

Time to start learning how to create melodies and play tunes in this style

We're getting to the part of the workshop series where if you don't have the Class 1 and Class 2 techniques down, you're probably not going to be able to do what comes next. If you're still working on the basics, don't worry—it takes most people much longer than two weeks to train their hands to do the basic claw thing, and it may take a while for hammer-ons and pull-offs to feel natural as well. You may wish to practice the basics for a couple more weeks, and then try the Class 3 songs. Don't settle for *almost* getting the bum-ditty or *almost* getting your thumb to do the right thing to form a note. Get those fundamentals in your muscle memory first. You don't need to be perfectly accurate, but before moving onto full songs you should 1) understand and "feel" the bum-ditty rhythm, 2) strike the desired notes more often than not, be able to do a hammer/pull/slide in time without losing the bum-ditty rhythm, and 4) ensure your thumb is properly contacting the 5th string on every single downstroke so it's preloaded for sounding notes on the upstroke. Skipping these fundamentals is how folks wind up playing for 20 or 30 years without ever quite getting it. The point of this workshop series is to drill these basics, have a solid foundation, and then enjoy learning tunes much more easily from there.

Class 3: Refine your claw hand and note striking

Now that you're hopefully getting clean notes most of the time, let's refine our claw hands and note striking even further.

1. We want to maintain a consistent claw shape and make clean notes but with as little muscle tension in our hand as possible—on a scale of 0 (beached jellyfish) to 10 (death grip of steel), we want to be around 2 or 3. Being relaxed is the key to a fluid sound, a nice brush, pleasant tone, and faster playing. Now that you're getting the claw shape and the feel of clean note striking into your muscle memory, you can probably relax a bit and trust that your hand knows what to do. This week, spend some time finding out how relaxed your hand can be while still striking clean accurate notes and while making sure you're getting prominent thumb notes when double-thumbings or doing the bum-ditty pattern.
2. Focus on what part of your fingernail is moving through the string when striking a note: left, center, or right part of the fingernail?
 - Which way feels most natural and comfortable?
 - Which way sounds best?
 - Which way sets the angle of your hand relative to the strings such that the subsequent brush sounds best?
 - If there's one part of your fingernail that feels most natural AND sounds best when striking notes, that's how you should do it!

How melodies work in folk, old time, and bluegrass music

The important melody notes of 99% of songs in folk, old time, and bluegrass music genres are **chord notes** of the chord the song is at a given time

- The most important notes fall on **downbeats**
- Occasionally melodies just go from chord note to chord note without any intermediary scale notes
- More often, downbeat chord notes are connected using *non-chord scale notes*, which typically fall on offbeats
 - For example, for the first line of “I’ll Fly Away” in the key of G (see Tab), the melody notes all fall on downbeats, and they’re all notes of a G chord:
Some (B) bright (G) mor (D) ning (G)
 - The next line of “I’ll Fly Away” has more syllables.
The **downbeat** notes are chord notes, and the **offbeat** notes are other scale notes:
When (B) this (A) life (B) is (C) o’er (B)
- You can also approach a downbeat melody note from one fret behind with a hammer-on or slide, regardless of whether that leading tone is in the scale (see class recording)
- 99% of folk/old time/bluegrass melodies work basically as described above: you can expect downbeats to hold important melody notes, and those downbeat notes are nearly always part of the chord triad (or an occasional flat 7 note) of the chord the song is on at a given time—this means most of these melodies work well with a “bum-ditty” treatment, which has a melody note for each downbeat (“one”) and a brush-thumb for the second half of the beat (“and-a”). You wind up essentially playing the core melody on downbeats and accompanying that melody with a brush thumb on the offbeat and thumb note.
- Note: there are two downbeat notes in the chorus melody of “I’ll Fly Away” that are *not* chord notes—the exceptions that prove the rule :)
- This knowledge of the importance of downbeat chord tones makes it much easier to find melody notes and will eventually help you improvise the melody of new songs
- For contrast, Joni Mitchell songs generally don’t work this way—yes, her singer/songwriter material is usually considered to be in the folk genre, but we recognize that her songs sound different than back-porch mountain music. They’re especially different because Joni features non-chord triad notes prominently in her melodies, and because her phrasing is such that any type of note might fall on a downbeat.
- So, when determining which songs will conveniently fit the downbeat-chord-note format, ask yourself, “If I brought this song to a bluegrass or old time jam, would I get invited back?” If the answer is yes, the song probably fits the patterns I discussed above, and you can count on downbeat melody notes almost always

being chord triad notes, which then form the melodic outline of the song for a bum-ditty treatment.

