BLUEGRASS MUSIC THEORY 101

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The Banjo Hangout

Introduction

Everyone cringes at the words "Music Theory", but this is mainly banjo related and very important to learning how to play.

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What is a scale?

A scale is an ascending and descending, ordered collection of notes that spans an interval of an octave. (Say that again in English) A scale is a group of notes spanning 7 notes and the beginning note again an octave higher.

Example: G Scale: G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G (octave)

All major scales are made up of 7 notes ranging from A to G. The D scale begins on D and goes as follows: D, E, F#, G, A, B, C#, D.

What is an octave?

An octave encompasses all notes from a given note to its next repetition. (What did she just say?) An octave is 8 notes starting on C and ending on C.

Example: C Scale: C D E F G A B C (octave)

A scale is made of up whole steps and half steps. In the G Major scale you have the following steps: whole step, whole step , half step , whole step, whole step , whole step, half step. (This is supposed to mean something to me?) Hang on, it will.

Example: Let's take the 3rd string on the banjo — open G.

Let's walk down that string and see what happens.

<u>Open G</u>

1st fret G#
2nd fret A
3rd fret A#
4th fret B
5th fret C
6th fret C#
7th fret D
8th fret D#
9th fret E
10th fret F
11th fret F#
12th fret G (octave)

1--2--3--4--5--6--7--8--9--10--11-12--------

Each Fret is a HALF STEP on your banjo. To make a G scale on the 3rd string, you fret as follows: open, 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11 & 12. Try it on your banjo, it works. (notice that there are 2 frets between each note EXCEPT B) and C and F# and G — this is why you need to know the whole and half steps. There are NO sharps and flats between B and C and E and F.

0--2--4--5--7--8--11--12----------

Why do you need to know this?

As you learn songs, you need to know what notes to play in what scale or key. If you are playing a song in the key of G, you normally start out in G and then as the song progresses, you may go to a D or a C. You need to know the G, D and C scales so you'll know which notes to play and better yet, which notes NOT to play. When you start playing chromatic or melodic, this information is invaluable.

Try this and see how it works for you:
Take the 1st string of your banjo, it's the D string.
Go down the string fretting each fret and see how it sounds.
You've got a D chromatic.
Now, fret open, 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11 & 12.

You've got a D scale.

0 -2--4--5--7--9--11--12----------

Now, if you think this isn't going to help you play the banjo, think again. It's teaching you where the notes are on your fretboard. Next time we'll go into how to play a scale using different open notes and fretted strings -- and how to make hot licks out of those notes.

NOTE: There are several notes in common in the D and G scales — what are they?

Let me know what you think and if you want more of this!

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Okay, gang, here's the 2nd installment of music theory. This one will show you a couple of hot licks you can use in your picking. Enjoy.

Did you figure out what notes the G and D scales had in common?

Did you see which notes were different? Let's see if you figured as I do:

G Scale: G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G

D Scale: D, E, F#, G, A, B, C#, D

Common notes: G, A, B, D, E
Different notes: C - C#,

So, the basic difference in these two scales is one note - a C or a C#. Play these two notes together and you'll see that they sound awful.

Now, you're never going to play a scale like that on a banjo, right? So, why did I even bother? You need to know your fretboard. This is a great way to learn it and will help you later on when you're playing chromatic/melodic licks.

Let's see if we can make it simpler to play on the banjo. Let's take a G scale and make it playable. (If you have tab paper, you can tab it out and it'll be a whole lot easier).

<u>G Scale</u>

3rd string, open
4th string, 7th fret
2nd string, open
3rd string, 5th fret
1st string, open
2ndstring, 5th fret
1st string, 4th fret
5th string, open

You have just played G, A, B, C, D, E, F# and G on the banjo. You can actually use this scale in as a hot lick on some songs.

You will use the scale tones to form licks. Many licks can be formed from this basic scale. Let's try a simple <u>G lick</u>:

3rd string, open
1st string, open
3rd string, 2nd fret, slide to 4th fret
1st string, open
5th string, open
2nd string, 5th fret
1st string, 4th fret
1st string, open

This is a 4 beat lick with the final G being the 1st note/beat of the next bar.

It is counted 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and 1. Each note is an 8th note and counts as ½ beat.

