

Beyond Chord Melody, Volume II

The Plectrum Banjo: A Modal Framework for Jazz

This book operates on a simple premise: I believe *you can learn to improvise jazz* on the plectrum banjo—or at least, *play and sound* like you’re improvising. Mind you, *nobody can teach* you to do it; the *learning* is entirely on you. All I can do is ‘guide’ you through the process. This book retraces the path that I have taken in *my own continuing* journey.

A Modal Framework refers to the musical/physical framework (scales/arpeggios/patterns) that one must learn and develop, either through instinct (‘natural’) or book-learning (‘learned’) in order to wiggle your fingers correctly and play jazz coherently. There are many possible frameworks available, but Modal theory is the best that I have found. It is what finally broke the dam for me, and has since been my area of concentration and growing expertise.

I have used that framework in my own unique way! I have tried to learn from many jazz method books over the years, and have even taken college improv classes and workshops from jazz musicians. In addition, I have received a lot of valuable advice from the many fine jazz musicians I have had the pleasure of knowing and working with over the years.

While I certainly gained *knowledge* through that process, I never could seem to find a ‘starting place’ that truly worked for me or inspired me to do the necessary practice/study—so I made my own! In the final analysis, directed *practice/study* is the *only* way forward. Now that I have found my own path, all that advice and teaching that I had previously received suddenly makes sense! *Just getting started* is the trick.

Most jazz improv method books will show you the theoretical framework scale and *nothing more*, and then encourage you to invent something based on it. I’ve taken it a big step further, and expanded that framework into practical patterns and licks. This is because the framework scale *by itself* was never enough *for me*. I started transcribing what I heard in my head into notation, and realized I should put them into a book for *you* to benefit from.

Yes, I heard all this stuff in my head, but lacked the necessary skills to put them through my instrument. After *decades of wishing* I could just ‘let it happen,’ I finally realized and admitted it was not going to be ‘instinctive’ for me! This volume makes the simple assumption that *you also* lack the single-string skills required to even *begin* the journey. In short, no single-string skills, no jazz improv! Don’t worry, you’re in good company!

The plectrum banjo is not known for playing ‘lots of notes.’ You can be excused for not developing the necessary ‘bag of tricks’: the vast majority of plectrum banjoists *never do!* The popular myth is that the plectrum is a chordal instrument *only*, that single-note lines are just not possible or practical (or even *appropriate*). Obviously, this attitude must be overcome. The few players who *have* figured it out are seen as inimitable geniuses—not role models.

This material will work for *any* instrument tuned C-G-B-D. The important distinction here is to learn to play the things that players of other instruments already take for granted, *on this tuning*. Notes on paper or in your head do you no good if you don’t know *where to find them* or *how to play them* on the banjo (without resorting to “Chicago” [guitar] tuning)! That traditional tuning *is* an issue, but it can be overcome through education and practice.

So, how *do* we develop single-string technique on the plectrum banjo? I won’t lie to you: *there is no ‘easy’ way!* A devotion to scales and arpeggios—those evil tools of torture employed by mean music teachers—is the only logical, *proven* path forward!

Based on my personal experience/observation, I can tell you that—unless you’re a musical savant who can just play ‘what you feel’ without actual effort or knowledge (a tiny minority of musicians)—you’re going to have to put in some serious work to achieve this goal. There is no magic wand available to grant you that wish or to transform you into a savant.

The first and hardest step then is to honestly and humbly admit “*I just ain’t got it!*” After that, it simply becomes a matter of saying (and *committing* to) “*but I’m gonna get it!*”

Introduction: Jazz Improvisation

In general, I'm talking about 'Modern Jazz' here: Bebop (1940s) and forward, but within certain musical parameters. That is, 'modern' in the sense of single-note 'horn-style' jazz, but within the basic harmonic/melodic limitations of the *Tin Pan Alley* and *Great American Songbook* 'standards' that we typically play on the plectrum banjo. I have no particular artist or genre in mind; they all learn and borrow from each other anyway. The book is called 'a Modal Framework,' but it is not necessarily 'Modal Jazz' (that genre *is* referenced though). If this material allows you to go beyond these historical limitations, wonderful!

'Ragging the tune': Melodic Improvisation

Jazz improv started off simply enough: players 'jazzed up' the melody with syncopated rhythms and arpeggiated fills. This was known as 'ragging the tune' (a reference to Rag-time being 'ragged,' or sloppy music—where it got its name). In modern parlance this is known as 'melodic improvisation'; the improvisation is simply a *variation* of the melody. I will always believe that 'knowing the melody' is first and foremost.

'Playing over the chords': Harmonic Improvisation

By contrast, '*harmonic* improvisation' is playing scale and arpeggio-based patterns that 'outline' and 'imply' the *chords* (the harmonic structure) with *little or no regard* for the melody. This style reached its first full fruition in the Bebop era and has dominated since. This was the true 'coming of age' for jazz: many techniques and structural elements introduced at that time have since been standard practice. The patterns and supporting theory in this book are harmonic by necessity, but *can* of course be used to rag the tune.

Jazzing-up the melody was largely the domain of naturals; harmonic theory 'codified' jazz and gave the newer generations a way to learn to play jazz and imitate the naturals. The theory and mechanics of it are pretty straightforward, and simply require learning and practicing. Most jazz musicians freely mix ragging the tune with outright harmonic improvisation.

