

## Plectrum Banjo Chord Circle Exercise #1: Major Chords by Ron Hinkle

Before I even start, I want to assure you about something: this is a very-easy lesson *to play!* This one is not about banjo *technique* (my usual area of interest); it is about musical *knowledge*—knowledge that is hard-sounding but easily gained. Rather than just read about it, I think it is more effective to use the banjo as a tool for learning. That way you not only learn the theory, but you learn to use it in actual music. If you get easily bogged down by complex concepts, I recommend you skip directly to the main exercise (1.c.), then return to the explanation. At any rate, you won't learn the lesson unless you *play it!*

I think that we get so wrapped up in “learning to play the banjo” that we forget about “learning to be a musician.” To accomplish *that*, we must learn the kind of things that will take us *beyond* strumming C, F, and G<sup>7</sup>. By combining concepts into one simple, progressive lesson, we can maximize our learning in a shorter amount of time. No matter your current ability level, I invite you to give this lesson a try; there will be more to follow (and it will certainly progress in difficulty).

The only prior knowledge required in this lesson is basic Major chord shapes. If you know them already, you already have everything you need in order to understand *this* lesson, and everything that will follow. Realize it will likely take *more than one attempt* to fully understand it. So, here we go.

### 1.a: Circle of Fifths

You have undoubtedly heard of this concept, but perhaps have considered it to be “over your head.” This will not be an exhaustive study of it; I've been working on it for over 30 years, and I still learn new things about it every day! *Getting started* on that lifelong journey is easy though, as you will see.

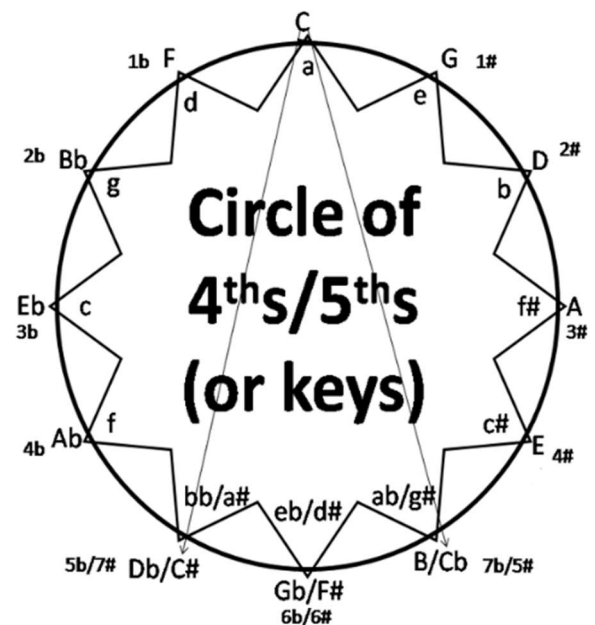
In this application, the Circle shows which note/chord is the “five” (V) of which key. This is known as the chord's “function.” The fifth relationship is one of the most important musical concepts of all to learn, simply because music tends to follow this path. If you have ever played a song, you have done it without realizing it.

Simplified (follow the circle): G functions as the V of C (it is the 5<sup>th</sup> note of the C scale), C is the V of F, F is the V of B<sup>b</sup>, B<sup>b</sup> is the V of E<sup>b</sup>, E<sup>b</sup> is the V of A<sup>b</sup>, etc., all the way around the circle, finally returning to G. Think of that ubiquitous D<sup>7</sup>-G<sup>7</sup>-C ending on many of our songs.

**Note:** If your head is already spinning, *relax!* You are about to find out how easy this actually is! Should you memorize this Circle function path? Sure, but we'll get to that. Do we need to know how to play in *every key*? Well, *that is* the ultimate goal; music is circular in nature, so understanding the *whole* circle is the key to understanding music. Just follow the simple exercises and you'll “get it” in no time. At any rate, you'll need to learn it *someday*, so why not start *today*?

### 1.b: Chord Shapes

If you have read my work before, you will know that I *despise* chord diagrams (“picture chords”). They are nothing more than “paint-by-number”; a *dependance* on them will severely limit your forward progress. There are countless musical concepts—important to progress—that simply *cannot* be shown with chord diagrams; they are a learning dead end! **However**, they are perfect for *this* exercise!



