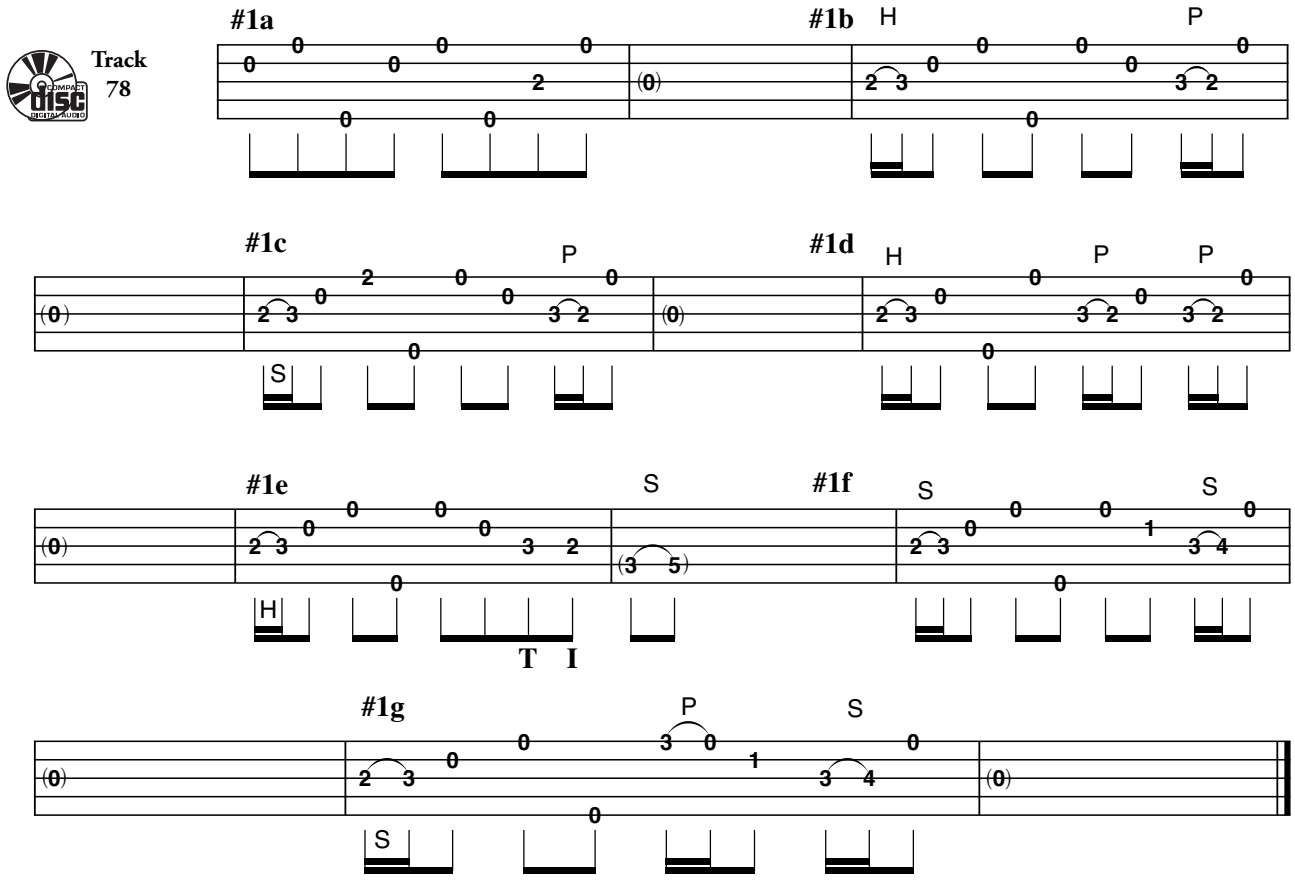
Musical Synonyms

Rather than think of the tune as a whole, I have divided the melody into eleven different musical phrases and numbered them accordingly above the measure. Below are corresponding phrases arranged in commonly performed bluegrass banjo style. Example #1a is one way that a bluegrass banjo player might express the melody of the first phrase. Other ways are given in Examples #1b through #1g. These variations may be thought of as musical and stylistic synonyms for the melodic meaning of the first phrase. Many of these banjo ideas have been covered in earlier sections. If the ideas are new, learn them now.