As a proud '*traditional banjoist*,' I also believe we have a responsibility to maintain and represent banjo tradition. I aim to reconcile the banjo with modern jazz, but I would never suggest that we should play *nothing but* single-note improv. On a strictly *technical* level, I have found that my understanding and playing of the traditional banjo has grown dramatically through my single-note work and study of modern jazz. Keep in mind that the casual banjo *listener* will appreciate the *melody* much more than any *fireworks* that you may play.

'Play it with feeling!'

"In art as in lovemaking, heartfelt ineptitude has its appeal and so does heartless skill, but what you want is passionate virtuosity" [emphasis added] John Barth

The main difference between playing 'just a bunch of notes' and playing 'jazz' is in the feeling. A skilled jazz musician can (and does!) take simple scale/arpeggio-based patterns and turn them into high art, simply by infusing them with jazz feeling. You might call it '*ragging the harmonic pattern*.' This jazz feeling is often referred to as 'swing.'

The difficulty in learning jazz feeling (if you don't *naturally* have it) is that it simply *cannot* be shown by written music. It must be felt. A simple way to approximate the feeling of swing rhythm is to stress the off-beat notes in a straight 8th note pattern.

Instead of counting 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &, say *Day, to-day, to-day, to-day*. Stretch 'day' (on the beat) just a bit, and stress the 'to' (off the beat). You will see this as an exercise in Chapter 3, as we get into the practical application of scales.

This is *not* a hard and fast rule! Actual swing is somewhere in-between these rhythms, is subject to individual interpretation and the style/tempo of the music, and again *cannot* be effectively conveyed by written music. *Listening to and imitating a lot of jazz* is the *best* way to develop it. If you are not an avid jazz listener already, now is a good time to start!

Chapter 1: The Plectrum Banjo—An Exposé

'Know thy instrument!' I'll say that often in this book! Knowing your way around *any* instrument is the key to using it to its full potential, thereby allowing *your* full potential to blossom. A trumpet player can't use a high-C in their playing if he/she...*can't play a high-C*. With that thought in mind, let's spend a few moments exploring what can actually be *done* on the banjo, with the goal of going *beyond* what is *popularly thought* to be its potential (in short, *chord melody/chord strumming*). "*The banjo can do this; why not me?*" Of course, the underlying *point* of learning/practicing scales, arpeggios, and patterns is to get to know your instrument *and* music. You'll want your banjo in-hand right now.

From C to Shining C

To begin with, the chord melody style only requires you to know the notes on your *first* string—'where the melody is'—and then to fill in the rest with simple block-style rhythm chords. You can easily see the built-in limitations of the style. Those same notes *exist on all four strings*, and are just waiting to be discovered by you and used to play melodies and improvisations! Why only play the melody on the *first* string? Why not use *all* the strings for the melody with a chord built around it wherever it occurs? Search for my lesson *Melody in Other Places* on my website, *The Banjo Snob* for more on this interesting technique.

Play these C chords with this thought in mind. Play the root note first, and then the chord. Strum slowly and listen closely to how the root fits into each chord inversion:

Next: Find all of the C notes on your banjo; there are two on each string. The open 4th string is of course C, so start there. Follow along on the music. If we finger the 12th fret of the same string we have a C 'an octave up.' Now find the C's on the 3rd string...now the 2nd string...and now the first string. The *8^{va}* means to play the note an octave up (follow the TAB). It is used to avoid excessive ledger lines and make the music easier to read.

Now, try this. There are three places to play the second-octave C, and three places to play the third-octave C. Play these two exercises over and over. Start slowly, then gradually increase your speed until your fretting hand 'knows' where to find them without thinking or looking. Follow the TAB and finger indications. This is a good illustration of the effectiveness of TAB:

Chapter 2: Scales = Chords = Scales

First things first: You must realize that when *good* jazz musicians improvise, they're not just playing a bunch of random notes! The notes they play are 'informed by'—and will 'fit over'—the chords/chord progression of the song, or it will sound *terrible*. Indeed, they are informed to such a degree that *even in the absence of chords*, the single-notes and patterns played by a good player will *imply* the accompanying chords. In other words, you'll hear the chords even when they are not being played. *This is a learnable skill!*

Plectrum banjoists—*myself included*—tend to be stronger on the *chord-only* end of the spectrum. In fact, the writing of this volume was inspired by a conversation with a very good banjoist (one of the best, actually) who admitted to me that he couldn't hear the connection between single notes and chords. To relate the single notes to the chords (and vice versa)—and ultimately to have the wherewithal to improvise jazz—we must leave our limited *chord-centric* banjo understanding/hearing of music behind and work toward a *scale-centric* classical/jazz understanding. In short, we need to learn to see and hear music as it relates to *scales and arpeggios*, and not just to *chords* (chords *are* important too!). They are two *very different* schools of thought and performance!

The bottom line? *Learn to know instinctively*—and especially *hear*—which single notes will go with the harmony (chords/chord progression), how to play them, where to find them on the banjo, and where they are *coming from/going to*. That is the thesis of this book.

Jazz Thinking

Jazz-oriented banjoists and guitarists approach their instrument from an entirely different direction than do chord-oriented players. They think and *hear* in terms of the *individual strings* and the *tones* that are played on them—not in *chord shapes*. This is in imitation of horn players, who can only play one note at a time. They know instinctively *and without hesitation*—either by gift or more-often by practice/study—where to find those tones (and tone combinations, aka chords) *anywhere on the fretboard*. Again, *'know thy instrument!'* A bad case of Chord Shape Dependence (like mine!) makes this difficult!

