Thumb Lead Two-Finger Banjo

Matt Brown

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- Listen to these arrangements
- Learn about the sources
- Sign up for classes
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Introduction

When starting in this style, I recommend playing simple arrangements, with the index finger playing only the first string while the thumb plucks the other four strings. Many of the iconic thumb lead, two-finger banjoists don't hold to this exclusively, though, and part of what distinguishes their styles is how they break or even ignore this "rule." It is merely a suggestion. I also want to acknowledge the outstanding index lead banjo players and those who play in hybrid styles, where pretty much anything goes.

I have loved the thumb lead style since I first heard Paul Brown (no relation) play banjo in the early 2000s. After we recorded the album *Lone Prairie* in 2005 with Beverly Smith, I returned to it repeatedly to learn Paul's banjo parts as best I could. On September 8, 2011, I began teaching banjo at Chicago's venerable Old Town School of Folk Music. In my seven years there, I had the good fortune to teach hundreds of students how to play thumb lead, two-finger banjo. Since leaving Chicago, I have continued to do so privately and at the Louisville Folk School. For years, students have asked me to write a book, and I've finally gotten to a point where I feel like I've amassed a large enough collection to warrant its publication: a book of arrangements that I enjoy teaching and that students seek to play. This volume is not a complete collection of two-finger banjo picking but a curriculum that can take a beginner student to an advanced level of learning from some of the masters mentioned below.

When I interviewed Stephen Wade for twofingerbanjo.com in July 2021, he shared "a tiny list" of two-finger banjo players who stirred him: Uncle John Patterson, Doc Watson, Byard Ray, Will Keys, Ola Belle Reed, Samantha Bumgarner, Clyde Davenport, Virgil Anderson, Etta Baker, Wade Mainer, Morgan Sexton, Lee Sexton, Raymond Perry, China Poplin, Ross Brown, Lawrence Eller, Land Norris, Chesley Chancey, Hobart Smith, Louvenia Smith, Howard Finster, Pete Steele, B. F. Shelton, Bascom Lunsford, Frank Proffitt, Doc Hopkins, J.P. Nestor, Dick Burnett, Roscoe Holcomb, Dee Hicks, Omer Forster, Kirk McGee, Gus Cannon, and Lewis Hairston.

To that remarkable list, I will add Granville Bowlin, Marvin Gaster, Ivory Howard, Lily May Ledford, George Pegram, Donna Gum, James Roberts, Dink Roberts, John Snipes, Marion Underwood, Fleming Brown, Clifford Glenn, Lee Monroe Presnell, Benton Flippen, Bertie Mae Dickens, Abe Horton, Fred Cockerham, Ed Teague, J. Roy Stalcup, Stephen Wade, Pete Seeger, Mike Seeger, Paul Brown, Brad Leftwich, Kirk Sutphin, Lynn "Chirps" Smith, Fred Campeau, Nick Hornbuckle, Nora Brown, Cedric Watson, Chip Arnold, and now you, dear reader!

Some Explanations

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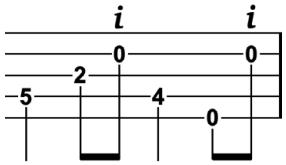
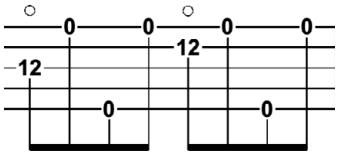


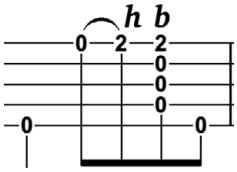
Indicated by an “i.” Pluck this note with your index finger.

Harmonic



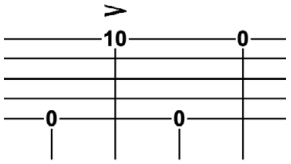
Indicated by a circle. Hover your fretting finger over the fret itself and touch the string lightly. A pure, bell-like tone will emanate if your bridge is in the correct place.

Brush



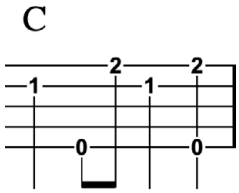
Indicated by a “b.” Drag your index finger down across the strings depicted. Keep your middle, ring, and pinky fingertips resting gently on the head of the banjo while you do.

Accent



Indicated by a greater-than sign. Play this note louder!

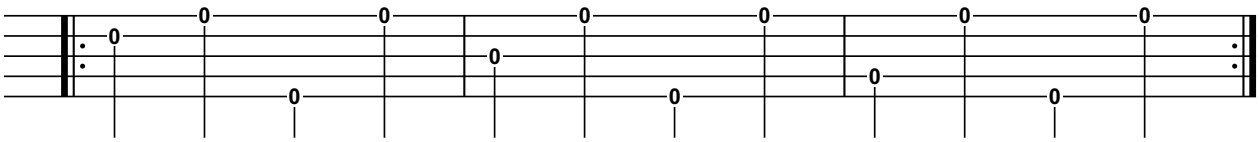
Chords



Many songs in the book have chords included above the tablature. These are the chords I prefer. For solo pieces like “Lost Gander,” I have not added any chords. The source recording had no accompaniment, and I’ll leave it up to you and your favorite guitar player to decide what harmony to add.

6 Picking Exercises

#1



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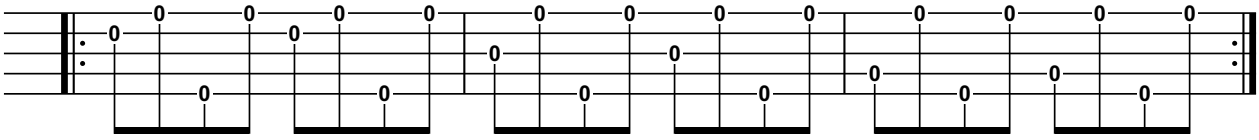

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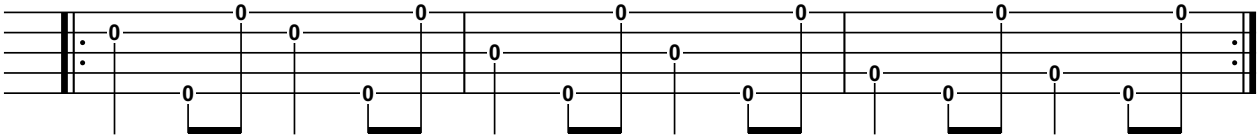

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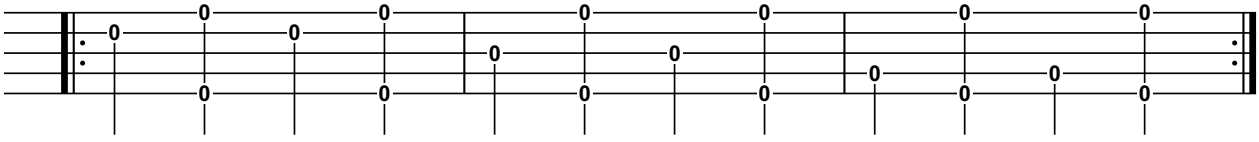

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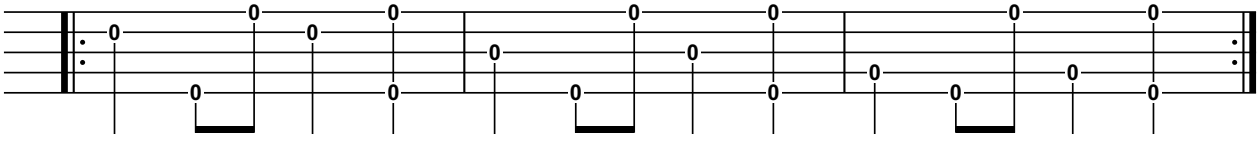

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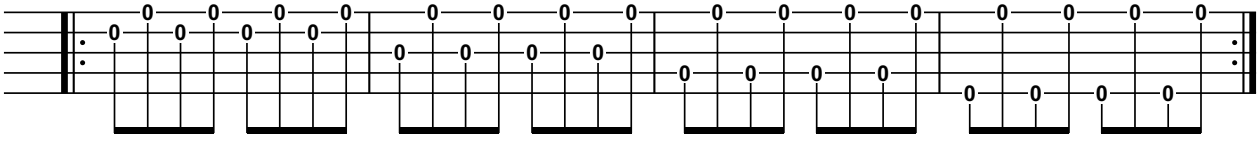
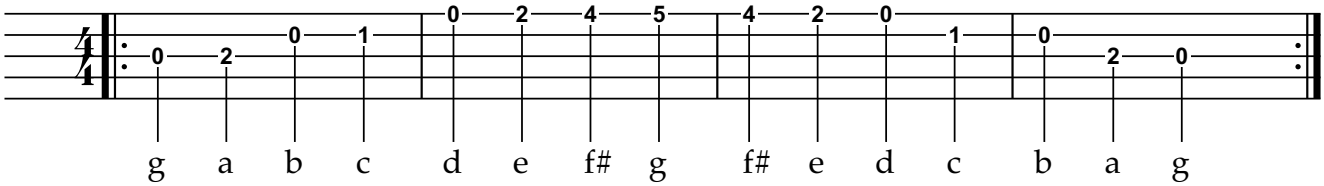
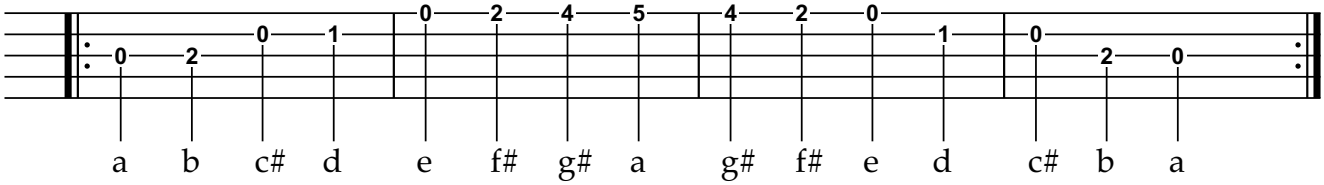


4 Scales

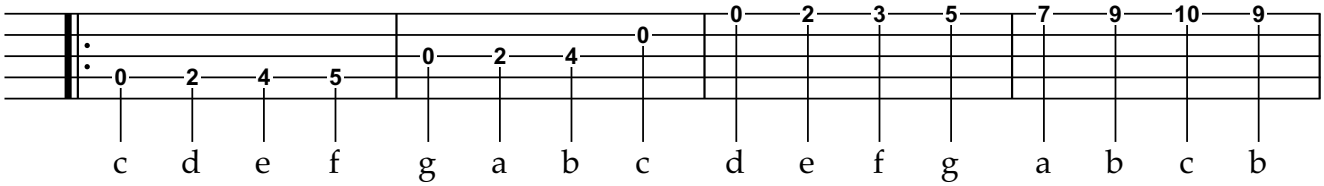
G major *(gDGBD)*

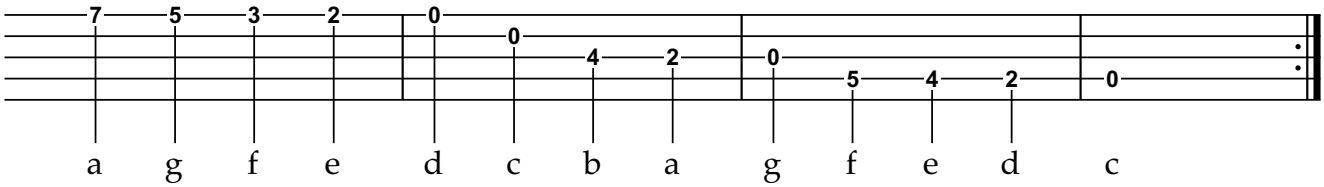


A major *(aEAC♯E)*

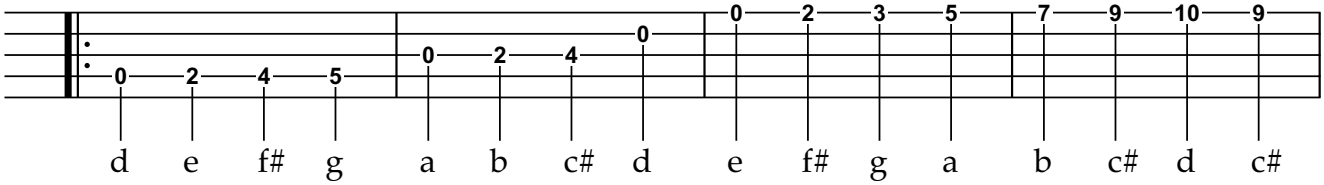


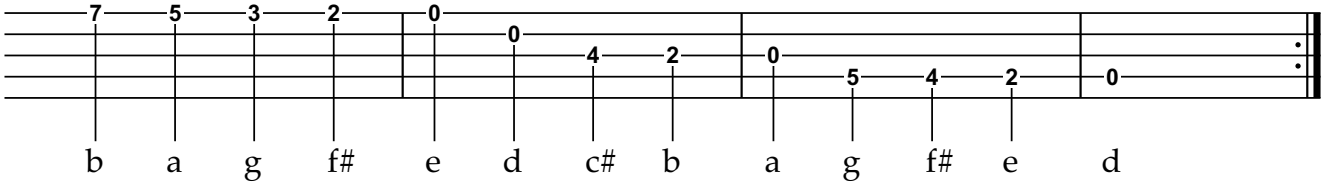
C major *(gCGCD)*





D major *(aDADE)*





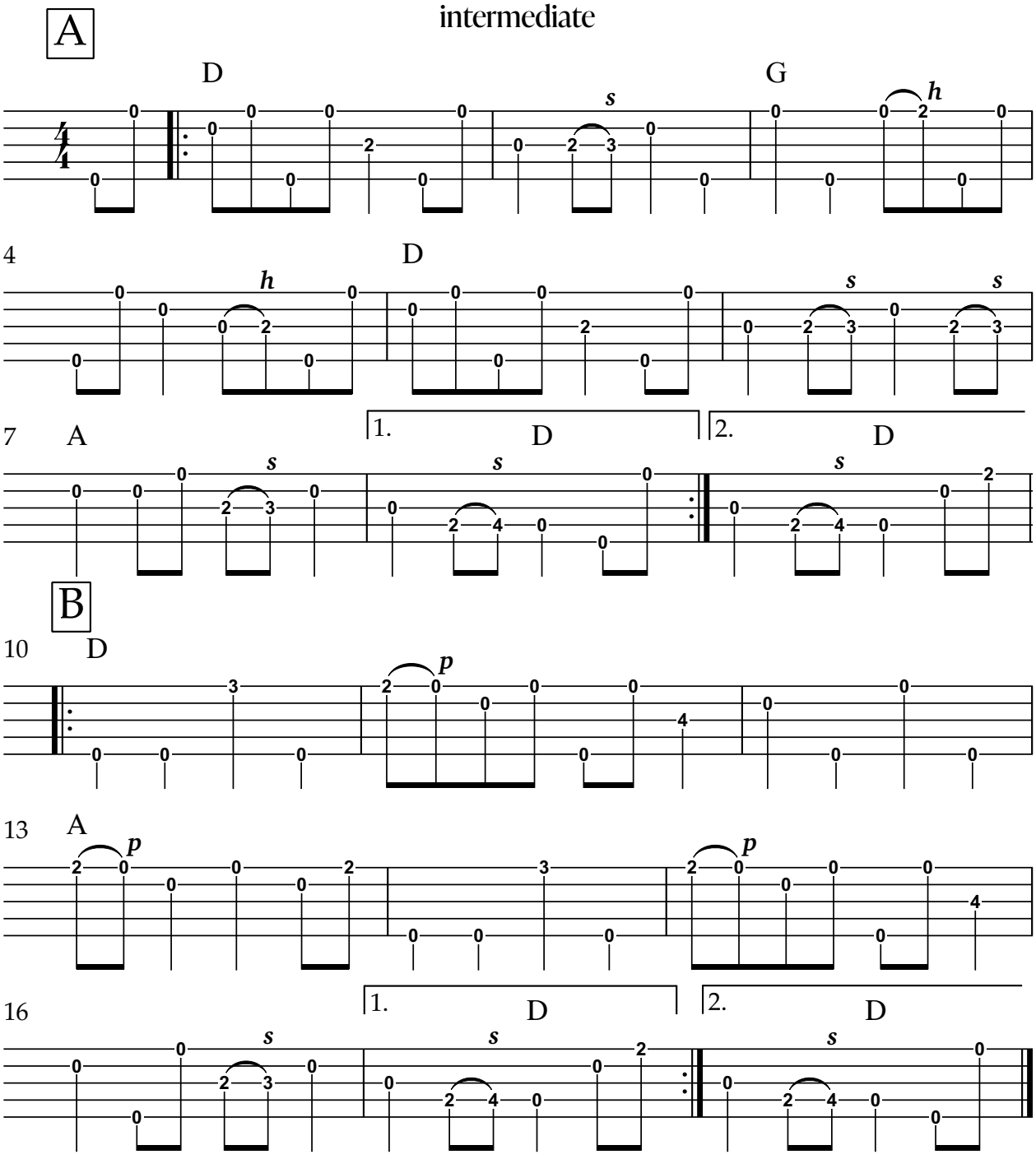
Have fun playing these tunes!

Let me know if you have any questions:
twofingerbanjo.com/contact

D major
aDADE

Arkansas Traveler

intermediate



Paul Brown suggested this surprising chord progression, which we played with Beverly Smith on my debut album *Lone Prairie*.