The choices presented may be viewed and learned as "licks," or rehearsed phrases, and performed as modules or motifs. It is helpful to think of them as how banjo players express melodies. The choices can and should be learned and rehearsed so that they come to your fingers as easily as words to your mouth. We do not write down and rehearse every conversation we have during a day, but draw upon a lifetime of language practice. The same can be true for music-making, but it takes a lot of practice and rehearsal to perform them so the music flows "trippingly" from the fingers.

The choices here become a part of the language of bluegrass banjo playing. There are many other words to learn but this is the beginning. Listen to other players for the synonyms, or "licks," if you like, that they use that are different. Try to get a sense of melody out of everything you hear and learn. What melody does this lick express? My mentor, Eddie Shelton, could sing the main focus of everything he played. Learn these lick-melodies and add them to your lexicon.

Each one-measure phrase below has a number of choices and always the "a" choice is straightforward and uses no slides, hammer-ons, or pull-offs. Also notice that the last note of each choice, indicated in parentheses, is the first note of the next melody phrase. As you play each choice, play the note in parentheses and it will help give you a sense of completion of the phrase.



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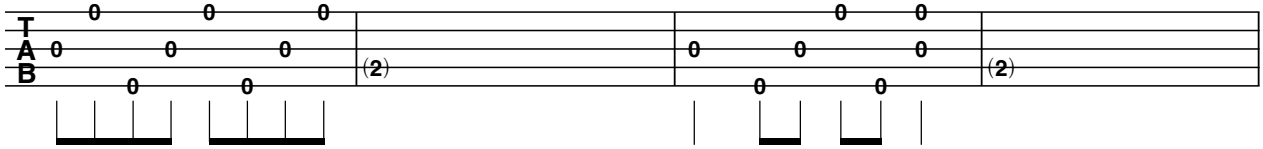
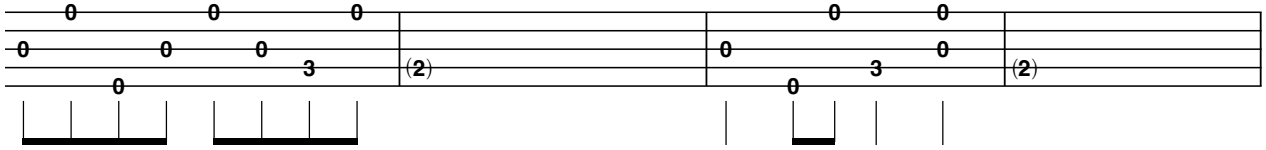
Track 79

#2a



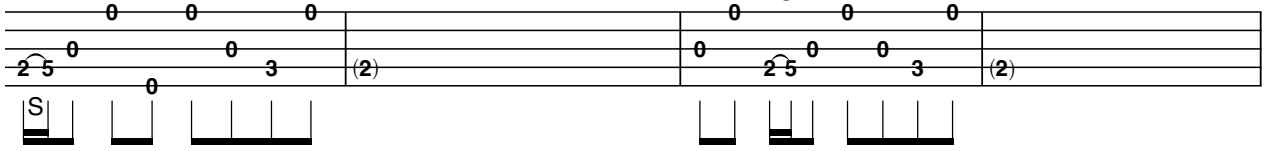
#2b

#2c



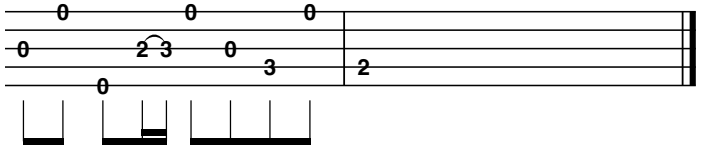
#2d

#2e



#2f

#2g



Track 80

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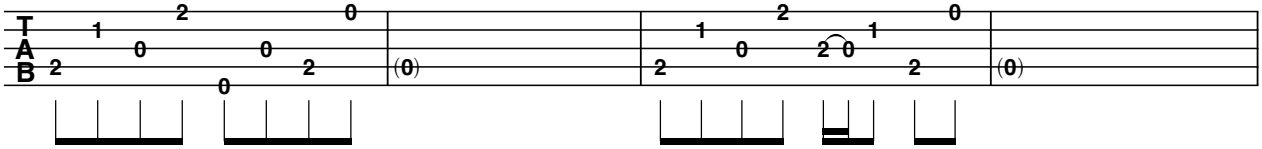