Now, does everyone understand how to count in music? 4/4, 3/4, 2/4, 2/2 6/8 etc.? No, we'll get to that later.

Another easy G lick that uses the scale

3rd string, open
4th string, 7th fret
2nd string, open
3rd string, 5th fret
1st string, open
2nd string, 5th fret
1st string, 4th fret
3rd string, open

It is counted as follows: 1, 2 and 3 and 4 and 1, next measure. In this lick the first note gets a full beat, the rest get ½ beat.

Okay, students, here's another music theory lesson on the C and D scales and licks. Some really neat licks in this one, try them, you'll like them!!

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D SCALE AND LICKS

How did you do with the two G licks I wrote out? Ready for more?

Let's take a look at the D scale. You can do it chromatically using the 1st fret and going down:
D 1st open
D# 1st fret
E 2nd fret
F 3rd fret
F# 4th fret and so on.

D scale on 1st string: 1 open, 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11, 12

D scale using all 5 strings:
1st string, open
3rd string, 9th fret
2nd string, 7th fret
5th string, open
2nd string, 10th fret
1st string, 9th fret
5th string, 11th fret
1st string, 12th fret

Let's look at a couple of D licks. Again, these use the notes of the D scale.

(And we're just going to say 3 open or 2 fret 3 instead of 3rd string open, 2nd string fret 3 because it saves time and is easier to do). Again, if you have tab paper, you can tab it out.)

3 open, 2 fret 2, hammer 3, 5 open, 2 fret 3, 1 open, 5 open.
This is counted: 1, 2 and 3 and 4 and. The first 3 open gets a full beat and everything else gets ½ beat.

1 fret 7, 5 open, 1 fret 4, 2 fret 5, 1 open, 3 fret 5, 2 open, 4 fret 7.
This is counted 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and with each note getting ½ beat.

What I've done on these licks is give you a Scruggs type lick and a melodic lick.

Now, are you ready to tackle the C Scale?

C SCALE

Again, we'll look at our fretboard. You can start with the 2nd string, first fret and go chromatic C, C#, D, D#, E, F, F#, G, G#, A, A#, B, C. (Note there are no #s between E and F and B and C — this is a given)

Now the scale in C is: 2nd string, fret 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 12, 13.The easy way to play it on the banjo: 3 fret 5, 1 open, 2 fret 5, 1 fret 3, 5 open, 2 fret 10, 1 fret 9 and 5 fret 10 (yes, you can fret the 5th string).

Two C licks:

2 fret 1, 1 fret 1, 5 open, 2 fret 1, 1 fret 2, 2 fret 1, 3 fret 2, 1 fret 2.
1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and

3 open, 1 open, 2 fret 5, 1 fret 3, 5 open, 2 fret 10, 1 fret 9.
1, 2 and 3 and 4 and.
Now do you begin to see why you need to know scales?

Okay, group, here's #5 of Vol. 1 and it starts with chords and how they are formed. I've also included two graphics that show you the F and D positions on the banjo. I've always called them #1 and #2 because it's easier to remember and not so confusing when you tell someone to make the F position C chord -- do what? Anyway the #1 position C chord is much easier to remember.

Hope you enjoy. Let me know if you have any questions.

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BLUEGRASSS MUSIC THEORY 101

CHORDS

We've gone through the G, C and D scales, told you what notes were in each and gave you examples of scales and licks.

Now, let's see how those scales make chords and why.

A Chord is made up of 3 notes. These notes are the 1st, 3rd and 5th notes of the scale (ah, there's that scale again). These notes harmonize or sound good when played as a group.

In the key of G you have the following chords: G, Am, Bm, C, D, Em F#dim and G (octave). This is supposed to mean something to me? It will, trust me!

To make a G chord on the banjo, just strum open, that's a G chord. But I'm strumming 4 notes, not 3! Yes, but you're strumming D, B, G and another D -- that's 3 notes with the D notes being an octave apart.

You can also make a G closed chord (no open notes) as follows: 2nd string, 3rd fret (index finger), 3rd string, 4th fret (middle finger), 4th string, 5th fret (ring finger) and 1st string 5th fret (pinkie). (This is called the 1st or F position on a banjo and you can make many, many chords using this position.) Again you have D, B, G, G.