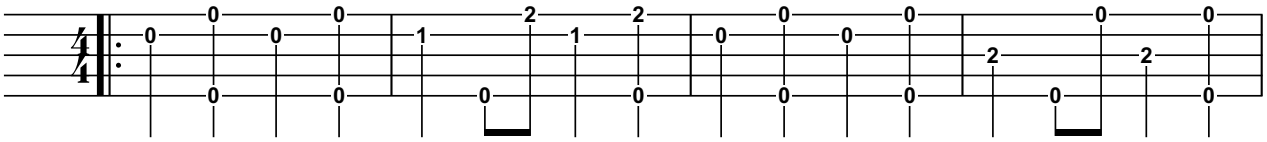
A major
aEAC♯E

Bile Them Cabbage Down

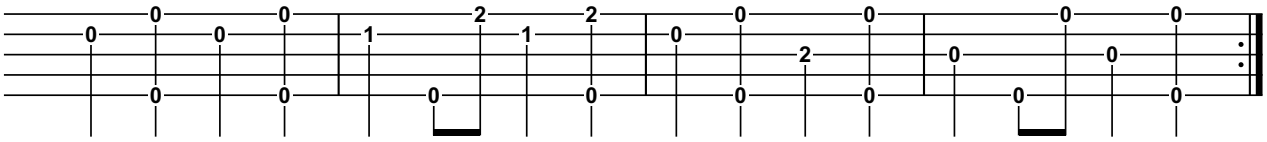
beginner

A

A D A E

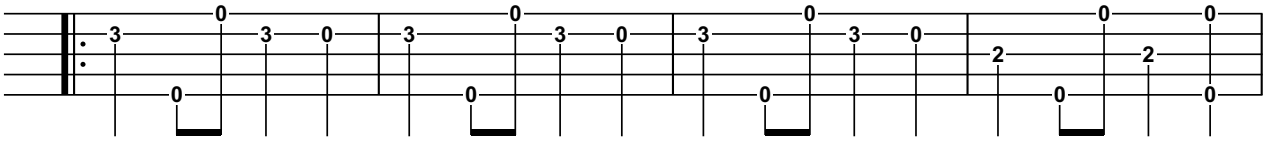


5 A D A E A

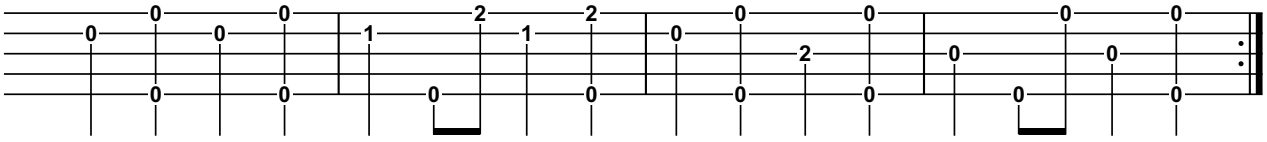


B

9 A E



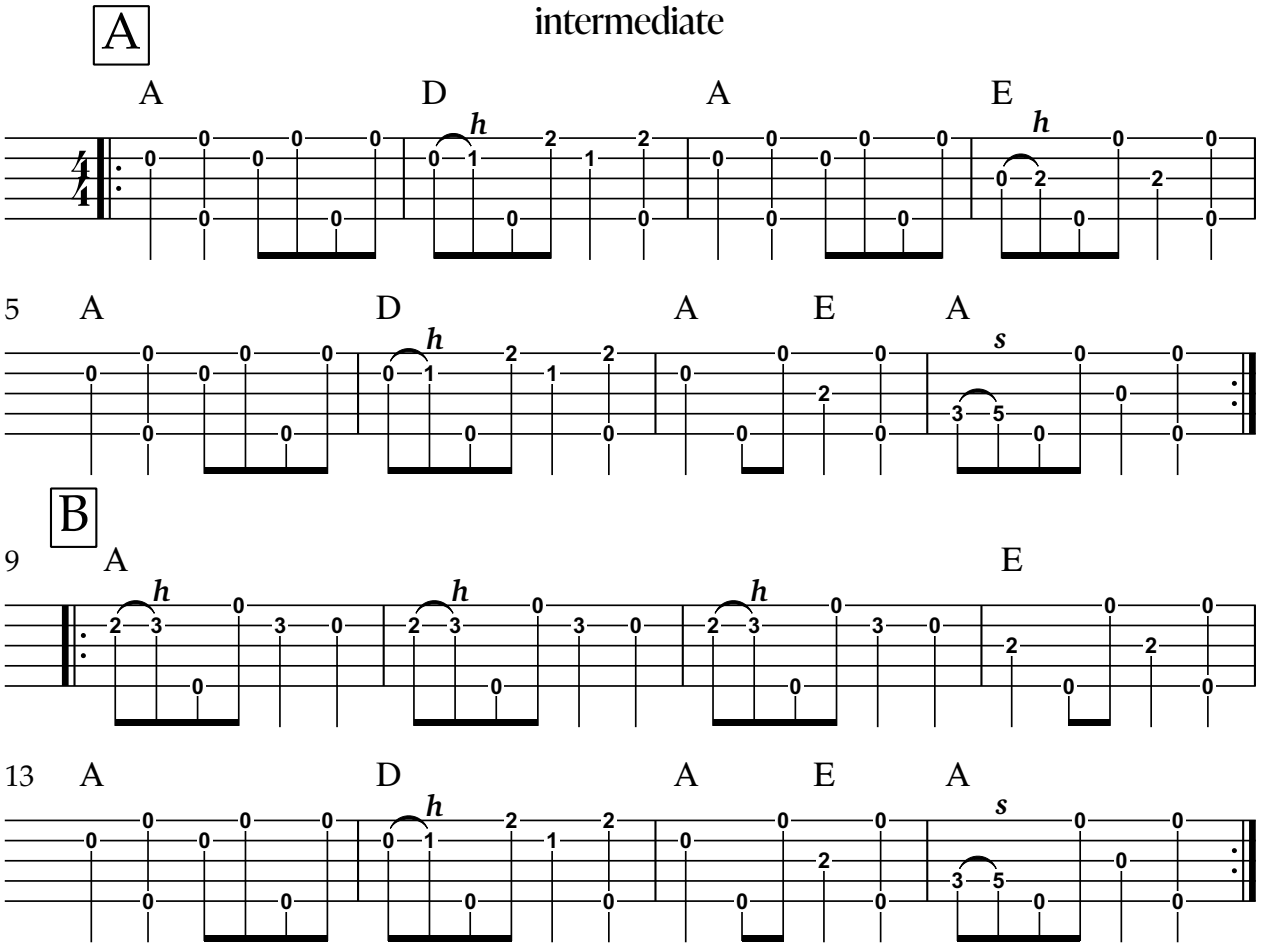
13 A D A E A



A major
aEAC♯E

Bile Them Cabbage Down

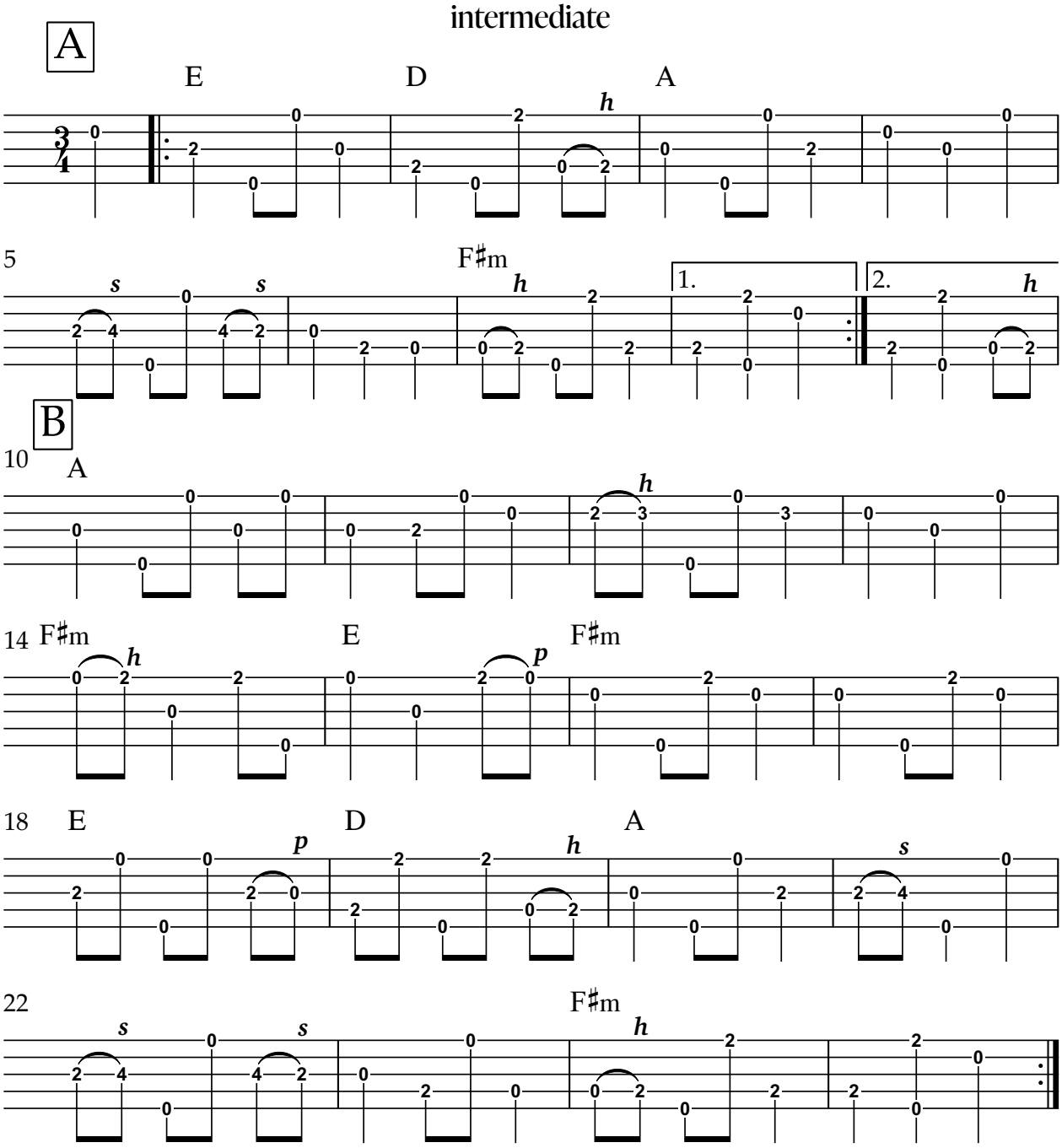
intermediate



F♯ minor
aEAC♯E

The Blackest Crow

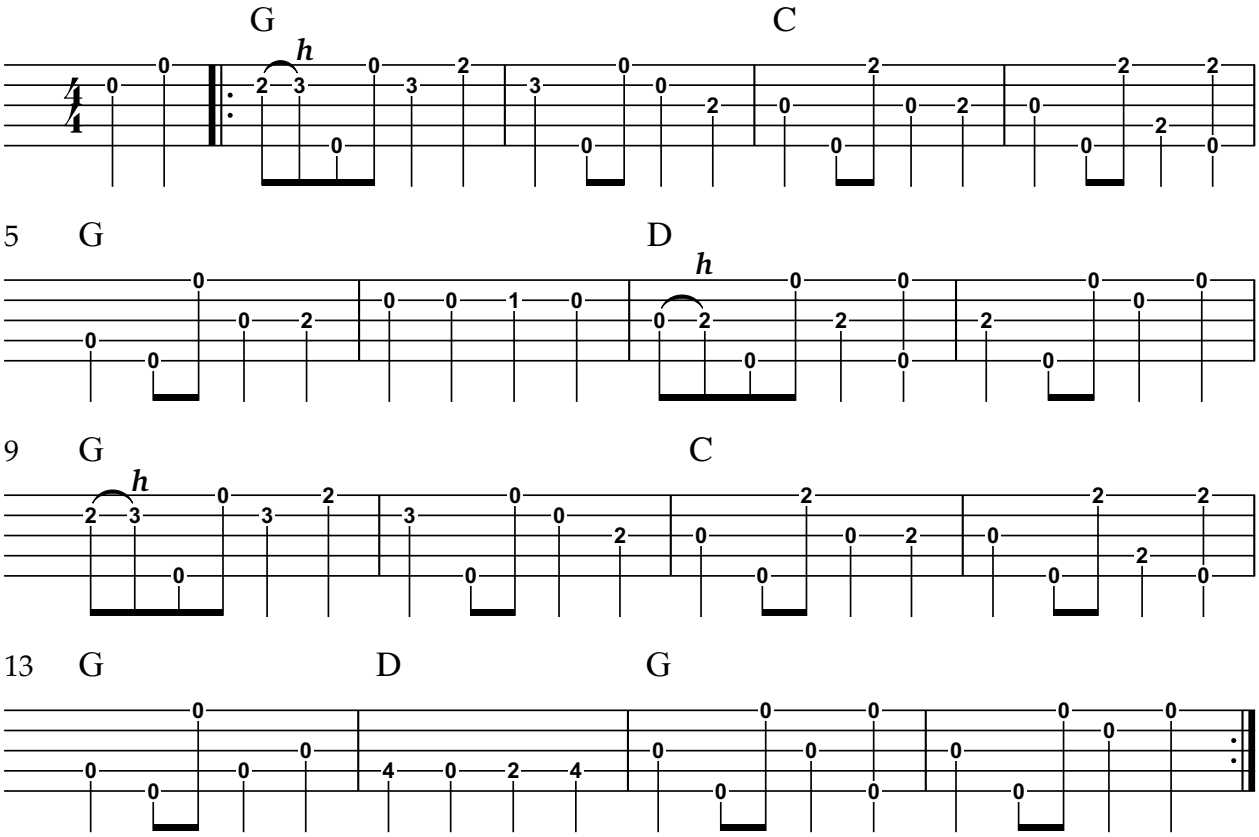
intermediate



G major
gDGBD

Bury Me Beneath the Willow

intermediate

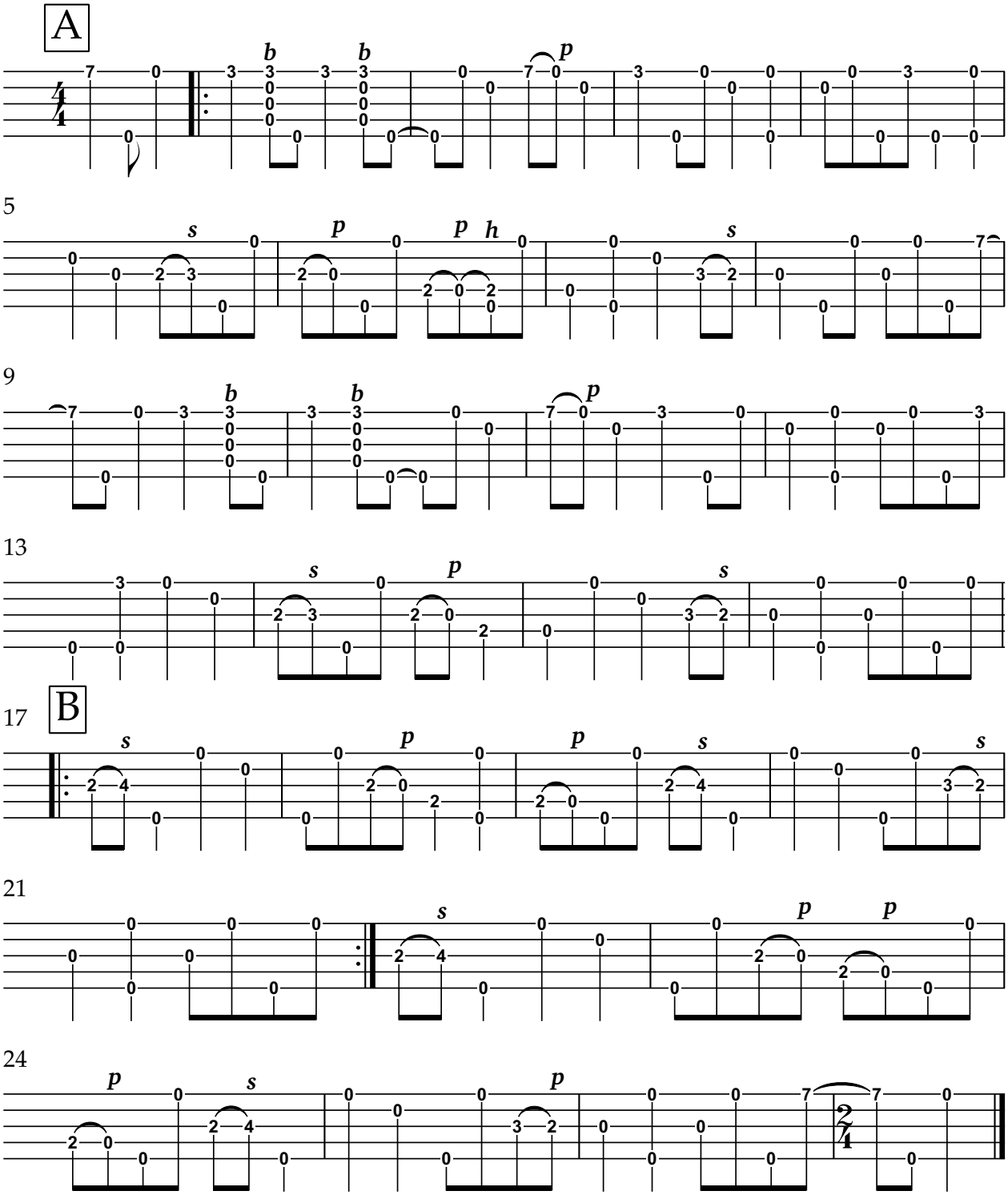


G major
gDGDE

from Paul Brown

Cacklin' Hen

advanced

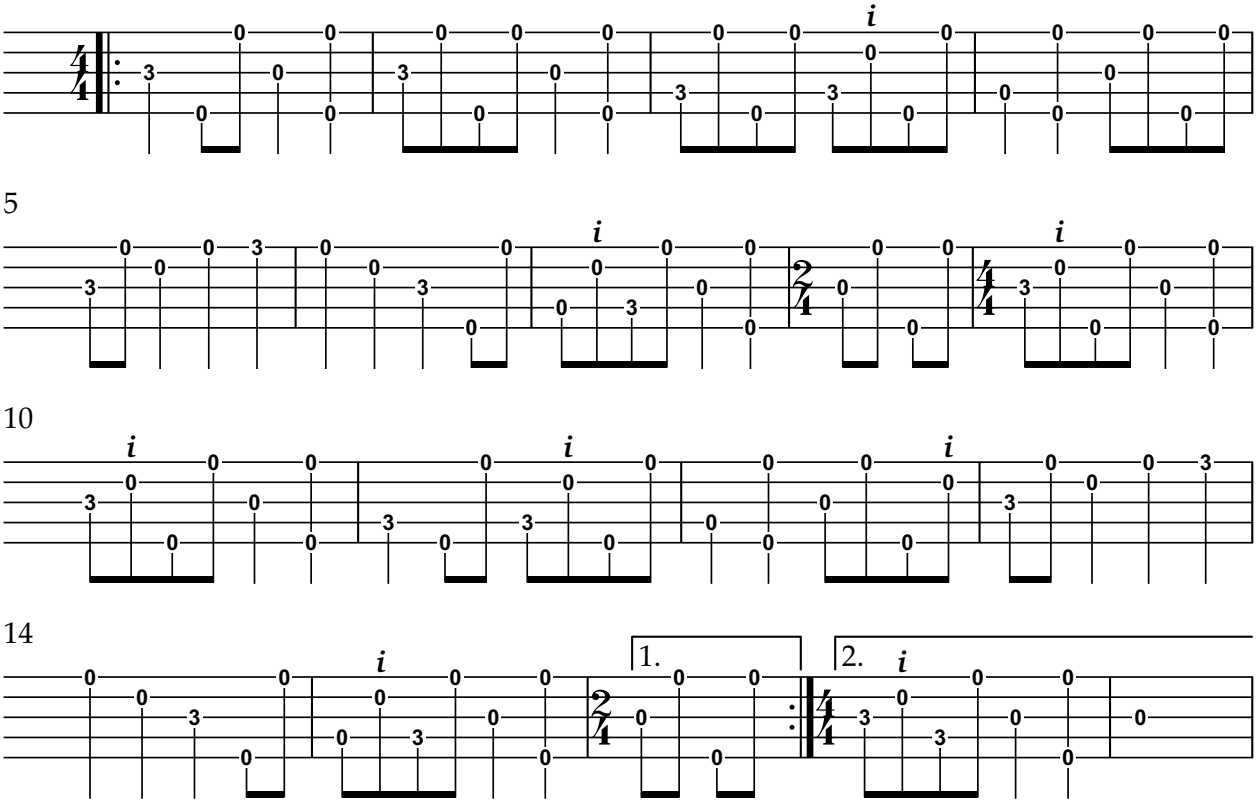


G minor
gDGCD

from Granville Bowlin

Charlie's Neat

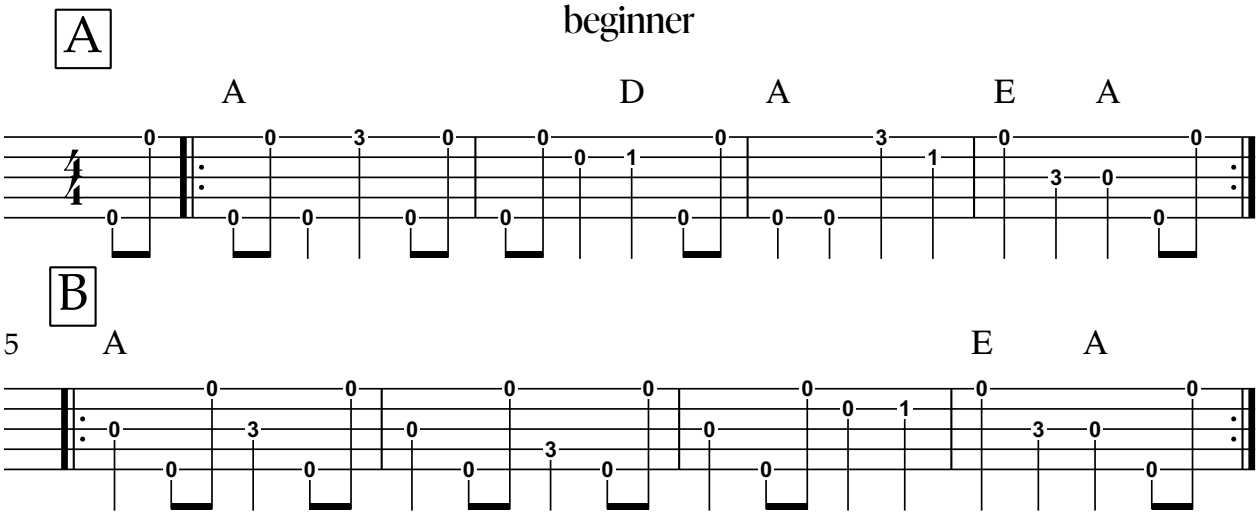
advanced



A
aEAC♯E