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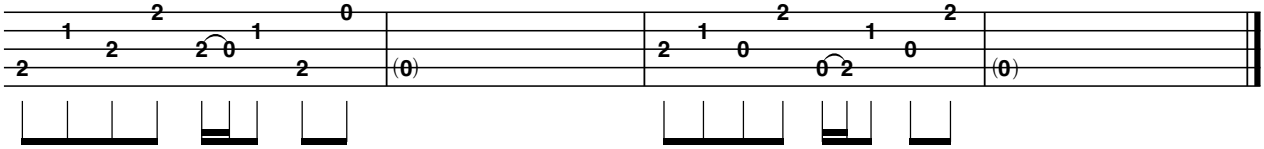

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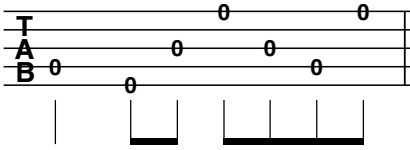
Track 81

#4a



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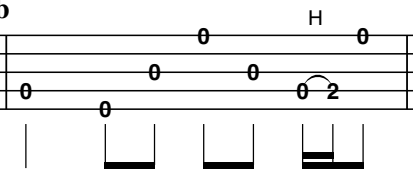

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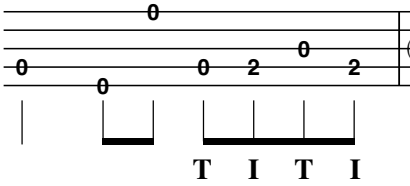

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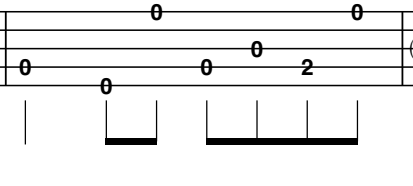
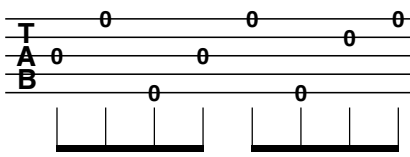


Track 82

#5a



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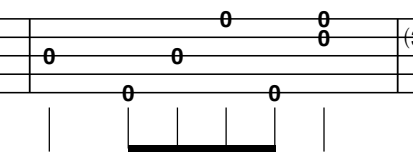

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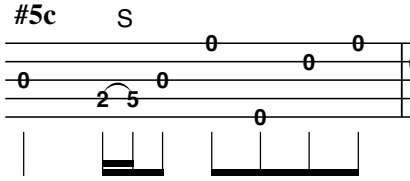

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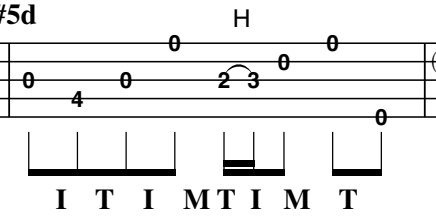
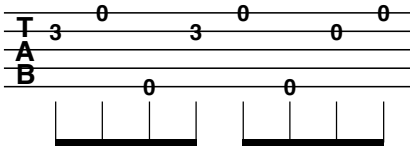


Track 83

#6a



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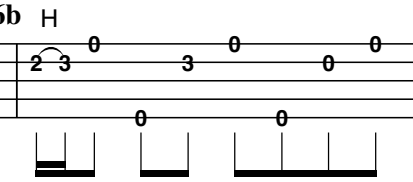

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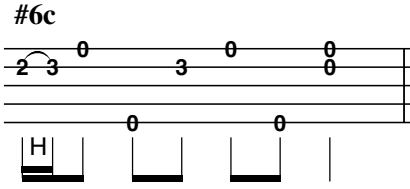