I need to stress though that you will certainly go farther in your banjo studies if you learn to read standard notation, at least good enough to learn some important musical concepts. TAB is a much more instructive “shortcut” than are diagrams. I have provided all three, and have thrown in chord symbols to boot.

Anyway, let’s talk about “Major” chords: they are three-note chords (“Triads”) consisting of the 1, 3, and 5 of the key scale. For instance, a C Major chord is “spelled” C (1)-E (3)-G (5). Because there are 3 notes in the chord, there are 3 ways to play the chord (“inversions”), depending on which of the scale “elements” is on the *bottom* of the chord. 1 on the bottom = a “root inversion” chord (1 is also known as the “root”); 3 on the bottom = a “1<sup>st</sup> inversion chord; and 5 on the bottom = “2<sup>nd</sup> inversion” chord.

In Chord Melody theory—because the note on the 1<sup>st</sup> string is the most important (it’s the melody note)—we use *top-down* “forms” instead of *bottom-up* inversions: 1 on the top string = a “form 1” chord; 3 on the top string = a “form 3” chord; 5 on the top string = a “form 5” chord. Knowing only your *forms* is a banjo-specific thing that will limit you to the banjo—and block the path to understanding mainstream theory; knowing your *inversions* will clear that road block. I will use *both* moving forward.

As you’ll see, using numbers instead of letters allows us to apply this to all 12 keys. “*Wait...all 12 keys!?!?*” you may exclaim with fear and trepidation. Of course! If you want to truly understand music, you must understand—“in theory” at least—all of music. Every key uses the same scale elements (1-3-5), so it is a *functional* shortcut, instead of memorizing the scale/chord “spellings.”

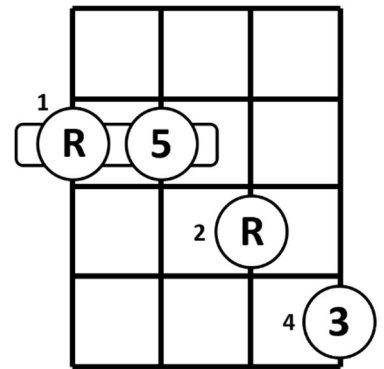
So, back to chord shapes: we refer to the finger configuration of the various chords as the “shape” of the chord. At the beginning level especially, it’s important to think in terms of the shape your fingers make on the fretboard, *and* get used to the physical feeling and aural sound (it’s “voicing”) this shape produces. This is the *one place* where chord diagrams shine, because they visually *show* the shape. Just twist your fingers into that shape and place it on the appropriate fret, and *voilà!* You’re “playing” the banjo! “*Playing music?*” Well, you gotta start somewhere!

### 1.c: Root Inversion/Form 3 Chord

Here is the chord diagram for the root inversion/form 3 chord:

As you can see, the root (R) is on the bottom string (making it a “root inversion”), and the 3 is on the top string (making it a “form 3”). The little numbers outside the circles refer to which finger to use. The bar behind the R and 5 means to “barre” with your flattened first finger.

As you can see, the root is “doubled”: because there are only *three* notes in a Triad—but *four* strings on the banjo—one note will *always* be doubled. Since the *root* is doubled here, this is the strongest of the Major chord shapes.



Where to place this? Again, there are two ways to think of it. #1: Chord Melody theory will give you the fret number of the highest note (3), because that’s where the *melody* note is. #2: locate the *root* note fret number. Note: this is how guitarists use chord diagrams; they are trained to think “bottom-up.”

Herein lies the difference between the “paint by number” approach and the “music theory” approach: Chord Melody arrangers will typically not talk about any note other than the *melody* note. So, you learn *nothing* about music—nothing that would allow you to learn *more* about music and go *beyond* Chord Melody that is! You learn *only* how to play simple songs using *block* chord shapes; a very limiting dead end, in my educated opinion! It is hard to advance if this is your only basis of understanding.

