

# A MUSICAL APPROACH TO LEARNING THE BANJO NECK



## Introduction

One of the things that has become clear to me, after a number of years of playing banjo, is that if I have any hope of improvising creatively over the entire neck of the banjo, I have to learn the fretboard. I have to know where to find notes, scales, and chords; and I have to know exactly what notes, scales and chords I am currently playing.

I have tried a variety of approaches to memorizing the fretboard, but most of the approaches I have used do not translate directly into MUSICAL thinking. Recently, I sat down and developed an approach to learning the neck that is musical, logical, and relatively easy to learn.

This system consists of 5 steps. Although it is tempting to rush through this process - DON'T DO IT. Take as much time on each step as is necessary to completely understand it. When you are sure that you have mastered a step, then, go on to the next one.

If you look at the bass notes, *the lowest sounding notes*, in the chord shapes, you will notice that **the root 'G' is the lowest note in G(1), the 3<sup>rd</sup> is the lowest note in G(2), and the 5<sup>th</sup> is the lowest note in G(3).**

As well, if you go across the strings **starting from the low D string, you will see that in G(1) the G chord is spelled out ; 1<sup>st</sup>,3<sup>rd</sup>,5<sup>th</sup>,1<sup>st</sup>. In G(2) you get; 3<sup>rd</sup>,5<sup>th</sup>,1<sup>st</sup>,3<sup>rd</sup>. In G(3) you get; 5<sup>th</sup>,1<sup>st</sup>,3<sup>rd</sup>,5<sup>th</sup>.**

These are the three inversions of the G chord on the banjo neck – the root inversion, G(1); the second inversion, G(2); and the third inversion, G(3).

You only have to learn **these relative note positions** once. They **remain constant for the three chord shapes in all 12 keys.**

If you look at the chords for A, you will see how this works.

## Step 1

### Learn The Three Basic Chord Shapes

There are three basic fingerings for major chords on the banjo neck. In the key of 'G' they are:

<p><b>G (1)</b></p> <p>G B D G 1 3 5 1</p>	<p><b>G (2)</b></p> <p>B D G B 3 5 1 3</p>	<p><b>G (3)</b></p> <p>D G B D 5 1 3 5</p>
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<p><b>A (3)</b></p> <p>E A C# E 5 1 3 5</p>	<p><b>A (1)</b></p> <p>A C# E A 1 3 5 1</p>	<p><b>A (2)</b></p> <p>C# E A C# 3 5 1 3</p>
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No matter what chord you are playing:

- **shape(1) is always 1, 3, 5, 1**
- **shape(2) is always 3, 5, 1, 3**
- **shape(3) is always 5, 1, 3, 5**

As well, the shapes will always follow each other in order. If the lowest shape is shape(3), the next shape will be shape(1), then shape (2), etc.

## Step 2

### Learn The Lowest Chord Form For All 12 Keys

The next step is simply to learn to go through the 12 keys, in fourths, playing the lowest chord form available on the banjo neck. I don't use chords with open strings at this point in the practice process. Thus, although there is a G(3) chord available by simply strumming the open strings, I play G(1) at the 3<sup>rd</sup> fret to start the G forms.

I start on the A chord and play the lowest chord form (lowest place on the fretboard where I can play the chord) for all 12 keys, progressing in fourths. The order of play would be:

A, D, G, C, F, Bb, Eb, Ab, Db, F#, B, E

<b>A (3)</b>  E A C# E	<b>D (2)</b>  F# A D F#	<b>G (1)</b>  G B D G	<b>C (3)</b>  G C E G
<b>F (1)</b>  F A C F	<b>Bb (3)</b>  F Bb D F	<b>Eb (2)</b>  G Bb Eb G	<b>Ab (3)</b>  Eb Ab C Eb
<b>C# (2)</b>  F G# C# F	<b>F# (1)</b>  F# A# C# F#	<b>B (3)</b>  F# B D# F#	<b>E (2)</b>  G# B E G#

## Step 3

### Learn The Chord Tones In All 12 Keys

As I play the chords, I name, out loud, the chord tones under each finger.

