

Backup

Even though it's as important as lead playing, backup is one of the more neglected aspects of bluegrass banjo. So in this next section I'm going to give you tips and tunes to get you started.

Earl Scruggs wrote the book on backup in the late forties and early fifties. But he didn't just rely on chunking off-beats (mandolin style). He also came up with a whole new framework of licks and roll combinations that added a jazzy punch and bounce to the music. His playing behind Lester Flatt in the early days is a masterful example of timing, finesse and sensitivity to the other musicians.

Sensitivity to the other musicians—that's the key to backup. Listen to what everyone else is doing, especially the person singing or playing the lead. If he leaves a short opening in his music, that's where you can fill in. The rest of the time you're there to provide solid support. And that means timing. If you can maintain a strong, even rhythm, that will create all sorts of space for the lead player to take off with his break. In addition, it will add to the overall tightness of the band. After all, the real joy in this (or any) music comes when you have a group of musicians cooking together effortlessly as one unit. Again, this is where the metronome comes in handy.

Also, you should pay attention to volume. Be careful not to overpower the lead. I know I've talked about getting a big sound out of your banjo, and there's a place for that. But you also have to know when to bring the volume down. If you listen to J.D. Crowe and the New South you'll find that there's almost no playing going on during their vocal choruses, with the exception of fills. Go for contrast. Since you're usually going to be working with only three chords and a beat that doesn't change much from song to song, you'll need these dynamics to help keep things interesting. To do this, move your right hand away from the bridge (almost to the neck) for the quiet backup, and then get into your standard, hard driving Scruggs stance for the heavy-duty backup. Now that you know *how* to do it, I'll show you *where* to do it.

Here are a couple of general backup techniques which will work well behind medium to fast songs.

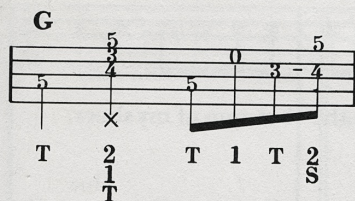
Although this first example is written out in the key of C, it can be repeated anywhere on the neck (D at the 12th fret, G at the 17th fret, etc.). Use your thumb to fret the seventh fret of the fifth string.

C

T S 2 T 1 2 T 1 2 T 1 2 T 1 T

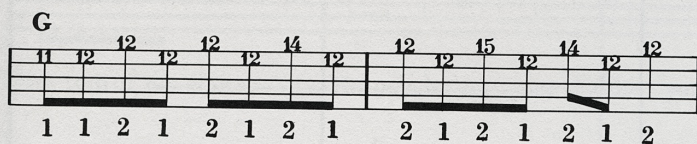
Notice, here, the extensive use of forward rolls, the most effective way to get a driving sound, up or down the neck.

This next short figure can also be repeated over and over again at different locations on the fretboard. The X at the bottom of the second quarter note means that you should lift your fingers ever so slightly off the fingerboard to create a damping effect.



A variation of this lick can be found at the beginning of *Dark Hollow*.

To close things out, here's a backup lick which can be used effectively on slow songs. If you're worried about doubling your index finger on the first two notes, take heart. As I said, this is for slow songs. So you'll have plenty of time to play both notes without twisting your fingers into a pretzel.



When you're playing this lick concentrate on putting some bounce into it. That can really make things jump. For the prime example of bounce-oriented banjo listen to Allen Shelton. (*Shelton's Special*—Rounder 0088). By the way, it wouldn't be such a bad idea to start incorporating that bounce into all of your playing. Keep it in mind.

O.K., that's a brief synopsis on backup. Even more than the lead, backup is best learned in conjunction with recordings or live music. There's just so much finesse involved here; you can't communicate it all via the printed page. So pick up some early Flatt and Scruggs recordings, play through these next four songs and you'll be on your way.

Salty Dog

Key of G

G **E** **A**

Stand-ing on the cor-ner with the low down blues, great big hole in the bot-tom of my shoes.

backup

T 2 T 1 T 2 T 2 T 1 T 2 T 1 S 2 T 1 2 T 1 T 2

D **G**

Ho-ney, let me be your sal-ty dog.

T S 2 T 1 2 T 1 2 T 1 2 T 1 T 2 T 1 2 T 1 T 2 T 2 1 2 1 T P 2

E **A**

Let me be your sal-ty dog or I won't be your man at all.

T S T 1 2 T 1 2 T 2 T 1 2 T 1 T S 2 T 1 2 T 1 2 T 1 2 T 1 T 1

D **G**

Ho-ney, let me be your sal-ty dog.

T 1 2 T 1 2 T 1 2 T 2 H T 1 P 2 T 2 1 T 1 2 H 1 T 2 P T

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Salty Dog

Key of G

G **E** **A**

solo

Stand-ing on the cor-ner with the low down blues, great big hole in the

2 T 2 T 2 T T S 2 T 2 1 T 2 1 H T 1 2 T 1 2 T 1 2 T 2 1 T 2

D **G**

bot-tom of my shoes. Ho-ney, let me be your sal-ty dog.

