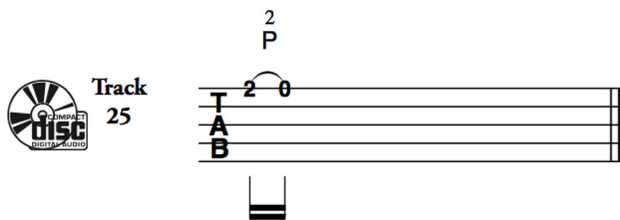


# The Pull-off

An important left-hand technique is the pull-off. In this technique, a finger of the left hand actually plucks the string in addition to the string being plucked by a finger of the right hand. The pull-off should not be viewed as merely a lift-off of the finger, but a vigorous pull with the finger.

Example #1 is a pull-off from the second fret, first string, to the open first string. With your second finger at the second fret, pluck the string with the middle finger of the right-hand. As the string is sounding, pluck the first string with the second finger of the left hand. The left-hand finger executing the pull-off is the same finger that is fretting the string. The direction of the left-hand pull-off will be down towards the ground.

## Example #1



Track 25

Diagram illustrating Example #1: A pull-off from the second fret, first string, to the open first string. The notation shows a guitar staff with strings T, A, and B. A '2' is written above the first string, with a 'P' below it, indicating a pull-off. The first string has a '2' and a '0' connected by a slur, with a 'P' above the '2'. The second and third strings have a '2' and a '3' connected by a slur, with a '0' above the '3'. Below the staff, a diagram shows the left hand with the second finger pressing down on the second fret of the first string.

Exercise #1 uses the pull-off in a roll situation. Practice until you are comfortable with the sound and feel.

## Exercise #1

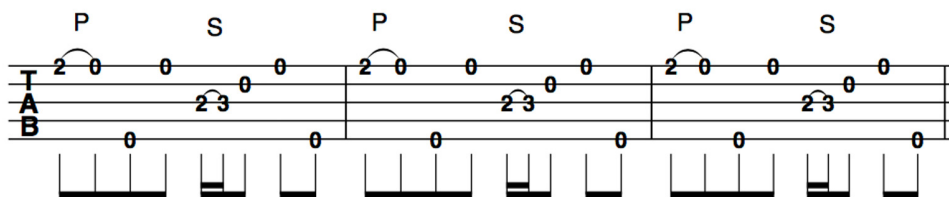


Diagram illustrating Exercise #1: A roll situation using the pull-off. The notation shows a guitar staff with strings T, A, and B. The first string has a 'P' above a slur containing '2' and '0', followed by a '0'. The second and third strings have an 'S' above a slur containing '2' and '3', followed by a '0'. This pattern repeats three times across the staff. Below the staff, a diagram shows the left hand with the second finger pressing down on the second fret of the first string.

Example #2 is a commonly used pull-off and is a prominent component in many phrases of bluegrass banjo playing. Notice the note that is sounded first is the third string, third fret. The pull-off is to the third string, second fret. This is performed by the second finger fretting the third string at the third fret, pulling-off to the first finger fretting the second fret. It is not uncommon for players to actually push-off, so to speak, with the plucking finger of the left hand pushing up or towards the ceiling. Whether you pull to the ground or push to the ceiling on this particular maneuver, you must pluck the string again with the left-hand finger.

## Example #2

Exercise #2 utilizes this 3-2 pull-off in the context of a forward/backward roll. This phrase is put to good use in later material in the book.

## Exercise #2

### Practice Tip

One way to get your rolls up to speed is to play along with recorded music. Even if you do not know the piece, you can mute the strings and play rolls in rhythm with the recording. The banjo at its basic level is that of a harmonic drummer. Take away the harmony by muting the strings, and you can perfect the rhythm function of your playing. Your fingers can get a sense of the groove that music requires. This also works well with a metronome or a drum machine.

## Train 45 Roll

The next pattern is not quite as orderly as the patterns we have learned up to now. It is the defining roll pattern in “Train 45” and is similar to the opening statement of “Foggy Mountain Breakdown.”