Their playing is 'multi-dimensional,' each string and *combination* of strings being its own independently-controlled dimension—instead of the *one-dimensional* approach of block chord shapes. The chords they *do* play are simply 'combinations of individual tones.' They use them to get the *sound* they want, without worrying about the 'name' of that combination. This advanced way of jazz hearing/thinking is our ideal—one that *can* be learned.

Chord/Arpeggio/Scale Sets

You do not need to be a *walking chord encyclopedia* to play jazz or to work this book—so put that massive chord book away! For our purposes, there are only 16 chord shapes you *need* to know to get started: 10 'Triads' (3 Major, 3 Minor, 1 Augmented, and 3 Diminished), and 6 Dominant 7th Chords—all on only 3 strings (I will touch briefly on 4-note 'Jazz 7th' chords in Chapter 4). Rather than think of them as 'chords' or 'chord shapes,' it is more productive to think of them as what they actually are: a 'combination of scale tones.'

First off, we must reverse-engineer the chords to see how they're built, and to reveal their scale/arpeggio underpinnings. *These* are the essential elements of music that are used in *single-note* jazz improv. We'll call it a 'scale set.' All three elements are a single, interrelated entity; *play* one, *think* of the whole set. When we get to the jazz patterns, you'll want to treat *them* as part of the scale set as well. Patterns (and music in general) are nothing more than *elaborated* and *combined scales/arpeggios*.

Play this slowly and listen closely (next page). This is a '2-2-2' (two notes per string) scale form (an incomplete scale 'fragment'). The tuning of the top three strings makes chords *and* scales very easy on the plectrum banjo! To remind you of another point from Chapter 1: these are all within an easy-to-reach 4-fret box:

Chapter 3: Scales—The 1st Building Block of Jazz

Despite popular perception to the contrary (which is all-powerful, unfortunately), the plectrum banjo is a very versatile scale instrument—provably more so than the *tenor* banjo, actually! My job here is to convince you of that—if you ever want to improvise jazz, that is. I’m not asking you to do the never-been-done. Just listen to Harry Reser, Perry Bechtel (two of the original 1920s players, before the rise of simplified chord melody!), and Buddy Wachter for proof of that (examples listed in the listening appendix). You should not consider them to be beyond your ability or understanding level. They are easier than you think! Scales are much more than just a boring ‘bunch of notes.’ Beside the points I have already made:

- Each note of a scale has a ‘function’ within that scale. Those functions inform how well-constructed music is composed. Learning to *hear* them and how they interact is the oft-neglected key to ‘ear training.’ Knowing your scales *in depth* will help you to *hear and predict* what’s coming next (melody *and* chord) in a song you’ve never played before. Music becomes more predictable (and thus easier) for those with the right scale-centric framework (*‘playing by ear,’* anyone?).
- Exercise physiologists will tell you that the best way to increase range and flexibility is to exercise a muscle at its greatest *safe* extension. When your fingers are extended to the max and you’re exercising them (ahem, *scales/arpeggios!*), they *will* become *stronger*, more *independent*, and more *agile*. If you can’t ‘reach it’ now, just wait until you’ve practiced them for a while. In other words, you can’t reach them yet because you’ve never *practiced* reaching them!
- Single-note *picking* technique is very different from chord *strumming* technique. Learning to play single notes will discipline and strengthen the *fine motor-movement* muscles in your picking hand/arm, which will in turn improve your *strumming* technique (a *gross motor-movement*) as well. Rather than picking a bunch of random single notes to get this exercise, you might as well *use* and thus *learn* the actual building blocks of music and kill two birds with one stone.

‘*Learning your scales*’ is not the *end-all*. They are simply the *means* to the end of all the things you’ll learn—and skills you’ll develop—from dedicated, *continuing* study and practice. In the beginning, “*because I said so*” may have to suffice for motivation, at least until you break through the tedium and disbelief, and discover *for yourself* why they are so important! I aim to help you break at least the disbelief. There’s nothing I can do for the tedium, at least not until you begin to *enjoy your own improvement*...

Scales are typically seen as something you grudgingly learn to do, play once or twice, and then discard. What *practical use* do they have in music (beyond just learning them)? How can they *possibly* make you a better jazz musician? It is my fervent belief though—through personal experience and observation—that scales are so much more than just a necessary evil. They provide a never-ending framework, especially for single-note-oriented styles like jazz improvisation. You may never play a ‘scale’ per se in your jazz solo, but you can bet that solo will be *informed* by them and made *better* by your devotion to them.

The more time and effort you devote to them, the more they give you in return. I am convinced that if we continue to work on them *every day*, we will never deplete the promise of improvement they offer. *Serious* classical and jazz musicians devote a large portion of their daily practice routine to them, whether they ‘like’ them or not. There *is* a reason for this!

Scale Note Function

The first step to learning what scales actually *do* for music—and for the in-on-the-secret musicians who embrace them—is to hear and understand the “function” each scale note serves.

Chapter 5: Introduction to Jazz Patterns

The Pre-Learned Framework for Improvisation

“*Ahh, those jazz guys are just making that stuff up!*” Homer Simpson

We come at long last to the meat of the book—the reason for all the fuss over scales and arpeggios: jazz (‘jazzy’) patterns. You may rightfully ask, “*are jazzy patterns jazz improvisation?*” My answer is no. They *do not constitute improvisation*—and I would never claim they do. However: If it *sounds* like improv to a *listener*, then it *will* be improv...*to them!*

There is a stubborn myth that jazz musicians just *invent everything* they play ‘out of thin air,’ with no pre-conceived notion of what they are actually doing. They are savants who don’t need to practice or study *at all* (thus, *neither do we*). In other words, you either ‘have it or you don’t.’ This goes along with the myth that all jazz must be *improvised on the spot*, or it’s not ‘real jazz’—and if you can’t do *that*, you have no business being on the stage!

