

Two-Finger Bluegrass Banjo

by Ira Gitlin ©2008

If you haven't already seen High Lonesome, Rachel Liebling's 1991 documentary about the history of bluegrass, stop reading RIGHT NOW and go order yourself a copy. It's entertaining, informative, and packed with great archival film clips of classic bluegrass performers and the early-twentieth-century mountain culture from which their music emerged.

For me as a banjo player, one of the most fascinating moments in the film comes in the middle of a mid-1950s clip of the Blue Grass Boys playing Bill Monroe's fiddle tune "Roanoke." Jackie Phelps takes a banjo break, and it sounds like a quirky but entirely plausible version of Scruggs style. Then the camera zooms in on his picking hand, and you can see how quirky it really is: He's only using his thumb and index finger!

Historically, that shouldn't really be too surprising. Although Earl Scruggs' music had an immediate and powerful impact on country music, the present-day orthodoxy of doing things "just like Earl" took a while to develop. In the days before the Scruggs book, the Murphy Method, Banjo Newsletter, and the like, information on exactly what Earl was doing was hard to come by. If you were already playing two-finger banjo when you first heard Earl in the late 1940s, you might not have realized that he was using that extra finger. Or maybe you knew, but didn't want to bother learning a whole new technique, figuring that it was enough to approximate the exciting new sound.

Anyway, that film clip got me wondering how close to the Scruggs sound I could get, picking with nothing but my thumb and index finger. It was obvious from the start that it would be impossible to copy many Scruggs licks note for note. But at least half of the notes in most Scruggs licks are actually filler—"banjo noise," as Washington, D.C., guitarist-singer Moondi Klein likes to say. Most often, those filler notes are played on the fifth and first strings. So how about this: As much as possible we'll try to play the important melody notes in their proper places, but wherever the Scruggs lick has a filler note, we won't care whether it's on the first or the fifth string; instead, we'll play a filler note on whichever of those two strings is most convenient.

Let's start with the first lick many beginners learn: the "Cripple Creek" lick. With three fingers, it's played like this:

```
-----0-----0--|
-----0-----0-----|
TAB--2-3-----2-3-----|
-----|
-----0-----0-----|
```

T S I T M T S I T M

Actually, this lick can be played note for note, simply by replacing the middle finger with the index:

```
-----0-----0--|
-----0-----0-----|
TAB--2-3-----2-3-----|
-----|
-----0-----0-----|
      T S I T I T S I T I
```

Now let's go for something just a little trickier—a forward-backward (a.k.a. "forward-reverse", or simply "reverse") roll. I don't know of any widely used name for this widely used lick, but among other things, it's the first lick in "Earl's Breakdown" and "Flint Hill Special":

```
-----0----0-----0--|
-----0-----0-----|
TAB--2-3-----3-2-----|
-----|
-----0-----|
      T S I M T M I T P M
```

By switching some of the first- and fifth-string filler notes, we can craft a pretty good approximation that leaves all the important notes in their original places:

```
-----0-----0---|
-----0-----0-----|
TAB--2-3-----3-2-----|
-----|
-----0----0-----|
      T S I T I T I T P I
```

Next, let's look at the most frequently used fill-in (or tag) lick:

```
-----0-----0-----0---|
-----|
TAB--0-----2--3--0-----|
-----2-----|
-----0-----|
      T M T I M I T M
          S
```

If you play the following two-finger version quickly and smoothly, no non-banjoist would be able to tell the difference:

```
-----0-----0---|
-----|
TAB--0-----2--3--0-----|
-----2-----|
-----0-----0-----|
      T I T I M I T I
          S
```

Of course, we'll need a way to play the "Foggy Mountain" lick—you know, this one:

```
-----0-----0-----0---|
----2-3----2-3-----0-----|
TAB-----|
-----|
-----0-----0---|
      I H M T H M T I M T
```

We can start our two-finger version with the thumb and switch around some filler notes:

```
-----0-----0-----0---|
----2-3----2-3-----0-----|
TAB-----|
-----|
-----0-----0-----|
    T H I   T H I   T   I   T   I
```

There's also this variant of the "Foggy Mountain" lick, in which the D note on the second string is held down:

```
-----0-----0-----0---|
----2-3----2-3-----3-----|
TAB-----|
-----|
-----0-----0-----|
    I H M   T H M   T   I   M   T
```