Track 27

I M T M T I M T

## Modified Forward/Backward Roll

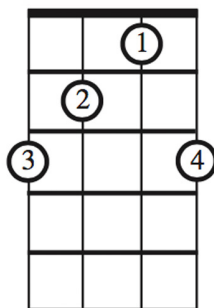
Another roll pattern that is similar to a forward/backward roll but different, i.e., sort of a half forward/backward, is shown below. It is used quite a bit and is the roll used to do what I call “The Lick.” It is probably the most-used passage in all bluegrass banjo playing. It is the banjo players’ equivalent to the Lester Flatt “G-Run” for guitar players. Again, let’s put all you have just learned into a really great-sounding bluegrass-styled instrumental called “Levelland Mountain Breakdown.” You will need to learn a new chord position. It is a standard position and can be used as a moveable chord (one that does not have any open strings). In this instance it is used as an F chord. Learn that new chord position and then move on to learn the tune.

## “The Lick”

Track 28

T M T I M I T M      T M T I M I T M

## F Chord





Track  
29

## Levelland Mountain Breakdown

Here is a piece that pulls together many of the techniques covered in this section. Work diligently to put it all together.

The musical notation is presented in four systems, each with a treble clef and a bass clef. The first system is labeled 'G' and contains four measures. The second system is labeled 'C', 'F', and 'G' and contains four measures. The third system is labeled 'C', 'F', 'G', and 'H' and contains four measures. The fourth system is labeled 'D', 'G', and 'H' and contains four measures. Each measure includes a fretboard diagram below the staff lines.

### Practice Tip

Many good practice strategies exist. One thing to remember in all of them is that you want to achieve certain goals: making cleaner pull-offs, making smoother rolls, and learning a new passage. If you have a goal that is contained in a short phrase, practice just that for three minutes straight. If you do not get it, lengthen the time to six minutes. It is important to take small, successful steps.



## Guidelines for Determining Right-Hand Fingerings

There is a logical way to determine which fingers to use in the picking patterns presented here. In the system used in this book, the following is generally true.

### Guideline #1

- The first string is picked by the middle finger\*.
- The second string can be picked either by the index finger or thumb.
- The third string can be picked by either by the index finger or the thumb.
- The thumb picks the fourth string. (I have a bias against the index finger picking the fourth string as part of a roll pattern. The index finger will pick the fourth string in the single-string style presented in Tools and Techniques.)
- The thumb picks the fifth string.
- Here is a quick reference:

Picking Finger	String(s) Picked
M	1st*
I	2nd and 3rd
T	5th, 4th, 3rd, 2nd

### Guideline #2

- The same finger generally cannot pick consecutive eighth notes in a roll. (At slow tempos it can be done, but as the tempos increase it becomes less do-able. There are those players that can pick consecutive eighth notes with the same finger, as part of a special musical and technical presentation, but in general it is not done.)

*\* There are occasions when the middle finger will be used to pluck the second string in a roll pattern. It is often referred to as an inside roll. It is used in this book only on one occasion- #7f of the "Solos to Songs" section.*

# Fingering Examples

Example #1 shows two measures of a forward roll. The first measure can start with either the thumb (my preference) or the index finger. Since the first measure ends with the middle finger, the second measure can again begin with either the thumb (my preference) or index finger.

#1

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

Example #2 shows the first measure as the Train 45 roll. Since it ends with the thumb, the index finger must start the next measure (Guideline #1 and #2).

#2

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

Example #3 shows the first measure as a forward roll and the second measure as the Train 45 roll. The first measure ends with the middle finger, so the next measure could start with either the thumb (my preference) or the index finger, which is the finger that is often used in this roll. Additionally, the third note in the second measure may be picked with the thumb (my preference) or the index finger.

#3

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

## Guideline #3

Following guidelines #1 and #2, consecutive quarter notes can be picked by the same finger, as in example # 4 below. Alternating the thumb and index finger is an option, but not required.

**#4**

Diagram illustrating Example #4. The notation shows a sequence of five quarter notes on the bass staff. The notes are on the 0th, 2nd, 4th, and 0th frets. The picking finger for each note is indicated by a 'T' below the staff.