Most claw melody notes are in the chord, on open strings, or within easy reach

As implied above, on clawhammer banjo, when you're making the chord, most of the important melody notes are right under your fingers, on open strings that are in the chord, or within easy access of your fingers without fully having to leave the chord shape.

- Example: I'll Fly Away
- Arranging it for the bum ditty: focus on downbeat notes, sometimes adding the second note with a hammer on etc. Remember that the hammer/pull/slide happens exactly at the same time that the right hand comes off the instrument for the upstroke – you have to coordinate those two moves to maintain the rhythm.

[Learn I'll Fly Away – see Tab and class recording]

Basic rhythm for backing up vocalists

- “I'll Fly Away” example: start by bum-ditty through the chord progression—but how do you know which note to use for the downbeat when playing rhythm?
 - Use the root of the chord if you have it on a lower string (e.g. 3rd string open for a G chord), or if convenient you can alternate root-fifth if it sounds good. Or use another chord note that sounds good, e.g. the 2nd fret/low string E note for a C chord (E is the major third of a C chord, which is CEG). In old time music you can also follow the melody around for the downbeat note (i.e. bum ditty through the melody while singing the melody too)
- Add select hammer-ons and pull-offs within the chord shape or conveniently located in proximity to the chord shape (e.g. fills during a G chord or to provide some motion to the C chord).
- If it's an old time jam you can play through the melody during the singing if it seems to improve the ensemble sound – but this is often not the right thing, especially in other genres
- That's really all you need to back up a vocalist! Over time you can work on dynamics and maybe add some other patterns (which we'll discuss in Class 4), or add some fills between vocal lines, but most of you will find the basic bum-ditty with a handful of hammer-on/pull-off moves over the basic chord shapes will do the trick if you're playing banjo and singing or accompanying someone else.

New techniques and songs!

New techniques:

- Closed position hammer-ons and pull-offs, aka hammering/pulling from a fretted note to another fretted note
- One-fret hammer-on or slide (often from a non-scale note)

- Changing melody notes on the “ditty”

Songs:

Cripple Creek – pretty easy as claw tunes go. This arrangement uses some 1-fret hammer-ons from non-scale notes

Cumberland Gap – uses closed-position hammer-ons

Buffalo Gals – two versions, one more straightforward and the other with some additional hammer-on/pull-off/slide moves. The first line of the chorus melody changes melody notes on the “ditty.” This is a common thing you should know about and practice!

Homework:

If you’re in your early stages of clawhammering, choose just one of the above tunes and try to learn it beginning to end at a nice slow tempo. If that’s too much for now, go back and work on basic note striking and the bum-ditty rhythm from Class 1 and our hammer-on-pull-off-slide exercises from Class 2.

If you’re farther along in your clawhammer journey, try to learn as many of these tunes as you can. Focus on both left and right hand technique and having a good, galloping bum-ditty rhythm—and enjoy the simplicity and rhythmic goodness of maintaining that same uninterrupted right-hand rhythm for the entire tune.

Addendum:

Getting in tune, placing the bridge, intonation concerns with G major tuning, and applying what you may know from Dobro or guitar to the banjo in G tuning

Getting in tune for open G

- Tune your G and D strings first with a tuner. Start with the thumb string and then revisit it at the end of the process after tuning the other strings
- To tune your B string, get it close with the tuner and then detail it by matching up the 2nd string/3rd fret D note with the open 1st string D note by ear. Because those two D notes are often played together, it’s important that their pitch matches precisely.

Placing the banjo bridge

- If you’re in tune but your notes get successively sharper or successively flatter as you fret notes farther up the neck, it’s almost certainly because your bridge is out of place
- Harmonics and fretted notes at the 12th fret should ideally give you the same pitch:

- If the fretted note is sharp compared to the harmonic, your bridge should get nudged towards the tailpiece
- If the fretted note is flat compared to the harmonic at the 12th fret, your bridge should get nudged towards the fingerboard
- The distance between the bridge and the 12th fret should be the same as the distance from the nut to the 12th fret—you can measure this with a tape measure or a piece of nonflexible string

Intonation problems with G major tuning (optional – this is only if you’re interested in the really finer points of intonation that players of fretted instruments usually don’t know or care about)

No fretted instrument has frets such that all notes will always sound right in tune:

