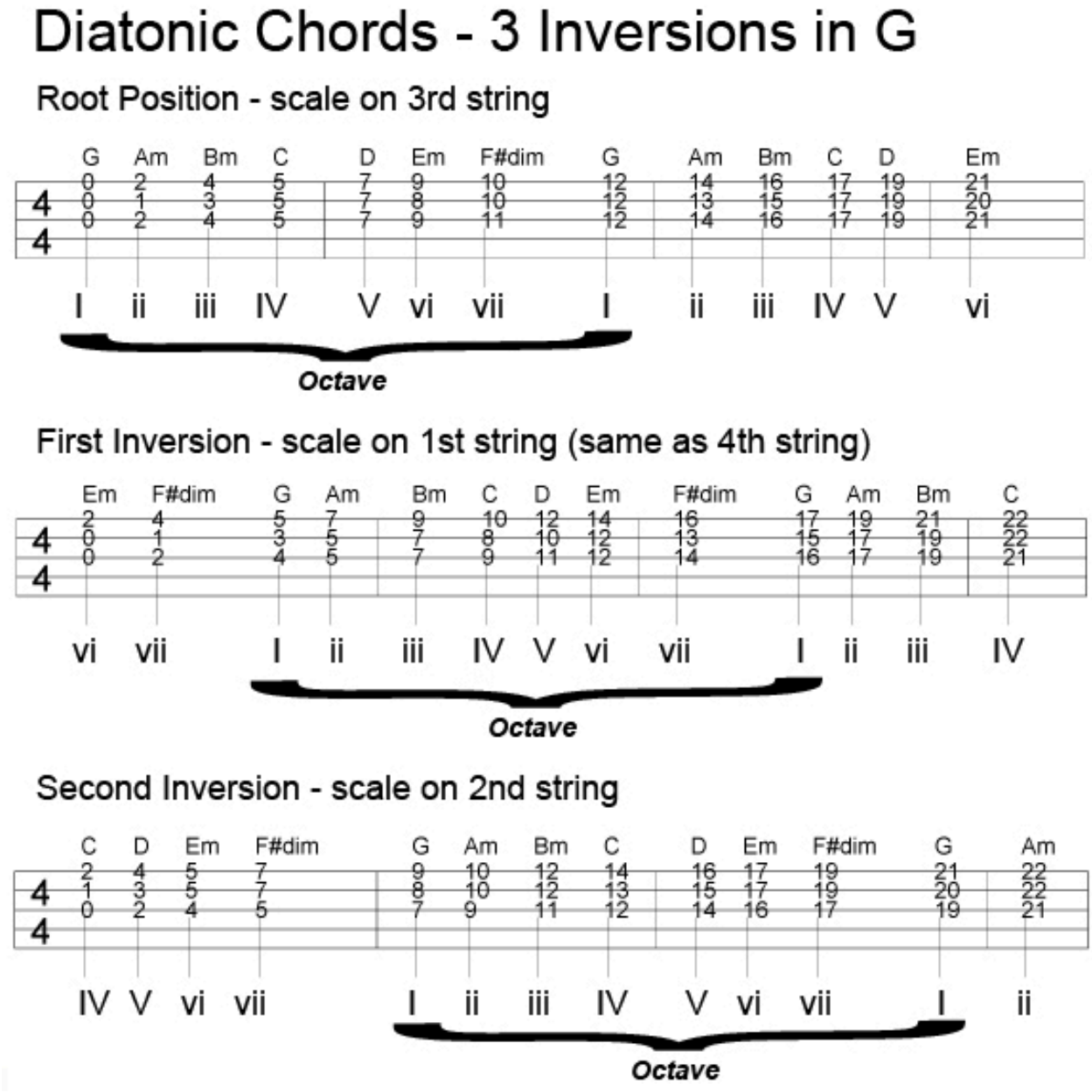
Key Chord Chart

Major Key	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
A	A	Bm	C#m	D	E	F#m	G#dim
B	B	C#m	D#m	E	F#	G#m	A#dim
C	C	Dm	Em	F	G	Am	Bdim
D	D	Em	F#m	G	A	Bm	C#dim
E	E	F#m	G#m	A	B	C#m	D#dim
F	F	Gm	Am	Bb	C	Dm	Edim
G	G	Am	Bm	C	D	Em	F#dim
Minor Key	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
Am	Am	Bdim	C	Dm	Em	F	G
Bm	Bm	C#dim	D	Em	F#m	G	A
Cm	Cm	Ddim	Eb	Fm	Gm	Ab	Bb
Dm	Dm	Edim	F	Gm	Am	Bb	C
Em	Em	F#dim	G	Am	Bm	C	D
Fm	Fm	Gdim	Ab	Bbm	Cm	Db	Eb
Gm	Gm	Adim	Bb	Cm	Dm	Eb	F

Please note that the V chord can be played as either a major or a dominant ("7th") chord. Also, the VII chord (diminished chord) doesn't occur very often in traditional bluegrass music, so you can let it slide for the most part until you learn the basics.

Once you feel comfortable with everything you've learned so far, you'll want to learn additional chords on your banjo. In the following chart we have various *inversions* of all the chords in the key of G.

An inversion simply refers to which note is lowest in the triad. We have the root inversion (where the root of the chord is lowest in pitch, followed by the 3rd and 5th). The first inversion is where the 3rd of the chord is lowest in pitch (followed by the 5th and root), and the 2nd inversion is where the 5th of the chord is lowest in pitch (followed by the root and 3rd).



WIKIPEDIA: Banjo

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banjo

Introduction

The banjo is a stringed instrument developed by enslaved Africans in Colonial America, adapted from several African instruments. The name banjo is commonly thought to be derived from the Kimbundu term mbanza. Some etymologists derive it from a dialectal pronunciation of "bandore" or from an early anglicization of the Spanish word "bandurria", though other research suggests that it may come from a Senegambian term for a bamboo stick formerly used for the instrument's neck.

History