The second method requires that you know where the notes are on each string. Just that simple exercise of learning the notes on all four strings will open up so much possibility for your playing and for the

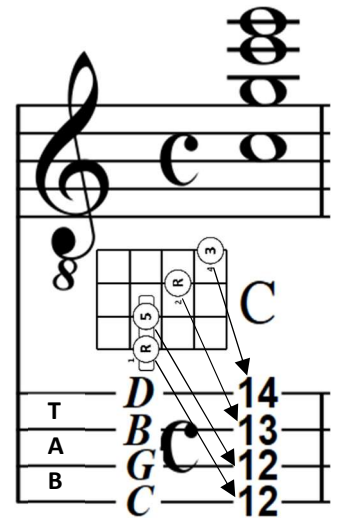
understanding of music. I will show both methods in these exercises, because they each have their advantages and special uses.

Now we will combine the Circle information above with the chord shape idea. Here is the first measure of the exercise:

The TAB staff shows the *fret numbers* on each string (bottom up) and in this case, the *open-string names* of each string; as you can see, this means to place your pinky on the 14<sup>th</sup> fret, and your first finger on the 12<sup>th</sup> fret (compare the diagram to the TAB). So, the chord shape fits between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> frets.

Reading standard notation: We know that a C Major chord is “spelled” C-E-G. This inversion is “stacked” (bottom up) C-G-C-E (or R-5-R-3). Even though the notes are “out of order,” they still spell a C chord.

As you are moving from chord to chord (again, realize it’s the same shape all the way through), keep the chord shape in your fingers with your fingertips lightly touching the strings. Slowly slide from chord to chord maintaining this light contact. Now, here is the whole exercise; take however much time you need and name the chords as you’re playing them. Even though I put a note “value” on them (whole notes), you needn’t be concerned with “keeping time”:



As you can see, this goes “all the way around” the Circle of 5<sup>ths</sup>! These are *not* 12 different chords: it is the same chord *shape* being used in 12 different keys. You just have to know where to play the shape; if you know where the Root is, you know its location *and* its name. For now, you need only memorize which fret the pinky moves to in order to take this trip.

Moving forward, you will also need to memorize the root movement and the physical distance (how many frets are skipped) between them. All of these things will become ingrained the more you practice it. The ultimate goal of this exercise is to *hear* the root movement.

You’ll notice that the G<sup>b</sup> and F<sup>#</sup> chords are on the same frets, even though the notation is different; they are “enharmonic” to each other (same *pitch*, different *name*), and in this case, they allow the circular movement to transition from flat keys to sharp keys. D<sup>b</sup> is the V of G<sup>b</sup>, but F<sup>#</sup> is the V of B. This transition will be assumed and not shown in the following exercises. Is the enharmonic concept something you would have learned without studying the Circle? *Not likely*; it would probably remain one of those esoteric “big words” that music professors use for no apparent reason. You now know the reason!

Now I can get to the *real* moral of this story: I can tell you to “*practice your root inversion/form 3 chord shape,*” which will very quickly become boring, and you will stop practicing. But remember, *repetition* is the key to learning *and* improving. By adding in the Circle of 5<sup>th</sup>s movement, you will now “practice” this chord shape 12 times in one sitting. You will also be learning to hear root movement and how to move a chord shape a prescribed distance without thinking—all using the same simple chord.

So, is this a *chord shape* exercise, a *root movement* exercise, or a *Circle of 5<sup>th</sup>s* exercise? *Ahh...*

On top of the repetitious physical drilling of something you already know and use every day, you are learning the concepts that will allow you to *continue* moving forward. By practicing this whole routine *over and over again*, all of these aspects will become ingrained habit, allowing you to move forward without having to *think* of all these details. And if you name the chords while playing it *over and over again* (have I said that enough yet?), you will also memorize the Circle! *This is what practice is for!*

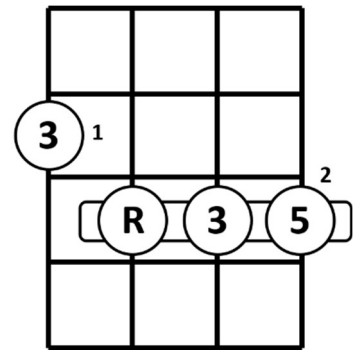
The important point is, even if you do not understand the *reason* for something, you should still practice it! Don’t think about *today*; think about *next year...next decade...your ultimate* level of understanding! I hope you realize that you *will* improve with time, but you need things that will push that timeline *now*.

