

Passing Chords: Part 1

Over the years, many chord melody banjoists have asked me for advice on how to make their playing more interesting. Passing Chords are certainly one of the easier ways to do this. They are an important chord accompaniment skill as well, *and* a simple pathway for some pretty advanced Modern Jazz concepts.

I have struggled for a while on how best to present this. I do not like chord diagrams (picture chords); I find them to be a very limiting, paint-by-number crutch. But I also realize that many players don't read music very well (me included!), and get easily frustrated by "all those little black dots." I will therefore use this lesson series as an opportunity to improve our music reading skills as well—starting with chord diagrams and basic counting. In the final analysis, the original method of notating music will always be the best and most complete!

Anyway, let's jump right in. There are many "cheating" shortcuts available in plectrum banjo chord melody. These are things that aren't necessarily done on other instruments. Most of them revolve around Dominant 7th chords—the most important chord in music. All of this assumes a chord on every beat in 4/4 time (all down strokes). The exercise number coincides with the [videos](#). Play this:

1. G^7 (passing chords) G^9

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4

Notes:

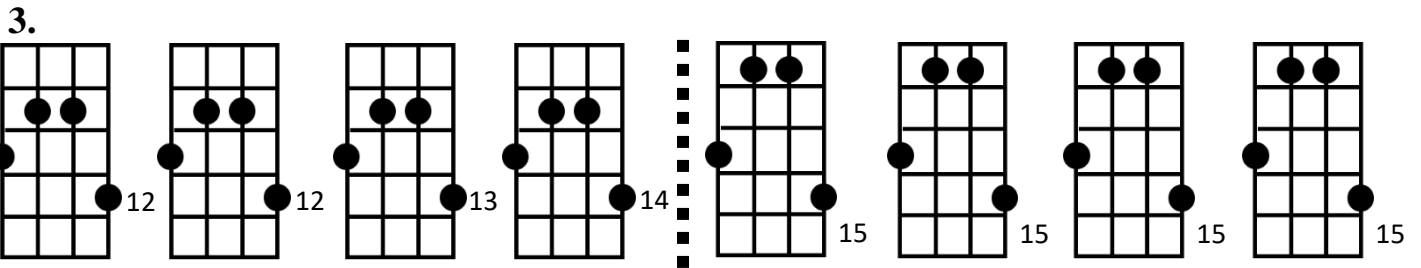
- I use the 9 chord shape because it is easier, fits the pattern better, and sounds better to my ear. The harmony is fairly ambiguous, and makes for a great passing chord (*in either direction*, as you will see. Eddie Peabody used this chord shape a lot because his fingers were short and stubby).
- This of course is two measures of 4/4 time, thus the numbers beneath the chords. In the beginning, it helps a lot to speak the numbers while playing. To emphasize the passing, count 1-[2]-3-4-1-2-3-4 (whisper the 2, stress the 3 and 4). The idea is to memorize/internalize the beat and chord shape combination.
- I didn't "name" the *active* passing chords because that is irrelevant. It's important to realize that the G^7 is "implied" throughout; the *static* harmony does not change. They work because they lead (pass) from one Dominant chord to the next. It is the step-wise, "scalar" movement of the individual notes within the pattern that makes them work. In general, you can use the destination chord shape in passing and it will sound right. By the way, this is one *huge* reason scale study is so important!
- The chord on beat one of the second measure is known as a "target" chord. If you "hit the target" too early or too late, it messes up the "metric accent" of the music.

As I said, you can do this in either direction:

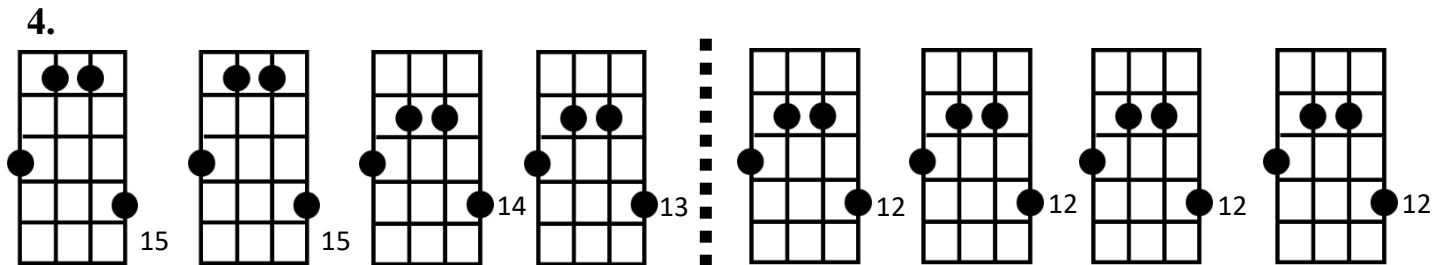
2.

