

MEL BAY'S GETTING TO.....

BLUEGRASS BANJO

**b
y** ALAN MUNDE



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Getting Into Bluegrass Banjo

By Alan Munde

Contents

SECTION 1: Getting Started	Page	CD Track
Introduction	4	
Hints and Suggestions	4	
A Few Hints on Practice.....	6	
Parts of the Banjo	7	
Reading Banjo Tablature	10	
Tuning the Five-String Banjo	12	1
Left and Right Hand	13	
Chords	15	2
First Picking Pattern: Single Note With Pinch	16	3
“Good Night Ladies”	17	4
“Boil Them Cabbage Down”	17	5
Slide With Pinch: “Boil Them Cabbage Down”	18	6
Hammer-on: “Boil Them Cabbage Down”	19	7
Four-Note Roll with Single Note and Pinch	20	
with G C D7	21	8,9,10
“Boil Them Cabbage Down”	22	11
“Good Night Ladies”	22	12
“Cumberland Gap”	23	13
Alternating Roll	23	14
New “C” Position	24	15
“Boil Them Cabbage Down”	25	16
“Good Night Ladies”	25	17
“Cripple Creek”	26	18
Forward Roll	27	19
“Boil Them Cabbage Down”	28	20
“Good Night Ladies”	28	21
“Boil Them Cabbage Down” (Mixed Rolls).....	29	22
Forward Backward Roll	29	23
“Cripple Creek”	30	24
The Pull-off	31	25,26
Train 45 Roll	33	27
Modified Forward Backward Roll, F chord	33	28
“Levelland Mountain Breakdown”	34	29
Guidelines for Determining Right-Hand Fingering	35	
 SECTION 2: Review of Rolls, New Rolls and Combinations of Rolls with Examples		
Four-Note Roll with Single Note and Pinch	38	30
Alternating Roll	39	31
Forward/Backward Roll	40	32
Variations of the Forward Roll	41	33
Train 45 Roll	42	34
Modified Forward Backward Roll	43	35

New Rolls

Reno Roll.....	43	36
Timing Fill-in Lick	44	37
Four-string Forward Roll.....	44	38
Four-string Backward Roll	45	39
Combinations of Rolls.....	45	40,41,42
“(Insert Your Name Here)” Breakdown	48	43

SECTION 3: Roll Logic

Rolls for Melody on the First String	50	44,45
Rolls for Melody on the Second String.....	53	46,47
Rolls for Melody on the Third String	55	48-52
Rolls for Melody on the Fourth String	57	53-57
“Bury Me Beneath the Willow”-Variations.....	60	58-61

SECTION 4: Tools and Techniques

COMMONLY USED INTERVALS

Thirds on the First and Second Strings	65	62
Sixths on the First and Third Strings	66	63
Thirds on the Second and Third Strings	67	64
Sixths on the Second and Fourth Strings.....	68	65
Thirds on the Third and Fourth Strings.....	69	66
Using Thirds and Sixths in “Grandfather’s Clock”.....	71	67-72
Scales and Arpeggios.....	74	73-76

SECTION 5: Creating Solos to Songs

Jesse James Melody.....	77	77
Phrases #1-#11	78	78-88
Jesse James all “A” Choices	84	89
Jesse James using mixed Choices	85	90

SECTION 6: Songs

“Ground Hog”	86	91
“Wildwood Flower #1”	87	92
“Wildwood Flower #2”	88	93
“Lost All My Money”	89	94
“Nine Pound Hammer”	90	95
“Worried Man Blues”	91	96
“Train 45”	92	97
“Old Country Church”.....	93	98
“Kneel at the Cross”	94	99

Acknowledgements	96	
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SECTION 1: Getting Started

Introduction

This course is designed for anyone interested in a well-founded, straightforward introduction to the essentials of bluegrass-style banjo. Whether you have never played a stringed instrument, are learning the banjo as a second instrument, or have struggled with other methods, this course will be of great help. It covers just that information needed to get the basic movements of the style together.

The ideas and approaches I offer in this text were developed from my many years of teaching bluegrass at South Plains College in Levelland, Texas, and my even greater number of years as a professional touring and recording artist. This text has been used by other instructors and their students with good results.

A well-rounded musician needs many other techniques and bits of musical knowledge that are not covered in this text. Please consult with private instructors and other instruction material, watch and listen to all the music you can, and talk to players about the many aspects of playing music. You will need every scrap of information you can get to be the best player you can possibly be.

I hope you enjoy your time learning, and then performing, in the bluegrass banjo style.

Hints and Suggestions

Before you begin, let me offer some ideas on music and practice. In my approach to music instruction, there are four basic areas of study. Although they are presented separately, they are interdependent and interactive.