Although my two-finger version of the previous lick uses different right-hand fingering, it sounds exactly the same as the original three-finger version:

```
-----0-----0-----0-----0---|
----2-3----2-3-----3-----|
TAB-----|
-----|
-----0-----|
    T H I   T H I   T   I   T   I
```

Here's a useful phrase that works well for the last line of many songs; it shows up as both the first and the last line in Scruggs' first break to "Roll In My Sweet Baby's Arms":

```

-----2-----0-----0- | -----0-----0----- |
-----0-----0-----0- | -----0-----0----- |
TAB---3-----3-2--- | -0-----2-3----- |
-----                | -----2----- |
-----0-----0-----0- | -----0-----0----- |
      T I M T M I T P M   T I T M T I M T
                               S

```

```

-----0-----0-----0- | -----0-----0----- | |
-----                | -----0----- | |
TAB--0-----2--3--0----- | -0--X-----X-----X-----X--- | |
-----2----- | ----- | |
-----0-----0-----0- | -----0-----0----- | |
      I M T I M I T M   T   M   I   M

```

In the following two-finger version I've had to displace the first-string E, playing it a little later than in the original lick, but that's okay; you hear similar things all the time in the playing of Ralph Stanley, Don Reno, and many others:

```

-----2-----0- | -----0-----0- |
-----0-----0----- | -----0----- |
TAB---3-----3-2--- | -0-----2-3----- |
-----                | -----2----- |
-----0-----0-----0- | -----0-----0----- |
      T I T I T I T P I   T I T I T I S I
                               T

```

```

-----0-----0-----0- | -----0-----0----- | |
-----                | -----0----- | |
TAB--0-----2--3--0----- | -0--X-----X-----X-----X--- | |
-----2----- | ----- | |
-----0-----0-----0- | -----0-----0----- | |
      T I T I S I T I   T   I   T   I
                T           T           T

```

Try some other licks—and whole breaks too, of course—on your own, and you'll start to get a feel for how this works.

It would seem at first glance, however, that the two-finger technique prevents us from using the three-finger banjo's signature pattern, the forward roll. Yet, surprisingly, there is a way for the two-finger player to capture at least some of the forward roll's syncopated headlong rush. Let's look at the following three-finger example, where a stretch of unbroken forward roll begins right after the rest (x):

```

-----0-----0--|-----0-----0-----
-----|-----
TAB--0--X----0-----0----|---0-----0-----0-----
-----|-----
-----0-----0-----|---0-----0-----0-----
      T      T I M T I M   T I M T I M T I etc.

```

Although we can't duplicate the 5-3-1-5-3-1... string sequence, we can place those third-string notes at the same rhythmic locations:

```

-----0-----0--|-----0-----0-----
-----|-----
TAB--0--X----0-----0----|---0-----0-----0-----
-----|-----
-----0-----0-----|---0-----0-----0-----
      T      T I T I T I   T I T I T I T I etc.

```

Notice how the third string in this pseudo-roll is picked first by the index, then by the thumb, then again by the index, then by the thumb, and so on. If we emphasize the third string and de-emphasize the filler notes on the first and fifth strings, what emerges from the "banjo noise" has the same three-against-four feeling that we get from a genuine forward roll. For a little practice, have a look at the tune at the end of this article. Do you recognize it?

Now, I'm not going to pretend that the approach I've outlined here duplicates what Jackie Phelps or any of the other two-finger para-Scruggs players actually did back in the '40s and '50s. It's just one picker's exploration of the topic. And much more could be done; for example, I haven't even begun to get into up-the-neck playing.

You might think that this is all just a parlor trick, something to amaze your banjo-playing friends during the downtime between songs at a jam session. But it could have some practical uses. It's well known in the banjo world that Tom Adams has been dealing with focal dystonia, a neurological affliction that prevents him from picking with his middle finger. Nick Hornbuckle, who plays with John Reischman and the Jaybirds, suffers from a similar condition. Both of these fine players have developed two-finger techniques that enable them to deliver a convincing bluegrass sound.