- “Equal temperament” fret spacing is a compromise that gets some notes right in tune and other notes reasonably in tune
- You’ll typically find that the 3rd of a major scale or chord, and the 6th of the major scale, sound a bit sharp even when your instrument is “perfectly” in tune
- G major tuning is especially susceptible to intonation problems because there’s a 3rd built into the tuning (the B string)
- You can mitigate this by being careful to fret notes precisely with your fingertip right by the fret and only pushing as much as is necessary (not too much) so as to not overly depress the string, which makes notes sharp
- If you don’t like the sound of a strummed chord, check your tuning again, but if it seems right, you can do the kind of brush that starts with a finger over every string (see class recording) which yields a more blendy and percussive brush where the individual notes are less evident. This masks the potential sourness of the chord compared to a low-to-high string brush.
- Don’t obsess over this – this is a nitpicky detail you’ve probably never heard discussed, and you’re now among the very few banjo players who have ever heard that G tuning presents more than its fair share of intonation problems. Just be aware of it and you’ll get used to which notes and chords may need some subtle attention. Most of all, but a little extra effort into tuning your banjo for G major.

Applying what you know from other instruments to banjo in G major tuning

G-tuned Banjo and Dobro are tuned the same: anything you know on the top four strings of the Dobro (the strings you probably play the most) translates exactly to the top four strings of the banjo

- Chord shapes on the top four strings of Dobro translate exactly to the banjo

- If you know slants on Dobro, those slant shapes are all classic banjo chord inversions – they’re easier to do on banjo since you can use your fingers to fret the notes!
- If you know a Dobro solo in G composed largely of scale notes, hammer-on/pull-off licks, slides, and open strings near the nut on Dobro, you can easily adapt everything from the top four strings to clawhammer banjo
- If you’re used to filling in the spaces between melody notes on Dobro with open strings and rolls, you can do the same on clawhammer using double-thumbing and the brush-thumb (aka “ditty”), along with some forward and reverse roll equivalents that I’ll show you in our fourth class
- If you play banjo in G tuning but don’t have a Dobro, what are you waiting for?

Standard guitar tuning shares 3 strings with banjo in G major tuning: the 4th, 3rd, and 2nd strings (D G B)

- This means that anything you know on guitar in standard guitar tuning on strings 4/3/2 translates directly to banjo in G major tuning on the same strings. For example, the Am chord we were using for our hammer-on, pull-off exercise is exactly like the Am chord you’d make on guitar, but we also used the high D string to make an Am7 with our brushes. The same general principle is true for an A major chord, though for chords all along a single fret, we’ll typically fret the high string as well, so on banjo in G tuning, an A chord is the entire 2nd fret.
- The same is true for other chord shapes on strings 2-4, but it’s less intuitive to notice the similarities for guitar G shaped, E shaped, F shaped, C shaped, and D shaped chords since those guitar chord shapes are not isolated to strings 2 through 4—so it takes a little extra thought to transfer guitar fretboard knowledge to banjo

I'll Fly Away - Key of G - beginner version

G

C **G**

H **Po**

D **G**

SI **H** **SI**

15

D

G

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system, labeled 'D', contains four measures. The first measure has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The notes are: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), and A4 (quarter). The second measure has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The notes are: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), and A4 (quarter). The third measure has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The notes are: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), and A4 (quarter). The fourth measure has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The notes are: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), and A4 (quarter). The second system, labeled 'G', contains four measures. The first measure has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The notes are: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), and A4 (quarter). The second measure has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The notes are: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), and A4 (quarter). The third measure has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The notes are: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), and A4 (quarter). The fourth measure has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The notes are: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), and A4 (quarter).

Cripple Creek - bum-ditty version G tuning © 2025 Ivan Rosenberg

G Po C G D G

4/4

D 5 5 2 0 0 2 0 0 | Sl 0 Po 0 0 0 0 |

B 0 0 0 1 1 0 0 0 | 2 4 4 2 0 0 H 0 0 0 0 |

G 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 | 2 4 4 2 0 0 0 2 0 0 0 0 0 0 |

D 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 | 0 2 0 0 0 0 0 0 |

G 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 |

D G

3 H 0 Po 0 H 0 0 0 0 | H 0 Po 0 0 0 0 |

B 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 H 0 0 0 0 |

G 3 4 4 2 0 0 3 4 4 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 | 3 4 4 2 0 0 0 2 0 0 0 0 0 0 |

D 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 | 0 2 0 0 0 0 0 0 |

G 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 |

Buffalo Gals - all bum-ditty basic arrangement © 2025 Ivan Rosenberg

First system of musical notation (measures 1-4). Chords: G, Po, D, G Po. Includes a 4/4 time signature.