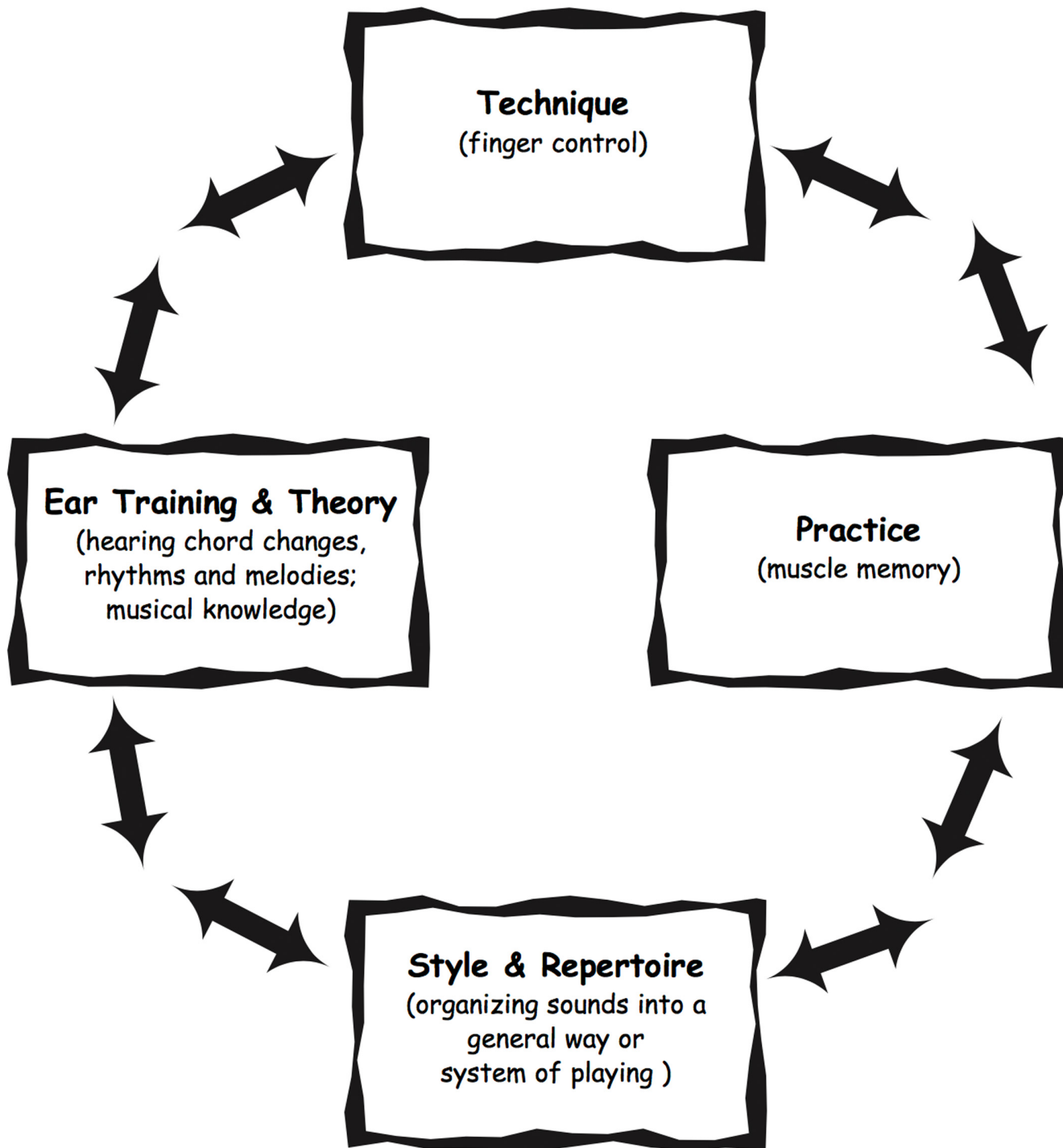
1. Ear Training and Music Theory. Just as you are trained from youth to use language, you will need to develop your ear to hear music and recognize its patterns, rhythms, and tonal textures. In bluegrass banjo you will want to begin listening for melodies, rhythms, chord changes, roll patterns, fingering techniques and song forms. Music theory may sound scary, but it is the result of hundreds of years of very smart people listening to and making observations about music. Some of their observations are connected to physics, others to culture and taste. In this presentation I cover very little music theory, so again, you may need to search out the information and ask many questions. In bluegrass, the theory is very straightforward and understandable. As you learn more about the normal occurrences in music as expressed in music theory, the more you can hear and apply those concepts to your playing and add interesting and beautiful ideas to your arrangements.

2. Technique. This area is about how to hold your hands and fingers, and how to move them gracefully and efficiently through the motions needed to play. Consult with local players and/or instructors for developing the details of your hand position.

3. Practice. After you feel you have the proper technique, you will need to repeat the motions many times to cement them into your mind and muscles. It takes many repetitions of these micro-muscular movements to play properly and to ingrain them so that they become gestures. Practice each new roll, left-hand technique, or new tune enough that when you pick up your banjo, those new things are in your fingers as readily as words are in your mouth.

4. Style. This is where you put Ear Training, Technique, and Practice together into a way of playing the bluegrass banjo. In this area you should learn the traditional literature of the music and standards such as “Roll In My Sweet Baby’s Arms,” “Foggy Mountain Breakdown,” “Old Joe Clark,” and hundreds of other tunes that are part of bluegrass music. In addition, you should work toward creating new arrangements in the style. The ability to do this comes from a great deal of listening, a deep understanding of the music, and an understanding of its roots and boundaries.

Remember that study in one area will generate new study in one or all of the other areas.

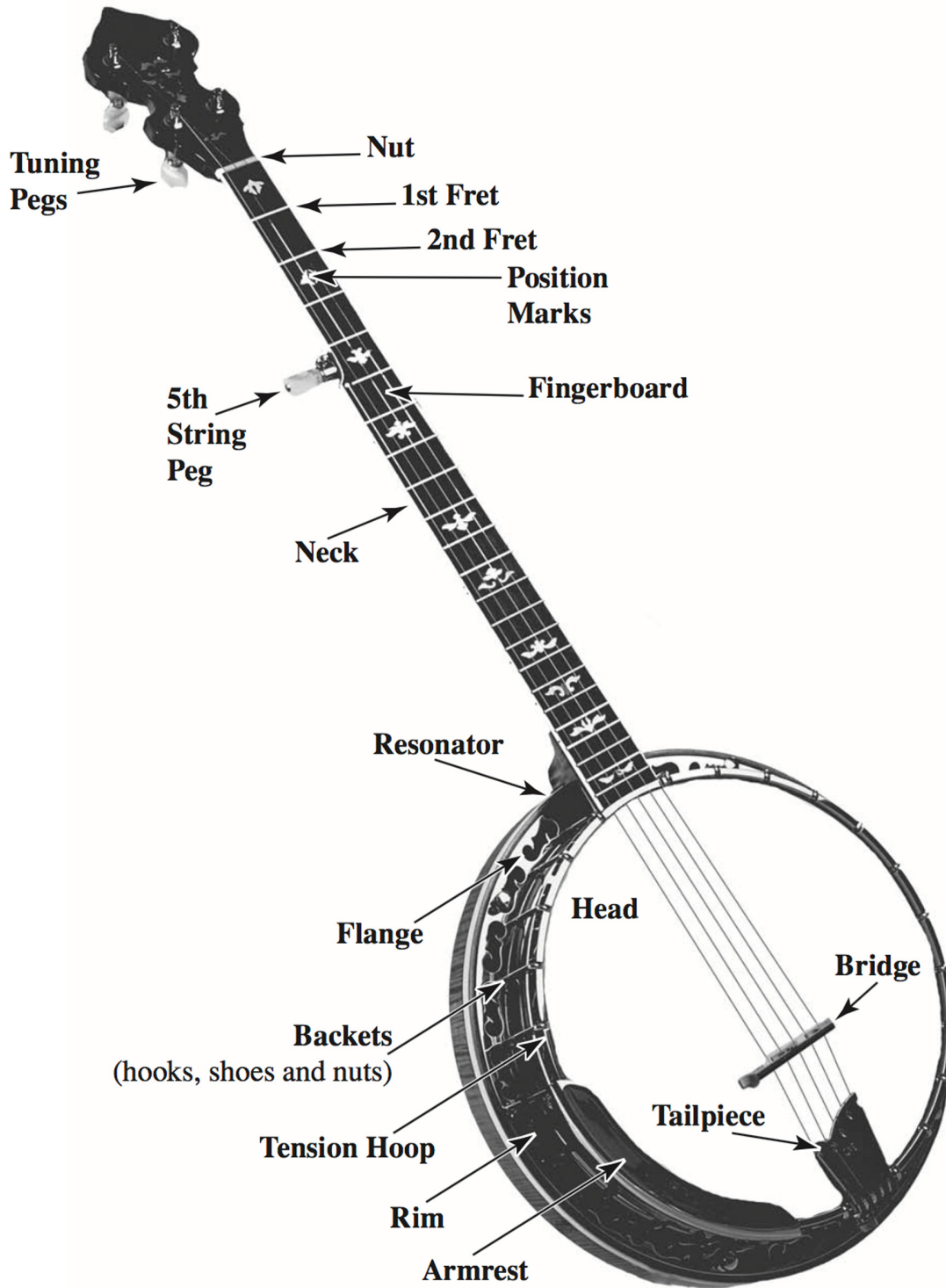


A Few Hints on Practice

There is no one best practice regimen. You will need to discover what works best for you. I can suggest some things that may be helpful:

- Compare your playing with that of bluegrass banjo players on recordings.
- Play along with recorded playing if possible. Even if you can keep up for only a few measures, do it.
- Dampen the strings with your left-hand, and play familiar rolls in time with recorded music to get the picking hand into the rhythmical feel and flow of the music.
- Play for other players and ask for advice.
- Record or videotape yourself and watch or listen.
- Watch admired players and try to imitate the grace, efficiency, and smoothness of their hands as they play.
- Watch your hands in a mirror as you play and try to imitate admired players.
- Seek advice and critiques of your playing.
- Play along with a metronome, drum machine, or other rhythm-keeping device.
- Check the tablature to ensure that you are performing the exercise or piece accurately.
- Be successful with very small bites of material and then build on those small successes.

The Banjo and its Parts



Parts of the Banjo

It is helpful to be familiar with the parts of the modern bluegrass-style banjo and to have some idea of their function.

The **NECK** is the whole of the slim portion of the banjo that the strings run along, including the headstock, fingerboard, and heel.

The **HEADSTOCK** is the area of the neck where the strings are attached. Notice that it is angled back so as to apply tension on the strings as they press down over the nut. It is also the area displaying the banjo maker's name.

The **TUNING PEGS** are the mechanical devices the strings attach to, that allow the tension of the strings to be changed for tuning the instrument. Notice that the fifth-string peg is located at the fifth fret on the top side of the neck.

The **NUT** is the small notched piece that separates the headstock from the fingerboard and stops the vibration of the unfretted strings.

The **FINGERBOARD** is the part of the banjo on which the fingers press the strings in order to shorten or lengthen them.

The **FRETS** are the metal bands running across and dividing the banjo neck into steps (two frets) and half-steps (one fret). The spaces between the fret wires are also referred to as frets.

For example, the space between the nut and the first metal wire is the first fret; the space between the first metal wire and the second metal wire is the second fret, and so on. They will be used to identify where to place your fingers. For example, "place your first finger on the first fret of the second string." When you place your finger, do not press on top of the fret wire but just behind it. You are actually pressing the string down onto the metal wire, which causes the string to stop vibrating at the point where it contacts the fret wire.

The **BRIDGE** is the part of the banjo that transfers the vibration of the strings to the head. It is at the opposite end of the string from the nut, and stops the vibration of the string. The string, when played open, vibrates between the nut and the bridge. Notice that the strings

arch over the bridge and that there is some tension which holds the bridge in place. The bridge can move as the tension is decreased, as when you are changing the strings. Its placement is important for the proper intonation of the instrument.

The **TAILPIECE** is the part of the banjo that the strings attach to, at the opposite end from the headstock.

The **ARMREST** is for the comfort of your arm as it lies on the banjo in the normal playing position.

The **HEAD** is the large vibrating membrane that transfers the vibrations to the rest of the banjo and to the air inside and outside the instrument. Its tension can be adjusted and affects the overall sound of the instrument. The head is replaceable and comes in several varieties and sizes.

The **TENSION HOOP** is the metal hoop that presses down on the head. It exerts firm, uniform pressure on the head and holds it in place at tension.

The **BRACKETS** are the metal pieces with curved ends that hook into the slots in the tension hoop and pass through the flange. They are tightened with nuts on the opposite side of the flange and are adjusted to tighten or loosen the head tension.

The **FLANGE** is the metal plate that fits around the perimeter of the banjo and holds the brackets as they leverage pressure against the tension hoop.

The **RESONATOR** is the wooden back of the banjo and forms the resonating cavity. It colors and projects the sound of the banjo.

The **RIM** is the round wooden frame that the parts rest against or are attached to.

The **TONE RING** is the metal ring that fits on top of the rim underneath the head. It is the heaviest part of the bluegrass-style banjo, and possibly the most important element in the banjo sound.

The **COORDINATING RODS** are the metal rods inside the banjo. Most banjos have two coordinating rods. They have a two-fold function. First, they are

threaded on the inside and attach to the lug bolts in the heel of the neck that pass through the rim. They tighten to hold the neck firmly to the rim. Second, they are used in a crude fashion to adjust the string action (the height of the strings above the neck, usually expressed as the distance from the strings to the top of the twelfth fret). This is an adjustment that should be made by person experienced in set-up.

The **TENSION ROD** is a threaded rod located under the fingerboard. It protrudes into the headstock and has a fitting that can be turned with a socket driver for adjustment. It controls the necessary bow in the neck

and should be adjusted by person experienced in set-up. The adjustable end is usually covered by a tension rod cover.

The **SET-UP** is the combination of proper fits, adjustments and parts that make up the sound of the banjo. Much importance is given by master players to set-up. Set-up is like fine tuning a machine and requires some years of experience and practice. Find a banjo-playing friend or a repair person you feel confident with to help you through the many interrelated adjustments that can affect the sound of your banjo. In time you will have a pretty good understanding of the process.

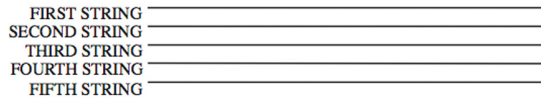
Speed

A common way to increase speed is to find a comfortable metronome setting. Practice at that speed until you are able to play correctly and completely. Then move the metronome setting up a few beats per minute and try again. As you are successful at each new setting, keep moving up until you run into difficulties. Keep challenging yourself until you reach a tempo that is close to or beyond a performance tempo.

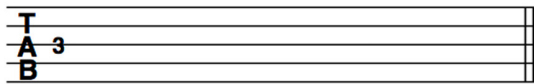
Here is another approach. Take a short complete phrase that you have rehearsed and are comfortable with. Relax and play it as fast as you can without regard to a metronome setting – throw yourself into it without worrying about mistakes. This will give your fingers experience with moving quickly. Make playing faster a part of each practice session no matter where you are in the course.