Example #5 is a roll ending with the thumb, so the first quarter note, which is an eighth note away, must be picked by the index finger.

**#5**

Diagram illustrating Example #5. The notation shows a sequence of notes on the bass staff. The notes are on the 0th, 0th, 0th, 0th, 0th, 0th, 0th, 0th, 2nd, 4th, and 0th frets. The picking finger for each note is indicated by 'T' or 'I' below the staff.

Example #6 demonstrates that the first note, a quarter note, can be picked with the thumb, followed by the thumb picking the fifth string.

**#6**

Diagram illustrating Example #6. The notation shows a sequence of notes on the bass staff. The notes are on the 0th, 0th, 0th, and 0th frets. The picking finger for each note is indicated by 'T' or 'M' below the staff.

This all may seem complicated but will become clearer as your speed increases and it becomes more difficult to pick consecutive eighth notes with the same finger. It can be a big stumbling block. If the situation is analyzed using the guidelines, the problem can be solved. Once solved, it becomes easier to see the logic in the fingering choices.

# SECTION 2: Review of Rolls, New Rolls, and Combinations of Rolls, With Examples

This section is a review of the rolls learned in the “Getting Started” section, plus new rolls and combinations of rolls. Each roll is numbered and followed by a number of examples of its use. The examples shown are commonly played phrases that appear with great frequency in bluegrass banjo playing. These examples should be practiced until they become physical and musical gestures that come easily to your fingers and to your ear. There are many variations and combinations of rolls used by players, and the rolls here represent only some of the more commonly played ones. In each of these you should strive to gain control of your fingers so they can move in any picking pattern that the music and style calls for. This takes a lot of disciplined practice.

## 1. Review of Rolls

Example #1 is the four-note roll with single note and pinch (the first roll presented in the earlier section). Example #1e is the banjo’s attempt to duplicate the musical introduction that fiddle players often use to set the timing of a piece; it is sometimes referred to as “potatoes.”



#1 Four-note roll with single note and pinch

#1a

#1b

#1c

#1d

#1e

## 2. Alternating Rolls

Example #2 is the alternating pattern. This relatively straightforward roll is used in many circumstances that may not be apparent to a beginner. This roll produces the sound of #2a, which should be familiar as part of the “Cripple Creek” chorus. By changing the strings struck by the fingers, you can also produce the phrases demonstrated in the remaining examples. Notice in #2c that the fifth note of the pattern is the fifth string. By sounding the fifth string in this spot, which is the downbeat and usually the place for a melody note, it displaces the emphasis and creates syncopation in the melody. It is used often and should be learned well. This is also true in #2d, but here the fifth string is the first note of the pattern. Remember that the roll pattern is the order in which the fingers move, not the strings they hit.



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31

#2 Alternating, Roll

#2b

#2c

#2d

#2e

#2f



### 3. Forward/Backward Roll

Example #3 is the forward/backward roll. Examples #3a and #3d are two of the most widely used phrases in all of bluegrass banjo playing. Spend time learning these two rolls and listen for their use by your favorite players. The logic of this roll divides the measure into two parts separated by the open fifth string. This allows you to have one chord, or position of notes, fingered with the left-hand on the first half of the measure, and to switch smoothly to a different position on the second half of the measure as the fifth string is sounded. In #3c there are two different chords in each measure. In bluegrass banjo playing, an open string is often required for making smooth transitions with the left-hand. When an open string is not available, as at the end of each measure in #3c, you have to move quickly. Sometimes you have to move so quickly at fast tempos that the last note of a roll actually sounds the note of the next position. This may seem complicated, but in fact it is a happenstance of the roll streaming and the left-hand changing positions at fast tempos. Example #3d is a variation of #3a.



Track  
32

#3 Forward/Backward Roll

#3a

#3b

#3c

#3d



## 4. Variations of the Forward Roll

We learned a version of the forward roll in the first section. Examples #4.1 through #4.3c illustrate some variations of that roll. The roll we learned has the TM TIM TIM finger order. The one listed as #4.2 moves the two-note portion of the roll to the end of the measure so that it becomes TIM TIM TM. #4.3 is M TIM TIM T, which splits the two-note portion of the roll and places one note at each end of the measure.