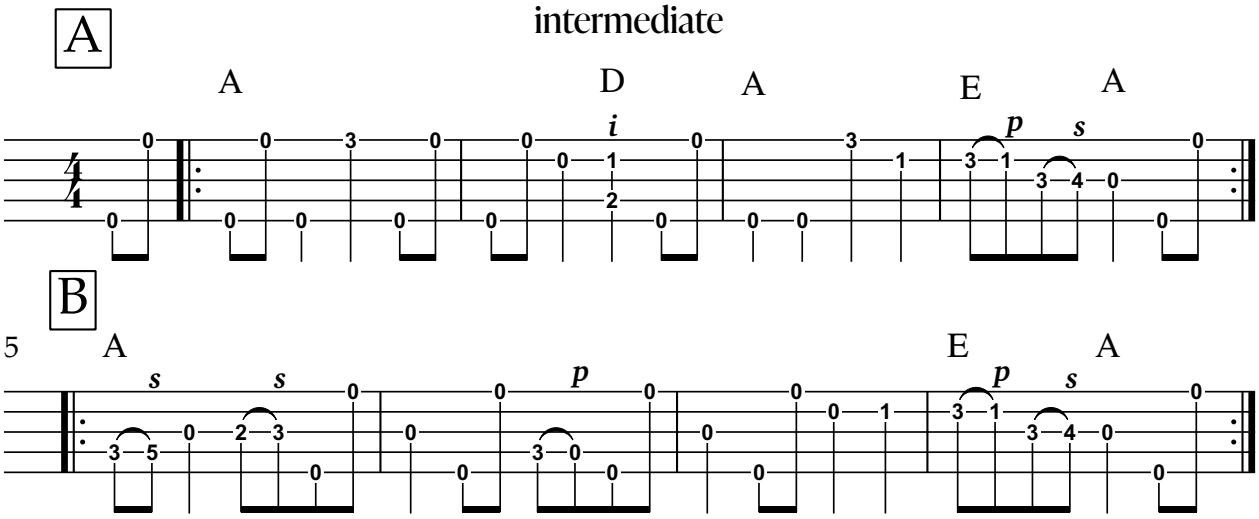
Cluck Old Hen

beginner



Cluck Old Hen

intermediate

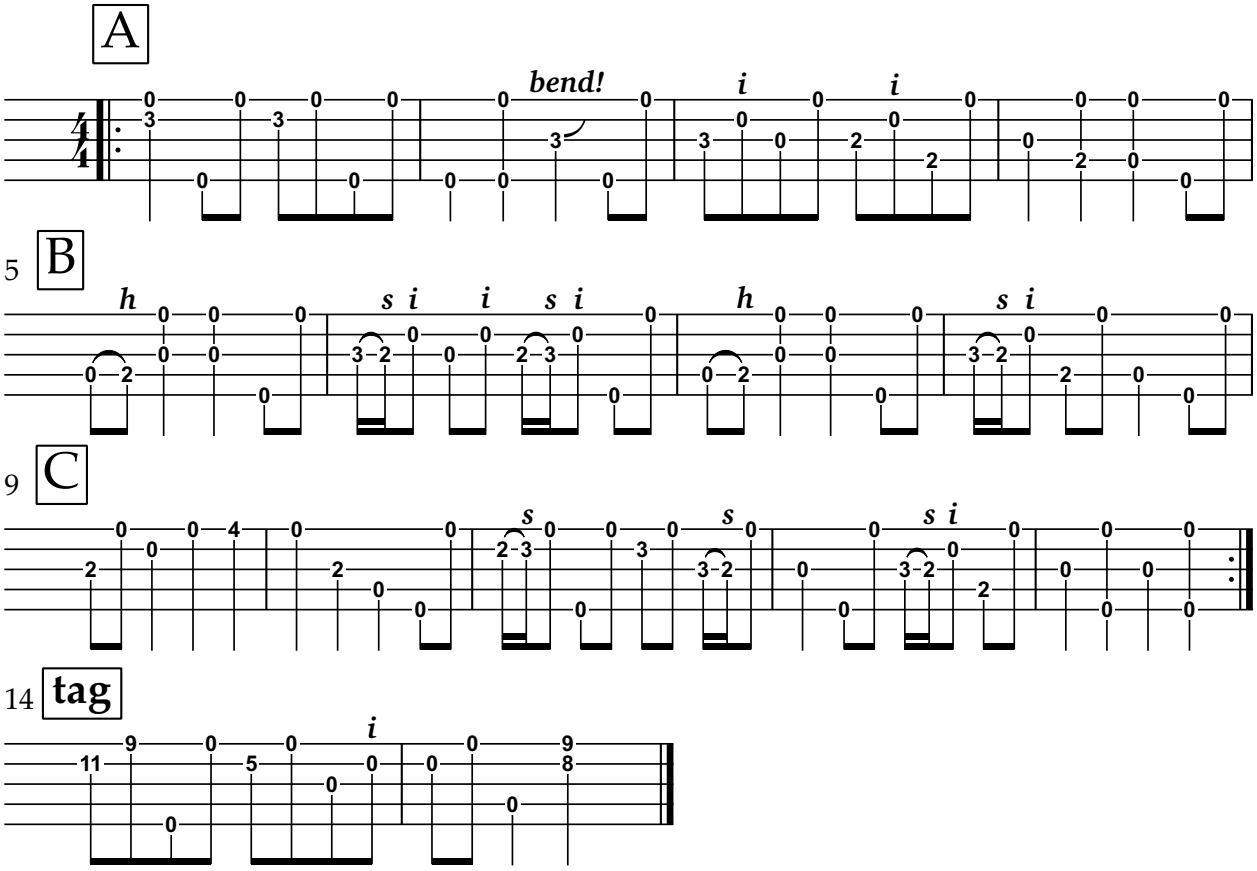


A major
aEAC♯E

from Granville Bowlin

Cotton-Eyed Joe

advanced

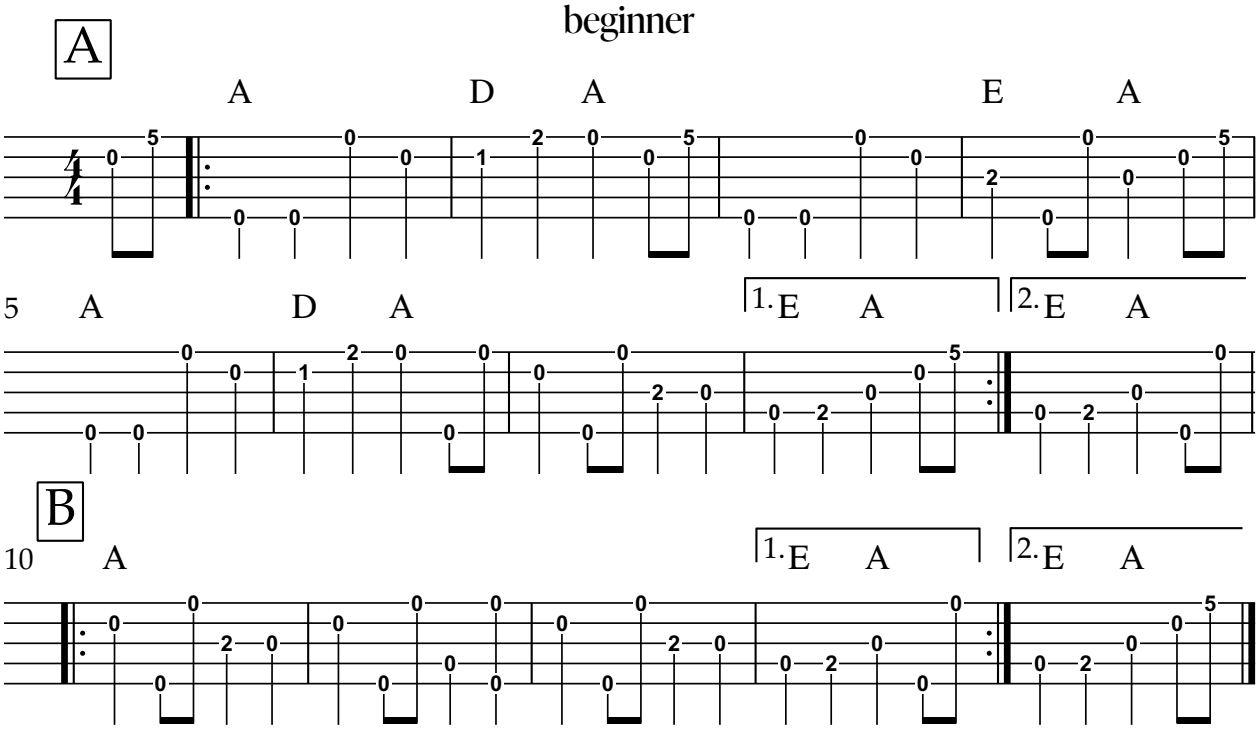


If you want to play this in a jam session, I recommend doubling up the A and B parts to create the typical binary form (AABB) and skipping the delightful but uncommon C part.

A major
aEAC♯E

Cripple Creek

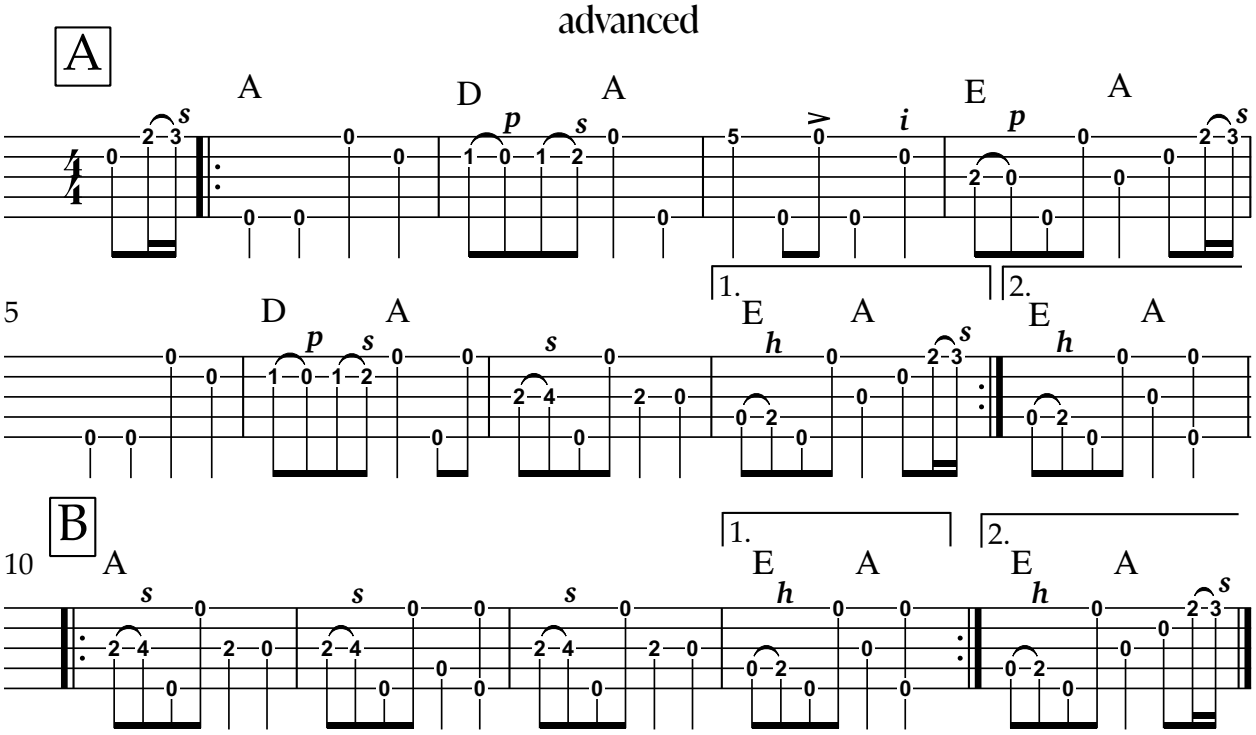
beginner



A major
aEAC♯E

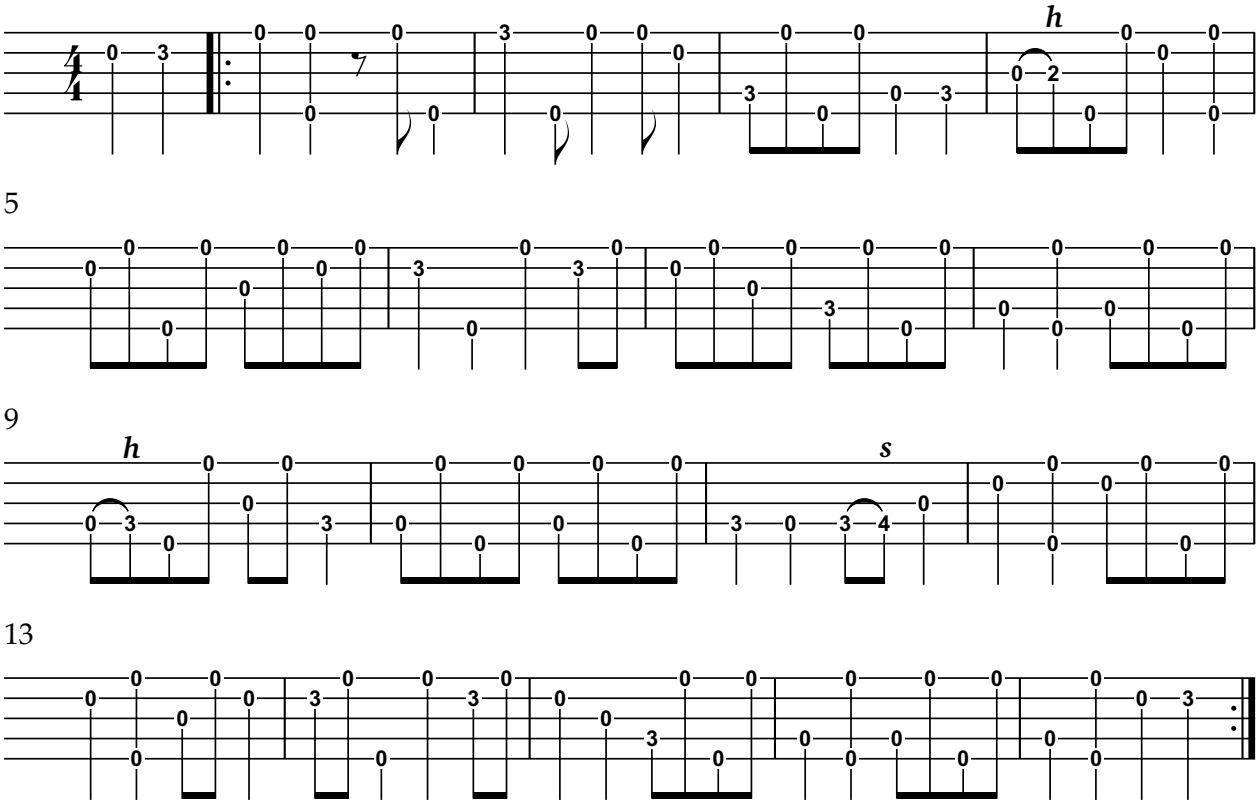
Cripple Creek

advanced



Darling Corey

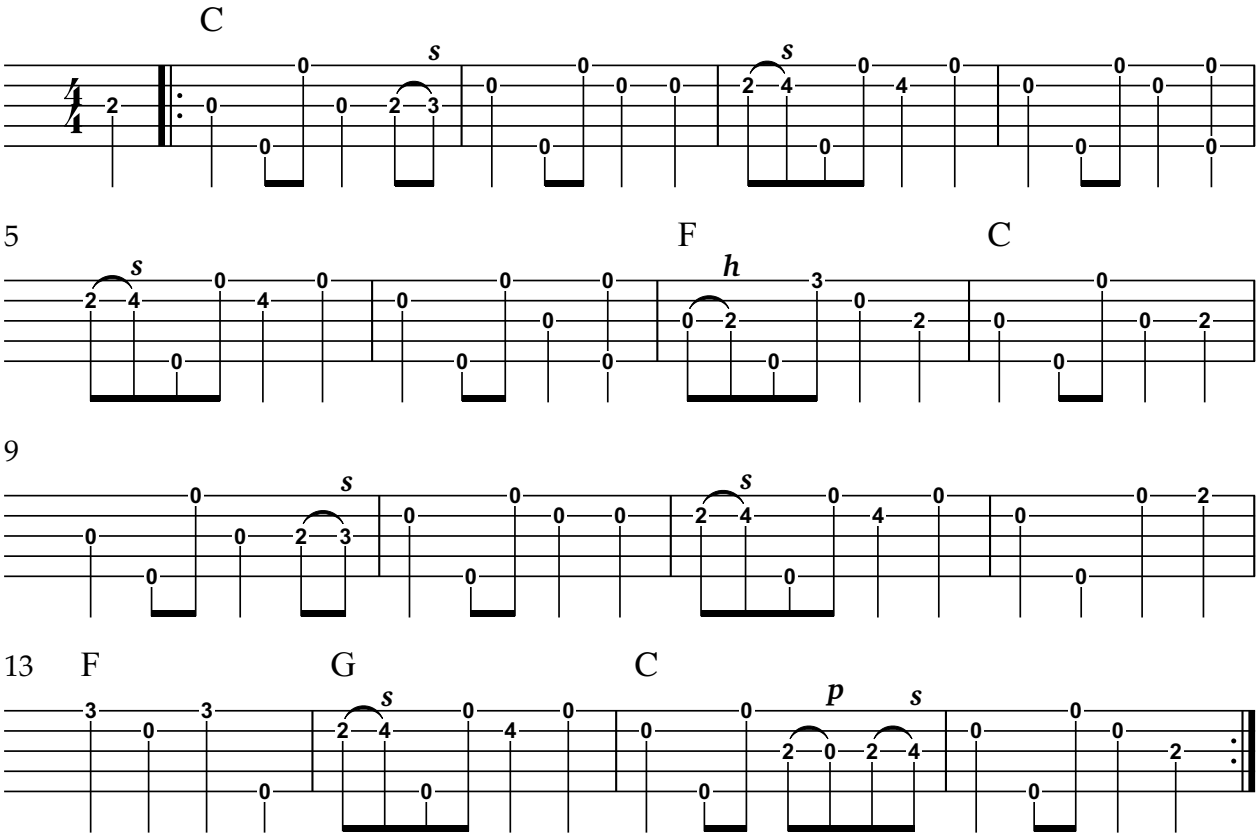
advanced



C major
gCGCD

Done Laid Around

intermediate

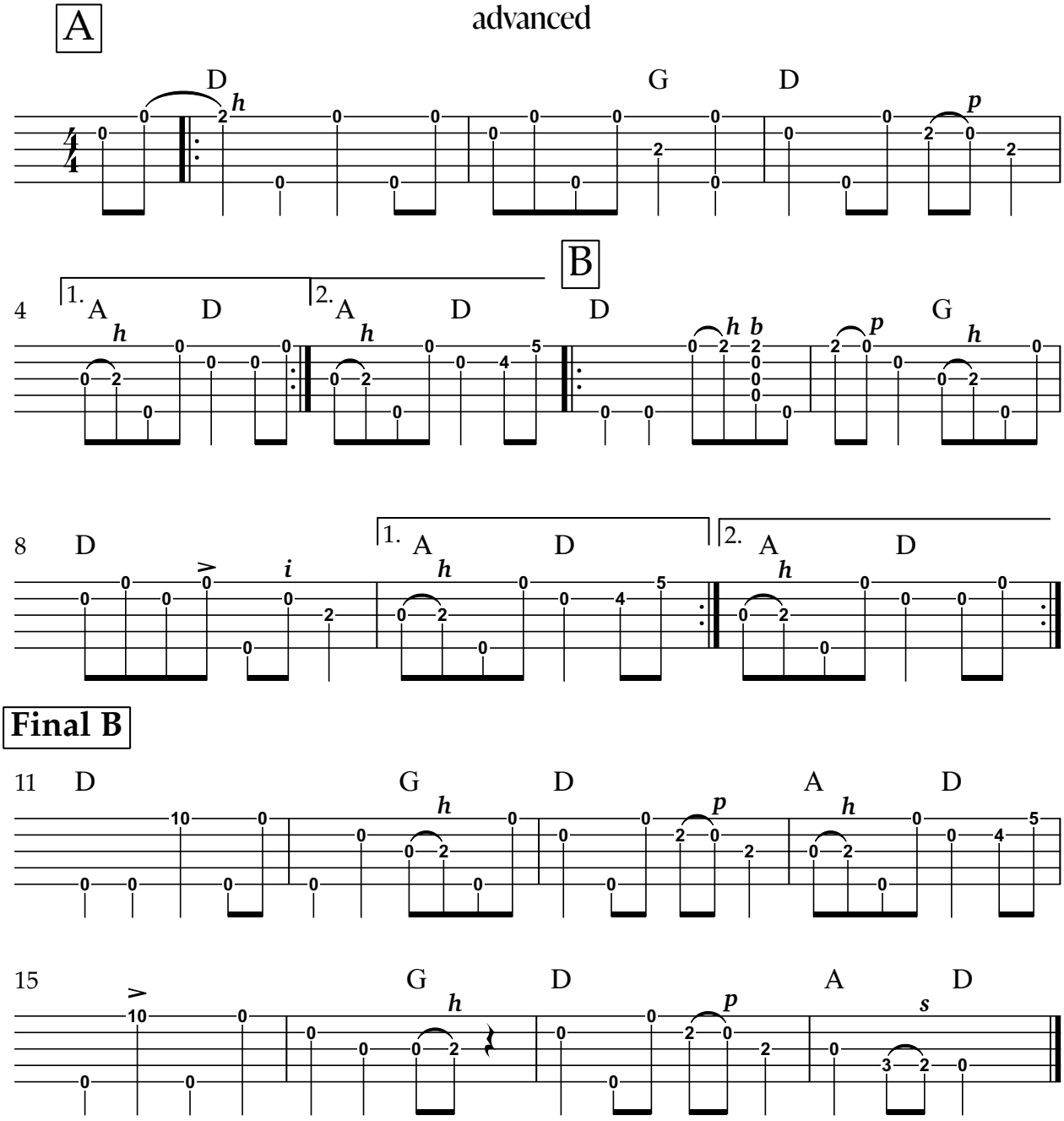


D major
aDADE

inspired by Paul Brown

Down the Road (Ida Red)