- The first A chord would be: 5, 1, 3, 5
- The D chord would be: 3, 5, 1, 3
- The G chord would be: 1, 3, 5, 1, etc.

I think you will be surprised how quickly you learn these chord forms and the locations of the scale tones in them. I would wager that if you go through the exercise a few times, you will have them memorized.

## Step 4

### Learn The Chord Notes In All 12 Keys

This is just an extension of 'Step 3', but it is where you really start to get an understanding of the musical layout of the banjo neck. In this step, after you name the chord tones, you name, out loud, the actual notes you are playing.

For the A chord say: 5, 1, 3, 5 - then say: E, A, C#, E.

You repeat this process for all 12 chords. You may find this part slow going at first. However, if you keep at it, you will soon be able to spell the major chords for all 12 keys and name the notes under each finger.

## Step 5

### Learn The Chord Tones And Notes For All 3 Chord Forms In All 12 Keys

This is the last step, and will open up the entire neck of the banjo.

In this step, you play all three chord positions for all 12 keys. You name the chord tones in each chord, and you name the notes you are playing. At first it seems daunting, but if you have completed the first

4 steps carefully, you will find that it is much easier that it first appears.

No matter what key you are in, the relative positions of shape(1), shape(2) and shape(3) remain constant. I think that you will find if you run through step 5 even once, you will find your hand moving automatically from one chord shape to the next.

Since you are repeating the same three shapes again and again, you will also find that naming the chord tones in all 12 keys and all three shapes is not difficult. You already learned to do that in step 3.

The work comes in naming the actual notes you are playing. However, even that is something you have already learned. In step 4, you learned to name the notes in the lowest chord form for each of the 12 keys. Now, all you have to do is spell the notes in the last two chord forms for each key.

## Where to go from here

Once you can run through the basic exercises, you can go through all the chord forms and flat the third. Now you are running sets of minor chords in all 12 keys. Try making Augmented and Diminished chords, 6ths, 7ths, 9ths, etc.

I think that you will find that this system not only results in learning the neck, but learning it in a way that immediately lends itself to 'making music'.

Playing the three chord forms in all 12 keys covers every note on the fretboard between the 1st and 12th fret. You will find after a while that you not only know all the notes on the banjo neck, but they are all part of a functional chord matrix that covers the entire fretboard.

Another good exercise is to play a I IV V sequence in all 12 keys and in all 3 positions. A progression to start with is G (root) C (4th) and D (5th). The following changes can be found in many standard traditional songs.

I / IV / I / V(7) / I

As you play these changes, you will find a variety of combinations available using only the 3 basic chord forms.

The following page is a chart of complete major diatonic scales for all 12 keys. It provides the information that you need to complete the exercises here, as well as the information you need to build minor, augmented and diminished chords from your basic major chords, and to build 6ths, 7ths, 9ths, etc.

Here are some chord formulas to get you started experimenting:

- **Major chord = 1, 3, 5**
- **Minor chord = 1, b3, 5**
- **Diminished chord = 1, b3, b5**
- **Augmented chord = 1, 3, #5**
- **Dominant 7th chord = 1, 3, 5, b7**

## Major Scales for all 12 keys

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
A	B	C#	D	E	F#	G#	A
D	E	F#	G	A	B	C#	D
G	A	B	C	D	E	F#	G
C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C
F	G	A	Bb	C	D	E	F
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Bb	C	D	Eb	F	G	A	Bb
Eb	F	G	Ab	Bb	C	D	Eb
Ab	Bb	C	Db	Eb	F	G	Ab
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Db	Eb	F	Gb	Ab	Bb	C	Db
F#	G#	A#	B	C#	D#	E#	F#
B	C#	Eb	E	F#	G#	A#	B
E	F#	G#	A	B	C#	Eb	E

**Note:** The C# scale contains 7 sharps. Two of them are E#, and B#. There are theoretical reasons why these two notes are notated as E# rather than F, and B# rather than C. However, for the purposes of learning the fretboard, this convention is not so useful. For that reason, I show the notes here as F and C.