I call B.S. on both counts. It is my experience that unless the artist is an *absolute savant* (a tiny percentage of actual musicians), the things they invent will be guided and made possible by what they *already know how to do*, and what they are *capable* of doing. We don’t see the *hard work* that went into their effortless artistry. I’ve had many very good jazz musicians tell me they usually just relax and play known patterns, open to that fleeting, on-the-spot inspiration when *and if* it hits. Plus, I know from observation that they *practice a lot!*

The whole point of this book is that pre-learned patterns (conscious regurgitation) and spontaneous inventions (un-conscious improvisation) *both* consist of *lots of notes*—*not* something that plectrum banjoists typically play.

Here’s how *I* see jazz improvisation: You simply take the music that’s in your head and channel it through your instrument—and hopefully it’s some pretty cool stuff, worthy of being heard by others! Again, for some folks this is easy, but they are a tiny minority; most of us need to work hard on it. I have *always heard* cool stuff in my head, but there was a disconnect between my head and my hands. I’d get a cool idea, but then—lacking the prerequisite skills/knowledge to ‘translate’ it—I’d try to play it and it would simply disappear. I would then fall back into my default chord melody safety net, tail between my legs.

What I am now increasingly able to do—thanks to my dedication to scales, et.al.—is to imitate the music in my head, in more or less *real time*. I no longer have to fumble around and risk losing the idea. I’ve memorized enough unique patterns that I can use them as a framework to extrapolate the ‘idea of the moment’ and add it to my bag of tricks. Instead of having to settle with letting it play out *internally in my head*, I am now better able to let it play out *externally through my fingers*. Most importantly, I am now better able to *hear, understand, and copy* what other jazz artists are doing. I’m one step closer to being able to *play* what they do, *and* to the goal of my *own* spontaneous inventiveness.

I am gradually ‘fine-tuning’ into the jazz radio station in my head. So, what if you don’t *have* a radio station (hear music) in your head? Well, that’s *all the more reason* to learn and study scales, arpeggios, and patterns! Learning and practicing these predictable fundamentals is also great ear training. And even if you *don’t* learn to hear, at least you’ll be able to play *something* appropriate based on other empirical data (i.e., chord changes in the sheet music)! I’ve known a few jazz musicians who get by just fine on visual input alone.

Your ultimate goal is to take these basic building blocks and create your own unique patterns and style. My ideas are great—*for me!* You eventually need to find *your own* unique voice, but mine can help get you there. Don’t worry about ‘copying’ my ideas; I don’t ‘own’ them. Music belongs to the universe—not to us!

Spontaneity is cool and all, but you will have much more to spontaneously improvise *with* if you already have a bunch of cool stuff under your fingers! In the final analysis though, *applying* them in a musical context is ultimately a matter of *your* ‘imagination.’

Chapter 6: Modal Sequences

The Overall Framework

I chose to start with Modal Sequences, simply because the Modal concept should be fresh in your mind after the last three chapters! This chapter is basically an elaboration and expansion of the Modal concept already presented. While there *are* some actual ‘licks’ presented here, most are simply the framework for the patterns yet to come.

Patterns based on the extended Jazz 7th chords will cover a lot of practical territory in a short amount of time. Everything else is simply modifications of these basic elements. You can *make* them fit any other chord just by changing one chord tone or another of the pattern (as if anyone would notice). You needn’t learn 10 gazillion chords to play jazz; they are yet another red herring, standing in the way of the real work of learning to wiggle our fingers.

The real magic of the Modes is that just about any lick/pattern that you can think of can be modified and ‘shoehorned’ into all seven of the Jazz 7th chords (CM⁷, Dm⁷, Em⁷, etc.). They will each sound unique due to the slight differences in extended harmony from one scale/arpeggio/chord to the next, and their relationship to the key. They will all have the same basic fingering layout and are based on the Modal Triad scales you saw in Chapter 2 (review that now). Most importantly, they are all harmonically-related to the home key.

This should be seen as a learning shortcut. For example, rather than learning an Em⁷ pattern as a separate entity, it is easier and *more effective* to learn it as part of a set—just one of seven ‘inversions’ of the complete sequential Mode set in which it functions. The overall concept is much bigger than the few examples I give here. Many (if not all) of the patterns in the following chapters could be given the Modal Sequence treatment. Of course, this is a simplistic view, but it will certainly get you started.

This concept *multiplies by seven* the usefulness of any given pattern, *and as a bonus*, would allow you to harmonize with another improviser, provided they know the same patterns! So, you have a nifty new G⁷ lick, for instance. Say to yourself: “*let’s see if I can figure out the Bm^{7(b5)} inversion of this*” (play the same relative pattern, but ‘a third-up’). Of course, those particular chords/patterns *naturally* fit together anyway, but being aware of *why this is so* will give you control over their use. Simply put, the things you use to modify the scales and arpeggios to fit the sequence are the same you’ll use to modify the patterns.

As I covered with scales and arpeggios in the previous chapters, these Modal patterns harmonize each other in thirds. A Phrygian pattern will harmonize the Ionian version of it, a Lydian pattern will harmonize the Dorian version of it, a Mixolydian pattern will harmonize the Phrygian version of it, etc.