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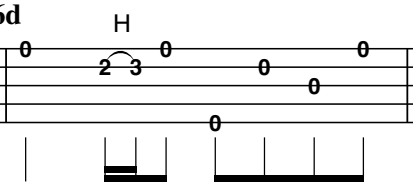

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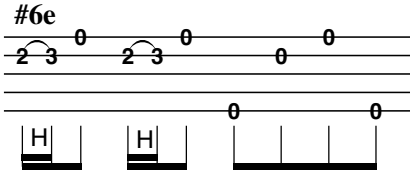

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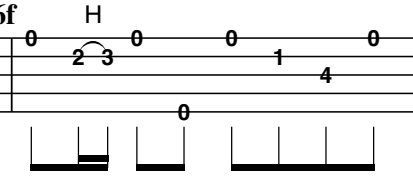

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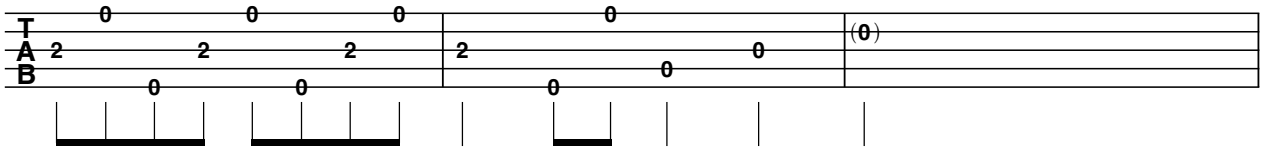
Note that the melody in Phrase #7 is two measures long and, vocally, is a held note. Bluegrass banjo players seem to use these two measures to feature an ear-catching roll, or the second measure to play pick-up notes leading back to the next melody phrase. A hint about bluegrass songs: when a song features the 5 chord (in this case D) in the middle of the chord pattern, the melody note is usually the second tone of the scale (in this case A). It happens a lot and should be noted. The Phrase #7 choices are important, as you will use them in many songs.

#7a



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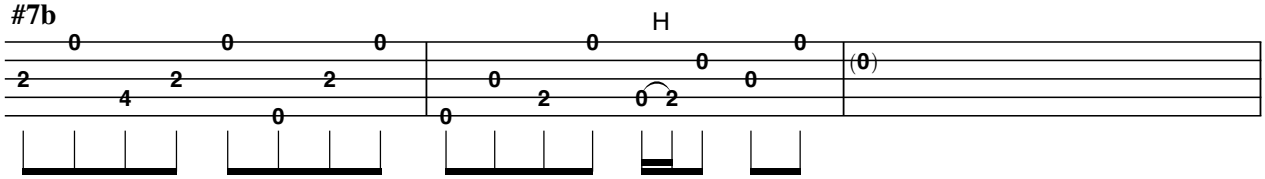

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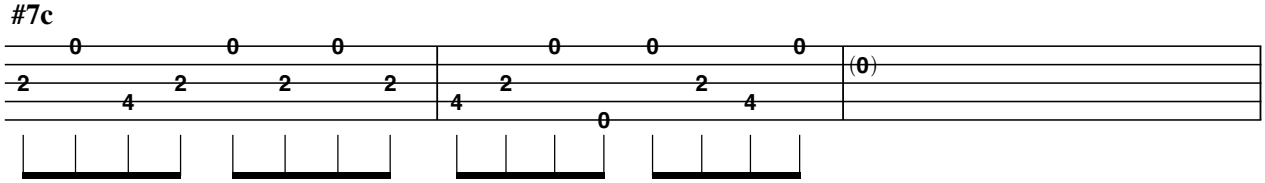