Reading Banjo Tablature

- Each staff line represents one string of the banjo. (The first string is closest to the floor when you are playing the banjo.)



- Numbers indicating the fret to be fingered by the left-hand will appear on the line. For example:

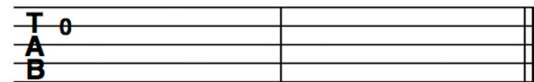


This indicates that you should finger the third string at the third fret.

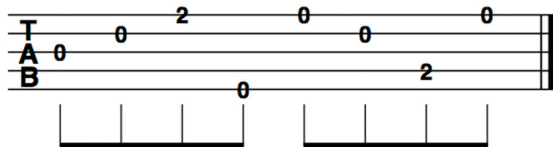
A zero represents an open string. Here it shows an open second string:



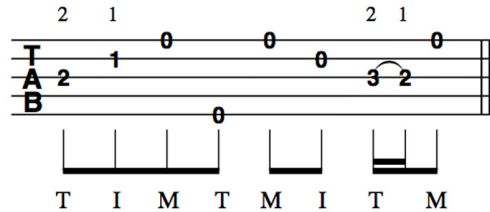
- The staff will be divided into measures by *bar* lines:



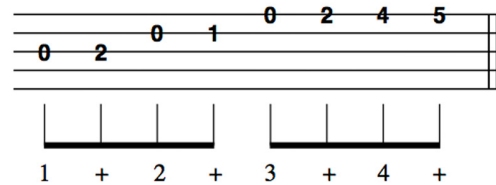
In most cases, a measure will contain the equivalent of eight eighth notes. Here are two groups of four eighth notes.



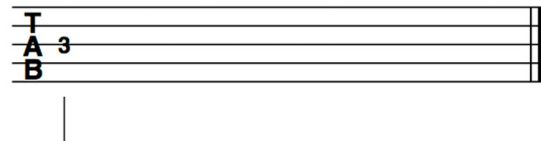
- Numbers above the staff indicate left-hand fingering; letters below the staff indicate right-hand fingering.



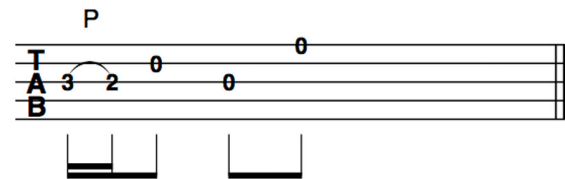
- Eighth notes get one-half a beat each.



- You will also see quarter notes, which are indicated by a single descending stem. These last *twice* as long as eighth notes, or 1 beat.

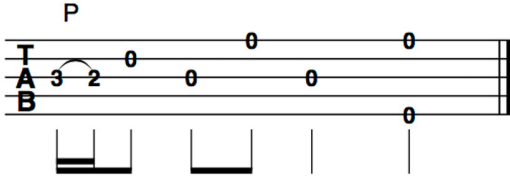


In addition, there are sixteenth notes which are played twice as fast as eighth notes and are indicated by a double beam.

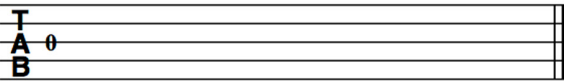


Use a pull-off for these quick notes if the numbers are going lower, and a hammer-on or slide if the numbers are going higher.

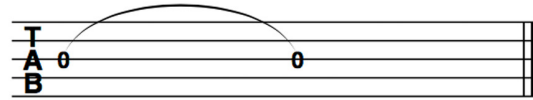
Here is an example of a measure that includes sixteenth, eighth and quarter notes:



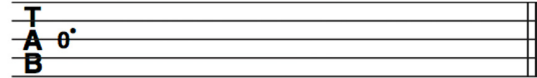
A half note, or two beats, is indicated by a number without a stem.



A whole note, or four beats, is indicated by two numbers with a tie.



Three beats are indicated by a dotted half note.