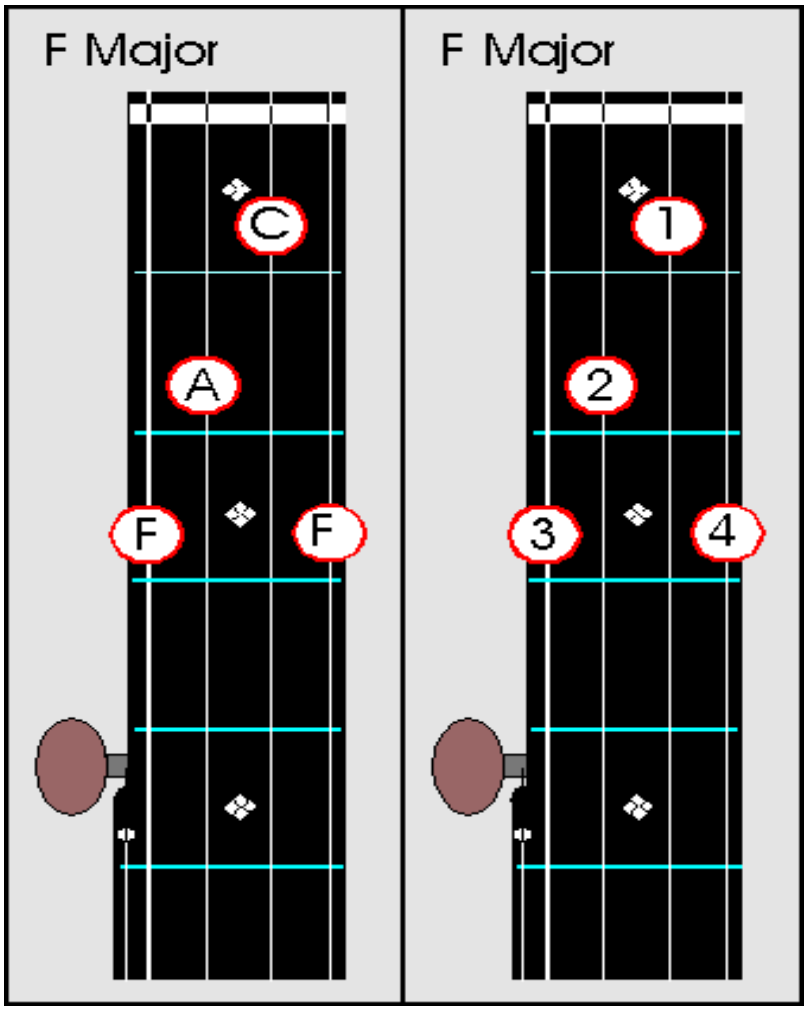
A C chord is C, E, G -- which can be made several ways on the banjo. The first C Chord on the banjo is as follows: 2nd string, 1st fret (index finger), 1st string 2nd fret (ring finger) and 4thstring 2nd fret (middle finger). This makes a complete C chord - C, E, G and C. (Note: the G (3rd string) is picked open)

A D chord is D, F#, A and can also be made several ways on the banjo. The first D chord on the banjo is made as follows: 3rd string, 2nd fret (index), 2nd string, 3rd fret (middle), 1st string 4thfret (ring) and 4th string, 4th fret (pinkie). (This is called the 2nd or D position and also makes many chords). You have notes A, D, F#, F#.

We'll get into the why of minor chords later if anyone is interested. Right now, just note that they are made up of 3 notes -- the 1st, 3rd and 5th, just like a major chord, but the inversion is different (no, you aren't supposed to understand that now, just take it at face value).

So, all the chords in the G scale are as follows:

G: G, B, D
Am: A, C, E
Bm: B, D, F#
C: C, E, G
D: D, F#, A
Em: E, G, B
F#dim: F#, A, C# (You'll probably never need to know this one -- it's seldom used in bluegrass, it's just for information).
And back to G which starts it all over.



NOTE:that the pitch of the fretted first string and forth strings will indicate the Major chord name. This chord shape is a really useful one when used in backup. In many tunes the forth string is not actually played so many players don't fret the forth string but it is best practice to learn the chord on all four strings so that it can be played at all fret positions as a closed chord