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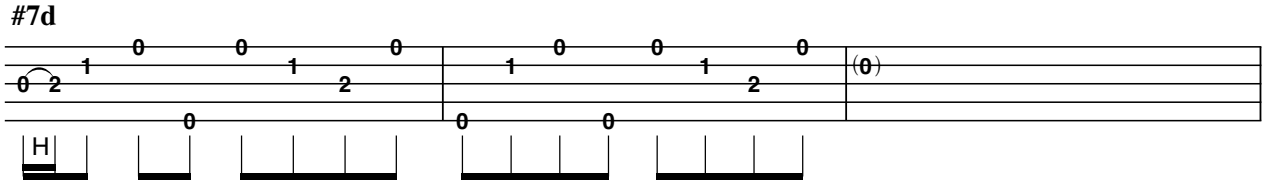

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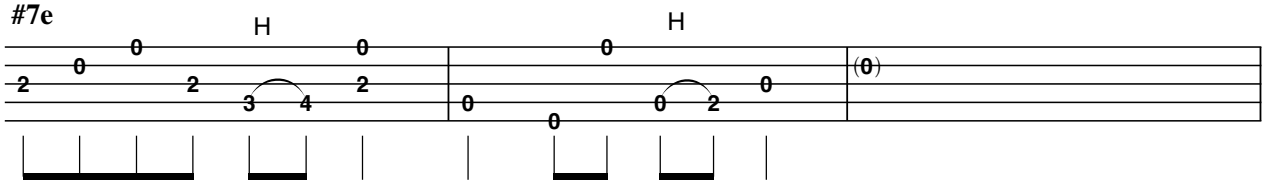

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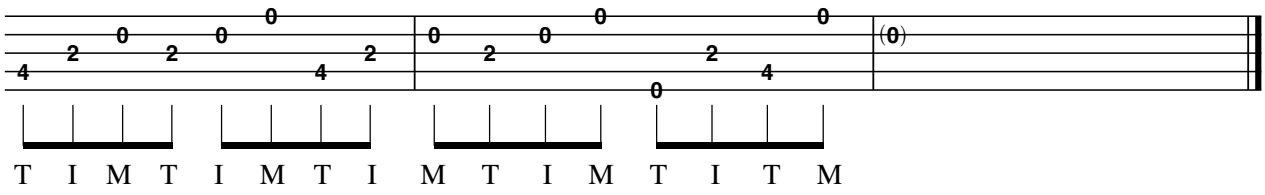

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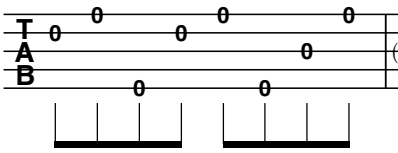
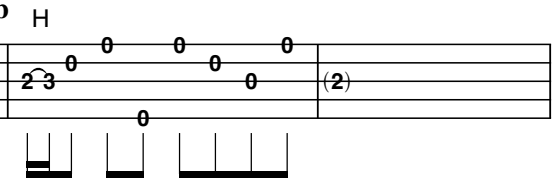
Track 85

#8a



#8b



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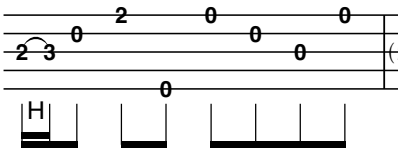

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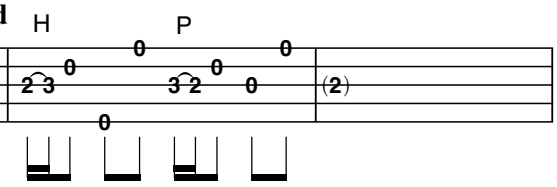

Track 86

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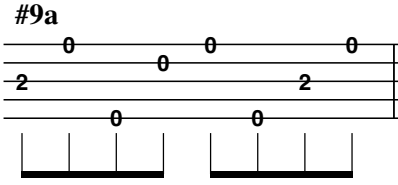

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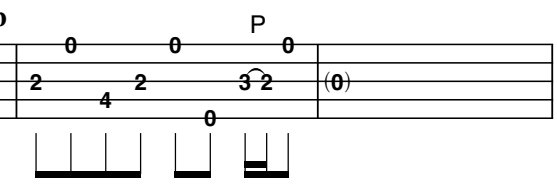

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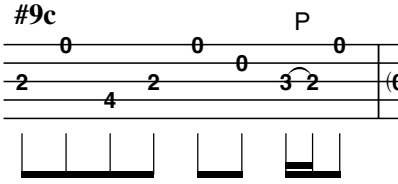