# PATTERNS ON THE BANJO NECK

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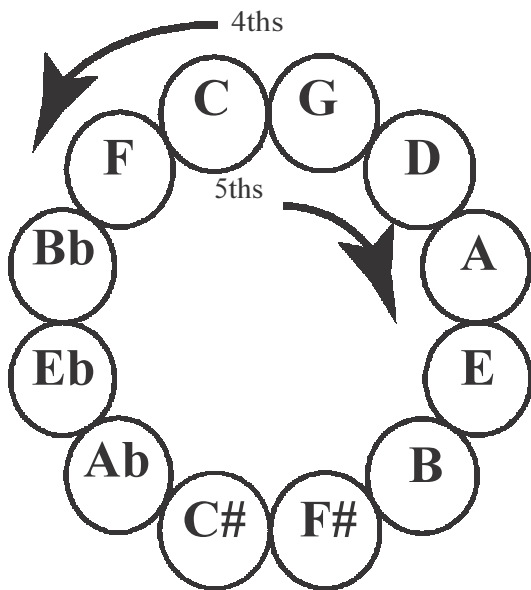
In the previous section, we looked at learning the notes on the banjo fingerboard by learning three basic chord shapes, learning the chord tones in those shapes, and learning the notes that the chord tones represented in specific chords.

We looked at the lowest chord form for the root chord in all 12 keys. This gave us 12 chord shapes that were positioned between the 1st and 5th frets and that used all three basic chord shapes - the root, 2nd, and 3rd inversions.

Although this is a useful approach to beginning to make sense of the banjo fretboard. It is possible to look at the neck in terms of *pattern sets* - relationships that are consistent and predictable over the entire banjo neck. This can be a very useful way of seeing the neck and note/chord relationships.

In order to begin this exploration, let's take a look at a simplified version of the Circle of 5ths.

The Circle of 5th's



The Circle of 5ths is a geometrical representation of relationships among the 12 pitch classes of the chromatic scale. The entire graphic is much more complex than the one above, but the simplified version will serve our purposes here.

Actually, this graphic is a circle of 5ths if you go around the circle in a clock-wise direction. However, if you travel around it in a **counter**-clockwise direction then it is a circle of 4ths.

For our purposes here, we are going to work with 4ths. The main reason being that moving in 4ths gives us a nice, easily remembered mnemonic -

BEAD - GCF - BbEbAbDb - F#

If we look at the notes on the 4th and 3rd strings, of the banjo, we will see that at the same fret, the note on the 3rd string is a 4th away from the note on the 4th string.

Thus, if we find the 4th string note on the circle of 5ths, the note on the 3rd string at that same fret is the next note counter-clockwise around the circle. If the note on the 4th string is a G, the one on the 3rd string is a C. This pattern continues over the entire neck. Barre the fifth fret to check this out.

This will create a related pattern of chords that repeat over the entire neck. If the root tone of the chord falls on the 1<sup>st</sup> and or 4<sup>th</sup> strings, the chord that you make from it is a 'root inversion form. "F" formation on first three strings with the second string fretted one fret down from the first string fretted, and the second string one more fret down from there.

If you make a 'root inversion' chord, then the 4th interval chord of this is always a '3rd inversion' (barre) chord starting two frets up the neck. Example - root inversion form chord G starting at frets 3, then move up two frets and create the barre or 3<sup>rd</sup> inversion. We have a C chord - one fourth up from G. This pattern repeats over the entire banjo neck.

If you refer to the graphic on the last page - PATTERNS OF 4THS ON THE BANJO - you will see that the banjo neck on the left shows the entire circle of 4ths on the 4th and 3rd strings over the whole neck of the banjo.

### **EXERCISE 1**

Starting on the 9th fret of the banjo, referring to the left-side neck chart, play the 12 chords in the circle of 4ths.

- The first chord would be B(1) on the 7th fret.
- The 2nd chord would be E(3) starting on the 9th fret
- The 3rd chord would be A(1) starting on the 5th fret.
- The 4th chord would be D(3) starting on the 7th fret, etc.