Sorry it took four pages to reach this point, but now we can cruise through the rest, and set up all the rest of the lessons to follow.

### 1.d: 1<sup>st</sup> Inversion/Form 5 Chord

Here is the 1<sup>st</sup> inversion/form 5 Major chord:

Now you see that the “3” is on the bottom string (making it a “1<sup>st</sup> inversion”) and the “5” is on the top string (making it a “form 5”). This time you barre the top three strings with your 2<sup>nd</sup> finger. The 3 is doubled: the root and 3 are the strongest notes of the chord, so the doubling makes this a strong voicing as well—just not quite as strong as the root inversion.



All of the general information from before applies, so let’s skip right to the Circle exercise; simply apply this chord shape at the fret indicated in the TAB for the melody string or the Root (3<sup>rd</sup> string):

The first staff shows the following chords and their fret positions:

- C: 17, 17, 17, 16
- F: 10, 10, 10, 9
- B<sup>b</sup>: 15, 15, 15, 14
- E<sup>b</sup>: 8, 8, 8, 7
- A<sup>b</sup>: 13, 13, 13, 12
- D<sup>b</sup>: 6, 6, 6, 5

The second staff shows the following chords and their fret positions:

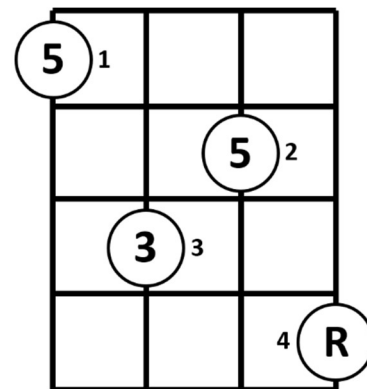
- G<sup>b</sup>: 11, 11, 11, 10
- B: 4, 4, 4, 3
- E: 9, 9, 9, 8
- A: 2, 2, 2, 1
- D: 7, 7, 7, 6
- G: 12, 12, 12, 11
- C: 5, 5, 5, 4

Since the root is hidden on the 3<sup>rd</sup> string, you should pick that note by itself and then the chord. Again, learning to *hear* the root movement is the whole point. Listen deep within the chords for the root note as you play them. Hint: it helps to sing or hum the root while playing the chord; more on that in a moment. Again, maintain light contact with the chord shape on the strings while moving from fret to fret. As you become familiar with the exercise (*over and over again!*), pick up the speed.

## 1.e: 2<sup>nd</sup> Inversion/Form 1 Chord

Now here is the 2<sup>nd</sup> inversion/form 1 Major chord: Now the “5” is on the bottom string (making it a “2<sup>nd</sup> inversion”) and the root is on the 1<sup>st</sup> string (making it a “form 1”).

This time the 5 is doubled: the 5 is the *weakest* note of the chord, so doubling it makes this a weak voicing. I know that folks tend to think of this as a strong chord shape because the root is on top, but that doubled 5 saps it of its aural strength.



And here is the Circle exercise:

## 1.f: Root Movement Exercise

Again, the most-important goal with all three inversions is to learn to *hear* the root movement, so let’s take a closer look at that. Here is a simple single-note exercise; the first part follows the Circle in a down-up pattern (C *down* to F, F *up* to Bb, etc.). The second part follows an up-down pattern (C *up* to F, F *down* to Bb, etc.). The aural relationship is the same. Again, take your time and *listen*:

Play these through slowly several times, speaking the note name until you start to hear the natural Circle movement. Next, if you can sing on pitch, sing the pitches as you play them. The ultimate goal is to be able to sing them without playing them. When you can do *that*, you will have trained your ear *and* your voice, adding *yet another* layer of learning! After this “ear training,” go back through the inversions and listen for the root movement.

If you have any difficulty with this, I encourage you to contact me. I will be happy to walk you through it and set you on the path to *real* musical learning.

In **Lesson #2**, we’ll do the same with Dominant 7 chords. **Lesson #3** will introduce 3-note chords and then start combining those chords in different ways.