

**Collette** (as recorded by Harry Reser on the plectrum banjo in 1927) by Ron Hinkle

I started out with the intent of writing and publishing a book on Harry Reser’s obscure pop tune recordings—which were done on the plectrum banjo. I realized though that since this project was strictly a labor of love on my part, what right did I have to ask for money? I’m doing this strictly for the educational benefit of myself and anyone else who might be interested in it. I do not own this music; it belongs to the world. Besides, publishing a book is a lot of work with little return!

Collette is a very straight-forward and simple song with a very easy chord progression: **Chorus:** Eb - Bb<sup>7</sup> (four bars of each), Bb<sup>7</sup> - Eb (four bars each), repeat for a total of 32 bars; **Verse:** 16 bars in G minor; **Half-Chorus:** 16 bars in Eb; **“Hot” Chorus:** a modulation to the key of C for 32 bars; **Chorus:** back to Eb and out. I mention the chord progression to show how Harry navigated the changes; these are the lessons I’m most interested in, because I want to learn to improvise in his style.

The hardest part of these transcriptions has been in figuring out his simple “time-keeping” strokes, which comprise the majority of this recording. The single-note fireworks are much easier to figure out! It is harder to hear the detail in chordal passages than it is in single-note passages, simply because they don’t stand out as much, and they blend in with the piano. I’ve done the best I can to notate the various rhythms, and *will not* claim 100% accuracy!

He had a relaxed rhythm style (at all tempos), with a lot of “damping” and “ghosting” (notated with X’s in the music). If you listen really closely, you’ll also hear a distinct “back-beat” (emphasis on beats 2 and 4) in his overall playing. Harry was a swing musician before swing was a thing! These rhythmic aspects make it very hard to copy; it is perhaps impossible to notate or imitate exactly.

1. His first single-note line is important for a simple reason: it perfectly outlines the Bb chord tones (Bb and F)—not nearly as difficult as it first sounds! Just follow the TAB (one string at a time, starting with the first finger) and you’ll see how easy the lick actually is.

As with everything, start slowly and work up the speed. The highest climb starts with the smallest step!

To start the TAB conversation off on the right foot, this shows why it’s so important: if all you were given was the standard notation, you might not realize the proper (and easiest) fingering. How do I *know* this is “proper?” *I don’t*; it’s just simple listening logic, and experimenting with what works/doesn’t work and why. It’s not magic; just simple mechanics.

Bb7

6  
6  
7

10-11-12 10-11-12 11-13-14-15 15-17-20

2. Next is a chord trick that he used often (common in the music of the era): the Augmented Chord scale:

It’s important to think of this as a “passing chord scale” and not just a series of chords. If you look at each individual line, you will see four distinct “whole-tone” scales, played at the same time (well, *three*, because the Eb is doubled). Notice the line starts and ends with a G<sup>+</sup> chord.

In this case, he used it to modulate from Eb to C. At the end of that section, he used an *ascending* Augmented chord scale to return to the key of Eb. The augmented chord gives forward motion to the music; to hear this, play G<sup>7</sup>, G<sup>+</sup>, C, all on the fifth fret. You will hear this inner voice-leading: D > D<sup>#</sup> > E.

G<sup>+</sup> F<sup>+</sup> Eb<sup>+</sup> Db<sup>+</sup> Cb<sup>+</sup> A<sup>+</sup> G<sup>+</sup>

17—15—13—11—9—7—5—5  
16—14—12—10—8—6—4—4  
16—14—12—10—8—6—4—4  
15—13—11—9—7—5—3—3

3. The next “hot lick” gives an opportunity to discuss an important point. There are *at least three* distinct ways you can play this, which again shows the importance of following the TAB! Learn all three, and see which works best for *you*.

**TAB #1** shows how you would play it taking advantage of open strings: It is logical enough, but what if it was in a different key that didn’t match up with open strings?

**TAB #2** shows how I instinctively played it at first, due to my guitar-based Modal scale training.

**TAB #3** takes into account the legend that Reser skipped the B string in his scale passages. After a lot of practice, I finally settled on this path; he knew what he was doing! You’ll see this same basic concept in a few other spots on this tune.

To solidify this, I then remembered that this is how he played the opening line to *Crackerjack* on tenor: Compare the four circled notes (sliding the second finger) with the same physical lick above. So, there *are* valuable clues to his plectrum playing in his tenor sheet music.

Again, don’t be frustrated: learn and practice this *however slowly* you need to, then pick up the speed. *This is how you learn to play difficult music!*

4. Here is a very common Reserism: you’ll find this one often in these transcriptions, and in his own compositions (*Cat and Dog* and *Easy Goin’* come immediately to mind). The triplet and following barred notes are played with a sliding first finger as shown. The second bar has many variations of the basic idea which I will be cover as they appear.

Speaking of variations, here is one from this same tune: the first measure is the same, but the third measure is played from the third string, and is played with a sliding 2<sup>nd</sup> finger.

These are examples of where I doubt that he skipped the B string; the fingering shown in all of them is by far the easiest and most logical. Notice how the D<sup>7</sup> line is related to the chord.

5. The last common trick I want to show is an easy way of moving a Dominant chord (G<sup>7</sup> in this case). The first chord is the “Tritone” from the chord (B and F). If you follow it down, you’ll see that the 7<sup>th</sup> beat of the series is the same Tritone again, just inverted (F and B). The line then finishes on a full G<sup>7</sup> on the downbeat of the third measure. This works because of where it starts/leads/ends, and also because the Tritone has an ambiguous sound.

I cover Tritones and “passing chords” extensively in my book *A Modal Framework for Jazz Improvisation*. A lot of what he played is just simple *logic*, following the rules of music—not the inimitable *magic* so many folks think!

1.

2.

3.

**Crackerjack opening line**

So, there *are* valuable clues to his plectrum playing in his tenor sheet music.

G<sup>7</sup>

E<sup>b</sup>                      F<sup>7</sup>                      D<sup>7</sup>

G<sup>7</sup>