#4.1 Forward Roll

#4.1a

Musical notation for #4.1a. It consists of two staves. The top staff has notes on the treble clef with fingerings 0, 0, 0, 0, 0. The bottom staff has notes on the bass clef with fingerings 0, 0. Below the staves are two sets of fretboard diagrams. The first diagram shows frets 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12. The second diagram shows frets 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12. The rhythm is indicated as T M T I M T I M.

#4.1b

#4.1c

Musical notation for #4.1b and #4.1c. It consists of two staves. The top staff has notes on the treble clef with fingerings 1, 2, 1, 2, 3, 3, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5, 5. The bottom staff has notes on the bass clef with fingerings 0, 0, 0, 0. Below the staves are two sets of fretboard diagrams. The first diagram shows frets 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12. The second diagram shows frets 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12. The rhythm is indicated as S 0 0 0 0.

#4.1d

#4.1e

Musical notation for #4.1d and #4.1e. It consists of two staves. The top staff has notes on the treble clef with fingerings 2, 3, 3, 3, 0, 2, 3, 3, 0, 0, 0. The bottom staff has notes on the bass clef with fingerings 0, 0, 0, 0. Below the staves are two sets of fretboard diagrams. The first diagram shows frets 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12. The second diagram shows frets 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12. The rhythm is indicated as H 0 0 0 P 0.

#4.2

#4.2a

Musical notation for #4.2 and #4.2a. It consists of two staves. The top staff has notes on the treble clef with fingerings 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0. The bottom staff has notes on the bass clef with fingerings 0, 0. Below the staves are two sets of fretboard diagrams. The first diagram shows frets 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12. The second diagram shows frets 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12. The rhythm is indicated as T I M T I M T M.

#4.2b

#4.2c

Musical notation for #4.2b and #4.2c. It consists of two staves. The top staff has notes on the treble clef with fingerings 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0. The bottom staff has notes on the bass clef with fingerings 0, 0, 0, 0. Below the staves are two sets of fretboard diagrams. The first diagram shows frets 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12. The second diagram shows frets 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12. The rhythm is indicated as S 0 0 0 S.

#4.2d

#4.2e

Musical notation for #4.2d and #4.2e. It consists of two staves. The top staff has notes on the treble clef with fingerings 1, 2, 0, 2, 2, 0, 1, 2, 1, 2, 3, 2, 1. The bottom staff has notes on the bass clef with fingerings 0, 0, 0, 0. Below the staves are two sets of fretboard diagrams. The first diagram shows frets 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12. The second diagram shows frets 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12.

**#4.3** **#4.3a** S

M T I M T I M T

**#4.3b**

**#4.3c**

**#4.3d**



## 5. Train 45 Roll

Example #5 is the roll most commonly associated with “Foggy Mountain Breakdown.” It’s also used in “Train 45,” another popular banjo showpiece (see SONGS section). Example #5a features two hammer-ons in the first half of the measure. Example #5b plays the first note, the D on the second string/third fret, straight on, with no hammer-on. Note that the second note of the roll is omitted. Example #5c will take some work, as it has the two hammer-ons and a pull-off. This phrase is used quite a bit, so give it your full and careful attention.

**#5** **#5a** H H

I M T M T I M T

**#5b** H **#5c** H H P

**#5d** H P **#5e** H

## 6. Modified Forward/Backward Roll

I refer to this roll as a modified forward/backward roll. I call #6a “The Lick.” It is used a lot as a punctuation mark at the ends of phrases, or as a fill-in lick to take up musical space. It is comparable to the G-run in bluegrass guitar. I’m sure that after you play it and listen to it you’ll realize that you’ve heard it a great deal in your favorite bluegrass recordings. Example #6c is also a good fill-in figure that can be played repeatedly as you wait for the singer to come in.

