

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION, FOREWORD

Page 1 - 7

INTRODUCTION: JAZZ IMPROVISATION

Page 8 - 10

## **PART 1: THE ESSENTIAL FRAMEWORKS**

Page 11 - 58

CHAPTER 1: SINGLE-STRING TECHNIQUE

Page 12 - 18

CHAPTER 2: THE PLECTRUM BANJO: AN EXPOSÉ

Page 19 - 22

CHAPTER 3: SCALES > ARPEGGIOS > CHORDS

Page 23 - 32

CHAPTER 4: SCALES: THE 1ST BUILDING BLOCK OF JAZZ

Page 33 - 48

CHAPTER 5: ARPEGGIOS: THE 2ND BUILDING BLOCK OF JAZZ

Page 49 - 58

## **PART 2: JAZZY PATTERNS**

Page 59 - 111

CHAPTER 6: MODAL SEQUENCES

Page 63 - 74

CHAPTER 7: THE DOMINANT 7<sup>TH</sup> CHORD (ii-Vs)

Page 75 - 88

CHAPTER 8: TRITONE RESOLUTION SEQUENCES

Page 89 - 102

CHAPTER 9: I-V-I TURNAROUNDS

Page 103 - 106

CHAPTER 10: CONNECT THE DOTS

Page 107 - 111

CONCLUSION

Page 112

APPENDIX A: LISTENING TO JAZZ

Page 113

APPENDIX B: DIGITAL SUPPLEMENTS

Page 114

## Course Synopsis

Some people say I talk too much, and I agree! But, just as many say they *like* my personal, conversational style; different strokes! At any rate, I realized it would help if I offered a bare-bones synopsis of this book so you know what you're about to get yourself into. If you get bogged down in my 'chit-chat,' re-read this to get back on track!

\*This is *not* a 'play-in-a-day' method! This book tells the blunt truth: developing the ability to improvise jazz (if you don't just 'have it') is a daunting task that requires commitment and hard work. I cannot and *will not* promise easiness.

\*Even if you are not interested in jazz improvisation, musical skill and knowledge is universal. I could have just as truthfully called this book 'A Modal Framework for Music.' In short, I am using *jazz* techniques to make myself a better all-round *banjoist*.

\*Jazz improvisation is a misunderstood art form. Most folks see it as a mysterious '*gift*' you either *have* or *don't have*. In reality, it is a '*skill*' you either *have* (by instinct, as a lucky *few* do) or you *get* (by hard work/study). This book is about *getting it*—developing the skill and knowledge (*it*) necessary to succeed in the absence of that rare instinct.

\*Many techniques of 'Modern Jazz' are actually *easier* to learn, and have naturally crept into and enhanced the performance of today's 'pre-modern' jazz genres (Trad, Swing, Gypsy). Modern Jazz should not be seen as an unachievable or undesirable goal for the plectrum banjo. It is just as capable and worthy of it as any other instrument. An important goal of this book is to help expand the definition of 'banjo music,' and make the banjo into a viable jazz instrument that can be played in *any* genre.

\*You need *some kind* of physical/musical framework to develop *it*: Modal theory is one of the best, in my opinion. It is based on stuff you probably already know, and so is a logical path to follow. 'Hard work/study' is all fine and dandy, *if* you know *what* to work/study *on!* The obvious key to success with *any* framework is to simply *do the necessary work!*

\*To *play* single-string *music* (jazz improvisation), you must first *develop* strong single-string *technique*. Chord strumming/fretting skill by itself won't get it.

\*You must *know* where the notes *are* and how to *play them* on your instrument in order to *use* them. Being able to read music would certainly be a help, but not totally necessary, thanks to TAB.

\*I lump many related things into the overall concept of 'scales': intervals, scales, arpeggios, chords, and jazzy patterns based on them (the 'scale-set') are all part of the 'scale-based' lexicon. Think of one, think of them all.

\*Chord knowledge *by itself* is not sufficient. You must also understand the fundamental 'voice-leading' role that scales and arpeggios play in chords. An intimate understanding of them will in turn lead to a deeper understanding of chords and chord progressions.

\*'*Scales with a purpose*' are the inescapable 'shortcut' (alas, the only one I can offer) to developing physical single-string technique and knowledge; they allow everything else to fall into place. In addition, a large part of fast, 'lots-of-notes' modern jazz is built directly *from* scales, so they are much more than just a bunch of boring notes.

\*Arpeggios are the bridge between scales and chords. They are the fastest and most-direct way to develop *finger* technique, and more-importantly to develop your *ear* and *knowledge* for modern jazz.

\*Jazzy patterns will further train your fingers/ear for the ultimate goal of *true* jazz improv. They *sound* like improv (*if* you play them with jazz feeling), so may be sufficient to make an audience and other musicians *think* you are an improv genius (not to mention giving you *something* to play in a jazz setting—a lot more fun than just *wishing!*). If *jazz genius* is actually in your future, they will lay the groundwork for instinct to take over. If not, so what? You'll *still* be playing some pretty cool stuff and will be a better banjoist to boot!