Enslaved Africans, living in Appalachia, fashioned gourd-bodied instruments like those with which they had been familiar in Africa. 18th and early 19th century writers transcribed the name of these instruments variously as bangie, banza, banjer and banjar. Instruments similar to the banjo (e.g., the Japanese shamisen and Persian tar) have been played in many countries, but a likely ancestor of the banjo is the akonting, a spike folk lute played by the Jola tribe of Senegambia. Other similar instruments include the xalam of Senegal and the ngoni of the Wassoulou region including parts of Mali, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire.[citation needed] It is probable that the banjo has migrated across continents, mutating from form to form for centuries. The modern banjo was popularized by the American minstrel performer Joel Sweeney in the 1830s. Banjos were introduced in Britain in the 1840s by Sweeney's group, the American Virginia

Minstrels, and became very popular in music halls.

Modern forms

The modern banjo comes in a variety of forms, including four- and five-string versions. A six-string version, tuned and played similar to a guitar, has been gaining popularity. In almost all of its forms, the banjo's playing is characterized by a fast arpeggiated plucking, although there are many different playing styles. The body, or "pot", of a modern banjo typically consists of a circular rim (generally made of wood), a metal tone ring, and a tensioned head, similar to a drum head. Traditionally the head was made from animal skin, but is often made of various synthetic materials today. Some banjos have a separate resonator plate on the back of the pot, while others have an open back. There are also electric banjos.

Usage

Today, the banjo is commonly associated with Dixieland, country, folk and bluegrass music. Historically, however, the banjo occupied a central place in African American traditional music, as well as in the minstrel shows of the 19th century. In fact, African Americans exerted a strong, early influence on the development of both country and bluegrass through the introduction of the banjo, and as well through the innovation of musical techniques in the playing of both the banjo and fiddle. Recently, the banjo has enjoyed inclusion in a wide variety of musical genres, including pop crossover music, indie rock (see Modest Mouse and Sufjan Stevens), and Celtic punk.