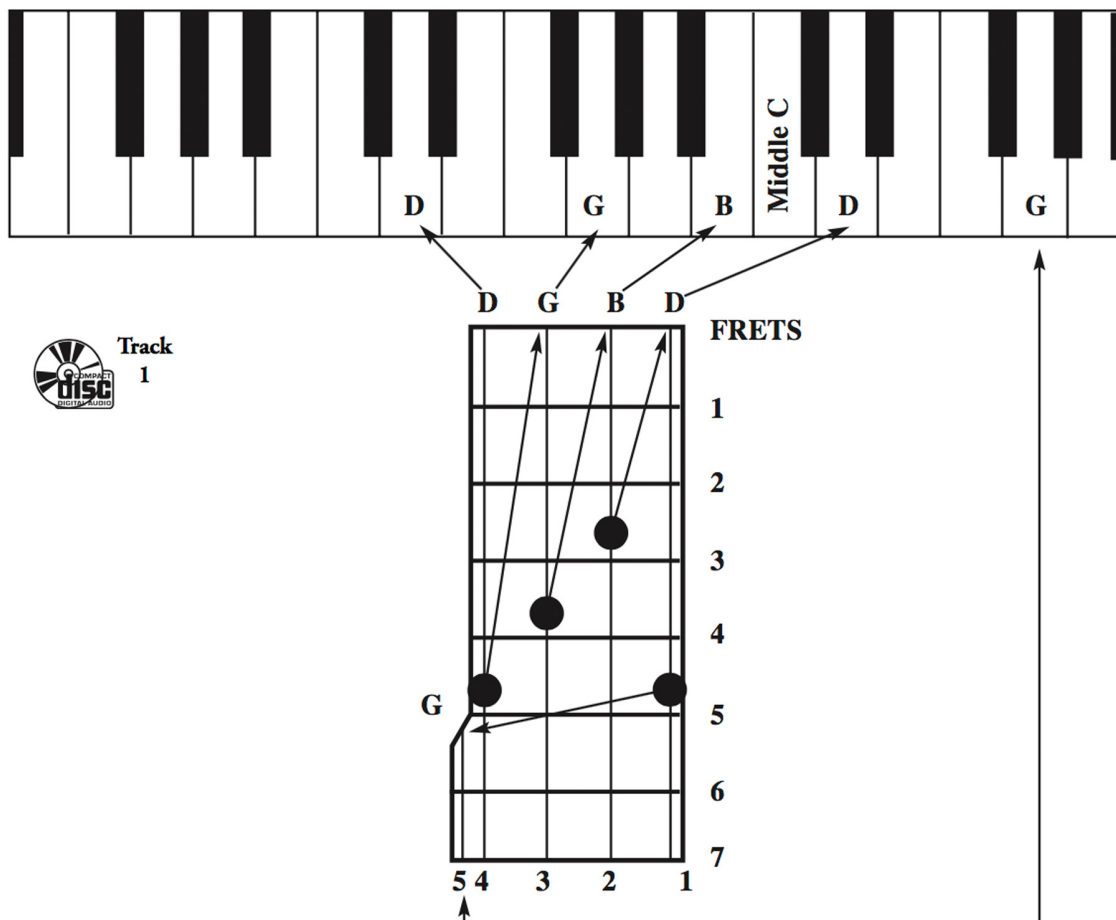
The Capo

Many players use a piece of equipment called a capo (pronounced “kay-po”). It allows us to play in keys other than G and still use all the licks and positions we have learned. The capo is a clamp device that fits around the neck and holds down the first, second, third, and fourth strings to create a sort of moveable nut. The fifth string will also have to be capoed at the same number of frets as the regular capo – i.e. if the capo is placed at the second fret, the fifth string will need to be capoed at the seventh. Thus you have a banjo capo and a fifth string capo (some people use a number of small miniature railroad spikes under the fifth string. The string is slipped under the spike and it frets the string). With this in place, we can play just as if we were in the key of G, but it will sound in the new key without any changes in the playing.

Capo placement	The key you think you are playing in	The key that is sounded
2nd fret	G	A
3rd fret	G	B \flat
4th fret	G	B
5th fret	G	C

Tuning the Five-String Banjo

If you have access to a piano you may tune your banjo as shown below.



If you don't have a piano, here are instructions for the "relative" G tuning of your banjo. Commercially available electronic tuners can also help.

1. Tune the 4th string to D, or anywhere near it. This can be tricky at first, but gets easier as your ear becomes trained.
2. Sound the 4th string with a finger fretting the 5th fret. Tune the 3rd string open to that pitch.
3. Sound the 3rd string with a finger fretting the 4th fret. Tune the 2nd string open to that pitch.
4. Sound the 2nd string with a finger fretting the 3rd fret. Tune the 1st string open to that pitch.
5. Sound the 1st string with a finger fretting the 5th fret. Tune the 5th string open to that pitch.

Left Hand and Right Hand

Left Hand

When you strum a banjo without depressing any of the strings, they vibrate their full length from the nut to the bridge. To change the pitches of the strings, we will actually change the length of the string by pressing the string with the tips of the fingers of the left-hand to the fingerboard at a given fret. This causes the string to rest against a fret wire and vibrate only between the fret that the string is against, and the bridge.

Left-Hand Position

The goal for the left-hand is to be able to move the fingers gracefully, accurately, and quickly to change the lengths of the strings. Each player develops a comfortable posture to hold the banjo neck and also to be in good position to fret the strings in an efficient manner. Cradle the banjo neck between the thumb and forefinger, and position your fingers as shown below. A technique you will need to develop is to keep the fingers arched over the fingerboard in a ready-to-play position so that as the fingertips depress the string(s) intended, they do not touch an adjacent string. This is critical and will come with practice. Be careful to keep up on the ends of the fingers when fretting the strings. As you progress in your playing you will need to develop the technique of fretting with the side of your finger, as when using one finger to fret several strings (called a barre) at once, or when stretching between notes that are several frets apart.



This view shows how the left-hand looks on the fingerboard while playing a C chord.



This view shows how the hand grips the back of the neck for the same chord.



This view shows how the left-hand looks on the fingerboard while playing a D7 chord.



This view shows how the hand grips the back of the neck for the same chord.

Right Hand

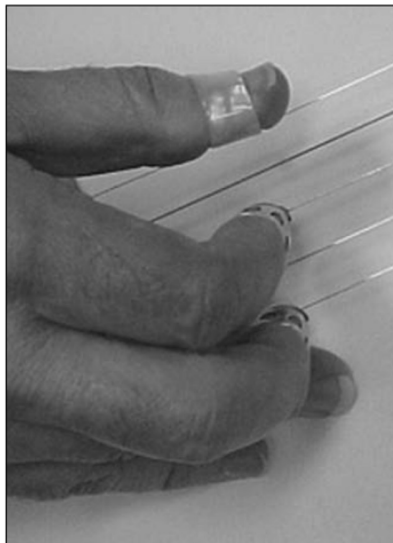
Everybody's hand is shaped a little differently and works a little differently. There is an interrelation of the micro-elements of hand position. In the most common hand position, the ring and the little finger of the right-hand rest on the head just below the strings, and near the bridge. There are many fine elements to be concerned with in hand position. The goal is to get the thumb, index finger and middle finger in a comfortable playing position so the tips of the picks are striking the strings in a clean and efficient manner. Much attention should be given to hand position. Watch other players to get an idea of the many variables, and experiment until you find a comfortable position.

Picks

Bluegrass banjo is played by picking the strings with the thumb, index finger and middle finger of the right-hand. Picks are worn on each of those fingers. There are many different styles of both finger picks and thumb picks. The picks you choose will have some degree of effect on tone and comfort, so experiment until you settle on the set that suits you. Watch and talk to other players to get an idea of the variety of choices. My experience is that most players use metal finger picks and a plastic thumb pick. I suggest that you start with that.



This view shows two fingers resting on the head, just in front of the bridge.



Keep your fingers in line and they will strike each string at the same point.



The goal is to get the thumb, index finger and middle finger in a comfortable playing position so the tips of the picks are striking the strings in a clean and efficient manner.

Chords

A chord is three notes that sound in harmony. Chords provide the background or harmony for melodies and are an important concept to grasp and perform.

Let's first look at the three important chords in the key of G. They are shown below in a chord diagram form. The G chord is the easiest because the form we are using here is sounded by just playing all the strings open. The C chord requires pressing the fingers down in very specific places. Study the chord diagram to insure correct fingering. The same is true for the D7 chord. Note that when you strum across all the strings while holding the D7 chord, the fifth string doesn't sound exactly right. In fact the fifth string, sounding a G, does not fit into a D7 chord, but it is a sound that appears a lot in banjo playing. It is one of the unique things that the five-string banjo has to offer. Get used to it and learn to enjoy it.

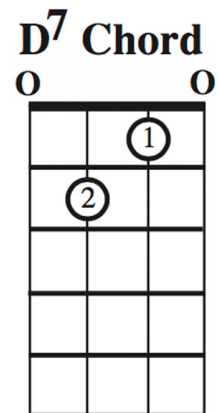
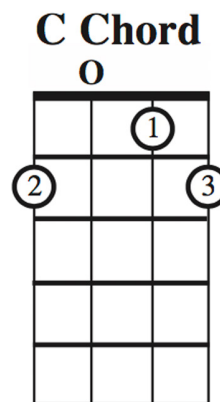
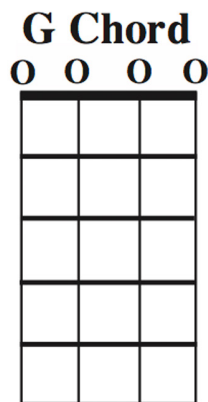


Track
2

Left-Hand Fingering:

- 1 - first finger
- 2 - second finger
- 3 - third finger

O = open string




Finger each chord using the fingers shown. Strum across all the strings in each chord and make sure that each note of each chord sounds clearly. The problem you may encounter is that a fretting finger may touch an adjacent string, causing a muted sound. Make slight adjustments with your fingers until you find the best way to place your fingers for the clearest sound. Also, the metal of the strings pressing against the soft flesh of the fingertips causes some pain and discomfort in the beginning. Over time, the fingertips will develop callouses and the pain will go away.