This will help you to learn to hear simple harmony while working on the patterns. While playing the pattern, hear (or sing) the harmonization in your mind’s ear. Beyond just being able to play harmony, this skill is essential to hearing how the patterns work over chords. The provided backing tracks will also give you this opportunity!

So, let’s start by combining a basic scale with a basic arpeggio. Remember, “jazz feeling” will keep it from *sounding* like a scale exercise. I included the stress marks on the CM⁷ pattern to remind you of the suggested exercise from page 41. Make it a habit on everything:

C Ionian D Dorian E Phrygian

5-7-9 6-8-10 9-10 12-9 12 7-9-10 8-10-12 10-12 14-10 14-10 14 9-10-12 10-12-13 12-14 15-12 16-12 16

Chapter 7: Dominant 7 (ii-V⁷) Patterns

The Most-Important Chord in Jazz

The Dominant 7 chord is arguably the most important chord in jazz! It is the chord that leads (as in ‘voice-leading’) music around the Circle of 5ths/4ths, as you will see in Chapter 8. It causes/allows forward motion in music.

In modern jazz theory and practice, the Dominant is paired with the ‘ii’ chord. The two chords are then treated as a single ‘dominant-function’ entity. Learning to hear them together is an important evolutionary ear training step. At first it may sound weird, but you’ll get used to it. Remember my lecture on extended harmonies in Chapter 4. This considerably increases what you can do with the Dominant, pattern-wise.

For these patterns, I am using only the Dm⁷/G⁷ chord, the Dominant of the key of C. Interchangeable with the word ‘Dominant’ are the terms ‘5’ (as in the 5th note of the scale), or the Roman numeral ‘V.’ Roman numerals are used to minimize confusion with all the other numbers used in music theory. Lower case = minor, upper case = major. When you see a V, you should assume it to be a ii-V⁷, whether it has the modifiers or not.

In a similar vein, when we see two chords per bar in a modern jazz arrangement, those chord pairs will have a similar symbiotic relationship, or are ‘substitute chords’ that encourage greater extended-harmony use. If you know how to use the extended harmonies of the basic arpeggios, why should you need this encouragement? I’m fairly convinced that they are only there to scare away beginners! You can play the same lines whether the ‘color’ chords are indicated or not. The ii-V⁷ is the first simplifying step toward this recognition.

Experienced players know that they don’t have to read the chart so literally. They look past all the fancy modifiers and see only the ‘important parts’: the letter (i.e., D) and the ‘quality’ (Major/Minor). Those complex chord progressions reflect every chord change possible—most of which can be glossed over with simple single-note improv patterns.

I have put these patterns into a non-resolving setting (the *resolution* of the Dominant is the subject of the next chapter). That way you can combine them with other patterns, and create a never-ending ‘practice loop’ over only one chord that never resolves—the ii-V⁷. When you get into it, it can have a hypnotic effect, which is great for practicing. Staying on one chord for a long time is the hallmark of ‘Modal Jazz,’ which evolved in the late 1950s. Listen to Miles Davis’s album *Kind of Blue* for an idea of this style. *So What* is the quintessential Modal tune from that album. Interestingly, these patterns will work equally-well over either a G⁷, or a Dm⁷ (the first 16 bars and last 8 bars of *So What*).

I have provided backing tracks for this, in various tempos/styles. Practice the individual licks with them, and then work toward connecting them together. I have tried to make connectivity a priority in the order that I wrote out the licks.

First, you should learn the ii-V⁷ chords so you can begin to hear how they go together. Here they are. Play the root note, then the chord. Some are difficult, so you may have to settle for now with listening to the recording. The whole point is to *hear* the harmonies, so actually *playing* the chords is secondary (unless of course you wanted to back up another player).

Let’s look again at the arpeggio notes of the extended Dm⁷ and the G⁷ arpeggio/chords. You’ll remember from the arpeggio chapter that all of the extensions (7, 9, 11, 13) are used.

Chapter 8: Tritone Resolution Sequences

Now you must learn about the ‘resolution’ of Dominant 7th chords. This is how you navigate from one chord to the next (voice leading). The ‘Tritone Resolution’ is an integral part of this. I will explain how that works, then show a few chord/pattern relationship frameworks, then finish with several resolution sequence patterns for practical application.

Circle of Keys

The Circle of Keys was well covered in Volume 1, so I will not go into great detail here. It would behoove you to have a solid grasp of the concept. I will include a chart here though for handy reference:

A ‘Tritone Resolution Sequence’ is simply a series of chords that resolve/revolve around the circle counter-clockwise: i.e., G⁷ resolves to C, C⁷ resolves to F, F⁷ to B^b, etc. In Classical theory, *in the key of C*, E⁷ is the ‘*Quarternary* (4th) Dominant’ (V of V of V of V; count the ‘Vs’); A⁷ is the ‘*Tertiary* (3rd) Dominant’ (V of V of V); D⁷ is the ‘*Secondary* (2nd) Dominant’ (V of V); and G⁷ is the ‘*Primary* Dominant’ (V of I). If you go from the root to the Sub-Dominant (C⁷ to F, in the key of C) as in the ‘Blues,’ the C⁷ is known as the ‘V of IV.’

Collectively, they are known as ‘Extended Dominants,’ and commonly referred to as secondary dominants. I’ll bet you didn’t realize just how complex *Five Foot Two* actually is!