Five-string banjo

The instrument is available in many forms. The five-string banjo was popularized by Joel Walker Sweeney, an American minstrel performer from Appomattox Court House, Virginia. In the 1830s Sweeney became the first white man to play the banjo on stage. His version of the instrument replaced the gourd body of the banjar with a drum-like sound box and included four full-length strings alongside the short fifth-string drone string. There is no proof, however, that Sweeney invented either innovation. This new banjo came to be tuned g'cgbd'. This is not quite a straight transposition of the e'aeg#b' tuning of the banjar; the B string of the banjo has the lowest pitch.

The banjo can be played in several styles and is used in various forms of music. American old-time music typically uses the five-string open back banjo. It is played in a number of different styles, the most common of which are called clawhammer or frailing, characterized by the use of a downward rather than upward motion when striking the strings with a fingernail. Frailing techniques use the thumb to catch the fifth string for a drone after each strum or twice in each action ("double thumbing"), or to pick out additional melody notes in what is known as "drop-thumb." Pete Seeger popularized a folk style by combining clawhammer with "up picking", usually without the use of fingerpicks.

Bluegrass music, which uses the five-string resonator banjo almost exclusively, is played in several common styles. These include Scruggs style, named after Earl Scruggs; melodic, or Keith style; and three-finger style with single string work, also called Reno style after Don Reno, father of Don Wayne Reno. In these styles the emphasis is on arpeggiated figures played in a continuous eighth-note rhythm. All of these styles are typically played with fingerpicks.

Many tunings are used for the five-string banjo. Probably the most common, particularly in bluegrass, is the open G tuning (g'DGBd'). In earlier times, the tuning gCGBd was commonly used instead. Other tunings common in old-time music include double C (g'CGc'd'), sawmill or mountain minor (g'DGc'd') also called Modal or Mountain Modal, old-time D (a'DAd'e') a step up from double C, often played with a violin accompaniment, and

open D (f#'DF#Ad'). These tunings are often taken up a tone, either by tuning up or using a capo.

The fifth (drone) string is the same gauge as the first, but it is generally five frets shorter, three quarters the length of the rest. One notable exception is the long-necked Pete Seeger model, where the additional three frets are not added to the fifth string. The short fifth string means that unlike many string instruments, the strings on a five string banjo do not go in order from lowest to highest from one side of the neck to the other. Instead, in order from low to high the strings are the fourth, third, second, first, and then fifth.

The short fifth string presents special problems for using a capo to change the pitch of the instrument. For small changes (going up or down one or two semitones, for example) it is possible simply to re-tune the fifth string. Otherwise various devices, known as fifth string capos, are available effectively to shorten the string. Many banjo players favour the use of model railroad spikes or titanium spikes (usually installed at the seventh fret and sometimes at others), under which the string can be hooked to keep it pressed down on the fret.

While the five-string banjo has been used in classical music since the turn of the century, contemporary and modern works have been written for the instrument by Béla Fleck, Tim Lake, George Crumb, Modest Mouse, Jo Kondo, Paul Elwood, Hans Werner Henze (notably in his Sixth Symphony), Beck, J.P. Pickens, Peggy Honeywell, Norfolk & Western, The Avett Brothers and Sufjan Stevens.

The instrument is sometimes used in musical theater. For example, the following musicals feature a banjo: Mame, Half a Sixpence, and Annie.

While the size of the five string banjo is largely standardized, there are smaller and larger sizes available, including the 'long neck' or 'Seeger neck' variation discussed above. Petite variations on the 5-string banjo have been available since the 1890s. S.S. Stewart introduced the banjeaurine, tuned one fourth above a standard five-string. Piccolo banjos are smaller, and tuned one octave above a standard banjo.

The Importance of Good Practice Habits

When learning to play any musical instrument, developing good practice habits is fundamental. Your success with the banjo will hinge not so much on how well your teacher conveys information to you, nor so much on your ability to memorize that information, but rather on your practice habits -- how often you practice, the time devoted to practice, and the quality of your attention to the tasks you set for yourself in practice. Learning the information is one thing... getting your fingers to perform what you learn is quite another.