Now we are going to combine fingering the three chords we have learned for the left hand with a picking pattern with our right hand. Much of bluegrass banjo playing is being able to control the fingers of the right hand to hit the strings you want.

First Picking Pattern

The first picking pattern we are going to learn is the single-note-with-pinch pattern. The single note will be picked by the index finger on the second or third or fourth string, as indicated. This is followed by a pinch, which is the thumb sounding the fifth string simultaneously with the middle finger sounding the first string. The rhythm on the single-note pinch pattern is shown above the tablature. It is played evenly, i.e., the distance between each unit of the pattern is equal. Start slowly and work for accuracy and speed. Using a metronome is helpful.

Track 3 

Count Evenly

	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
T	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
A	0		0		0		0	
B	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	I	M	I	M	I	M	I	M
		T		T		T		T

Our next exercise adds the C and D7 chord. As you play through the exercise you may find that you slow down or stop as you reposition the left-hand fingers. This is necessary at first as your fingers learn to dance through the steps required for the changes. At some point you will need to begin to be aggressive about getting your fingers down quickly and accurately. After you have rehearsed and feel you know the fingerings, you may need to throw your fingers at chords and accept the mistakes as you keep the rhythm regular until your fingers have made the micro-muscular adjustments necessary to perform the changes.

Single Note With Pinch

T	0	0	0	1	2	2	0	1	0	0	0	0
A	0			0			2				0	
B	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4				
	I	M	I	M	I	M	I	M				
		T		T		T		T				

Good Night Ladies

The first song we are going to learn in the single-note-with-pinch pattern is “Goodnight Ladies.” It uses many of the same movements you have practiced already. The melody notes in this arrangement are the single notes played by the index finger. The pinch supplies a rhythm and adds the harmony notes of the chord. Play just the single notes to hear the main melody alone. Also notice that the melody notes fall on some note of the chord. This is a very common occurrence and will become important as you begin training your ear to hear melodies and chord changes.



Track
4

G D⁷

G C G D⁷ G

Boil Them Cabbage Down

The next song we are going to learn in the single-note-with-pinch style is “Boil Them Cabbage Down.” It uses the same elements of “Good Night Ladies,” but arranged in a different sequence. This should give you some clue as to how music, like language, is the simple or highly complex manipulation of a few common sounds.



Track
5

G C G D⁷

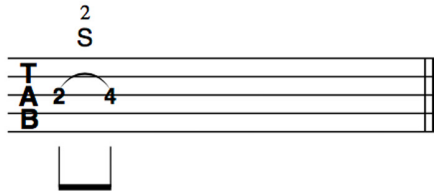
G C G D⁷ G

The Slide

Now we are going to add a left-hand technique that gives the music a little more character and makes it a little more song-like. The slide is a technique where a fretted note is picked, and while the note is still sounding, the fretting finger slides to a higher fret. In the example given, the slide is on the third string from the second fret to the fourth fret. Sometimes you will want the slide to be quick and other times slow depending on the effect you want. Practice it both ways.

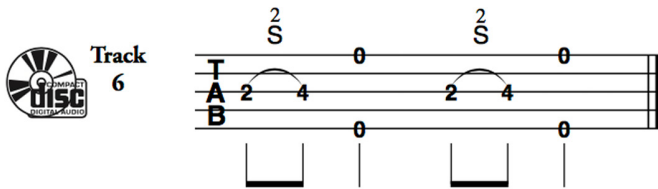
Examples:

Slide



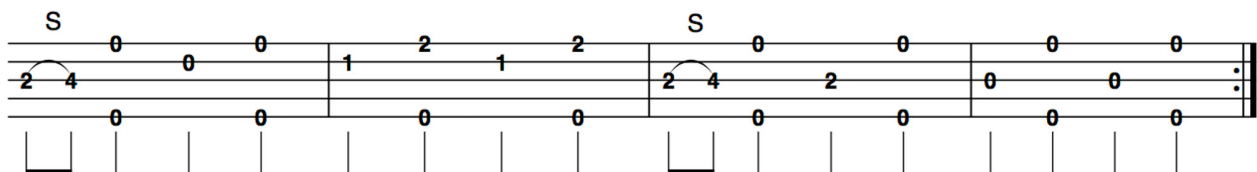
Now let's add the slide to the single-note-with-pinch pattern.

Slide With Pinch



Now lets add this new slide technique to the song "Boil Them Cabbage Down."

Boil Them Cabbage Down (with slide)



The Hammer-on

Another left-hand technique is the hammer-on. On paper the hammer-on looks similar to the slide. It is indicated by a fret number, with a \frown to a second higher fret number, and an “H” above the staff line. While the open string is still sounding, a finger is brought down (hammered) on the string at the higher fret.

Example

Track 7

The example shows three measures of music on a three-line staff. The first measure has a hammer-on from fret 0 to 2 on the top line, indicated by a '2' above the staff and an 'H' above that. The second measure has a hammer-on from fret 0 to 2 on the middle line, indicated by a '2' above the staff and an 'H' above that. The third measure has a hammer-on from fret 0 to 1 on the bottom line, indicated by a '1' above the staff and an 'H' above that. Fret numbers 0 and 2 are also shown on the other lines of the staff.

Let's add both the slide and the hammer-on to “Boil Them Cabbage Down”.

Boil Them Cabbage Down (with slide and hammer-on)

The notation for 'Boil Them Cabbage Down' consists of two systems of three-line staves. The first system has four measures. The first measure has a slide from fret 2 to 4 on the top line, indicated by an 'S' above the staff. The second measure has a hammer-on from fret 0 to 2 on the top line, indicated by an 'H' above the staff. The third measure has a slide from fret 2 to 4 on the top line, indicated by an 'S' above the staff. The fourth measure has a hammer-on from fret 0 to 2 on the top line, indicated by an 'H' above the staff. Fret numbers 0, 2, and 4 are shown on the other lines of the staff.

