

Improvising

Now that you're getting this music solidly implanted in your fingers, let's move from worked-out breaks to a bit of improvisation. Playing off the top of one's head is as important in bluegrass as it is in jazz, though bluegrass obviously orbits somewhat closer to earth. To ease your way into improvising I want to talk about interchangeable licks.

If you'll remember back to the beginnings of the Scruggs, Reno and melodic sections, you learned a number of basic licks which fit nicely in a variety of settings. Those licks could just as easily have been replaced by an infinite number of substitute licks. And that's the secret of basic improvising. If you have a constantly expanding repertoire of interchangeable licks for every chord you might want to play, your music will always sound fresh. Since bluegrass banjo is primarily concerned with only three chords (the I, IV and V out of the G position) your job is an easy one.

What I'm going to do now is give you five licks each for the G, C and D chords. After that you'll have a chance to play through a version of *Bile 'Em Cabbage Down* which will incorporate a number of those licks to simulate an improvised break. Here they are.

G

T 1 S T 2 T P 1 T 2

G

T 1 S 2 T 2 1 T 2

G

T 1 T 1 T 1 T 1

G

T 2 T 1 2 T 1 2

G

T 2 1 T 2 1 T 2

C

T 2 T 1 2 T 1 2

C

T 2 T 1 T 2 T 2

C

T 1 T 1 T 1 T 2

C

T 1 T 2 1 2 T 2

C

T 2 1 2 T 1 T 2

D

T 1 2 T 2 1 T 2

D

T 1 2 1 2 T 1 2

D

T 1 T 2 T 1 T 2

D

T 1 T 2 T 1 T 2

D

T 1 2 T 2 1 T 2

G C G

T 1 T 2 TP1 T 2 T 2 T 1 2 T 1 2 T 2 1 T 2 1 T 2

S

D G C

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

G D G

T 1 T 2 T 1 T 2 T

S

You can get a feel for real improvising by making your own substitutions for the chord changes above. Remember, any of the five G licks are playable against any of the G chords. The same holds true for the C and D licks. Note, however, that the last two measures should remain the same as they are in the example above. That means you'll have the first six measures to play with. This will ultimately lead you to the creation of original licks which will more fully express the creative aspects of your personality. And that's when you'll really start playing music.