12 12 11 10 9 9 9 9

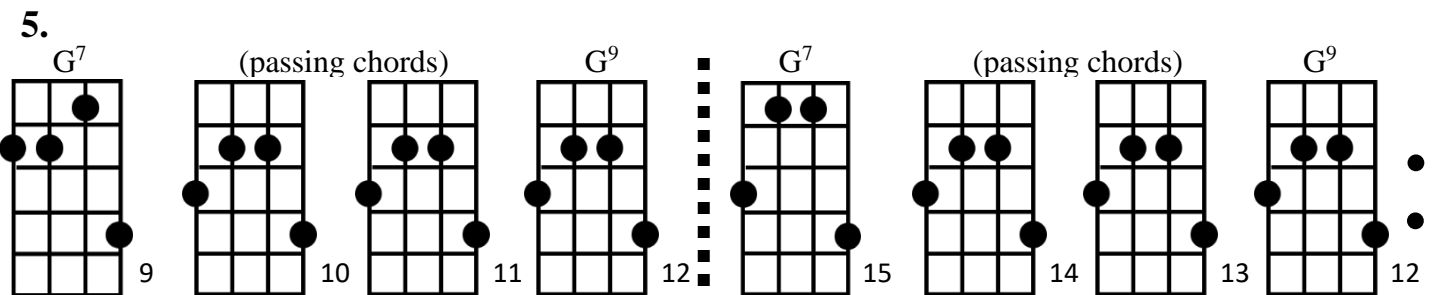
Next, we'll pass from that 12th fret G⁹ chord *up* to a 15th fret G⁷ chord. Notice how similar the chords are:



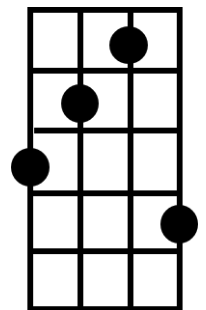
And back down:



Now, it gets fun! I'm going to combine #s 1 and 4. It will still cover two bars of 4/4 time, but a fundamental change has to be made in the handling of target notes (the 15th fret G⁷ is the target; try it with the 12th fret G⁹ on the target beat, and it will sound awkward). This one will assume either a chord change in the third measure (which we'll get to in the next lesson), or a repeat of the same two measures, thus the repeat sign (:) at the end:



One final note: in the Notes following #1, I commented that the 9 chord is ambiguous. What I mean by this is that the chord can be named differently (for example, it is *also* a “Minor 7 flat 5” or “half-diminished” chord (^ø), named by the note on the fourth string). An even more ambiguous chord is the Diminished (^o); it can be named by *any* of the four notes! Because of this, it sounds even better as a passing chord; just plug it in in place of the 9 chords. Here's the shape; notice how similar it is to the 9 chord (only the second-string note is different). In #6, I will demonstrate it in all of the previous exercises (with a couple of false starts!): 6.



In conclusion, it is important not to get bogged down by the individual chords: if you were to stop on *any one* of the passing chords and/or repeat it, the passing *effect* would be totally negated, and it would become a “wrong” chord! If this is new to you, this *whole lesson* may sound wrong to you, but you'll get used to it (the obvious point of *practicing* it). This in turn will stretch your ear to all kinds of interesting things you can do. The skillful use of passing scales/arpeggios/chords (and related single-note jazz patterns) is one of the things that sets a good jazz musician apart from the rest. They give the music considerable “correct” interest, movement, and possibility.

In Part 2, I will introduce a few more things: More patterns, how to play them with a Peabody-style syncopated rhythm, and how to “resolve” to the next key, going all the way around the Circle of 5^{ths}.