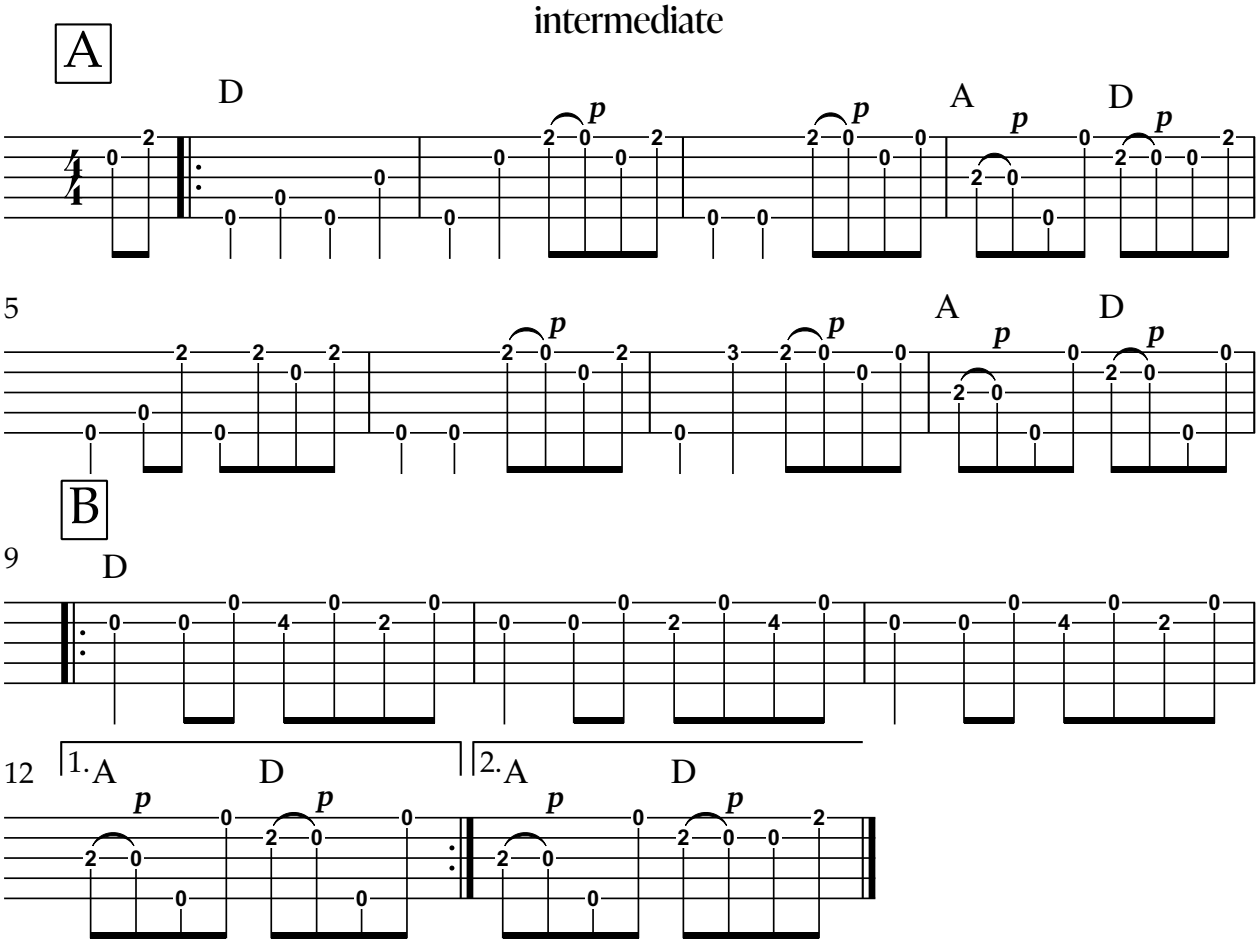
advanced



D major
aDADE

Ducks on the Millpond

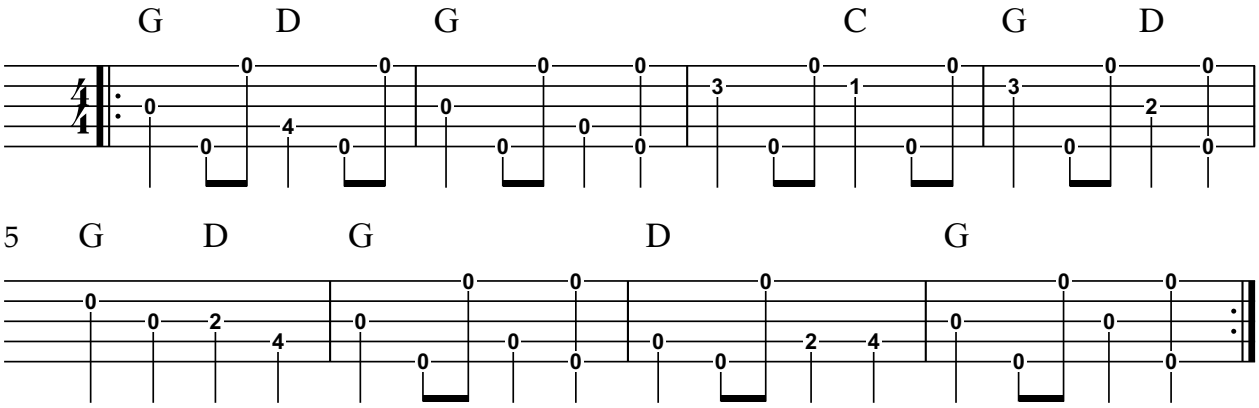
intermediate



G major
gDGBD

Groundhog

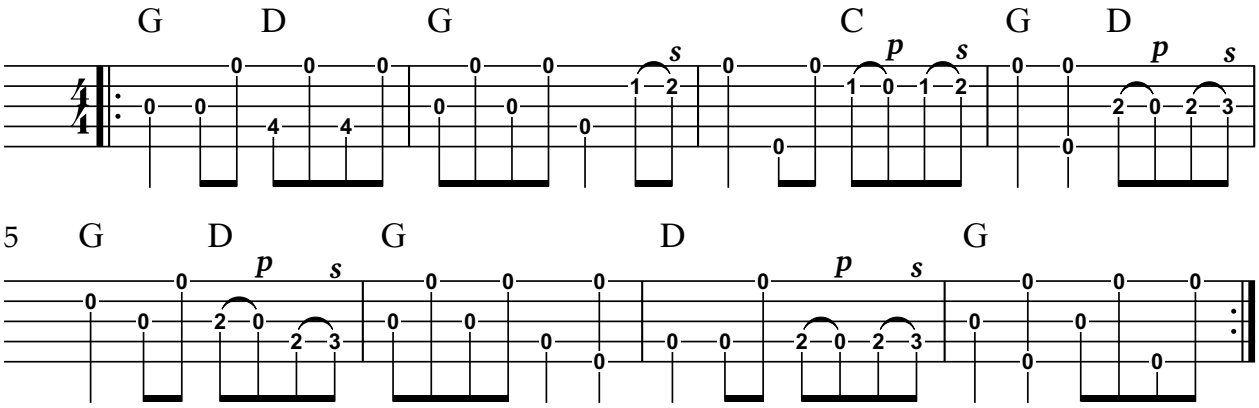
beginner



G major
gDGBD

Groundhog

intermediate

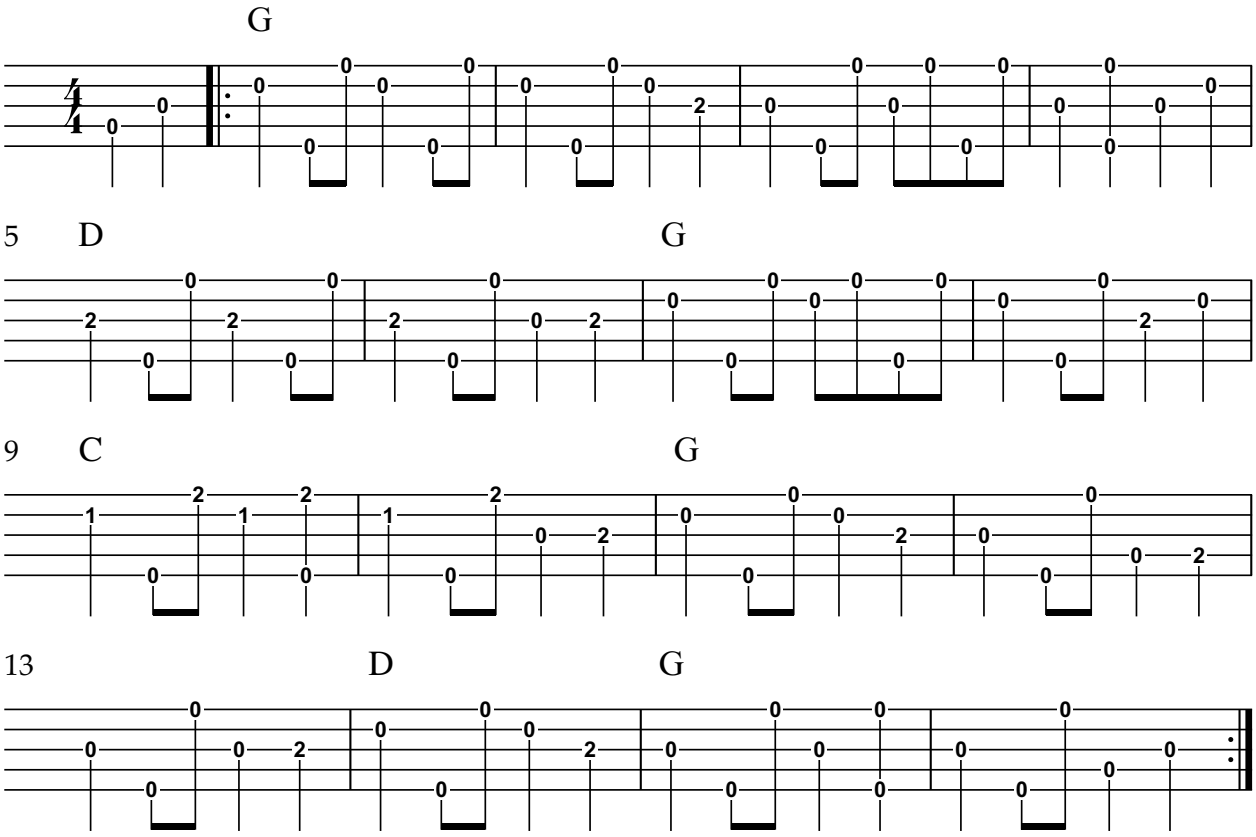


G major
gDGBD

James A. Bland

Hand Me Down My Walking Cane

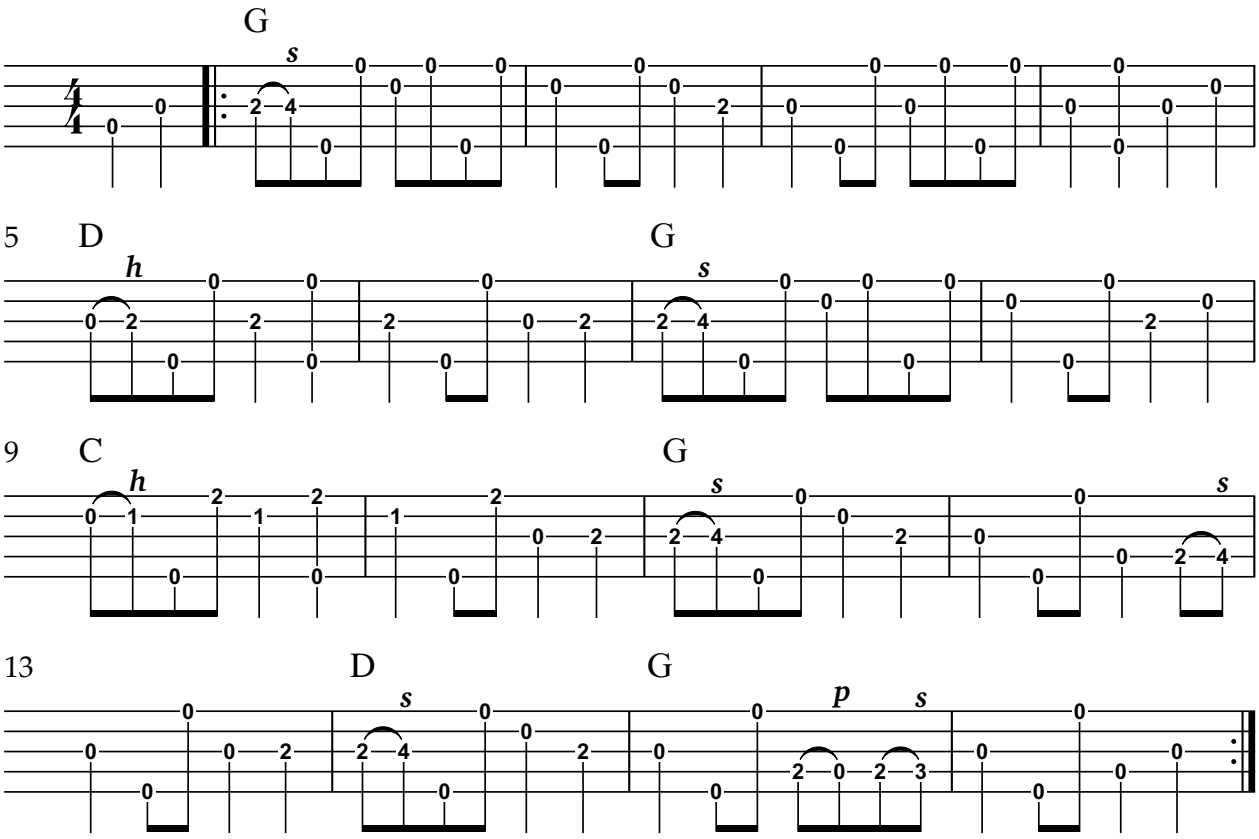
beginner



James A. Bland

Hand Me Down My Walking Cane

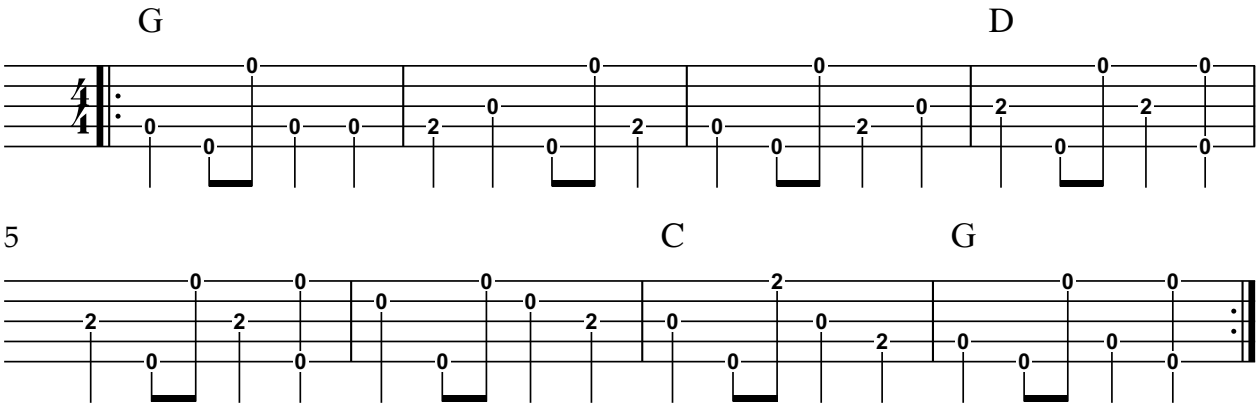
intermediate



G major
gDGBD

Handsome Molly

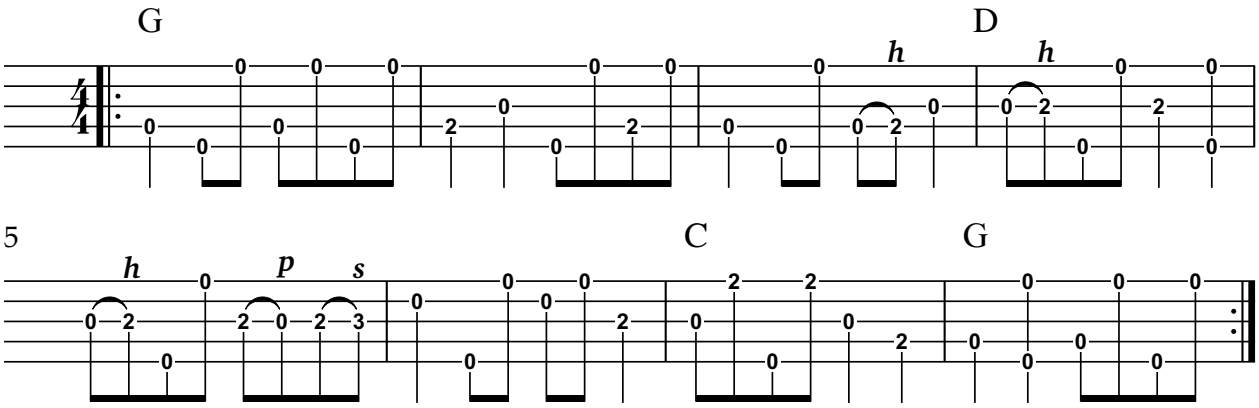
beginner



G major
gDGBD