The second system of notation also has four measures. The first measure has a slide from fret 2 to 4 on the top line, indicated by an 'S' above the staff. The second measure has a hammer-on from fret 0 to 2 on the top line, indicated by an 'H' above the staff. The third measure has a slide from fret 2 to 4 on the top line, indicated by an 'S' above the staff. The fourth measure has a hammer-on from fret 0 to 2 on the top line, indicated by an 'H' above the staff. Fret numbers 0, 2, and 4 are shown on the other lines of the staff.

Practice until you can perform these left-hand techniques smoothly. Increase the tempo as you feel comfortable. You will notice that as the tempo increases, the execution of the slide and hammer-on has to be a little quicker.

Practice Tip

In order to get a good sense of your right and left-hand positions, play looking into a mirror. Turn several different ways to get different views into your right-hand position. Work towards playing on the tips of your picks. Avoid digging too deeply into the strings. Many beginning players hit the banjo head with their picks and causes and non-rhythmical and nonmusical sound. Make sure you have a slight bend in your wrist. As you use your left-hand fingers to fret the strings, work to keep them close to the fingerboard just above the strings. Pay attention to both hands and work towards smooth, graceful, and efficient finger movements.

The Roll

The essence of banjo picking is the concept of the thumb, index finger and middle finger playing in arpeggio patterns; that is, single notes played in rapid succession. The basic bluegrass banjo style divides a measure of 4/4 into eight equally spaced notes.

Count Evenly 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 +

The style is further characterized by how the three picking fingers combine to produce the eight-note patterns or rolls. There are three basic finger movements, which are assigned directional names (forward, backward) and a descriptive name (alternating).

Forward - T (thumb)	I (index)	M (middle)	
Backward - M (middle)	I (index)	T (thumb)	
Alternating - T (thumb)	I (index)	T (thumb)	M (middle)
(also MIMT)			



Forward	Backward	Alternating

We are going to move slowly into using rolls by combining a four-note roll for a half measure, with the single-note pinch we learned for the second half of the measure.

Four-Note Roll With Single Note and Pinch

Count Evenly 1 + 2 + 3 4 1 + 2 + 3 4

As you play through this pattern, be sure to sound the measure as indicated. It is very important that you perform the roll with the proper timing. When you feel comfortable with the roll, gradually increase the tempo.

Now perform the roll with the G, C, D7 chords you have learned.



Track
9

Tablature for Track 9 showing a roll pattern across four measures with chords G, C, D7, and G. The pattern consists of notes on the top string (T) and bottom string (B) with fingerings (0, 1, 2) and picking directions (T, I, M, T, I, M, T). The notes are: G (0, 0, 0), C (0, 1, 2), D7 (2, 1, 2), G (0, 0, 0). Picking directions are T I M T I M T etc.

It is important to realize that a roll is the order in which the fingers move and not necessarily the strings they hit. The tablature may indicate different strings, but the order of the picking fingers is the same.



Track
10

Tablature for Track 10 showing a roll pattern across four measures with chords G, C, D7, and G. The pattern consists of notes on the top string (T) and bottom string (B) with fingerings (0, 1, 2, 2, 2) and picking directions (T, I, M, T, I, M, T). The notes are: G (0, 0, 0), C (0, 1, 2), D7 (2, 2, 2), G (0, 0, 0). Picking directions are T I M T I M T T I M T I M T T I M T I M T.

It is important to take time at this point to make sure your timing is correct, that you are hitting the strings cleanly and clearly, that the slides and hammer-ons are crisp, and that the sound you are getting is a pleasant sound. No matter what your level of skill, know your material well and make your playing sound the best it can. Listen to good players and strive to imitate their good sounds.

Now we are going to incorporate this new picking pattern with left-hand movements we have already learned and play a new version of “Boil Them Cabbage Down” and “Good Night Ladies.”

*This is a slight variation in that the middle finger is striking the single note rather than the index finger.



Track
11

Boil Them Cabbage Down

(with four-note roll, single note, pinch, slide and hammer-on)

Tablature for Track 11, first system. The top staff (T) has a hammer-on (H) above the first measure and a slide (S) above the second and third measures. The bottom staff (B) has a slide (S) below the first measure. The notation includes fret numbers (0, 1, 2) and a four-note roll (2-4) in the first measure of each staff.

Tablature for Track 11, second system. The top staff (T) has a slide (S) above the second measure and a hammer-on (H) above the third measure. The bottom staff (B) has a slide (S) below the first measure. The notation includes fret numbers (0, 1, 2) and a four-note roll (2-4) in the first measure of each staff.



Track
12

Good Night Ladies

(with four-note roll, single note, pinch, slide and hammer-on)

Tablature for Track 12, first system. The top staff (T) has a slide (S) above the first measure and another slide (S) above the second measure. The bottom staff (B) has a slide (S) below the first measure. The notation includes fret numbers (0, 1, 2) and a four-note roll (2-4) in the first measure of each staff.

Tablature for Track 12, second system. The top staff (T) has a slide (S) above the second measure and a hammer-on (H) above the third measure. The bottom staff (B) has a slide (S) below the first measure. The notation includes fret numbers (0, 1, 2) and a four-note roll (2-4) in the first measure of each staff.

“Cumberland Gap” is another popular banjo tune you can play using the techniques you have learned. Note that in the last half of the second measure, the single note before the pinch is on the first string. In the last half of the third measure there are two single notes and no pinch. Also note the first and last measures are the same. Just as in language, where words are repeated and repositioned, musical phrases are repeated and repositioned. Watch and listen for phrases that are the same or very similar.



Track
13

Cumberland Gap

(with four-note roll, single note, pinch, slide and hammer-on)

The Alternating Roll

The next roll pattern we are going to learn has come to have several names: square roll, alternating roll, or thumb-in-and-out roll. The idea behind the alternating roll is that the thumb alternates between the index and middle fingers in a four-note pattern. This four-note pattern of eighth notes may be repeated twice to fill a four/four measure.



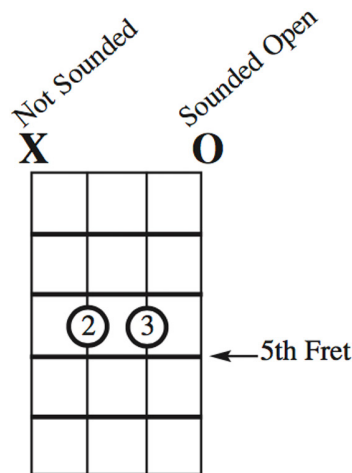
Track
14

In the example above, the thumb plays the third string and the fifth string. Rolls are the order of the right-hand fingers, not necessarily the strings they strike. Below are two examples of other ways the alternating roll is used, striking different combinations of strings.

Remember we will be adding left-hand fretted notes that will give the different combinations more meaning. Here are a few common alternating roll passages for you to practice.