There's an old musicians' saying that sums it all up very succinctly:

"It's not how many years you've been playing that count... it's how many hours."

Hitting Plateaus

There's a certain "general level of competence" which many players reach but never exceed. We've all seen players who can say they've been playing banjo for decades, yet the level of their playing is unimpressive. Perhaps they only play a couple of times a month, or perhaps they play a lot one week but then hardly touch the instrument for weeks (or months) on end. And when they do "practice", they play the same old stuff they've been playing forever... the same songs, the same riffs, leads and fills. They reach a certain level of competence, become satisfied (complacent might be a better word), and don't challenge themselves to improve. So their playing ceases to evolve. They have hit a plateau, and that's pretty much as good on their instrument as they ever get.

While there's certainly nothing wrong with being content and satisfied in your playing, if you really want to improve, you have to challenge yourself on a regular basis. And you can't beat daily for regularity! Andre Segovia, the godfather of classical guitar, once said, "If I miss one day of practice, I notice it. If I miss two days, my manager notices, as well. And if I miss three days, everyone notices it." For professional musicians, daily practice is a lifestyle.

The Zen of Banjo Playing

Meditation is, in essence, a letting go of the mind, a surrender of self in contemplation. A good example of meditation is where one sits still, focusing on one's breathing, or staring at a burning candle. The particular focus of one's attention is not as important as the degree of surrender to the exercise one achieves.

Losing yourself in practicing your banjo is thus a form of meditation. I've often sat down to practice my banjo for maybe 10 minutes, and later discover that an hour or two has gone by. Time has passed, BUT my banjo playing has improved a bit, and my mind feels refreshed. Practicing your banjo is an effective way to relieve stress and escape from the trials and tribulations of life for awhile. We all need time in our day to just relax and let go

of our worries and tensions. The great thing about music is it is both an escape AND a skill-building exercise. In this regard, playing music is much better than any drug known to man.

Go For The Burn

Those who succeed at mastering (to even a modest degree) any musical instrument will tell you that it takes many, many hours of practice over many, many years to develop control of the fine-motor muscles involved in playing the instrument well.

Playing banjo is, odd as it may sound, an athletic undertaking. Moving your fingers around real fast isn't as easy as a pro makes it look. Muscles of the back, shoulders, arms, hands and fingers must all be trained, conditioned and strengthened to withstand the rigors of playing for protracted lengths of time. Calluses on the fingertips must be developed and thickened to ease discomfort. Accuracy in the placement of the thumb and fingers, the angle of the hand to the neck, using the picks with accuracy and agility and speed... all these physical challenges and more must be dealt with in your practice time.

Keep a Practice Log

It can be very useful to keep a log of your practice time. Every time you practice, be it for 5 minutes or two hours, write it down in a notebook. Then look at it once a week or so, and strive to increase your time the following week. It can be a challenge to find time in your busy life for music, and sometimes you have to literally make time to practice. But if you do, you'll see the results on down the road.

What Is Talent?

I have this theory on the definition of talent. From my observations of players (from beginning students to professional artists of the highest calibre), it seems apparent that those we might call talented have an innate aptitude for learning and utilizing what is learned. But more significantly, they have an ability to actually enjoy the daily, mind-numbingly repetitive act of practicing their instrument. Talented people seem to intuitively know that perfection of a skill can only be achieved through patient repetition.

So how much should you practice?

A 30-minute practice session every day should be considered a minimum. Shoot for an hour or better when you can. And if your day is hectic, try to avoid the thought of skipping that day and making it up the next. One, you don't really make up anything, the time you practice is the time you practice on any given day. And second, it's much better to at least warm the hands to your instrument for 5 or 10 minutes than to skip playing that day altogether. It's the daily devotion to mastering an instrument that yields the best results.