The first system of musical notation consists of four measures. The first measure is marked with a 'G' chord and a 4/4 time signature. The second measure is marked with a 'Po' chord. The third measure is marked with a 'D' chord. The fourth measure is marked with a 'G Po' chord. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. The notes are: Measure 1: G4, B4, D5, G4; Measure 2: G4, B4, D5, G4; Measure 3: G4, B4, D5, G4; Measure 4: G4, B4, D5, G4.

Second system of musical notation (measures 5-8). Chords: Po, D, Po, G. Includes a 3/4 time signature.

The second system of musical notation consists of four measures. The first measure is marked with a 'Po' chord and a 3/4 time signature. The second measure is marked with a 'D' chord. The third measure is marked with a 'Po' chord. The fourth measure is marked with a 'G' chord. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. The notes are: Measure 5: G4, B4, D5, G4; Measure 6: G4, B4, D5, G4; Measure 7: G4, B4, D5, G4; Measure 8: G4, B4, D5, G4.

Third system of musical notation (measures 9-12). Chords: G, Po, D, G Po. Includes a 5/4 time signature.

The third system of musical notation consists of four measures. The first measure is marked with a 'G' chord and a 5/4 time signature. The second measure is marked with a 'Po' chord. The third measure is marked with a 'D' chord. The fourth measure is marked with a 'G Po' chord. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 5/4 time signature. The notes are: Measure 9: G4, B4, D5, G4; Measure 10: G4, B4, D5, G4; Measure 11: G4, B4, D5, G4; Measure 12: G4, B4, D5, G4.

Fourth system of musical notation (measures 13-16). Chords: G, Po, D, G. Includes a 7/4 time signature.

The fourth system of musical notation consists of four measures. The first measure is marked with a 'G' chord and a 7/4 time signature. The second measure is marked with a 'Po' chord. The third measure is marked with a 'D' chord. The fourth measure is marked with a 'G' chord. The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 7/4 time signature. The notes are: Measure 13: G4, B4, D5, G4; Measure 14: G4, B4, D5, G4; Measure 15: G4, B4, D5, G4; Measure 16: G4, B4, D5, G4.

Buffalo Gals - 100% bum-ditty w/ one-fret hammer-ons © 2025 Ivan Rosenberg

First system of guitar notation (measures 1-4). The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The notation includes a G chord, a hammer-on (H), a pull-off (Po), and a D7 chord with a slide (Sl). The fret numbers are 0, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 0. The strings are labeled D, B, G, D, and g.

Second system of guitar notation (measures 5-8). The notation includes a hammer-on (H), a pull-off (Po), a D7 chord with a hammer-on (H), and a G chord. The fret numbers are 0, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 0. The strings are labeled D, B, G, D, and g.

Third system of guitar notation (measures 9-12). The notation includes a G chord, a pull-off (Po), a D7 chord with a slide (Sl), and a G chord with a pull-off (G Po). The fret numbers are 0, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 0. The strings are labeled D, B, G, D, and g.

Fourth system of guitar notation (measures 13-16). The notation includes a pull-off (Po), a D7 chord with a hammer-on (H), a pull-off (Po), and a G chord. The fret numbers are 0, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 0. The strings are labeled D, B, G, D, and g.

Cumberland Gap - Key of G - bum-ditty only arrangement © 2025 Ivan Rosenberg

Chords: G, Em, D, G

Staff 1: D, B, G, D, g

Staff 2: 4/4

Staff 3: 0 2 0 0 2 4 4 0 0 0 2 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

Staff 4: 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

Chords: Em, D, G

Staff 1: 3

Staff 2: H 0 2 2 2 2 0 0 0 0 Po 0 0 0 0

Staff 3: 0 0 0 0 2 4 4 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

Staff 4: 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

Chords: G, Po, Em, G, Po, Em

Staff 1: 5

Staff 2: 5 5 5 5 7 5 5 2 2 5 5 7 5 5 2 2 2 2

Staff 3: 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

Staff 4: 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

Chords: G, Po, Em, D, Po, Po, G

Staff 1: 7

Staff 2: 5 5 5 5 7 5 5 2 2 0 0 2 0 0 2 0 0 0

Staff 3: 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

Staff 4: 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0