Handsome Molly

intermediate

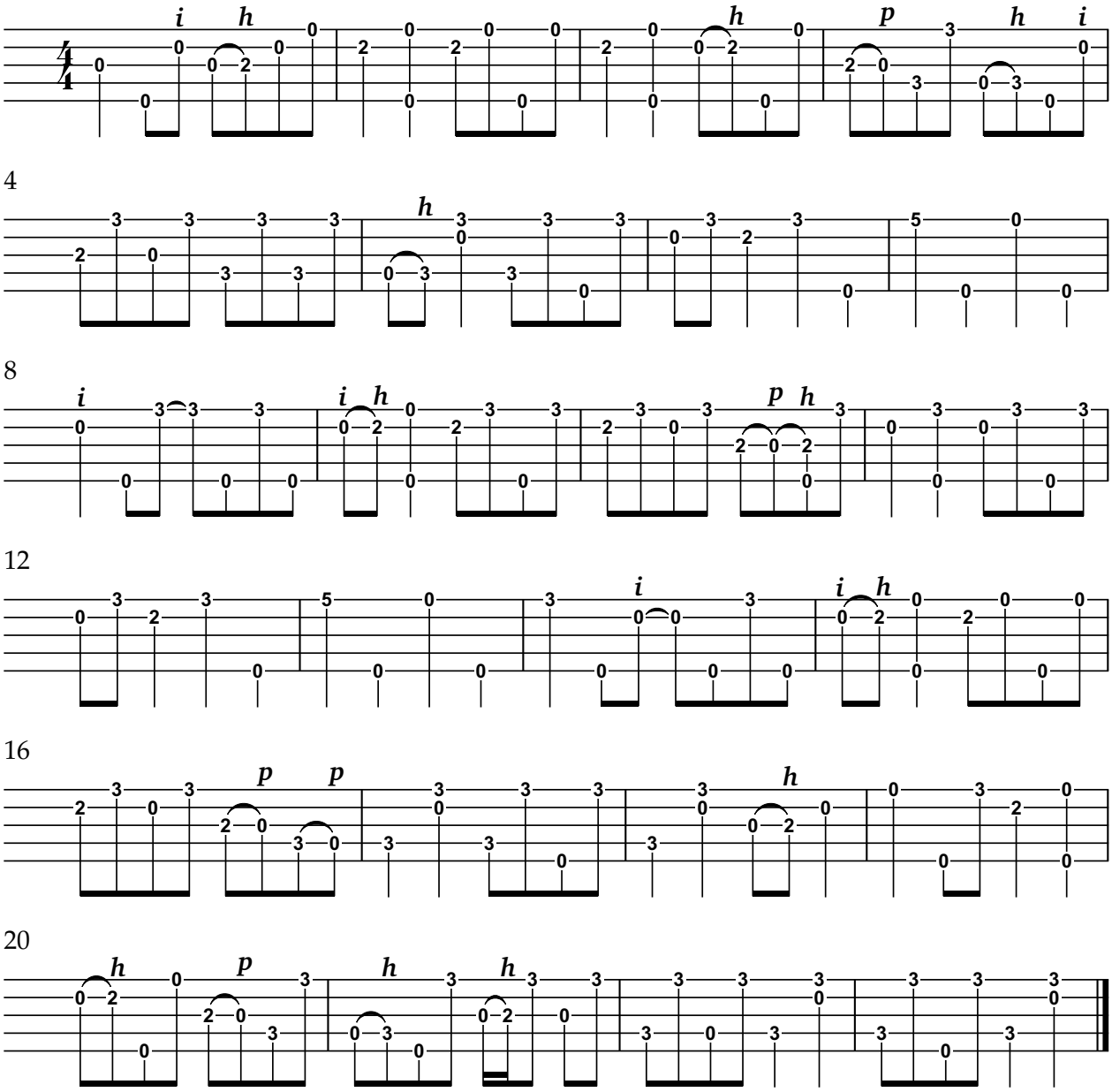


F major
fDGCD

from Roscoe Holcomb

The Hills of Mexico

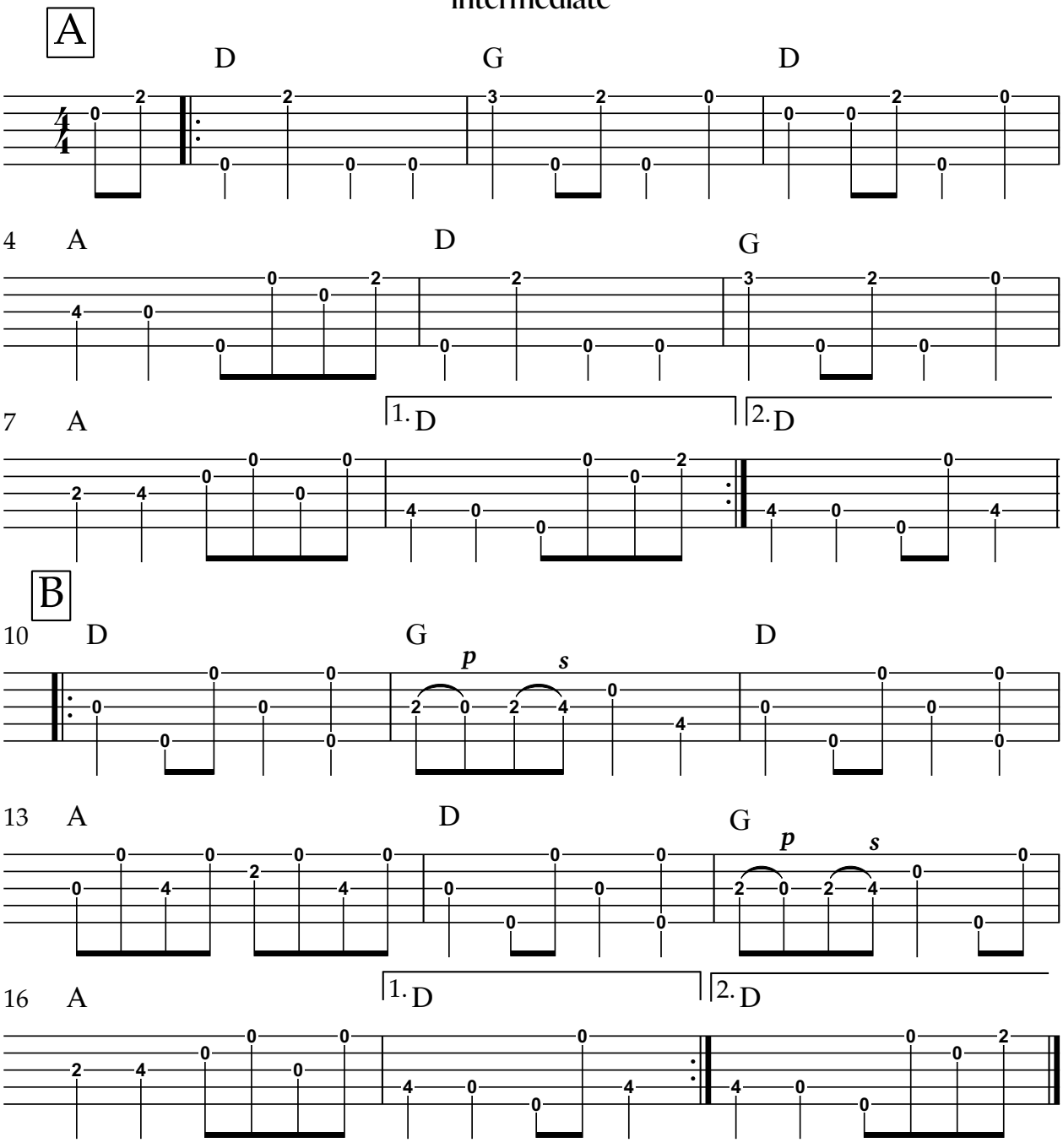
advanced



D major
aDADE

John Dye

intermediate

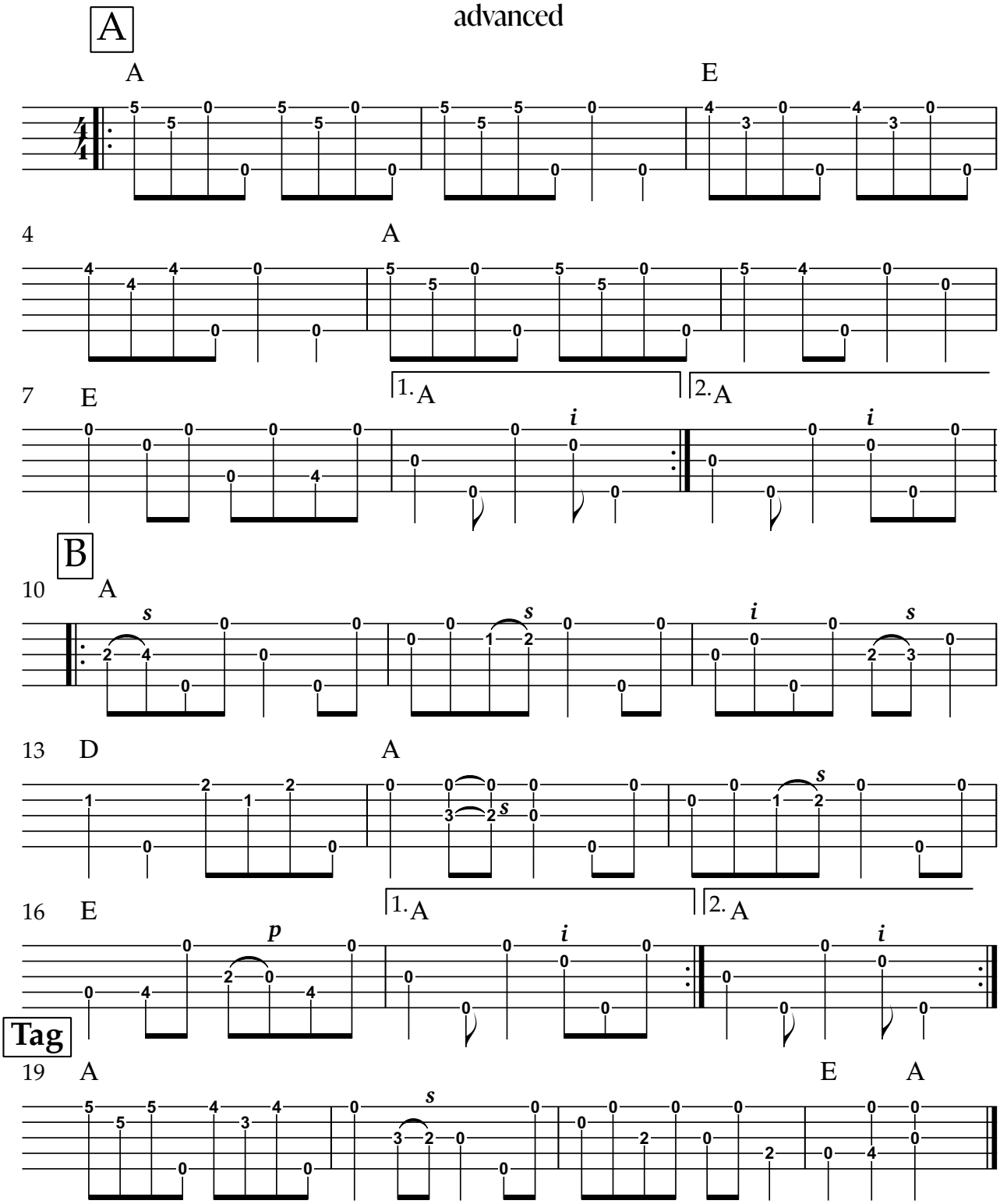


A major
aEAC♯E

from Benton Flippen

June Apple

advanced

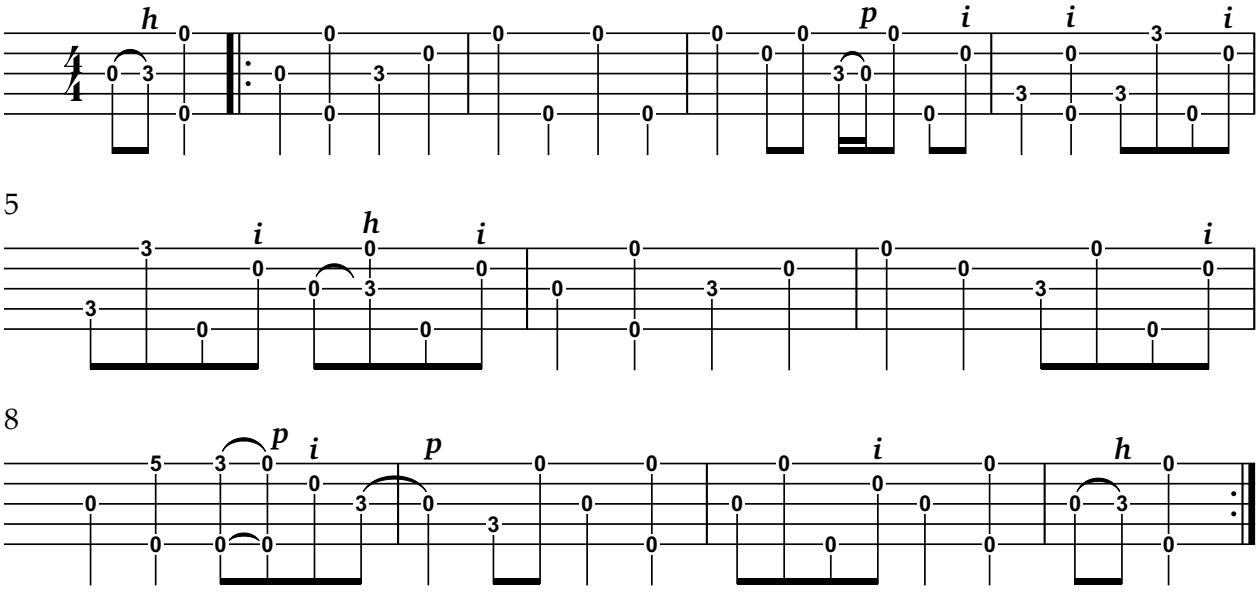


G minor
fDGCD

from Lee Sexton

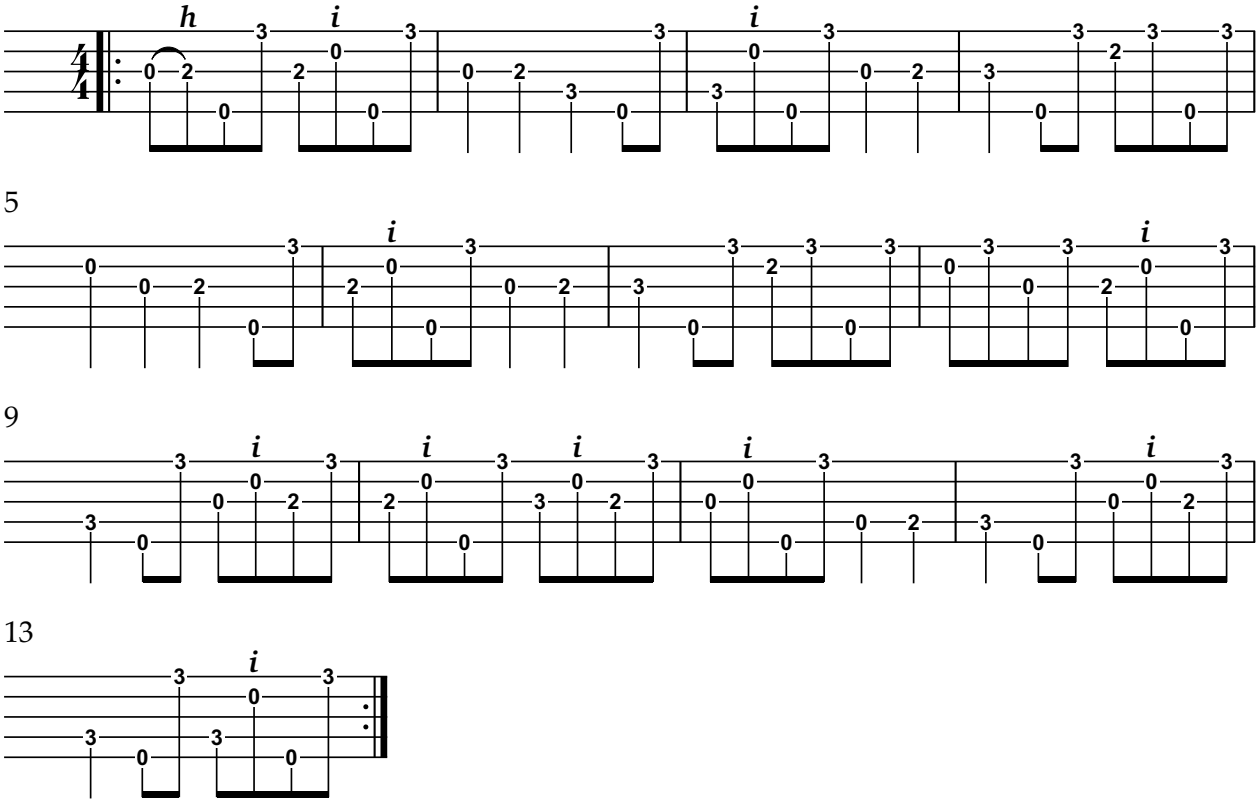
Little Maggie

advanced



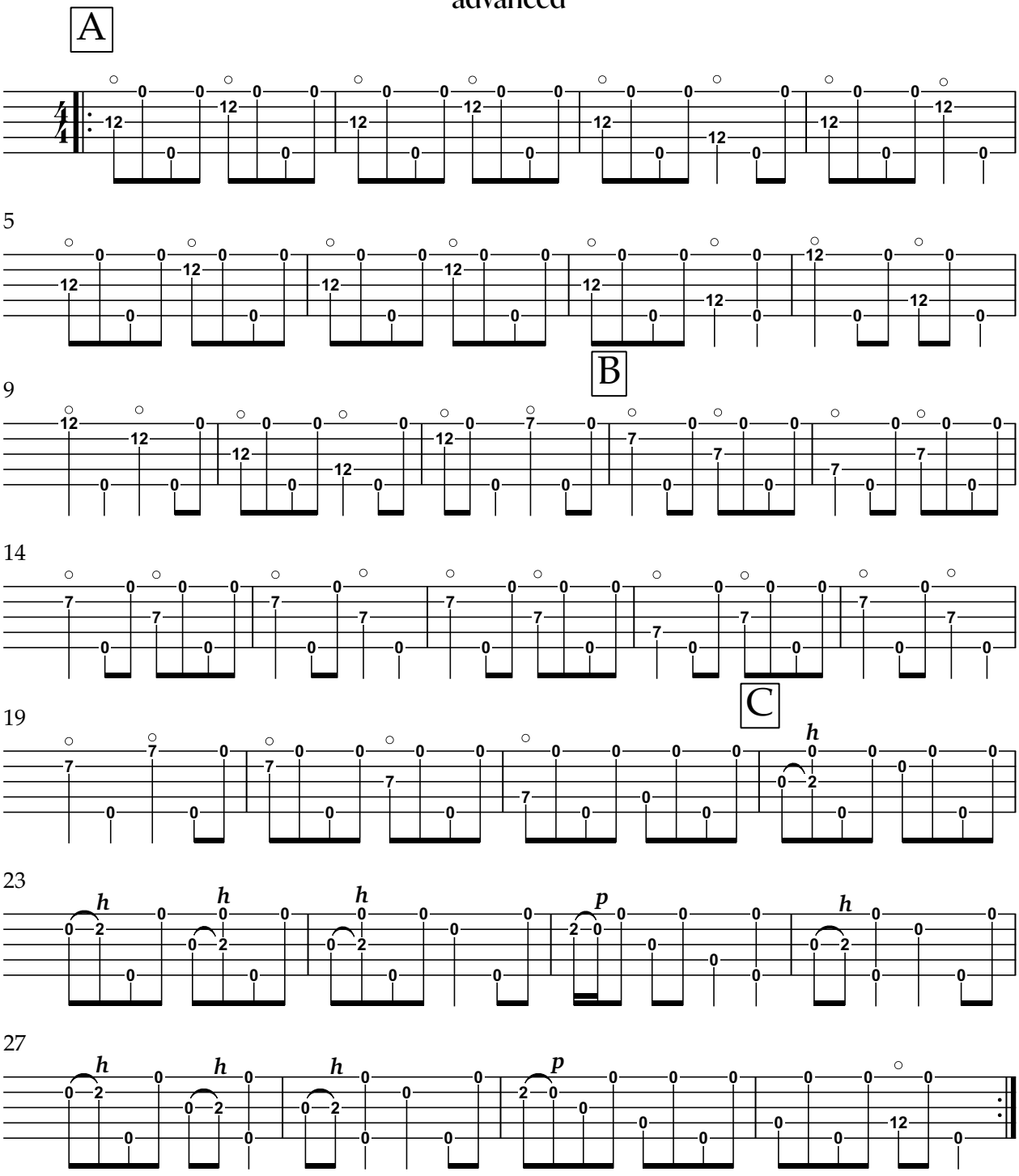
Little Sunshine

advanced



Lost Gander

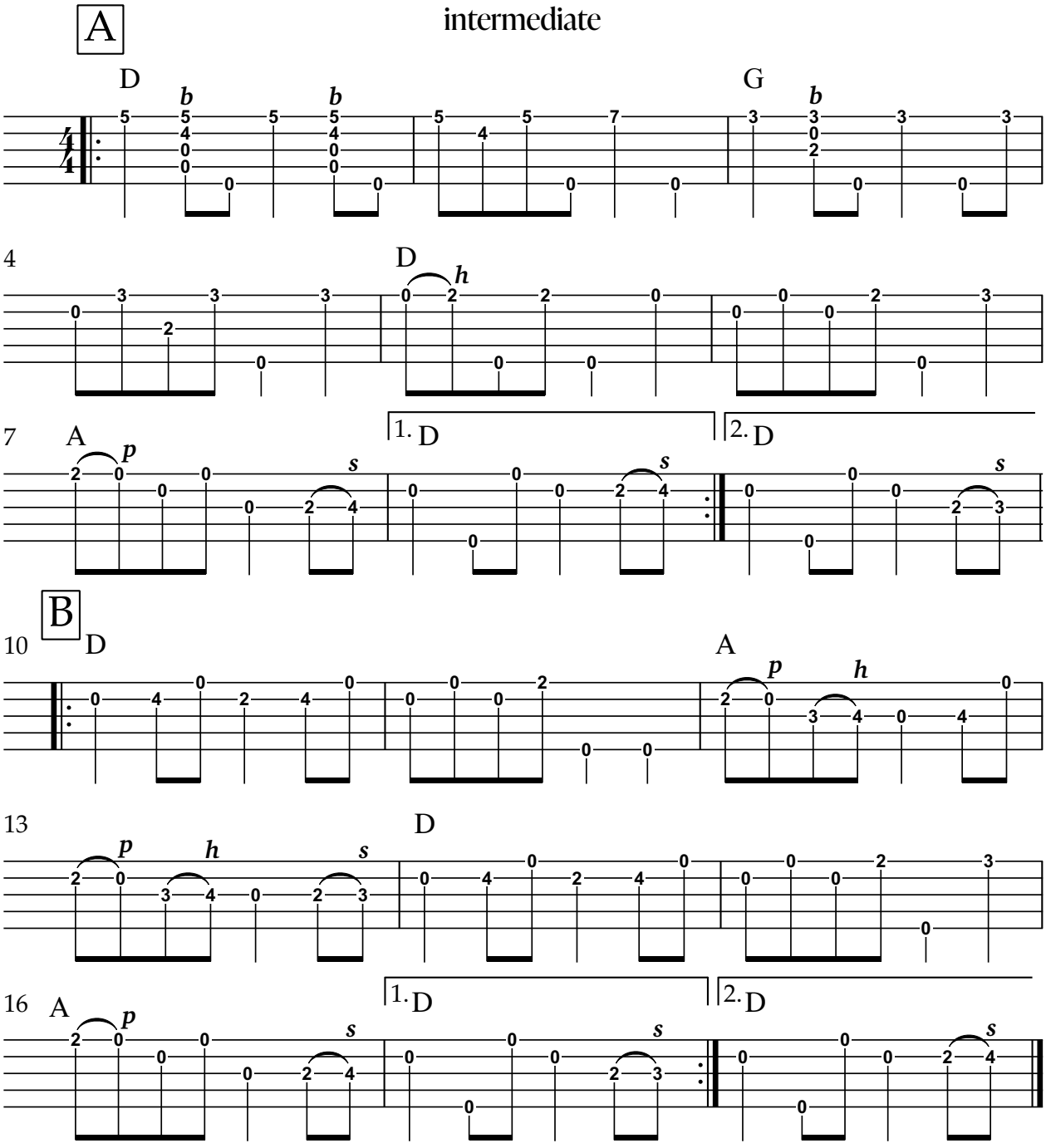
advanced



D major
aDADE