T 1 2 T 2 1 T S T 1 2 T 1 2 T I 2 T H T 1 P 2 T 1 2 T 1 2 1 T P T T 2 T

E **A**

Let me be your sal-ty dog, or I won't be your man at all.

T 1 2 T 2 1 T 2 T 2 T 1 2 T 1 2 T 1 2 T 2 1 T 2 T 1 2 T 2 1 T 2

D **G**

Ho-ney, let me be your sal-ty dog.

T 1 2 T 1 2 T 2 1 2 T 2 1 T P 2 T 1 T P T 1 H T 2 T

Sally Goodin

Capo on 2nd fret:
actual Key of A

Part A

4/4

G D G

2 T 1 2 T 2 T 1 | 2 T 1 T 1 T 1 | 2 T 1 2 1 T 1 T | 2 1 2 T 1 T 1

backup

T 1 S 2 T 1 2 T 1 | 2 T 1 2 T 1 T 2 | T 1 T 1 S 2 1 T 2 | T 1 T 2 T 1 T 2

1. D G | 2. D G

2 T 1 2 T 2 T 1 | 2 T 1 T 1 T 1 | 2 T 1 2 1 T 1 T | 2 1 2 T 1 T 1 | 2 1 2 T 1 T 2

T S T 1 2 T 1 2 H | T 1 2 T 2 1 TP2 | T 2 T 1 2 1 TP2 | T 1 T 2 T 2 T | T 1 T 2 T 2 T

Part B

G D G

1 T 1 T 2 T 1 2 H | T 1 2 T 1 2 T 2 | 1 2 T 1 2 1 T 1 | T 1 2 1 T 1 T 2

1 S T 1 2 T 1 2 | T 1 2 T 2 1 T 2 | T 1 2 T 2 1 T 2 | T 1 2 T 2 1 T 2

1. D G | 2. D G

1 T 1 T 2 T 1 2 H | T 1 2 T 1 2 T 1 | T 2 1 T 2 1 T 1 | T 1 2 1 T 1 T 2 | T 1 2 1 T 1

1 S T 1 2 T 1 2 | T 1 2 T 2 1 T 2 | T 1 2 T 2 1 T 2 | T 1 2 1 TP2 T | T 1 2 1 TP2 T

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Sally Goodin

Capo on 2nd fret:
actual Key of A

Part A

4/4

G D G

2 T 1 2 T 2 T 1 2 T 1 T 1 T 1 2 T 1 2 1 T 1 T 2 1 2 T 1 T 1

solo

2 1 T 2 1 T 1 2 T 2 1 T 1 2 T 1 2 1 T 2 1 T 2 1 2 1 2 1 2 T 1 T 1 T

1. D G 2. D G

2 T 1 2 T 2 T 1 2 T 1 T 1 T 1 2 T 1 2 1 T 1 T 2 1 2 T 1 T 1 2 1 2 T 1 T 2

2 1 T 2 1 T 1 2 T 2 1 T 1 2 T 2 T 2 1 T 2 1 2 1 2 T 1 T 1 T 2 1 2 T 1 T 1 2

Part B

G D G

1 T 1 T 2 T 1 2 H T 1 2 T 1 2 T 2 1 2 T 1 2 1 T 1 T 1 2 1 T 1 T 2

T 1 T 2 T 1 2 T 1 T 2 T 1 T 1 2 T 1 T 2 T 1 T 2 T 1 T 1 2 1 T 2

1. D G 2. D G

1 T 1 T 2 T 1 2 H T 1 2 T 1 2 T 1 T 2 1 T 2 1 T 2 1 T 1 T 2 T 1 2 1 T 1 T 2

T 1 T 2 T 1 2 T 1 T 2 T 1 T 1 2 T 1 T 2 T 1 T 2 T 1 T 1 2 1 T 2 T 1 T 1 2 1

Dark Hollow

Capo on 2nd fret:
actual Key of D

C G C

I'd ra - ther be _____ in some _____ dark hol - low ____

solo

1 T T 1 T 2 T 1 2 T 2 1 T 2 T 1 2 T 2 1 T 2 T 1 T 2 T 1 T 1 H H

F C

where the sun _____ re - fused _____ to shine, ____

T T 1 2 1 2 T 2 H T 1 2 1 2 T 1 2 T 1 2 1 T 2 T 1 2 T 2 1 T P 2

F

than to be at home a - lone _____ know - ing that you're

T T 1 2 1 2 T 1 2 T 1 2 1 T 2 1 2 T 1 2 1 T 2 T 1 H 2 T 2 1 T 2

C G C

gone _____ would cause me to lose _____ my mind. ____

T 1 2 T 1 P 2 T 2 T 1 2 T 2 1 2 1 T P 1 T 2 T 1 2 T 1 2 T 1 T 1 2 T 2 1

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