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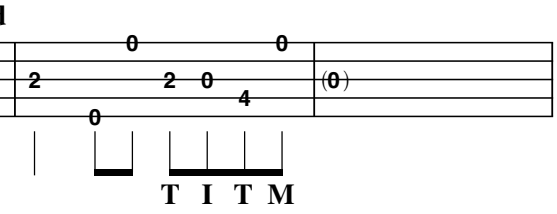

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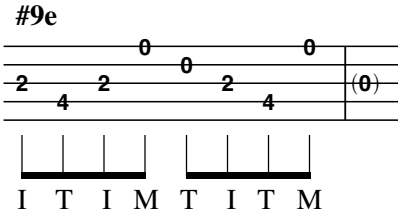

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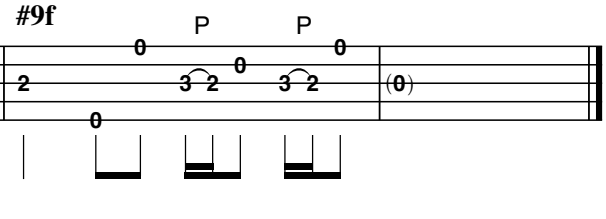

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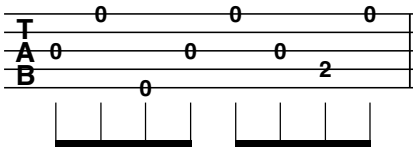
Phrase #10 is the last note of the melody, usually the tonic note, or G in our example. This is the spot where banjo players traditionally use the phrase I call "The Lick." The choices offer several variations. Phrase #11 is a measure of fill-in that can be used for pick-up notes leading back to the top. Here are several ways players fill this measure if not going back to the beginning.

Track 87

#10a



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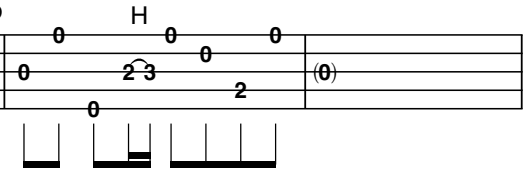

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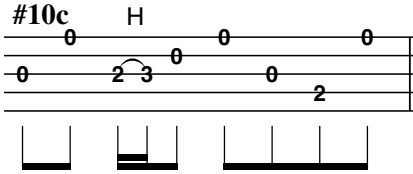

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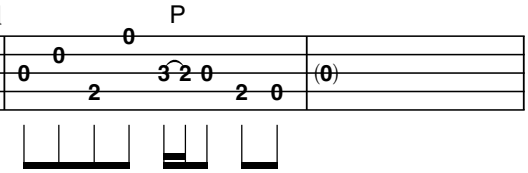
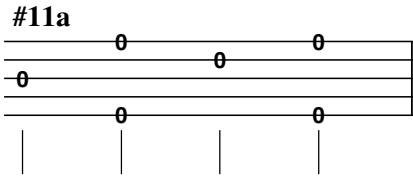


Track 88

#11a



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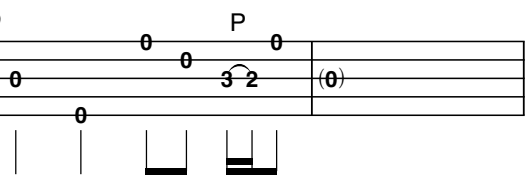

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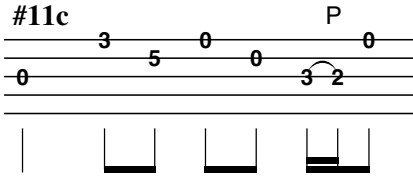

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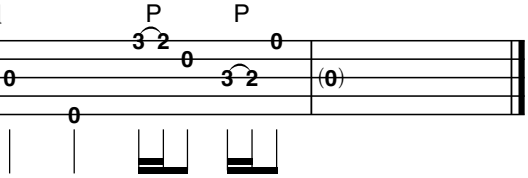

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