### **NOTES ON THE 2nd AND 3rd STRINGS**

If you find a note on the 3rd string of the banjo, the note one fret up on the 2nd string is a 4th away. Thus, if you find the G note on the 12 fret of the 3rd string, there is a C not located on the 13th fret of the 2nd string. Again, this pattern of 4ths occurs consistently over the entire banjo fretboard.

If we build a chord using the 3rd string note as the root, again, we get a '3rd inversion' chord. Like a barre or 3<sup>rd</sup> inversion at the 5<sup>th</sup> fret is a C chord and C is the note of the 3<sup>rd</sup> string.

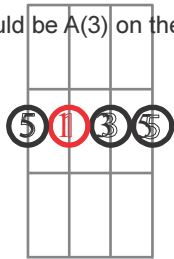
If we want to build the same chord using the second string for the ROOT note, then we must use a second (D shape) inversion (frets 7-8-9 for example for strings 3-2-1 and our second string is our G or root note.

Thus, if you make a '3rd inversion' chord anywhere on the neck of the banjo, playing a '2nd inversion' chord at the same fret will give you a chord that is a 4th away from your first chord. If you look at the - PATTERNS OF 4THS ON THE BANJO - you will see this pattern drawn on the middle banjo neck graphic.

### EXERCISE 2

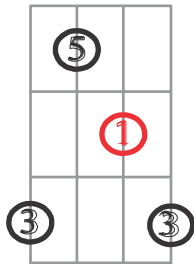
Starting on the 4th fret of banjo, referring to the center neck chart, play the 12 chords in the circle of 4ths.

- The first chord would be B(3) on the 4th fret.
- The 2nd chord would be E(2) on the 4th fret.
- The 3rd chord would be A(3) on the 2nd fret.



If we build a chord using the note on the 2nd string as the root tone, we get a '2nd inversion' chord.

#### 2nd Inversion



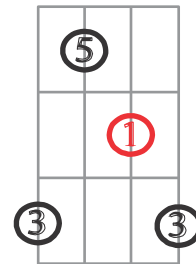
- The 4th chord would be D(2) on the 2nd fret, etc.

### NOTES ON THE 1st AND 2nd STRINGS

If you find a note on the 2nd string of the banjo, the note two frets up on the 1st string is a 4th away. If you find a G note on the 8th fret of the 2nd string, there is a C note two frets up on the 10th fret of the 1st string. Again, this pattern of 4ths occurs consistently over the entire banjo fretboard.

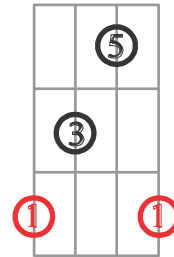
If we build a chord using the note on the 2nd string as the root, we get a '2nd inversion' chord.

#### 2nd Inversion



Building a chord using the note on the 1st string yields a 'root inversion' chord.

#### Root Inversion



### EXERCISE 3

Starting on the 12th fret of banjo, referring to the right-hand neck chart, play the 12 chords in the circle of 4ths.

- The first chord would be B(2) on the 12th fret.
- The 2nd chord would be E(1) on the 14th fret.
- The 3rd chord would be A(2) on the 10th fret.
- The 4th chord would be D(1) on the 8th fret, etc.

### Making Use of the I IV Patterns

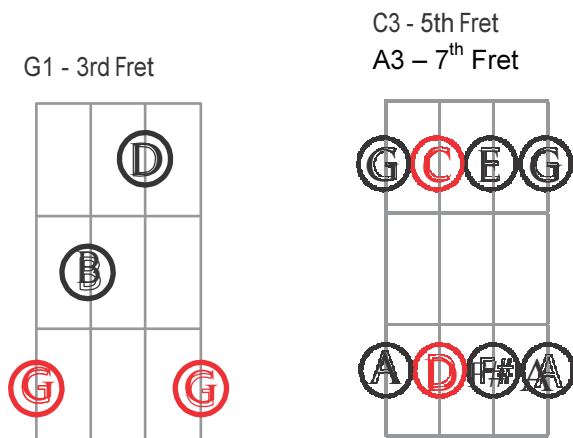
Playing through all three exercises will provide a picture of chordal relationships on the neck in all 12 keys that can be used to instantly find the basic chords to most Bluegrass tunes.