Realize that many of the more-sophisticated and/or modern chord progressions don’t use Extended Dominants as much, and stick more to the *Modal Triad* ideal. Thus ii (Dm⁷) instead of V of V (D⁷) etc. Still, they happen enough to warrant this study, especially in the older music we play in the banjo world. It is also a perfect opportunity to learn some repeating physical practice patterns, *repetition* being a very strong reinforcer of ideas.

This is a simplified introduction, meant to get your fingers and ear moving in the general direction of jazz. There will be more-detailed information on chord progressions in the next volume.

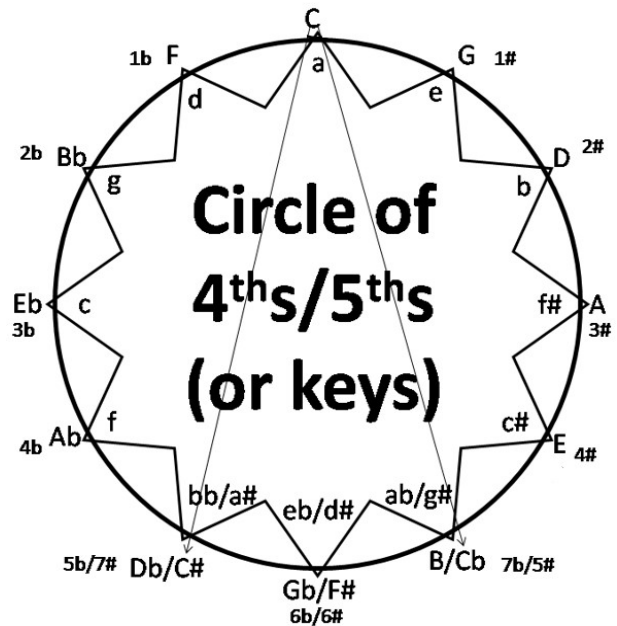
Anyway, just like the chords, the *related patterns* move/resolve from one to the next, all the way around the circle. The *Tritone Resolution* is what makes this work.

Tritone Resolution

The non-resolving ii-V⁷ patterns of the previous chapter probably left you feeling a bit agitated, or simply, ‘un-resolved.’ To relieve this constant tension and feel relaxed (and thus move forward), we need *resolution* (a ‘tension-release cycle’). Well-written music is a carefully-choreographed tug-of-war between the tension of ‘dissonance’ (agitated sound) and the release of ‘consonance’ (relaxed sound); otherwise, it would be pretty boring.

Dissonance *hurts the ears and the psyche*, and makes the soothing consonance all the more welcome. How can we truly appreciate *either* without the *other* for comparison, especially when it causes forward movement? This is a good metaphor for *life in general*, if you think about it. Music does indeed reflect the human condition! Most importantly, *it happens whether you realize it or not*. This is the universal *physics* of sound at work.

As a musician, *knowledge* of it means that music is much more interesting, both to play and to listen to. You have *mastery* over it and can use it to your best advantage, playing up the



Chapter 9: I-V-I Turnarounds

Whereas the last chapter concentrated on progressing from one Dominant chord to the next around the circle, this chapter concentrates on going from the Tonic to the Dominant, and then the final resolution of the Dominant back to the Tonic. We have finally achieved true resolution!

This is actually what got me started on my current jazz improv kick. I watched an old video of Joe Pass and Roy Clark tearing it up on *Jambalaya*. When I realized that *Jambalaya* consists of only two chords, I knew that I had finally found my starting point. Many simple Trad Jazz tunes use this progression as well, at least in segments. Some of them switch the order, starting the form with the V chord and alternating with the I from there. The patterns presented here will work with either.

Besides its simplicity, this concept gives me an opportunity to introduce several important things: ideas for how to handle a Tonic chord, more V⁷-I resolutions, turnarounds, etc. The basic banjo-band chord progression (in the key of C) is very simple:

C / C / G⁷ / G⁷, G⁷ / G⁷ / C / C (8-bar phrase in two 4-bar halves)

Play through 4 times for a total of 32 bars. That's it! Dressed up in jazz style (there are many variations/chord substitutions; I'm only using the most basic), the changes are:

C / C^o (diminished) / Dm⁷ / G⁷, Dm⁷ / G+ / C, C^o / Dm⁷, G⁷

The last two bars are known as a 'turnaround,' which is meant to 'turn the music back around' to the next 8-bar phrase. In this particular case, it's a 'diminution' (condensing) of the *first* four bars; compare the last 2 bars with the first 4 bars.

Song Structure

I have not talked much about song structure ('form') or chord progressions yet (recall my notes in Chapter 5): consider this to be a basic introduction (Volume III will cover it in much greater detail). The vast majority of the *Tin Pan Alley* and *Great American Songbook* songs you will ever play (besides the 12-bar Blues, or some of the older songs in 'march form') are set up in four 8-bar phrases, for a total of 32 bars.

Those 8-bar phrases are further broken up into two 4-bar phrases, all separated by 'phrase breaks.' You could think of the break as a chance for a horn player to take a breath. It also provides a rhythmic resting/re-starting point, which adds to the overall effect of 'going somewhere' with the song.

This is important for many reasons, not the least of which is that playing a 'fill' in the 4 and 8-bar phrase breaks was one of the forerunners of modern improvisation. Musicians would often make the morning entertainment news for the thrilling 'hot break' they played in the previous night's concert. Harry Reser (and a few others) devoted a chapter in his tenor banjo method books to hot breaks. It still represents an effective way to ease into improv: play the song (melodic), and throw in scale/arpeggio-based patterns in the breaks (harmonic).