Taking the Long View

I can guarantee that you will experience frustration at times. There will be days when, no matter how much you practice, it will seem as if you're making little or no progress. Or you might hear some hot-shot player and think your quest is hopeless, that you'll never be able to play like that. This is letting self-doubt and cynicism get the better of you. The really good players got that way because they cultivated a love of playing... period. Goals or no goals, they simply love to play, and do it with dedication. They make it a part of their lives, and give their playing priority over their inevitable moments of frustration. Making music isn't a competition, it's an act of artistic expression which, with time and practice, can bring more joy to your life than you might imagine. It doesn't really matter if you ever achieve "greatness" as you might define it -- focus more on your innate desire to make music part of your life... a desire that brought you to this book in the first place.

So strive to love the learning, because no matter how good you get, there's always room for improvement. Be patient with yourself. Take the long view, relax and enjoy the process. It may sound trite, but it’s true: It's not about the destination, it's about the journey.

About The StringDancer Banjo Primer

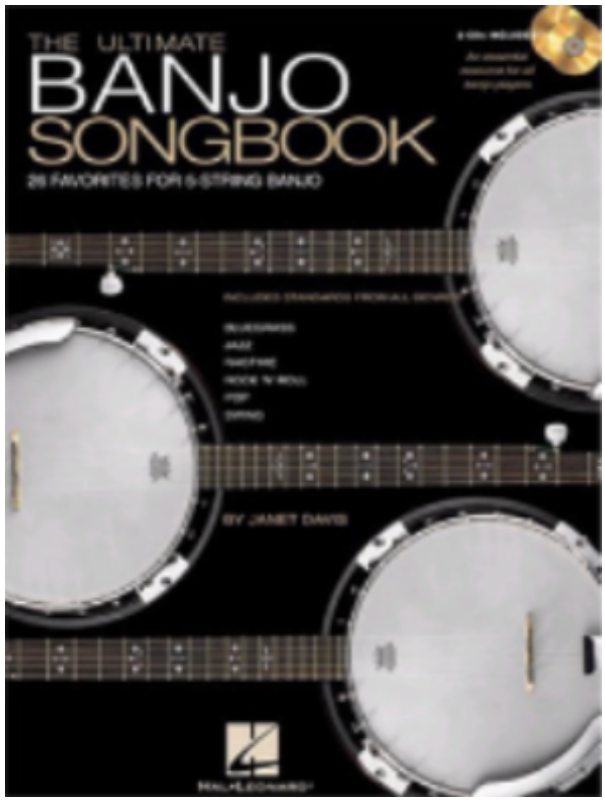
This little handbook was originally written for a beginning banjo class I was teaching in 2009 at Ivy Tech Community College in Bloomington, Indiana. It underwent some minor changes over several semesters, augmented with additional materials I thought might interest my students. I found it to be a good introductory method book for my private banjo students as well, and with this edition (August, 2018) I’ve increased the materials yet again.

I hope my little contribution to 5-string banjo pedagogy has been useful in your practice as a beginning banjo student. I have additional instructional materials for guitar and banjo available for free on my website, ***StringDancer.com****.*

Another great online resource I can heartily recommend is ***BanjoHangout.org****. They have forums, tutorials, videos, lessons, and many other resources for banjo pickers of any level.*

Now what?

Now that you've completed the StringDancer Banjo Primer, you have learned all the basics you need to continue your studies on your own. Virtually all banjo methods, sheet music and song books utilize the tablature approach we have used, and even the most advanced instruction uses the same basic techniques we have covered.