Let's use this new pattern to play the old favorite "Boil Them Cabbage Down." With this new version, we will add a new C position.

New "C" Position



The reason this is still a C chord is that we have moved the C and E notes of the C chord to a new place on the neck. (Play the first two strings of the first C-chord position and compare them with the third and second strings of the new C-chord position, and hear that they are the same notes.) In "Boil Them Cabbage Down" the C note is the melody note we want in the second measure. In the first C-chord position, the C note is on the second string. The alternating roll as we have outlined, has to have two strings above the melody string. The new C-chord position has the C note on the third string. This is an important concept to grasp, because when you begin arranging melodies in the bluegrass style, you will need to have the ability to find the same melody note at several locations on the neck in order to match them with particular rolls.



Track
15

Here is the alternating roll with the new C-chord position. You will note that the open first string D note is sounded. It is not part of the C chord but adds what is referred to as an "added ninth." It adds an openness, or expanded sound, to the chord, which is an interesting and beautiful sound often used in bluegrass.

Here is “Boil Them Cabbage Down” using the alternating roll coupled with slides, hammer-ons, and the new C- chord position.



Track
16

Boil Them Cabbage Down

(alternating roll with slides and new C position)

First system of musical notation for "Boil Them Cabbage Down". It consists of two staves: Treble (T) and Bass (B). Above the Treble staff, there are three 'S' labels indicating slide techniques. The notation includes rhythmic patterns (2 4) and fingerings (0, 5, 2, 1) across four measures. Below the staves are chord diagrams for each measure.

Second system of musical notation for "Boil Them Cabbage Down". It continues with two staves (T and B) and includes 'S' labels. The notation shows rhythmic patterns and fingerings across four measures, ending with a double bar line. Chord diagrams are provided below the staves.

Here is “Good Night Ladies” using the alternating roll with slides, hammer-ons and the new C- chord position.



Track
17

Good Night Ladies

(alternating roll with slides, hammer-on and new C position)

First system of musical notation for "Good Night Ladies". It consists of two staves: Treble (T) and Bass (B). Above the Treble staff, there are three labels: 'S', 'S', and 'H' (hammer-on). The notation includes rhythmic patterns (2 4) and fingerings (0, 1, 2) across four measures. Chord diagrams are provided below the staves.

Second system of musical notation for "Good Night Ladies". It continues with two staves (T and B) and includes an 'S' label. The notation shows rhythmic patterns and fingerings across four measures, ending with a double bar line. Chord diagrams are provided below the staves.

Cripple Creek

Here is a neat arrangement of the classic banjo tune “Cripple Creek” that utilizes all the techniques we have discussed up to this point: the single-note-with-pinch, four-note roll and alternating roll, coupled with slides and the new C-chord position. Note that we are changing the 2-4, third-string slide to a 2-3 slide.



Track
18

Cripple Creek

(with single-note-and-pinch, four-note roll, alternating roll with slides.)

The Forward Roll

At the heart of bluegrass banjo playing is a group of rolls known as “forward rolls.” These rolls are the more syncopated rolls in that the melodies often fall in slightly unusual places in the measure. Often melodies fall on what is sometimes referred to as the strong part of the beat, i.e., the down beats 1 2 3 or 4. When a melody note is shifted from the strong position to what is referred to as the weak part of the beat, i.e., the up-beat, or the “and” of the beat, as in “1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and,” the melody has been syncopated. The forward rolls have the capacity to do this. Forward rolls are usually organized by patterns of two–three–three or three–three–two to create an eight-note pattern. The first example we will look at is (TM) (TIM) (TIM).

2 3 3

Forward Rolls



Track 19

1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 +
 T M T I M T I M T M T I M T I M T M T I M T I M

The easiest way to learn the pattern is to remember that the thumb and middle finger play the first component, followed by two patterns of thumb-index-middle. Practice this pattern until it flows smoothly and seamlessly from one repetition to the next.

Remember that a roll is the order that the fingers move and not what strings they hit. You will need to practice the patterns with the fingers striking different strings. The example below will demonstrate this. Note that the finger order of the right-hand is the same each time; the difference is the strings they strike.

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

G C D⁷ G

Let's use the forward roll to play "Boil Them Cabbage Down" and "Good Night Ladies."



Track
20

Boil Them Cabbage Down

(with forward roll)

First system of guitar tablature for "Boil Them Cabbage Down". It consists of two staves, T (top) and B (bottom). The T staff has notes: 0 0 0 0 0 | 1 2 1 2 1 2 | 0 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0. The B staff has notes: 0 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 0 | 2 2 2. Below the staves are fret markers for each string.

Second system of guitar tablature for "Boil Them Cabbage Down". It consists of two staves, T (top) and B (bottom). The T staff has notes: 0 0 0 0 0 | 1 2 1 2 1 2 | 0 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 0. The B staff has notes: 0 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 0 | 2 2 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0. The system ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.



Track
21

Good Night Ladies

(with forward roll)

First system of guitar tablature for "Good Night Ladies". It consists of two staves, T (top) and B (bottom). The T staff has notes: 0 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0. The B staff has notes: 0 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 0 | 2 2 2. Below the staves are fret markers for each string.

Second system of guitar tablature for "Good Night Ladies". It consists of two staves, T (top) and B (bottom). The T staff has notes: 0 0 0 0 0 | 1 2 1 2 1 2 | 0 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0. The B staff has notes: 0 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 0 | 0 2 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0. The system ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Now that we have a number of right-hand roll patterns and left-hand techniques to work with, let's put them into a version of our old standby "Boil Them Cabbage Down."



Track
22

Boil Them Cabbage Down

(with mixed rolls and slides)

Alternating Forward Alternating Forward

S S S S

Alternating Forward Alternating Forward

Forward/Backward Roll

The "forward/backward" roll (also referred to as forward/reverse roll) has two sections to it, as its name suggests. There is a forward roll (T I M), the thumb then strikes the fifth string, a backward roll (M I T), ending with the middle finger striking the first string.



Track
23

T I M T M I T M

As with all roll patterns, the order in which the fingers move is the key. The strings that are struck can be altered to create the note order you want.

Let's use this new pattern to play a variation of "Cripple Creek."

Note that there is a new left-hand fingering position introduced in the first measure, and another new position in the fifth measure. Practice that measure until you feel comfortable with the movement and coordination of the two hands. The A section of the tune uses three forward/backward rolls in the first three measures, and the last measure is a four-note roll with a single note and pinch.

A neat thing about the forward/backward roll is that a left-hand position can be held on the first half of the roll and then changed or released on the second half of the roll, as in the first three measures of this new arrangement of “Cripple Creek.”



Track
24

Cripple Creek

(with forward/backward roll)

2 1

3 1

S S H

S S H