Perhaps most importantly though, is that being able to *feel* the passage of time—as demarcated by phrases—is a big part of playing by ear. I just *know* when 4, 8, 16, and 32 (and occasionally 40) bars have gone by, and not just because of the melody. There is an overall melodic/harmonic structure to any song, the understanding of which greatly aids in the learning of the song, and in learning other songs that share similar characteristics.

If a song varies too much from a typical harmonic framework (the 'chord progression': there are only so many in our music), it will not be as memorable. As far as 32-bar (8 X 4 = 32) songs are concerned, *Jambalaya* is one of the simplest. It therefore makes a perfect introduction to the concept, as well as an opportunity to introduce more patterns. Keep this information in mind as you work the patterns.

I'll talk a little more about structure and chord progressions in Chapter 11 (Connect the Dots), and as I said, *much* more in Volume III.

Chapter 10: Symmetrical Patterns

As I pointed out in their introduction in Chapters 3 and 4, symmetrical scale/arpeggio patterns deserve their own chapter. I believe that the majority of us would not have them *instinctively* available, and so they are a perfect candidate for ‘pre-learning’ and structured practice. However, they are hard to write and read in standard notation, making them a challenge to learn. For that reason, I have done away with standard notation here and use only TAB. They will probably sound weird (non-intuitive) until you’ve trained your ear to them. Learning to hear them will open new pathways in your musical brain.

Yes, it would be great for you to learn to *read* them, but I’m more concerned with you learning to *play and hear* them for now. They defy the rules of spelling and are difficult to pin down with a ‘name.’ All those non-sensical and arbitrary accidentals in the music scare away many musicians (too-much information!), myself included at one time. My trying to codify them correctly runs the risk of being totally wrong and leading you astray. I don’t want that to happen to you (or me!). I learned them as physical patterns without the aid of written music, and I will pass them on in the same manner.

Another thing this material naturally defies is logical position marker use. I consider this to be an ideal opportunity to overcome your dependence on them. To increase the training effect, I have put many of the exercises into chromatic sequences: just when you think you have found a marker pattern, I move it up or down one fret and it all goes out the window.

You must learn to play them by feel and sound, and by relative ‘intervallic relationship’ (how far the notes are apart from each other). This is ultimately how you should approach *all* patterns by the way, allowing you to play them *in any key* without dependence on position markers, or having to learn what every chord is and how to spell it. Of course, the ear is much more important to music than is the eye! The discipline developed by this will aid in their unconscious use in improvisation.

Learn one pattern at a time, and practice it until it is memorized. As you get used to the non-intuitive sound of symmetry, each successive pattern will become easier to learn, eventually leading you to use them instinctively. I find them to be great warmup exercises for the fingers and the ear. Learning to *sing* them is even better for the ear, and as a bonus, is also a great way to train and strengthen your singing voice.

Chromatic Scales

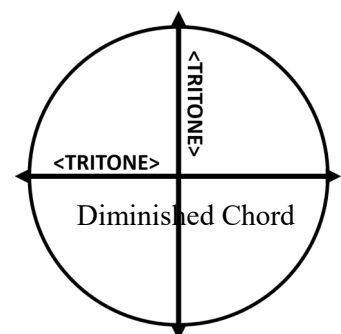
You’ll remember the chromatic scale pattern in Chapter 6. In addition, many of the patterns in Chapters 7-9 incorporated chromatic lines. They will also be worked into some of the Diminished patterns, and so could be considered to be related to them. Because they don’t imply any particular chord or scale, they are amazingly versatile and have unlimited practical application, if you know how to use them.

The concept of ‘chromaticism’ or ‘chromatic harmony’ is mostly beyond the scope of this book. It will have a central position in Volume III.

Tritone Arpeggios

Tritones have already been explored in great depth, so I will not go any further with them here. Something I didn’t emphasize before however, is that the Tritone is exactly half of the complete scale: C-F#/Gb-C. This is reflected in the Circle of Keys: C and F#/Gb are exactly opposite of each other on the Circle. This holds true for all Tritone pairs.

I will also remind you that *Diminished* chords consist of two superimposed, equidistant Tritones; they are thus the *defining feature* of the chord. The tones are found in the ‘compass points’ of the Circle. Working the Diminished patterns will therefore strengthen your understanding of Tritones *and* the Circle.



Chapter 11: Connect the Dots

While there are numerous definitions of ‘music,’ I have found the analogy that I like the best: music is just a big game of connect the dots. We’ve all done ‘connect the dots’ puzzles I’m sure: follow the dots from one number to the next with a pencil to reveal a surprise picture.

In the case of written music, the musician simply follows the dots to solve the musical puzzle created by the composer. Interpreting someone else’s creation—while staying within the confines of the written puzzle—is a highly-respected artform in itself. A successful, top-tier Classical musician typically toils for *decades* before finding his/her own unique voice and hitting the big-time (outside of the occasional and *rare* savant, of course).

In the case of the many forms of *unwritten* music—which of course includes jazz improvisation—the problem-creation/resolution process happens entirely within the imagination of the musician. This process is greatly facilitated by learn-ed memory (study/practice). That’s why Classical musicians—who are used to *working hard* to solve the puzzles hidden within the *written* music—often successfully ‘crossover’ into unwritten jazz.