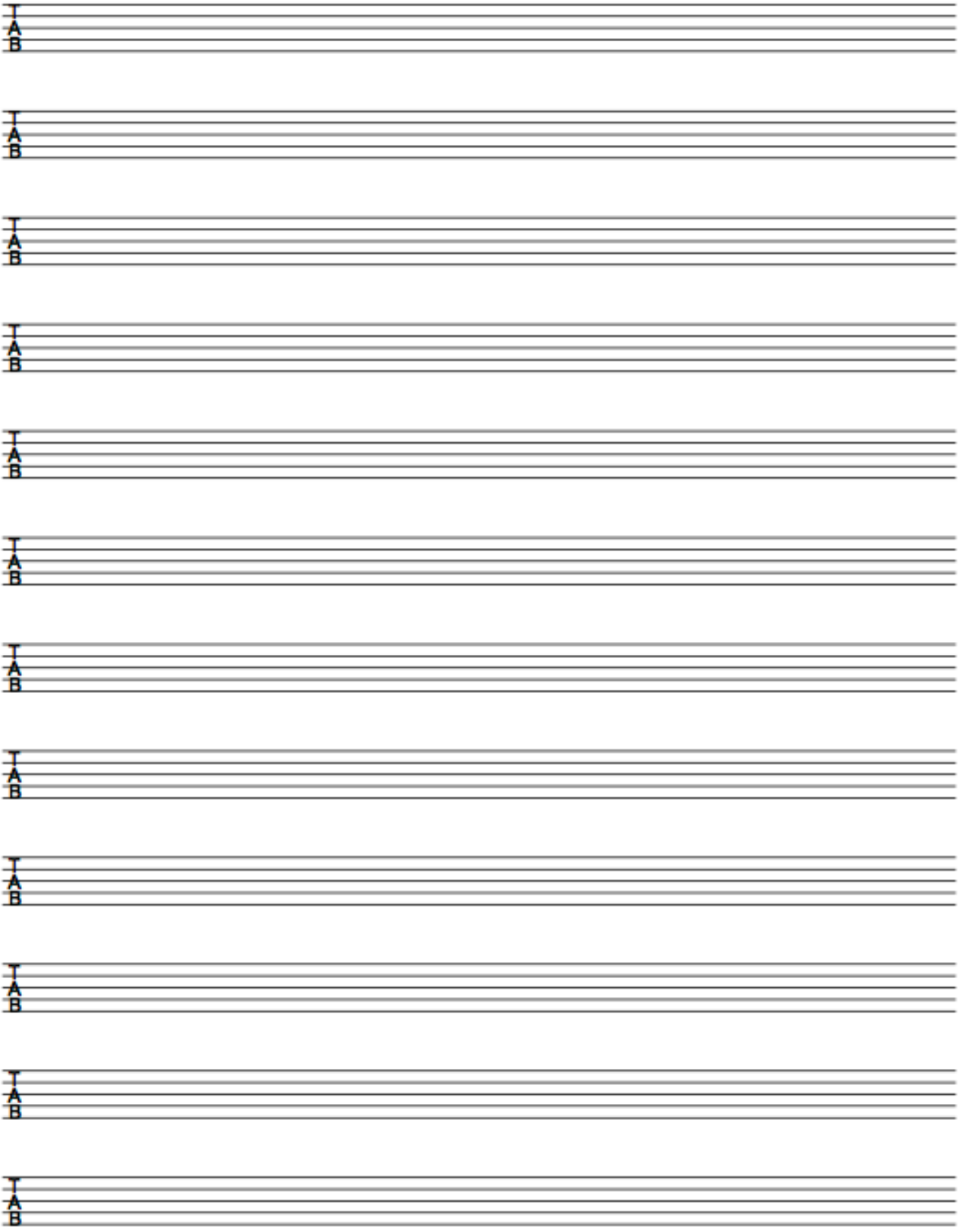


One book I can highly recommend that I use with my private students is **Janet Davis' Ultimate Banjo Songbook**. It contains material for all levels, beginning to advanced, and covers a wide range of styles. It comes with a 2-CD audio disk set that let's you hear each exercise at reduced tempo to facilitate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

awarded to

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for completion of the StringDancer 5-String Banjo Curriculum,
who henceforth shall be considered a Journeyman Banjo Picker,
with all the honor and appurtenances pertaining thereto.

Bestowed _____
by Jeff Foster, Dean of 5-string Banjo

Jeff Foster
_____