Mississippi Sawyer

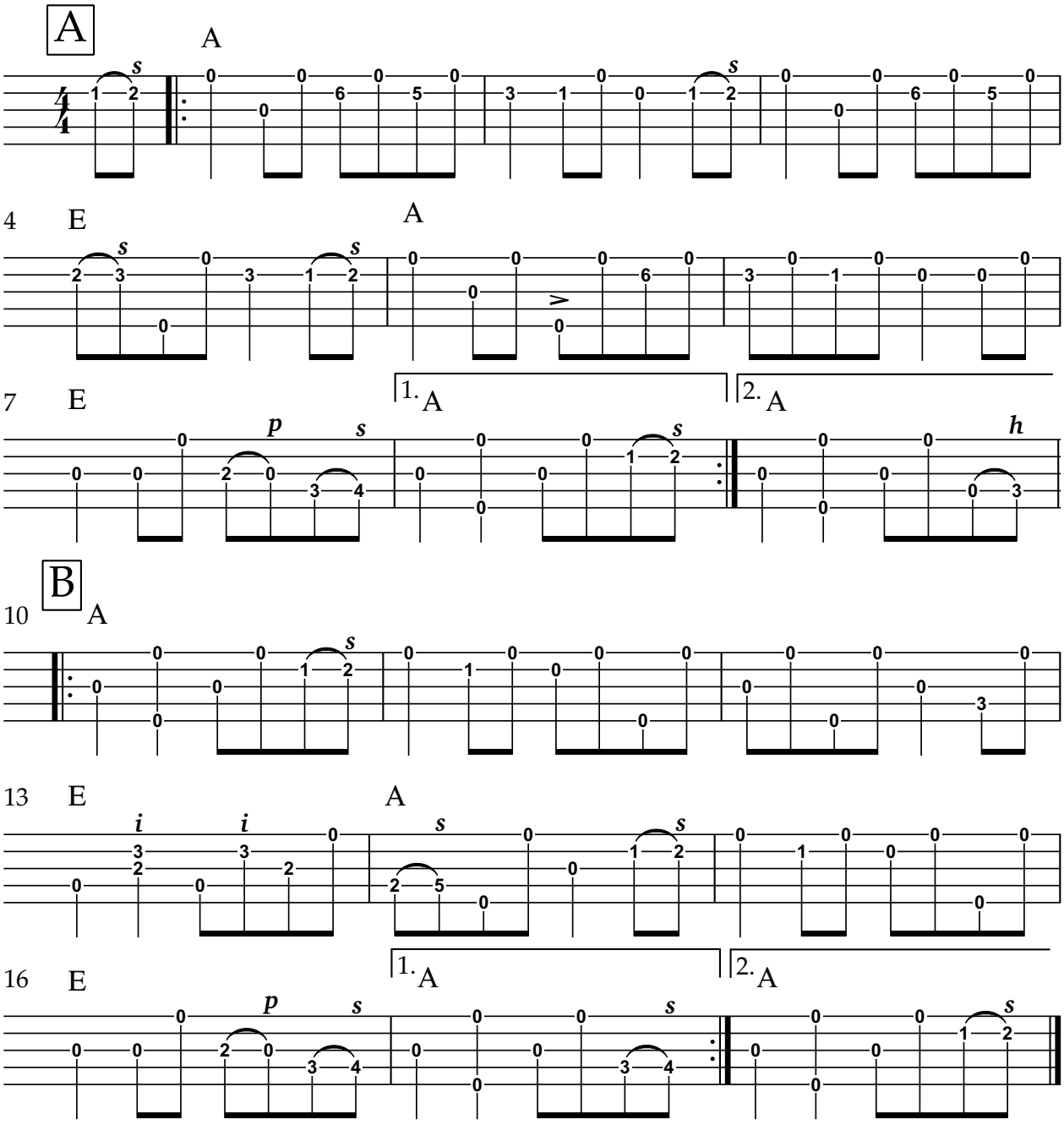
intermediate



A Mixolydian
aEAC♯E

Old Joe Clark

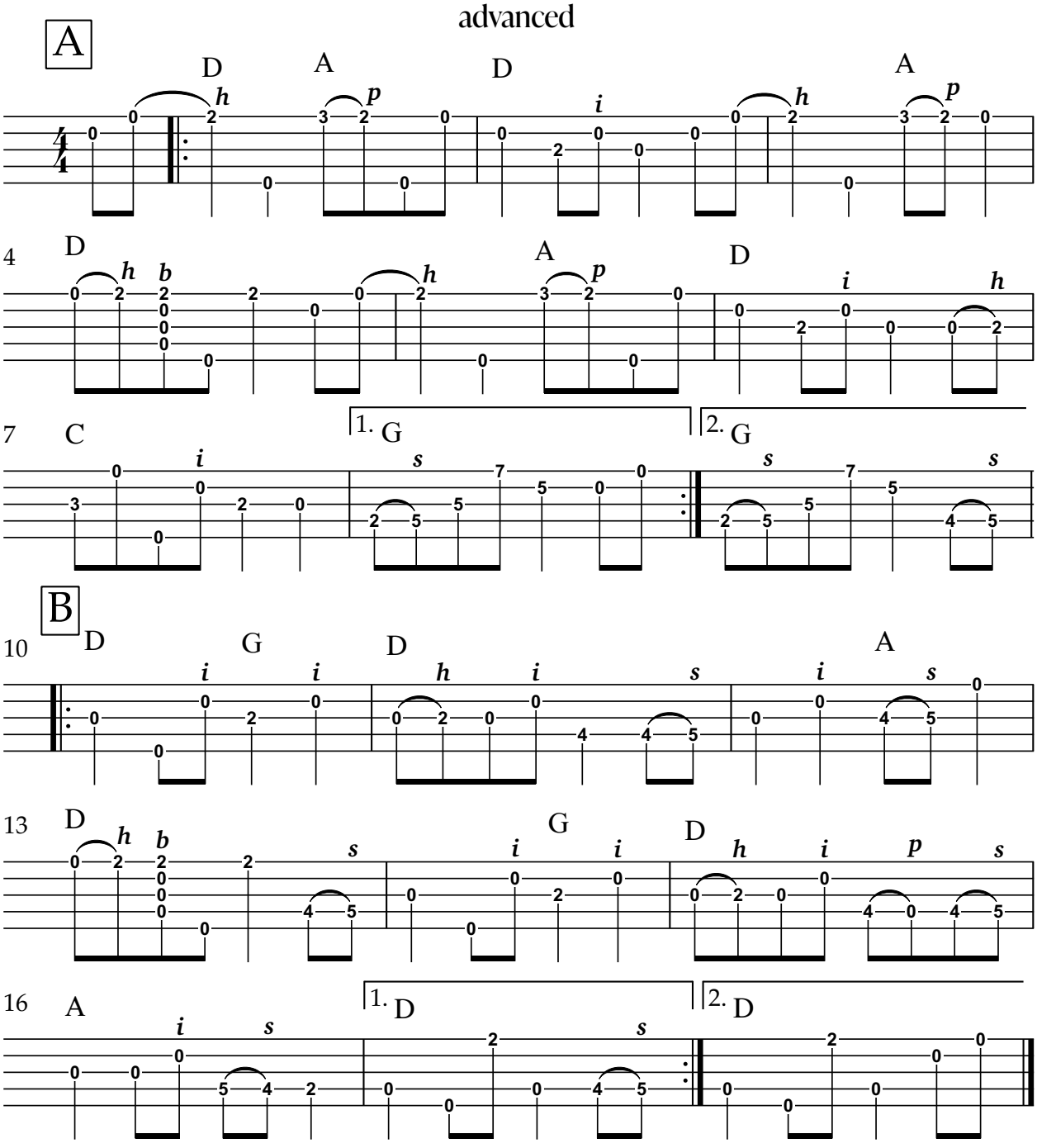
intermediate



D major
aDADE

Over the Waterfall

advanced

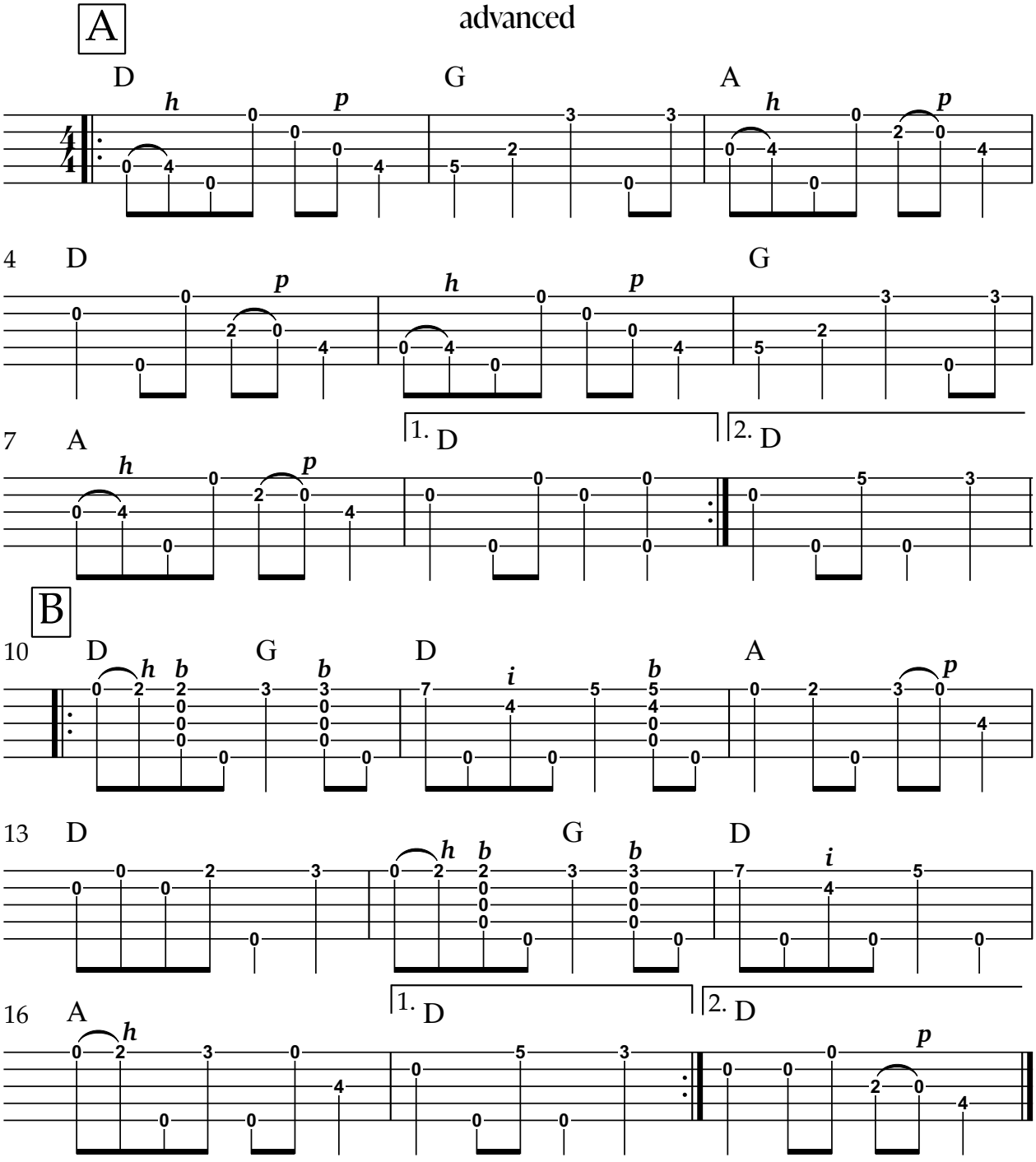


In the first and second endings of the A part, slide from the 2nd fret up to the 5th fret with your index finger, then make a barre chord across the 5th fret with the index finger while the ring or pinky finger holds down the 7th fret on the first string.

D major
aDADE

Rachel

advanced

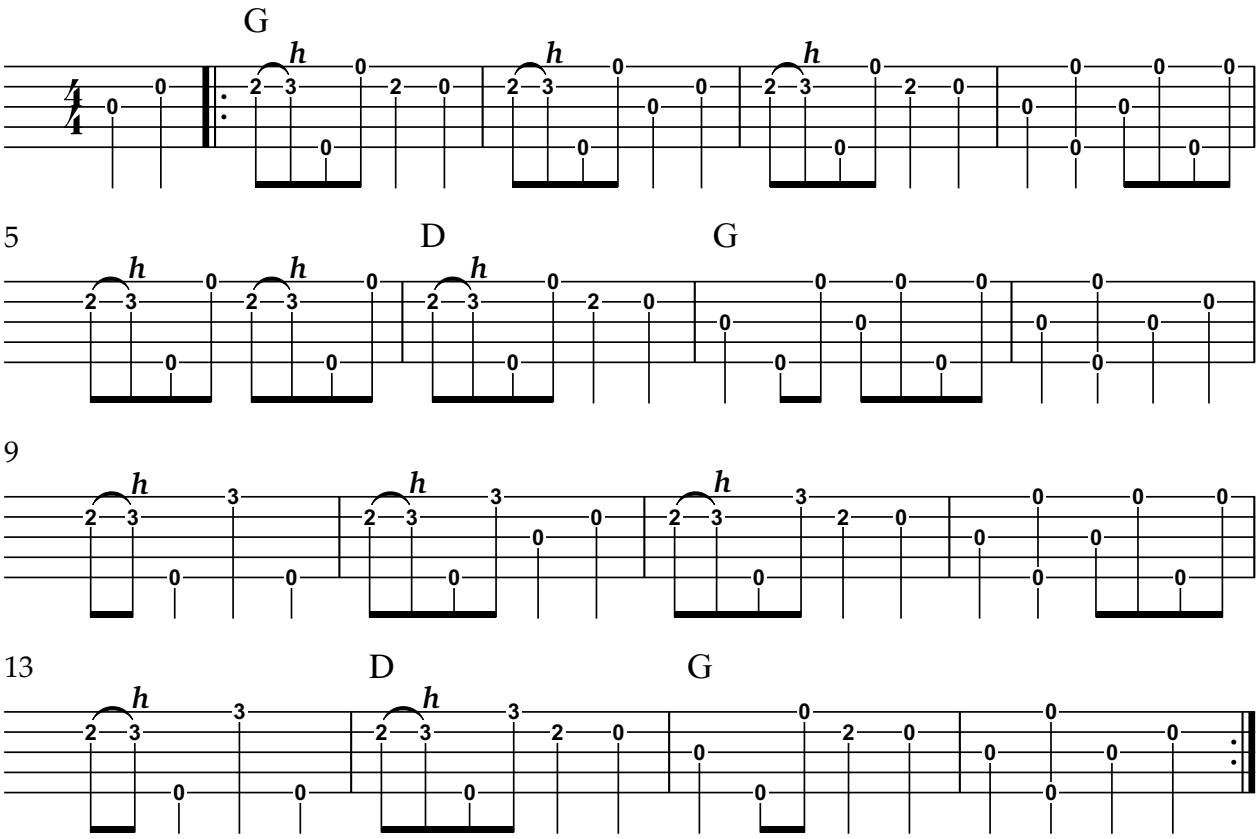


G

gDGBD

Ruben's Train (Train 45)