## 085a.

085a. Musical notation showing six variations (a-f) of a guitar lick. Each variation consists of a treble clef staff with a melody and a bass clef staff with a broken-chord arpeggio. The variations are: a. Cmaj9, b. Dm9, c. Em9, d. Fmaj9, e. G9, f. Am9, g. Bm9(b5), and Cmaj9. The arpeggios are broken-chord strokes with fingerings indicated by numbers 1-4. Some variations include 'target notes' in the melody.

Here is another way to play the second half of this lick. Up to now, we've concentrated on horizontally-fingered arpeggios with no B string. This one uses the broken-chord stroke arpeggio (or 'slip stroke'), and can only be done on the top 3 strings (and *does* use the 2<sup>nd</sup> string). Notice that the notes of the arpeggio are simply the held chord shape:

086. Musical notation showing a sequence of four broken-chord arpeggios (Cmaj7, Dm7, Em7, Fmaj7) followed by four more (G7, Am7, Bm7(b5), Cmaj7). The notation includes a 'va' (vibrato) marking over the first two notes of the second half. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4.

This can be used as an introductory phrase or connector for a longer lick. Especially with the shorter licks like this one, combining licks and tricks into something new provides a bottomless pit of creativity. Rather than wait for practice inspiration, get creative and see what you can come up with. In other words, practice a lick and see where it takes you.

## Conclusion

*“This book operates on a simple premise: I believe you **can learn** to improvise jazz on the plectrum-tuned banjo—or at least, play and sound like you’re improvising.”*

I wanted to repeat my opening line for final perspective. At this writing, I still do not consider myself to be a ‘natural improviser’; I *have* however gained the knowledge and skill to *sound* like I’m improvising—and that is certainly a big step toward that ultimate goal.

When I started writing this book, I had no idea it was going to lead me in such a modern direction. My original intent was to stay within the style confines of 1920s-30s music, but I discovered that much of what we hear played today owes its existence to more-modern concepts. Of course, the *Modal framework in itself* is ‘modern,’ so I shouldn’t be surprised! In that sense, this effort has helped me to discover what is apparently my *true* musical voice. Maybe I’ve been trying to fit a square peg into a round hole all these years...

Here’s the important point: **Jazz is jazz!** Unless we’re striving to *authentically* recreate a particular style of jazz, we need to let it be what it *wants* to be, or it’s not in the true *inventive spirit* of jazz. I don’t think we’ll get kicked out of a *Trad* jam session for playing too many *Bebop* lines! To begin with, the horn players will probably be shocked to find that the *banjo player* (of *all* people!) can keep up with them in the single-note department.

For me, the important goal was just to get my fingers and mind moving in the direction of ‘jazz,’ regardless of genre. Modal theory does tend to push one toward a modern sound, *but* it uses the *same 12 notes* found in *Trad*, *Swing*, *Gypsy*, *Bebop*, *Cool*, *Straight-ahead*, etc.!

If we *really* want to be ‘jazz musicians,’ we should be able to convincingly imitate the entire spectrum of the artform! The same logic applies to the *banjo* itself: to be a true, legitimate ‘jazz instrument,’ all genres should be within its purview. I’m convinced that the material in this book will give us at least the *physical* ability to do this. At that point, it simply becomes a matter of *listening* to the intended style *a lot*, and then trying to channel it.

The overall thought here is that as we develop our own ideas—and especially when we are *truly improvising*—we need to have every possible technique literally ‘at our fingertips.’ Instead of fumbling around blindly, *trying* to find a note (the ‘Columbus method’: find a key and land on it), our fingers will be already trained to do ‘whatever it takes’ to fulfil the requirements of inspiration—to *include* jumping clear across the fretboard with one finger, or shifting quickly from one box/position to the next.

This is the obvious point of memorizing and making-automatic our scales, arpeggios, and patterns. They show us what is possible and how to do it. We *hear* it and then *play* it, simple as that! At that point, we’ll realize that we don’t need a jazz *banjo* teacher; we can learn from *any* jazz musician (or book/online material), whether he/she knows anything about the banjo or not. The banjo then becomes ‘just another musical instrument.’

And that I suppose is the ultimate goal: The banjo and its historical musical canon is very special to me of course, but that doesn’t mean it’s any ‘different’ or ‘*more-special*’ than any other musical instrument. Yes, I’m a ‘banjo player’ (a *banjo geek* is more like it), but more importantly, I’m a ‘musician.’ I just happen to have chosen the *banjo* for my musical expression (I well remember when Buddy told me that regarding himself).

And ultimately, I want to go beyond being ‘a musician,’ and become simply ‘**musical.**’ I pick up my banjo—or sax, or clarinet, or ukulele, or voice—and produce music with it. My musical skills are so well-developed that I can let go of conscious control, and allow my instrument to be a conduit for the complex, wonderful music that’s in my head. Too easy!

I sincerely hope that I have had a positive influence on *your* journey to become a plectrum banjo jazz improviser; I know *I’ve* certainly learned a lot writing it! I can’t wait to hear where this material takes you—hopefully far beyond the limits of it! Working together, we can raise the bar for the plectrum banjo, and really catch the attention of the mainstream music world. That is my ultimate goal.