This chapter is meant to help you to connect the dots beyond what you have already seen in Chapters 6-10. While a book covering every possible chord progression and jazz pattern would be massive (if even *possible*), a few all-purpose voice-leading tricks will give you the ability to solve a lot of it yourself. At a basic level (which is what this book is about), you can easily connect the dots of any chord to any other chord with a jazz pattern (or simply a scale or arpeggio, like a connecting bus line between trains), by identifying the chord tones involved and finding ways to voice-lead from one to the next.

As I’m sure I’ve made abundantly clear by now, the framework is simple but requires work: improvisation requires imagination on top of it. Knowing how to use a scale or arpeggio to correctly connect chords will set the stage for improvised licks, or at the very least, *give you something to play* if no idea comes to mind in the heat of the moment.

‘Across the Break’ Phrasing

The first jazz musicians simply played from chord to chord with a break in-between, with little attempt at connecting them together. Even today, many jazz musicians never progress past that—and that’s fine. This is what set Louis Armstrong apart from the crowd: he could play through those natural breaks and connect the dots together like nobody else at the time. He started it all! As the great Bebop trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie famously said, “*No Louis, no me!*” And Dizzy in his turn was an important stepping-stone for subsequent musicians.

This will require experimentation on your part, but I’ll give some examples to show you how to do it and to get you started. This is best learned in a simplified setting, then trying more and more sophisticated chord progressions as you advance. The bigger and more-complex the puzzle, the more concentration and pre-learning it takes to find the next dot.

Metric Accent

Of course, the dots must be connected using some standardized guidelines so we can *all* understand and enjoy the resulting music! You’ll remember the frequent topic of ‘metric accent.’ I stated that if you put a strong note (chord tone) on a strong beat (1 and 3 in a measure of 4/4 time), you end up with a strong melodic rhythm.

If you look back through the jazz patterns you’ve seen, you’ll find that the majority of them follow this principle. If you play too many weak notes on strong beats (or vice versa), you run the risk of implying too many ‘wrong’ chords, and will sound like you are wandering aimlessly. In the case of extended chords/arpeggios, it may *seem* at first like aimless wandering, but that will evolve as you learn to hear those extensions. It is in itself a little ‘box’ that you must stay within (or close to) to make your music sound good. And we *want* to sound good, right?

Coda

The Future

I have *no doubt whatsoever* regarding the importance of this material to jazz improv, and of the need for *somebody* to *try* to apply it to the banjo (it's been stuck in time for far too long now). Any doubts I may have are in regards to *my* worthiness to be the messenger.

I can only hope you learn as much as *I* did through the process. If so, *do something about it!* I hope that you are either *inspired* by it or *pissed-off* by it, enough so that you will write your *own* book someday, based on your *own agreement/disagreement* with this material! Surely, I got *something right* that will inspire more, and/or I did *something wrong* that needs correcting. At least I tried.

There are countless jazz books already out there for the 'standard' jazz instruments, yet—as far as I know—only *this one* specifically for the plectrum banjo (unless you count Buddy's *Banjo Pathways*, which may lead one to jazz improv, among other things)! If I am wrong about this, please fill me in.

While I appreciate the wide-open field available to me, I would appreciate it *even more* if there were other *competing* perspectives out there. Come on in; the water's fine, and the pool is nearly deserted! Show by your contribution that this is indeed a viable concept and creative direction for the banjo, and especially, that the banjo is *worth the attention!* I'll even help you write it if you're not sure how to put your thoughts and ideas into words and/or notation (*seriously*: contact me, and let's collaborate). This is how seriously I want you to take the banjo.

The Present

I'm biased of course, but the four-string banjo is one of the most-unique instruments I know of. It would be a crying shame to see it disappear in its historic form! When I try to imagine any other fretted instrument being played in the same manner as the plectrum banjo, I realize just how special and one-of-a-kind it is.

This uniqueness *needs* to be preserved and presented to the public as the way the banjo was played 'back in the day'—and for our own baseline comparison of how far we've come. I have vowed my best efforts to doing just that, even as I try to go 'beyond' it. The overall effort is not to *replace* the old ways, but to help *expand* the musical horizons for an instrument that has the 1920s down pat, but not much past it.

Frankly, single-string jazz improvisation is not a 'normal' part of the plectrum banjo canon—but it should be! If it was, we'd be hearing a lot more of it! I'm convinced that if the guitar hadn't taken over *so completely* in the 1930s, banjoists might have gotten the notion that *they too* should be in the front row with the horns, and thus earn at least a *page* in mainstream jazz history books. Some of those guitarists were originally banjoists! We would have a very different *present* if not for that missed evolutionary opportunity.

As it is, we are only an occasional 'early jazz' footnote, often with no name attached ("*what is that funny-lookin' round gee-tar in all these old photos?*"). The four-string banjo came along at just the right time to be part of the *birth* of jazz, but then got dropped like a hot potato just as things were heating up. Is the banjo *still* a 'jazz instrument' or not?

Unfortunately, there are many jazz aficionados (and some history writers) who view 'pre-modern jazz' as a separate, *lesser* entity from the rest of jazz history. In their view then, the banjo is nothing but a cute-but-obnoxious novelty, an aberration in the otherwise stellar history of jazz as a serious artform.

That evolution into modernity *didn't* happen of course, so it is what it is. I believe it to be well worth our time today to try to retrofit the 100-year-old four-string banjo to the single-note modern jazz that got its start *80 years ago* with the advent of Bebop.