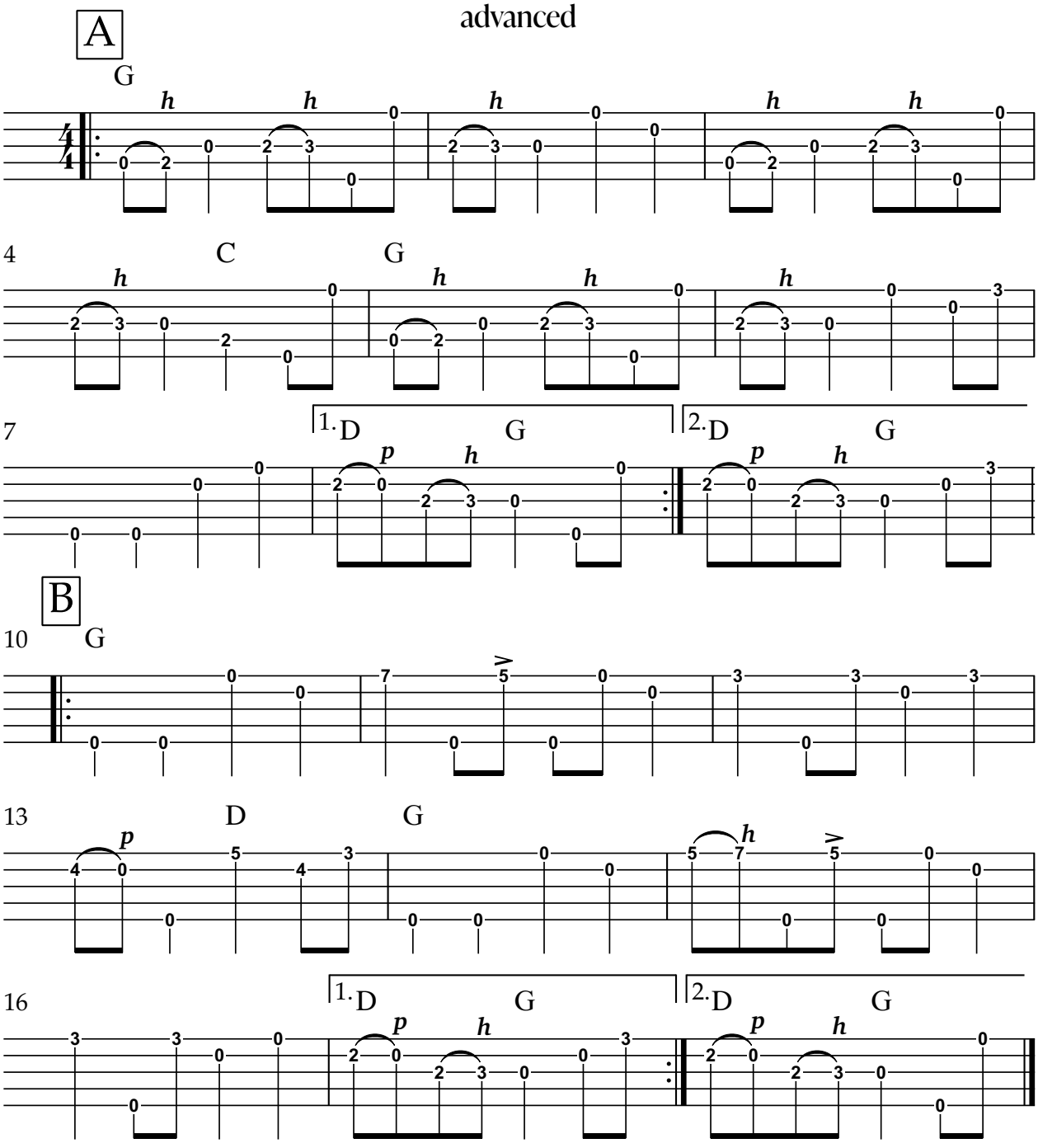
intermediate



G major
gDGDE

Sandy River Belle

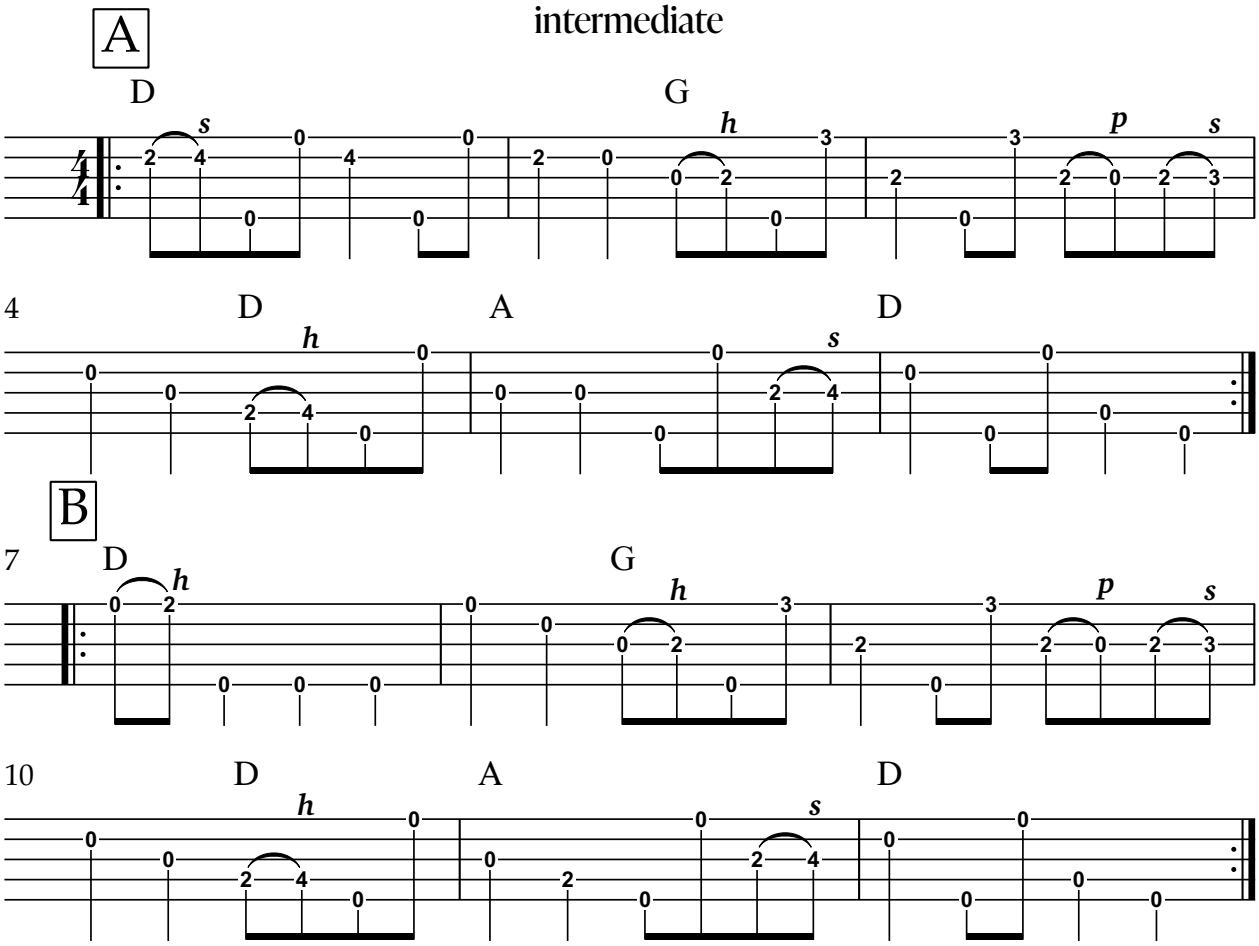
advanced



D major
aDADE

Say Darling Say

intermediate

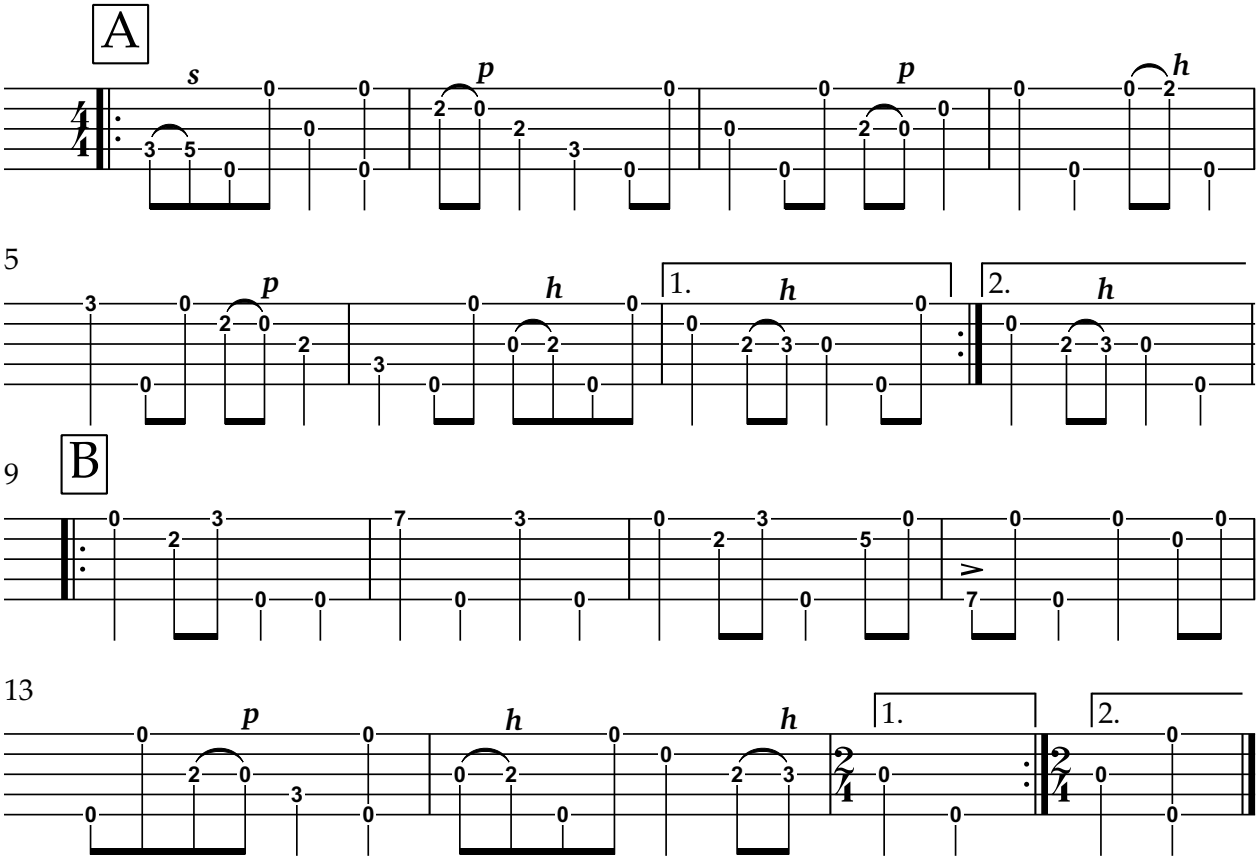


G minor
gDGCD

inspired by Wade Ward

Shady Grove

advanced

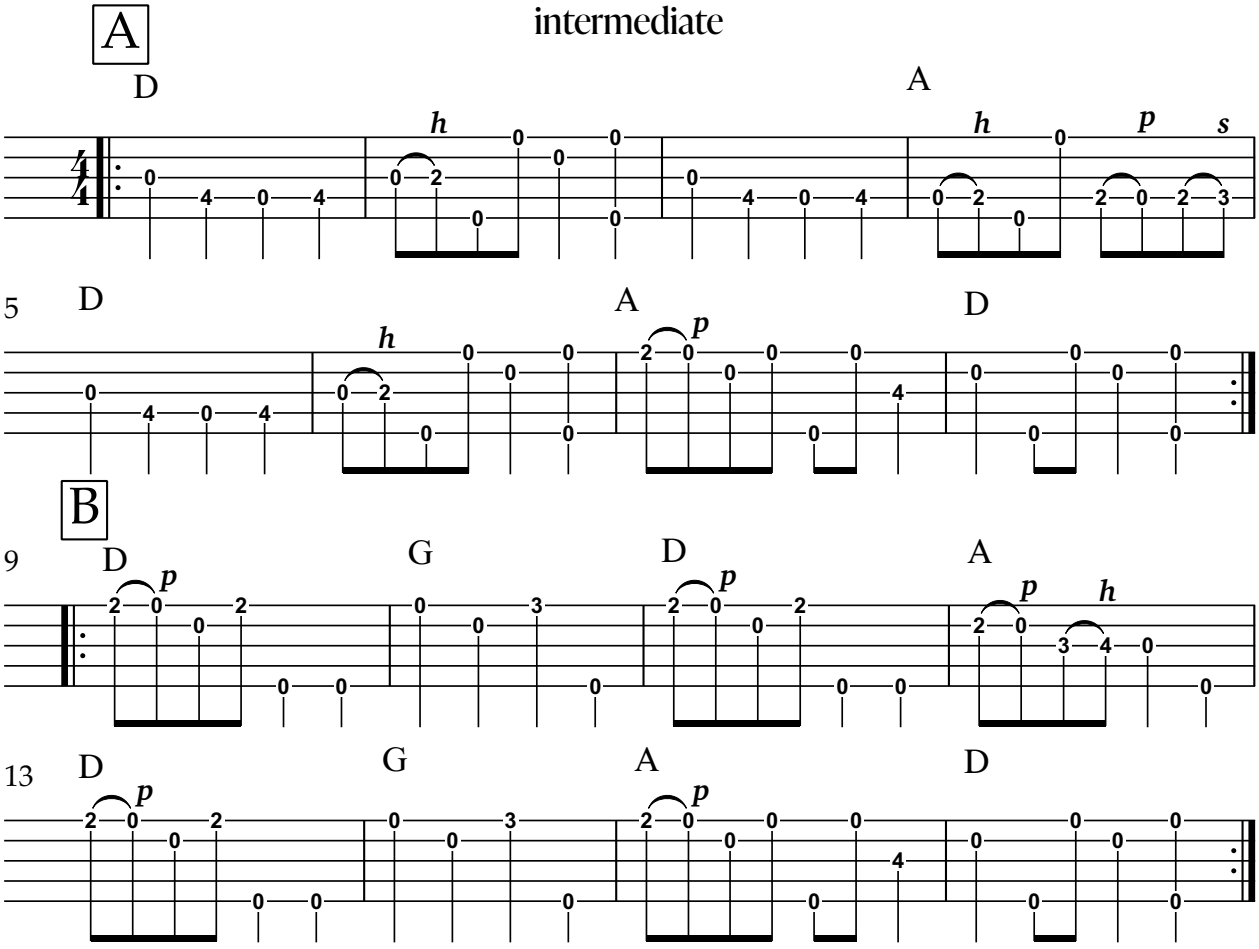


Wade Ward had a captivating clawhammer version of "Shady Grove." I learned it the best I could from his playing on the album *High Atmosphere*, then came up with this two-finger arrangement.

D major
aDADE

Soldier's Joy

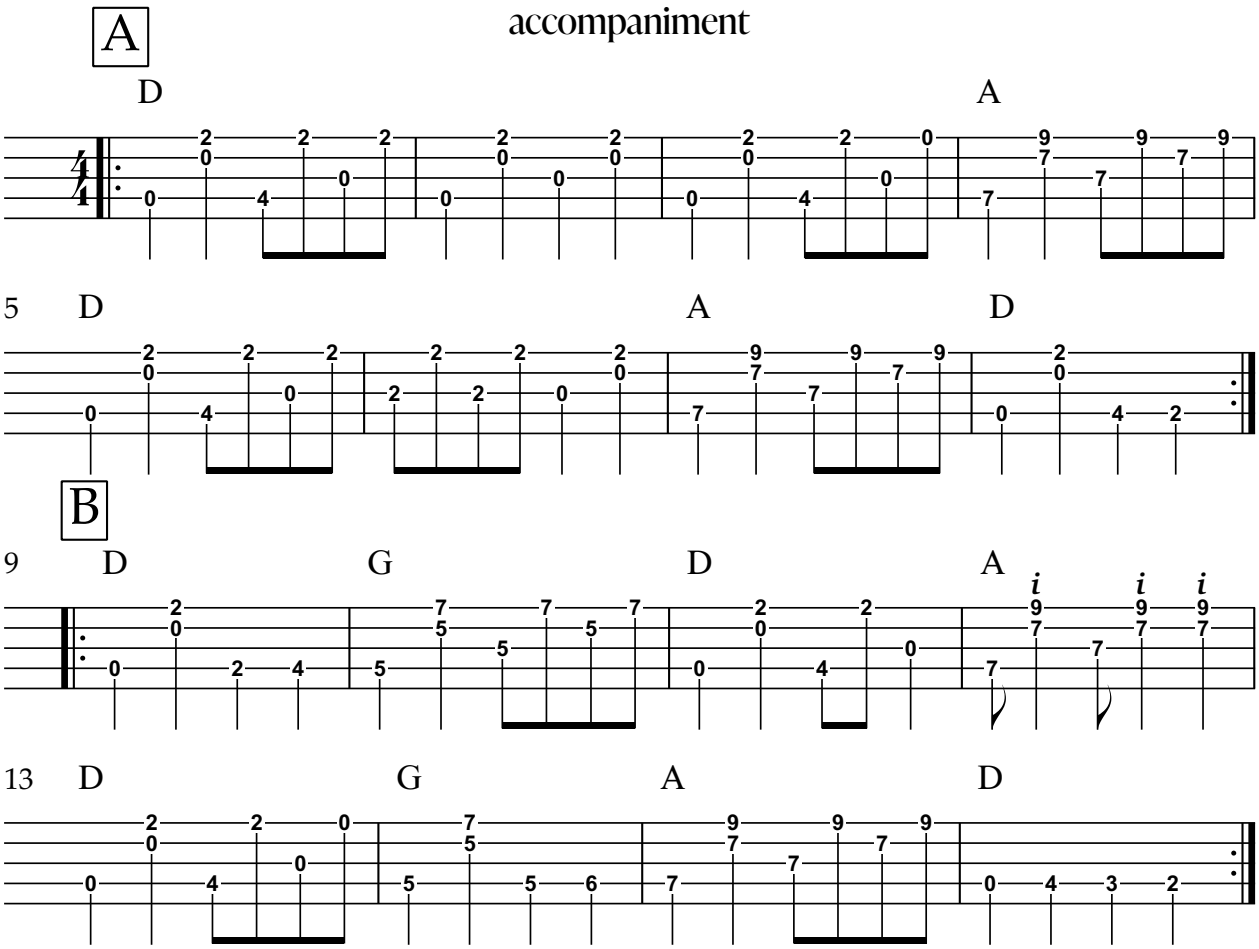
intermediate



D major
aDADE

Soldier's Joy

accompaniment



I don't often hear folks provide accompaniment using the two-finger style, but it is fun! This is how I would approach it on my favorite fiddle tune. All the dyads (pairs of notes) on this page are pinches with the thumb and index finger, except in measure 12, where the index finger plucks both notes.

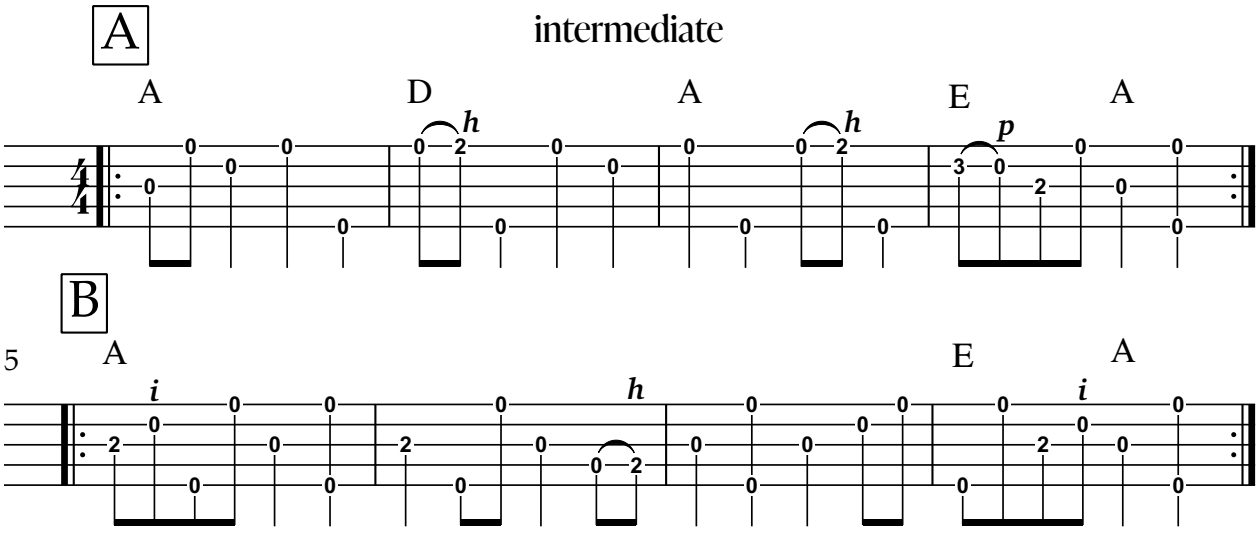
For the G and A chords, I recommend a barre chord. That means your index finger will lay flat across either the 5th (G) or 7th (A) fret while another finger holds down the 7th (G) or 9th (A) fret on the first string.