If we look at the G note on the 5th fret of the 4th string, we know that we can build a G(1) chord using the G note as a root tone. We also know that we can simply move up two frets and make a C(3) chord. We have played a I IV chord progression.

Most simple bluegrass (as well as folk, pop, rock, etc.) tunes are built off of a I IV V progression. In the key of G, that consists of a G, C, D(7) chord progression.

We have played 2/3 of the three chord progression by simply finding the I IV chord relationship we have been practicing in the exercises. All we need is to find the V chord - and that is a simple process. All we have to do is slide our IV chord up two frets.

So, returning to the G on the 4th string, we play a G(1) chord on the 3rd fret. Then a C(3) on the 5th fret and, finally, a D(3) on the 7th fret.



### Playing a Song

Here are the chords and lyrics for a Bluegrass tune that comes up at any jam you attend. If you have a standard Bluegrass Song Book, this is what you will likely find printed:

#### Verse

G C G  
I got a gal and she loves me  
G D G  
She's as sweet as she can be  
G C G  
She's got eyes of baby blue  
G D G  
Makes my gun shoot straight and true.

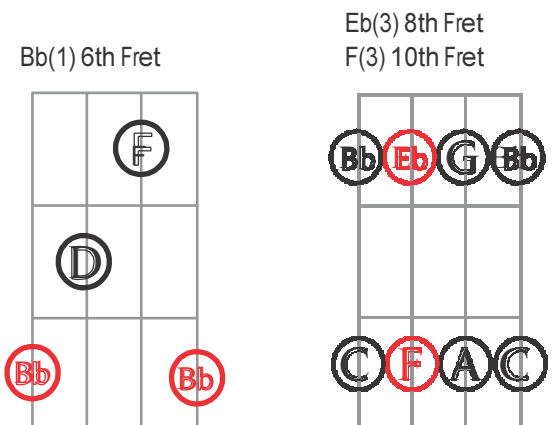
#### Chorus

G  
Go-in' up Crip-le Creek, go-in' on the run, G  
D G  
Go-in' up Cripple Creek to have some fun.

However, we know that if we are playing in the key of G then G, C, D is a I IV V progression. We also know that we can find the all the chords easily using the I IV relationships in exercise 1 through exercise 3.

Knowing this, we can play 'Cripple Creek' in any key, anywhere on the neck!

Let's say our singer can only sing the song in Bb. Yikes, how do we play the song in Bb. Well, just look at the left-hand neck chart. There is a Bb(A#) note on the 4th string 8th fret. So the entire song can be played using . . .





Not only can we play 'Cripple Creek' in any key using the I IV relationships shown on the left-hand neck chart. Using all three of the neck charts, we can play 'Cripple Creek' in any key, in three different positions on the neck.

#### **Exercise 4**

Using the left-hand neck chart, find the I IV V chords in the key of G (we already did this in the discussion above. Play 'Cripple Creek' again using G, C, and D chords.

When you are comfortable with playing 'Cripple Creek' using those chords, look at the middle neck chart. Find the I IV chord set in G on that chart. Remember that the V chord is made by simply sliding the IV chord up the neck two frets. Play 'Cripple Creek' using the chords made from the notes on the middle neck chart.

Again, when you are comfortable with these changes, look at the right-hand neck chart. Once again, find the I IV note set in G. You will find the G at the 8th fret on the 2nd string. Build and play the I IV chords on the 2nd and 1st strings, slide the IV chord up two frets to make the V chord. Play 'Cripple Creek' using your new chords.

Once you get comfortable with this note/chord matrix, you will be able to play 'Cripple Creek' in three positions on the banjo neck, in all 12 keys.

# PATTERNS OF 4THS ON THE BANJO