Track 35

#6 Modified Forward/Backward roll

#6a

T M T I M I T M

#6b

#6c

#6d

#6e

## New Rolls

Now that you’ve had time to get control of your fingers through careful study and practice of the “Getting Started” and “Review of Rolls” sections, let’s look at some new rolls.

## 7. Reno Roll

Example #7 is a roll featured effectively in the music of Don Reno. In this Reno Roll, #7a, the open first string (the third and sixth note of the roll) is where the left-hand position shift occurs on the fourth and/or eighth note of the roll. In example #7b, the last note of the roll before the position change is played open in order to facilitate a smooth transition. As you play through these examples it should become clear how the roll and the position shifts are operating.

Track 36

#7 Reno Roll

#7a

T I M I T I M I

#7b

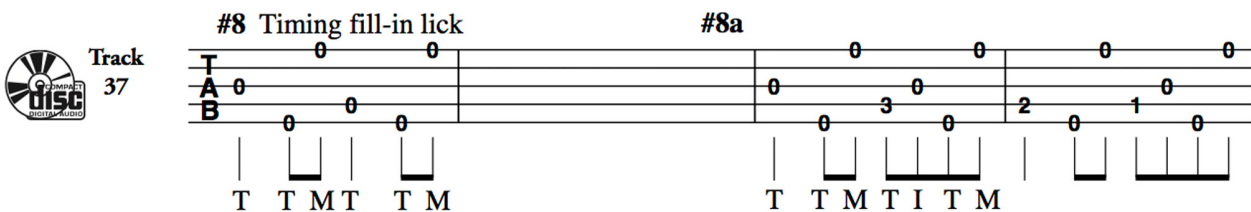
## 8. Timing Fill-in Lick

Example #8 is basically a timing fill-in lick that is often used as the equivalent of a single note and pinch. Played once, it takes a half measure, so it is often played in conjunction with another half-measure roll to make a full measure, as in #8a and #8b. Bluegrass banjo playing is a contemporary expression of American folk instrumental playing and draws on many previous styles. This small T M roll can also be used as a complete style of playing, as in the song “Ground Hog,” included in the SONGS section.