A major
aEAC♯E

from Morgan Sexton

Sourwood Mountain

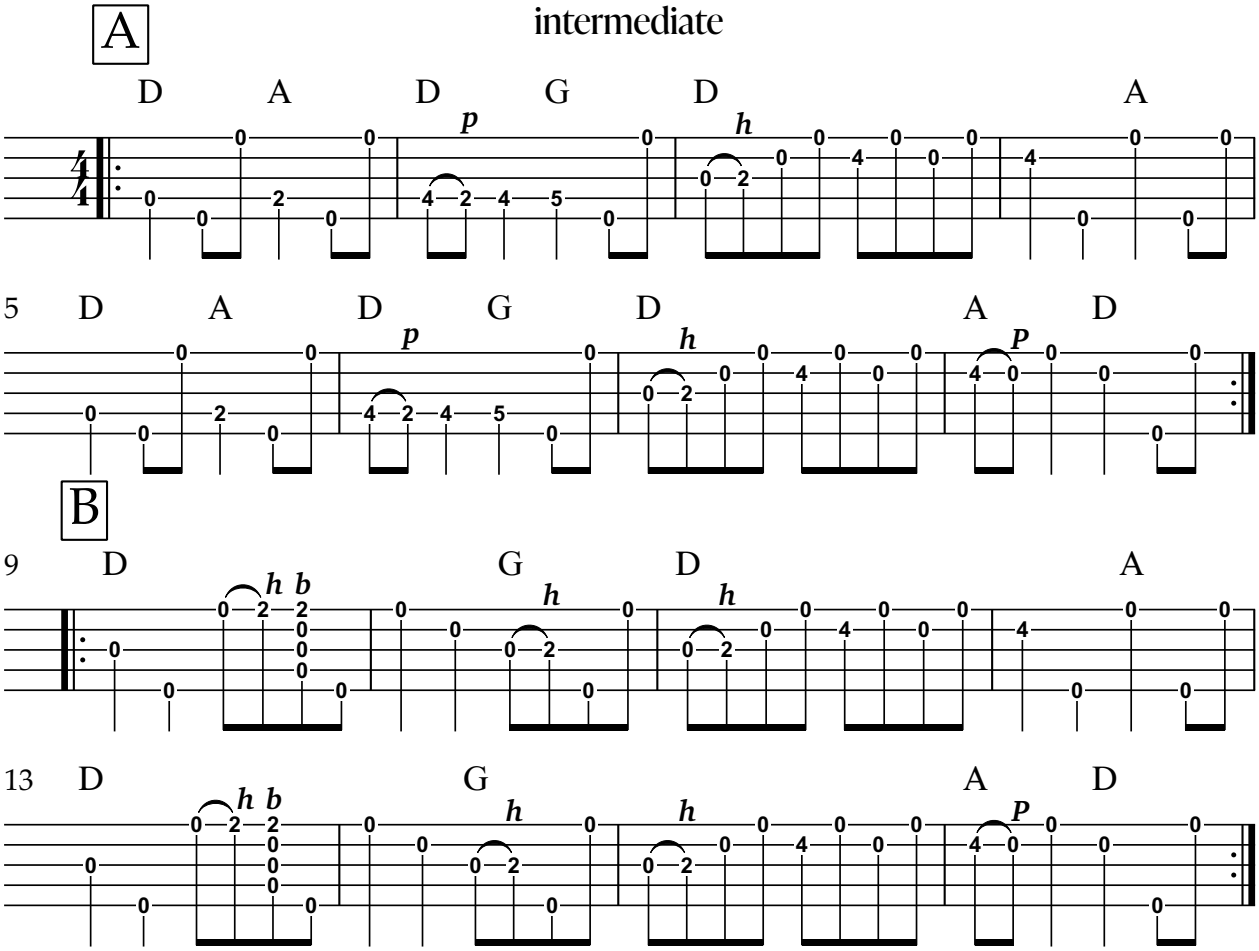
intermediate



D major
aDADE

Spotted Pony

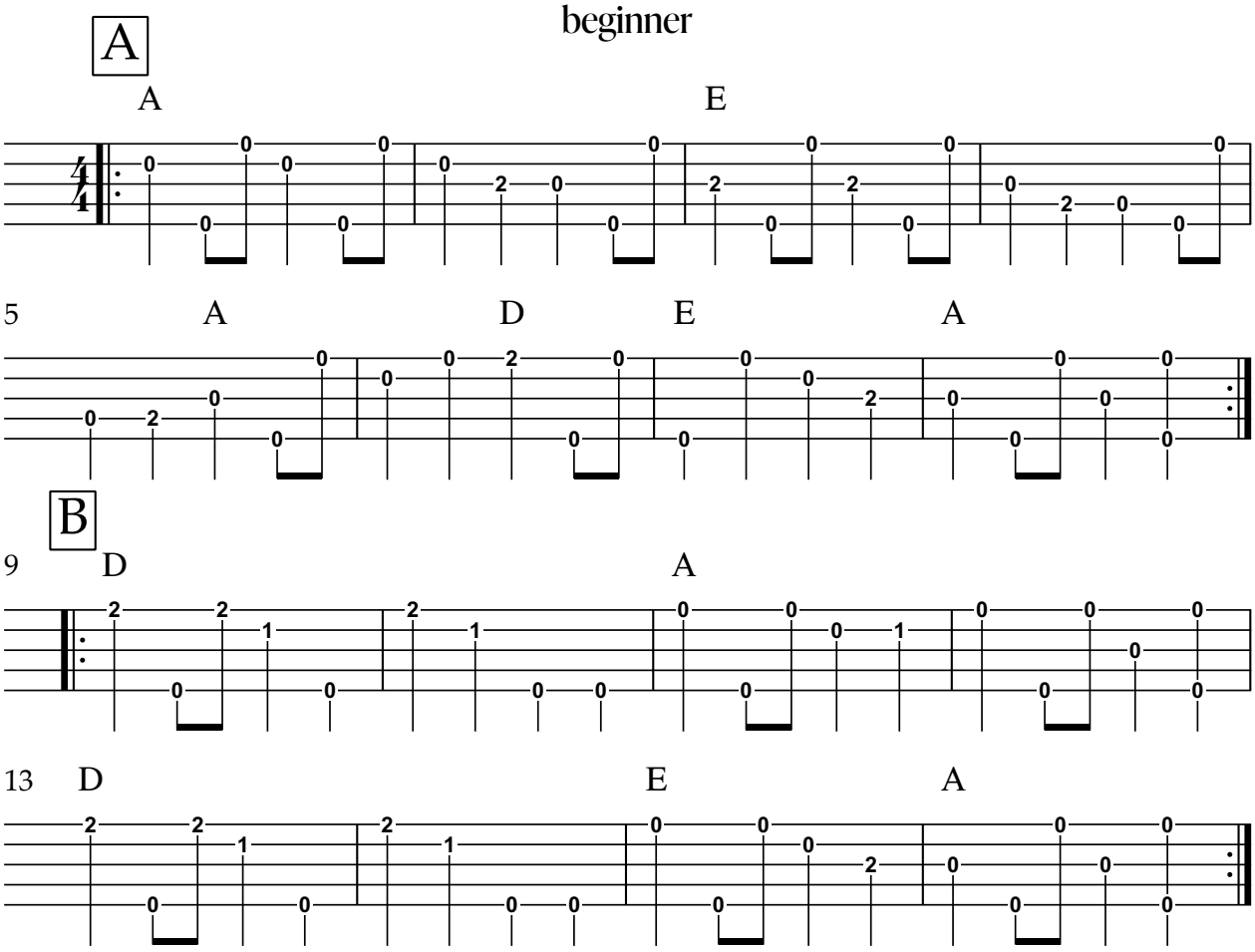
intermediate



A major
aEAC♯E

Stay All Night

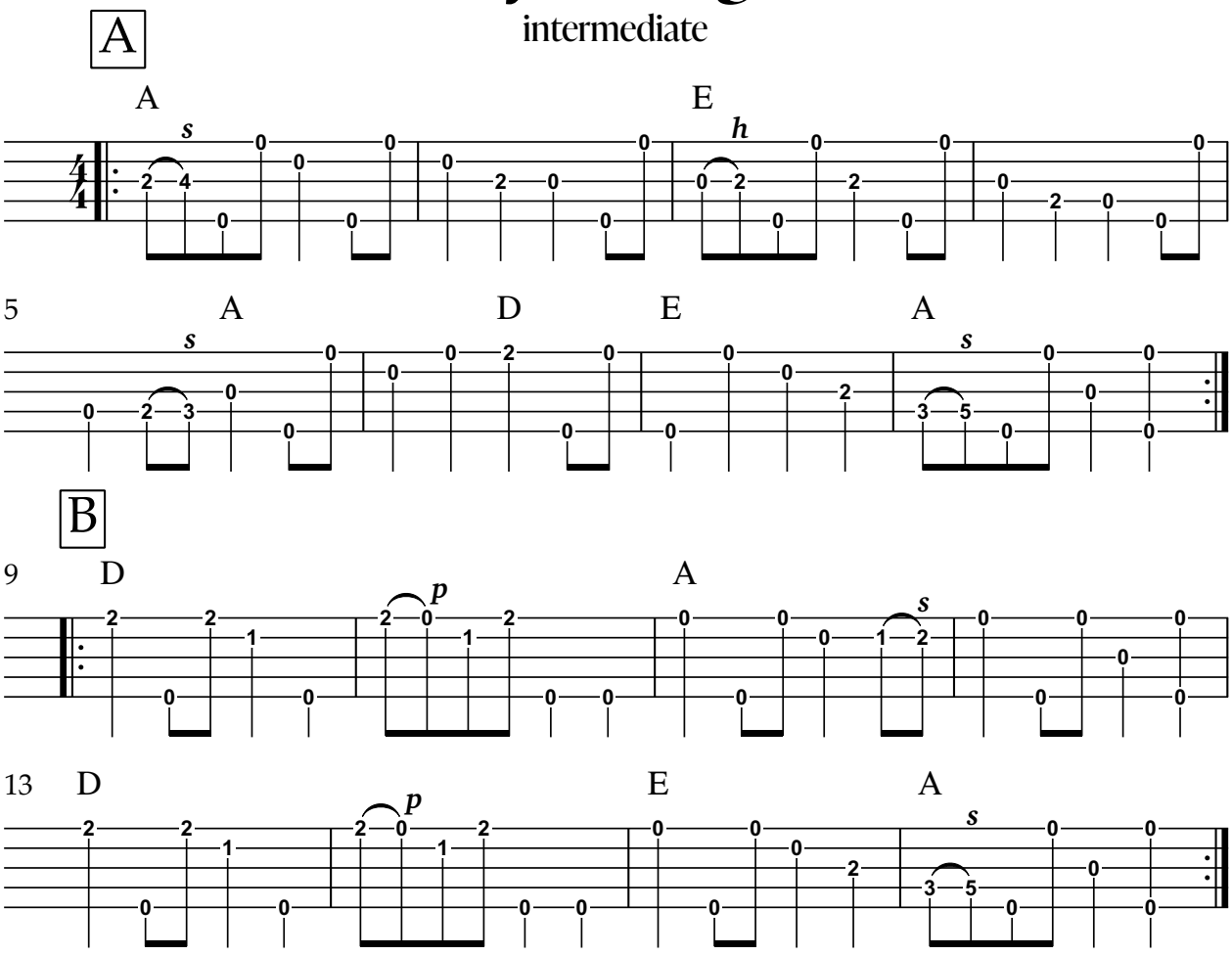
beginner



A major
aEAC♯E

Stay All Night

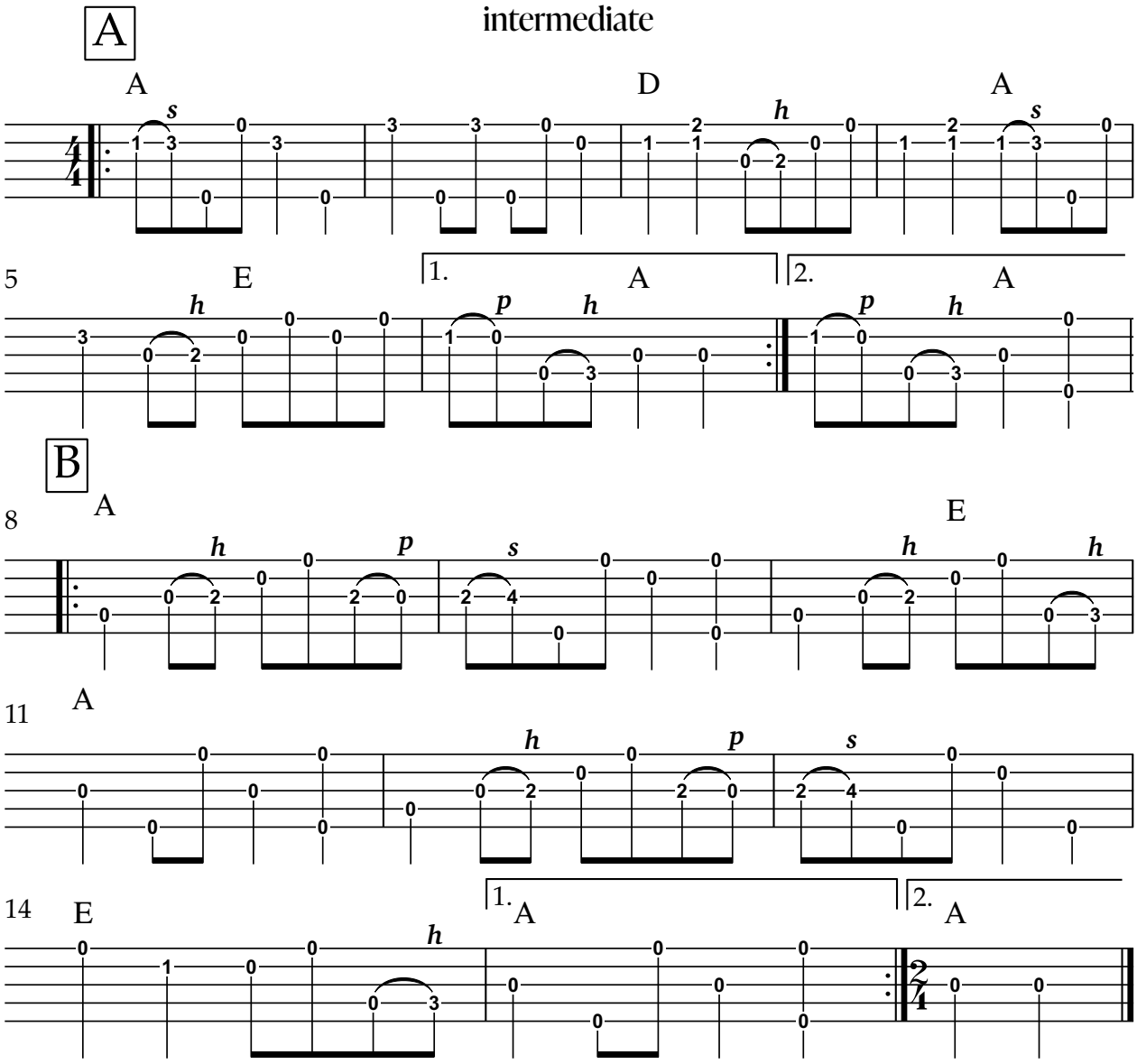
intermediate



A Mixolydian
aEAC♯E

Trouble on the Mind

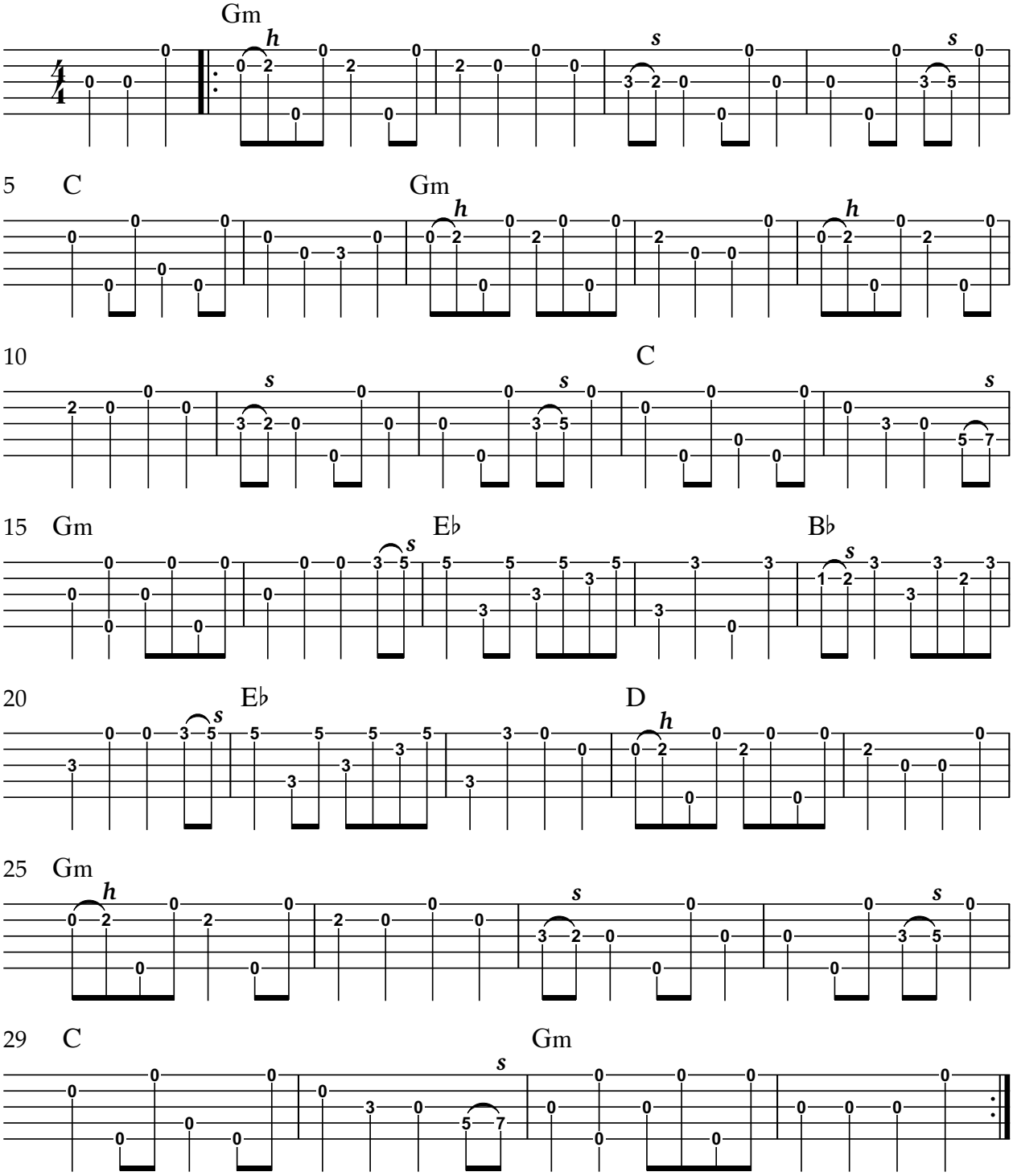
intermediate



G minor
gCGCD

Wayfaring Stranger

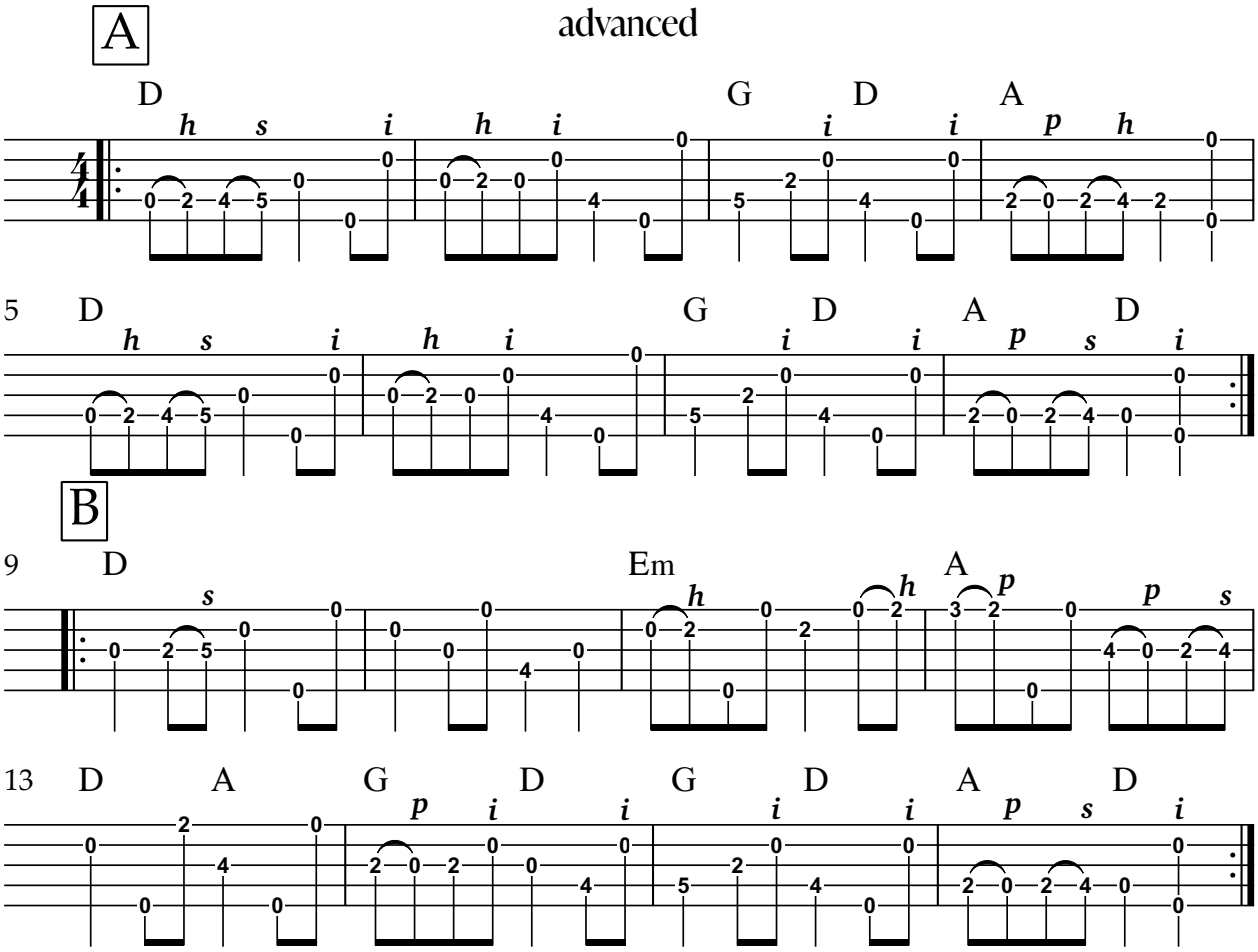
advanced



D major
aDADE

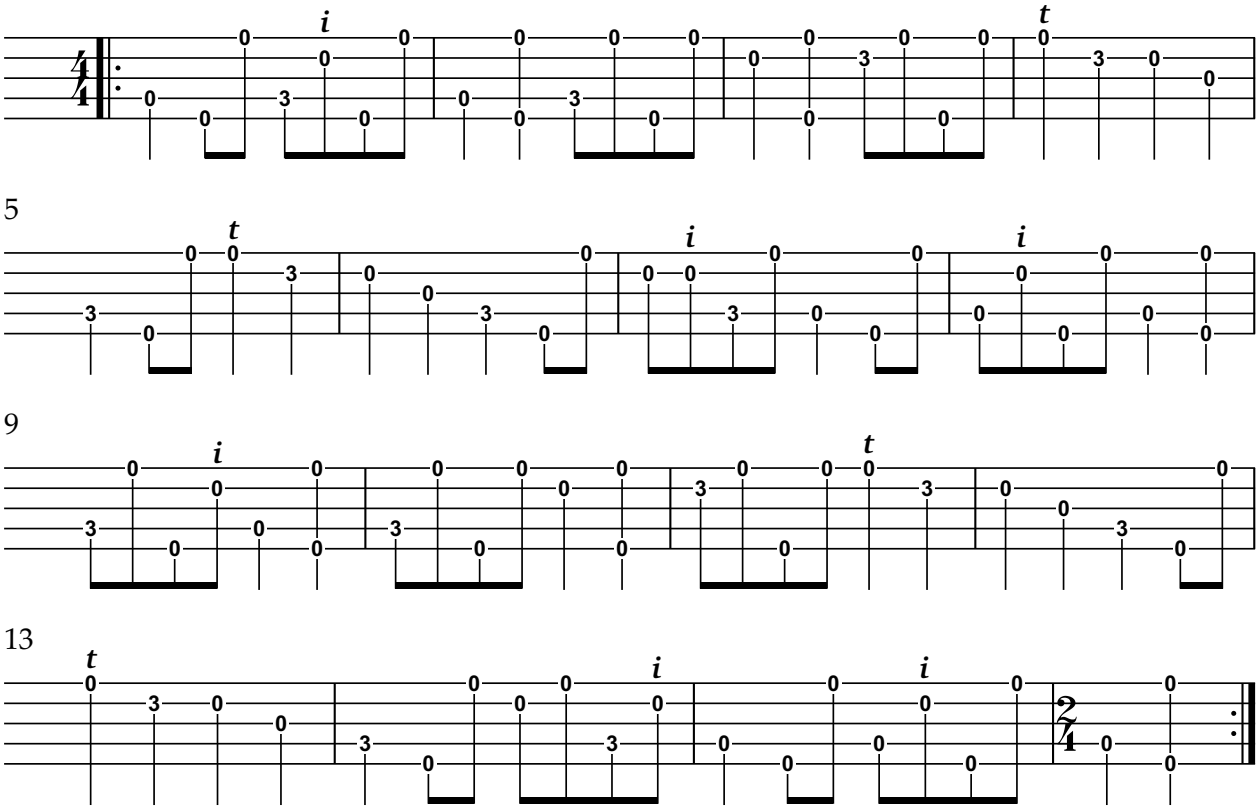
Whiskey Before Breakfast

advanced



Wild Bill Jones

advanced

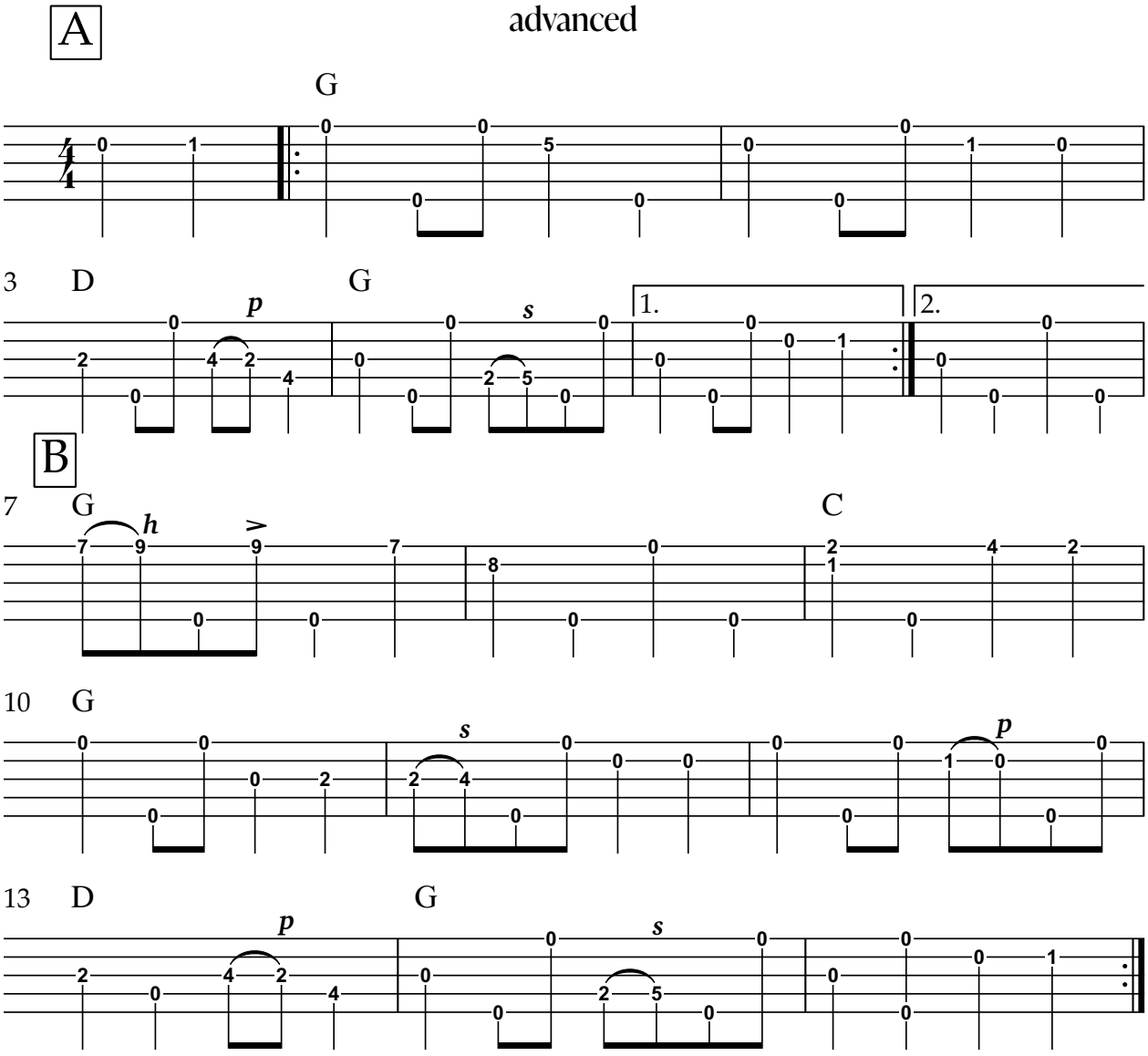


I play the last note of measure 3 with my index finger and the first note of measure 4 with my thumb. This combination happens again in measures 5, 11, and as 12 goes into 13. In measure 7, I play the consecutive notes in the opposite fashion: the first note is with the thumb and the second is with the index finger.

Joseph Philbrick Webster

Wildwood Flower

advanced



"Matt's approach to teaching thumb lead, two-finger banjo is beautifully straightforward, and his arrangements perfectly combine accessibility and musicality." - Adam Hurt

Matt Brown is an old-time musician who has performed on the Grand Ole Opry and at The Kennedy Center. He has taught hundreds of people how to play thumb lead, two-finger banjo. He was a teaching artist at the Old Town School of Folk Music in Chicago for seven years. Matt now teaches remote private lessons to students worldwide and runs the website twofingerbanjo.com. He lives in Kentucky and works at the Louisville Folk School.

twofingerbanjo.com