I mentioned my two-finger musings in a recent conversation with Pete Kelly, the former Banjo NewsLetter columnist and sideman to Dale Ann Bradley and Michael Cleveland. To my surprise, he had come up with a similar approach on his own. In fact, he took the idea one bizarre step further. Pete envisions a seven-string banjo with two "first" strings—one tuned to the normal D, and one tuned to the high G like the regular fifth string—and two "fifth" strings—one tuned to the normal high G, and one tuned to the D below it like the regular first string. With that configuration, your thumb and index would each have easy access to both a high G and a D. So you could actually play many (if not all) Scruggs licks note for note using a two-finger technique like the one I've described above! So far, this heptachordal monstrosity exists only in Pete's imagination, but if anyone wants to build one, I for one would love to hear about it. Just drop me a line at ira@iragitlin.com.

[Name That Tune]

Arrangement by Ira Gitlin © 2008

```

-----|-----0-----0-----|
-----|-----|
TAB--x--x--x--x-----|-----0-----0-----0-----|
-----0--x--2--x--| -2-5-----|
-----|-----0-----0-----|
           T      T      T S I T I T I T I

-----0-----0-----0--|-----0-----0-----|
-----0-----0-----|-----0-----|
TAB-----3-2---0-----|-----0-----|
-----| -2-----0-----2-----|
-----0-----|-----0-----|
    T I T I T P I T I      T I T I T I T I

```

```

-----0-----|-----0-----0-----|
-----|-----|
TAB--0--x----x----x----x--|-----0-----0-----0-----|
-----0-----2-----|2-5-----|
-----0-----|-----0-----0-----|
      T      I      T      T      T S I T I T I T I
      M

```

```

-----0-----0-----0-----|-----0-----0-----0-----|
-----3-----3-----0-----|-2-3-----3-----3-----|
TAB-----x----x----x--|-----|
-----|-----|
-----0-----|-----0-----0-----|
      T I T      I      I      T H I T I T I T I
      T      T

```

```

-----0-----|-----0-----0-----|
-----3-----3-----5-----|-5--8-----8-----8-----|
TAB-----x----x--|-----|
-----|-----|
-----0-----0-----|-----0-----0-----|
      T I T I T      T      T S T I T I T I

```

```

-----0-----0-----|-----0-----0-----0-----|
-----3-----5-----|-2-3-----3-----3-----|
TAB-----x----x--|-----|
-----|-----|
-----0-----0-----|-----0-----0-----|
      T I T      T I T      T H I T I T I T I

```

-----0-----	-----0-----
 TAB-----3--2-----0--x-----x-- | -0--x-----0-----0----- |
 -----2----- | -----2----- |
 -----0-----0----- | -----0-----0----- |
 T I P I T T T T I T I T I
 T

-----0-----0-----	-----0-----0-----
 TAB-----x-----0----- | -0-----2--3--0----- |
 -----0-----2-----2----- | -----2-----2----- |
 -----0----- | -----0-----0----- |
 T T I T I T I T I T I S I T I
 T

----- | |
 ----- | |
 TAB--0----- | |
 ----- | |
 ----- | |
 T



Ira Gitlin, a native of New York City, is widely known and respected in Washington-Baltimore bluegrass, folk, and roots-music circles as a versatile multi-instrumentalist, teacher, and writer. A former National Bluegrass Banjo Champion and six-time Wammie award winner, Ira has worked with such nationally known performers as Bill Harrell, the Johnson Mountain Boys, and Peter Rowan, and has played on over two dozen recording projects. He can be seen performing frequently with the Blue Moon Cowgirls, Karen Collins & the Backroads Band, the Oklahoma Twisters, and other D.C.-area artists.

In addition to numerous festival workshops, Ira has taught at the Maryland Banjo Academy (1998, 2000, and 2002), the Swannanoa Gathering (2001-3), the Augusta Heritage Workshops (2004-7), the Grey Fox Bluegrass Academy for Kids (2000-2007), and the Kids' Academies at the Gettysburg Bluegrass Festival (2003-2007) and the Joe Val Memorial Festival (2004-7).

Ira has written about bluegrass music in the pages of Bluegrass Unlimited, Banjo NewsLetter, and Bluegrass Now, and he has contributed liner notes to several commercial recordings. He has lectured on the history of bluegrass for the Smithsonian Associates, and in 2005 he delivered a paper ("The Parking-Lot Vernacular") at the world's first academic symposium on bluegrass.

In 1993 Ira was a one-day winner on the television game show Jeopardy.