

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.”



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#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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#2 Alternating, Roll

T
A
B

T I T M T I T M

#2a

S S

#2b

P

S

#2c

H

#2d

H

#2e

H

p

#2f

H P

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.



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#3 Forward/Backward Roll

#3a

T I M T M I T M

#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.



Track
33

#4.1 Forward Roll

#4.1a

TM TIM TIM

#4.1b

#4.1c

#4.1d

#4.1e

#4.2

#4.2a

T I M T I M T M

#4.2b

#4.2c

#4.2d

#4.2e

#4.3 **#4.3a** S

M T I M T I M T

#4.3b

#4.3c

#4.3d



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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 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0

A 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0

B 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0

T M T I M I T M

#6b

1 2 1 2 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0

0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0

#6c

0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0

0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0

#6d

1 2 1 2 1 2 | 1 0 2 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0

0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0

#6e

0 5 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0


0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0

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

A 0 0 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 2 1 0 2 | 3 2 0 3 4 3 3

B 0 0 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

T I M I T I M I

#7b

12 12 12 12 0 | 9 8 0 7 8 9 0 | 5 5 5 5 5 5 0 | 2 1 0 0 0 0 0

12 10 12 12 0 | 9 8 0 7 8 9 0 | 5 5 5 5 5 5 0 | 2 1 0 0 0 0 0

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 TM 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

T A B

T T M T T M

T T M T I T M

#8b Cumberland Gap

H

I T M M T M

#8c

H

I T M T T M

#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

T A B D

T I T M T I T M

#9b

I T I T M T I M

#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.



Track
41

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

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

#12a

P

#12b

P

P