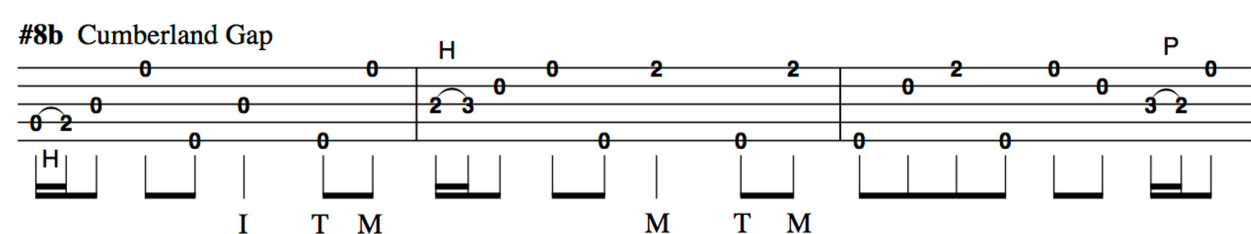
### Examples

**#8 Timing fill-in lick** **#8a**

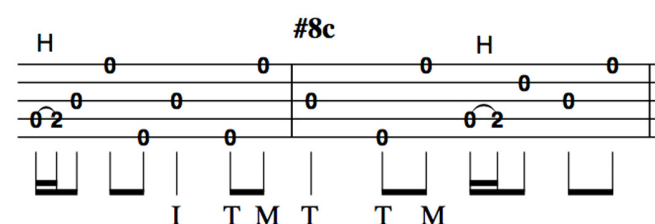
Track 37



**#8b Cumberland Gap**



**#8c**



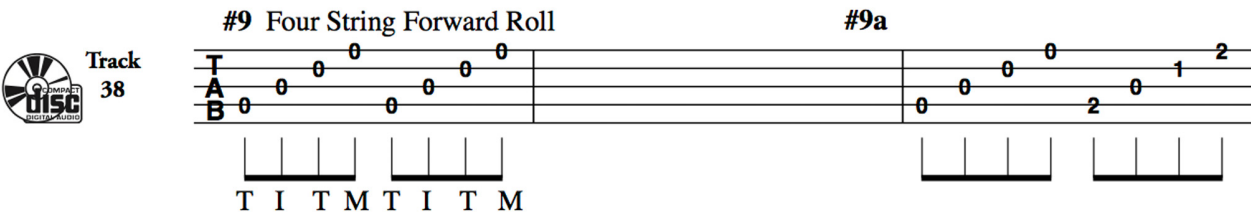
## #9. Four-String Forward Roll

Example #9 is a roll I use to play the fourth to first string. The fingering pattern is an alternating pattern, TITM, with the thumb crossing to the second string on the third and seventh notes of the pattern.

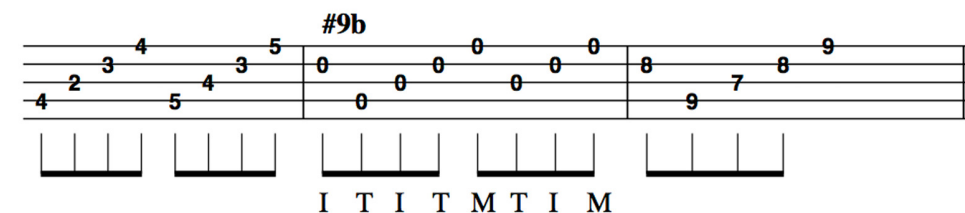
Example #9b is a pattern that results in a sweeping arpeggio across a chord.

**#9 Four String Forward Roll** **#9a**

Track 38



**#9b**



## 10. Four-String Backward Roll



Track  
39

Example #10 is the reverse of Example #9, and again, is an alternating pattern, this time beginning with the middle finger, MTIT.

**#10 Four String Backward Roll** **#10a**

M T I T M T I T

**#10b** **#10c** P

M I T M T I T M T

M I T M T I T I

## Combinations of Rolls

Rolls are often combined to create phrases longer than just one measure or less. Below are some of the more common combinations.

## 11. Four Patterns of TIM and 4-Note Alternating Pattern

Example #11 combines four patterns of TIM, for a total of twelve eighth notes, and then a four-note alternating pattern, TITM, at the end, for a total of sixteen eighth notes to fill the two measures. Example #11a shows how it might be used over a G chord and a C chord as an accompaniment idea. Example #11b demonstrates the roll combination used to play a standard bluegrass melody. To complete the melodic idea, I've added the last two measures with the rolls indicated. Example #11c is often used over a D chord, and then walks up to the G note of the G chord.



Track  
40

### 11. Four Patterns of TIM and 4-Note Alternating Pattern

**Forward** **Alternating** **#11a** **G**

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

**C**



#11b S Forward P Alternating

#11c Forward Alternating

## 12. Train 45 Roll, Alternating Pattern, and Backward Roll

Example #12 is the combination of the Train 45 roll, an alternating pattern, and a backward roll. Examples #12a and #12b are very similar but begin on different strings. Note that in #12b, the second note of the roll, the D note on the first string, is omitted. This is not an uncommon practice. Study the arrangements in the SONGS section for examples of notes left out of a roll.



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41

### #12 Train 45 roll, alternating pattern, and backward roll

### #12a

### #12b



# 13. Alternating Pattern and Forward Roll

Example #13 is the combination of an alternating pattern and a forward roll in one measure. Example #13a is a phrase that leads to the C note of the C chord, or it might lead to the D note, (shown in parentheses). Example #13b is also an alternating pattern combined with a four-note forward roll; it works nicely as an ending phrase.



Track  
42

#13 Alternating pattern and forward roll

#13a

#13b



# (Insert Your Name Here) Breakdown

Here is an exercise for practicing some of the phrases you have learned in the context of a commonly played bluegrass chord progression. Over each measure is the number and letter of the choice of phrase, taken from the examples in this section. You should explore and find others that also fit.

G #3a P #4.1 C H #2c

G #2a S #2b P

S #2b P D #4.1 G #12a

C #6b G

#4.1d S #3b P P D #13b

G #6a