

## Plectrum Banjo Challenge Part 2

Here is the challenge again (now with TAB and finger indications):

8 fingers:  
D 1 3 4 1 2 3 1 4 1 3 4 1 2 3 1 4 etc. . .  
B 5-7-8 8-7-10 8-10-11 11-10-13 11-13-14 14-13-16 14-16-17 17-16-19 17  
G 1-3-4 4-4-3-6 4-6-7 6 7-7-6-9 7-9-10 9-10 10-9-12 10-12-13 12-13 13-12-15 13

Challenges:

### 1. Can you read it?

The double-flats were unavoidable: I could have “spelled” the Bbb enharmonically as A, but that would have been technically incorrect (as part of a “C<sup>7</sup>” chord—spelled C-E-G-B, with modifications for the various Jazz 7<sup>th</sup> chords). If I respelled the other two chords (Eb Dim and Gb Dim), I would have ended up with even more double flats. Diminished chords are a spelling challenge for sure!

The point is, TAB shows everything, with no concern for spelling rules; reading standard notation is understandably daunting, especially with weird chords. Because of this, *music theory* itself is often seen as “over my head”; it doesn’t have to be. I know *I* still have a tendency to “tune out” and avoid things like this, which of course means *I learn nothing*; TAB has been *my savior*!

There are already countless books and on-line lessons *filled* with patterns like this (in standard notation—no TAB); why am I bothering to write yet another book? Because it needs to be applied to the plectrum banjo! I hope that the combination of standard notation and TAB will lead you to a greater music reading ability—that being one of the best ways to learn about, well. . .music! The most-important result though is *being able to play it*, regardless of how you get there.

### 2. Can you figure out the fingering?

Here’s where TAB really shines: There is no easier, more-effective way to show where to put your fingers, especially in an exercise like this where there are several options. I have shown what I consider to be the two best options (not only where to play the notes, but which fingers to use for the greatest efficiency). I encourage you to experiment and find all the other possibilities for yourself; you may find one that works better for you. Of course, in actual use, you’ll probably only use a fragment of it, in which case your fingering needs to flow smoothly from the previous chord/lick and into the next (voice leading).

Exercises like this are wonderful tools of discipline and consistency-through-repetition—no different than any other targeted physical workout (your fingers are attached to *muscles* in case

you hadn't noticed!). Practice this and gradually pick up your speed until you no longer have to think about the fingering—until you can just “let it happen.”

### 3. Can you tell what scale/chord/chord type it uses?

It *implies* a C Diminished chord, but this lick is actually *based on* a C Diminished *scale* (and Eb, Gb, and A Diminished scales). This scale has *eight* notes, therefore one of the seven named notes has to be used twice (I chose Bbb and B natural). The type of scale used *always* has a direct bearing on what type of chord results—thus the importance of learning scales; a *scale-based* skill/understanding will beat a *chord-based* skill/understanding any day for playing jazz (the difference between chord melody thinking and jazz thinking). The scale should always be your first-line reference. Here are those complete scales:

C Diminished Scale

1 3 4 1 2 4 1 3 4 etc. . .

Eb Diminished

Gb Diminished

A Diminished

### 4. Can you play it?

If you can read it, you should be able to play it! Though I read *okay*, it is a slow, painful process for me (I am an *ear* player by nature and stubborn habit, not an *eye* player). With my ingrown aversion to standard notation, it would have been very frustrating for me to figure out where to play the notes in *this* exercise. I probably would have lost interest before getting there—showing how my prideful reliance on natural skills *used to* hold me back! TAB has literally made learning and improvement *possible* for me! Call it a “learning disorder,” I don’t care.

Some see it as a crutch, but it is a legitimate, centuries-old notation system that *really works*. If this is a crutch, please show me more! I would rather *learn* and *improve* than stick my nose in the air and say “*it’s beneath my dignity to ‘cheat’ like that.*” Sure, I wish my reading chops were better—and that I could get by without TAB—but wishing got me nowhere for too many years.

As far as actually *playing* it is concerned, it is quite simple; just *looks* daunting.

### 5. If you can play it, does it sound “hip” or just plain “weird?”

This is purely subjective of course; it is certainly “different” from what we normally play! Having the ability to play it and hear it should have a positive training effect on your fingers *and ear*. The

goal for exercises like this is for it to become “normal” (if not “liked”), to stretch your ear to new dimensions, and to lead you to increasing musical open-mindedness. When you can hear and especially *sing* this accurately and on pitch, you will have improved your musicianship *and* your voice (and thus your ear). Twisty, weird-sounding exercises can do wonders for that!

## 6. Do you think this exercise was worth your time?

If you are truly interested in improving as a banjo musician, *anything* that stretches your fingers/ear/mind should be considered to be worth your time! Sometimes it just takes a bit more information to help it make sense, and lure you into at least *trying* it. If it is something you have never done, well then, *it's something you've never done—and therefore should!* Don't think in terms of “improving what you already do”; think about learning something you have *never done before* (and I guarantee, there will always be plenty of *that!*). Otherwise, you just spend your precious time practicing your mistakes and digging yourself deeper into your frustrating rut.

I tried for decades to learn to improvise jazz (the nail) using only my chord melody skills (my hammer) and questionably-good looks; *it doesn't work!* Can you say “square peg in a round hole?” My eventual goal *is* to learn to improvise jazz (*learn to improvise*: The ultimate oxymoron!), but even if I never accomplish that, working these kinds of exercises is why I have been improving so much over the last several years. It takes a lot of work to teach *this* old dog new tricks, but it *can* be done (and *is being* done)!

In conclusion: If you had never played or heard a Diminished scale and its non-intuitive sound before (or a similar “out-there” thing), do you think you could have just *spontaneously invented something based on it?* Sure, there are great jazz musicians who can do just that (possibly without even knowing what it is), but they more than likely *pre-learned* these things (at least the scale, in this example). They are basing their *unconscious* improvisations (“letting *it* happen”) on stuff that their fingers and head *already consciously-know how to do* (“it”)!

The untrained “out of thin air” savants that everyone raves about (and wishes they were like so they wouldn't have to work so darn hard) are exceedingly rare; don't compare yourself to them unless *you are one!* There is no need to be embarrassed by *that* shortcoming.

The moral of this story? The more things you *pre-learn*, the more will be *available* to you in the heat of the moment. I guarantee that the vast majority of top jazz musicians do this (or at least *did* when they were starting out)—certainly more than don't. That is the value of learning and internalizing scales, arpeggios, and patterns, and of studying/copying the great works of those who came before us (the premise of my book). This is no different than working on your golf or tennis swing; relying on natural skill (and osmosis, *I guess*) will only get you so far.

Yes, of course you want to someday work *past* this type of learning, and get to where you can just “let it happen.” Unless you are a savant though, you're just going to have to bite the bullet for now and *get to work*.

I hope you'll join me on my quest to “*take over the banjo world!*”