Melodies and Rolls: Creating a Bluegrass Banjo Solo

(Advanced beginner/ Intermediate)

By: Bruce Stockwell

Creating your own solo means coming to terms with the central challenge of bluegrass banjo; manipulating roll patterns well enough to smoothly "frame" a melody. Here are a few suggestions that might help you get started but keep in mind what experienced players do: they borrow phrases from other arrangements they know. Each new melody line you encounter will likely resemble something you already know how to play.

- Start with a basic tune you know by heart, melody and chords, in the key of G in 4/4 time. Vocal tunes are easier at first. Sung melodies are apt to be simpler and clearer than instrumentals built around licks. Also, the words may help you keep your place in the melody line.
- Sing or hum the melody while playing through the chord changes.
- Locate the melody notes in the first position using open strings whenever possible. They'll likely be degrees of the G major scale. Then practice playing just the melody, slowly, in time, to get a feel for two critical issues 1) which strings the notes fall on and 2) how long the spaces are between them. Try tapping your foot on the downbeats (1-2-3-4) as you play. Most of the melody notes will land on these beats. And keep in mind: your eighth note rolls allow you to play these beats plus the upbeats between them (1+2+3+4+), two notes per foot tap.
- Most arrangements begin with pick-up notes, several short lead-in notes before the first full measure which help establish rhythm and tempo. Sometimes these are actual melody notes, sometimes not. The first roll usually begins on the first downbeat of the first full measure with the first strong melody note.
- Which string is this melody note on? Which rolls can you start there? (Keep a sheet with the rolls in tab handy for a visual reminder of the possibilities.) Which string is the second melody note on? How much time elapses between the two? It's possible to count how many eighth notes fit between them but it's easier to just experiment with various rolls. Through simple trial and error you'll probably find something that can start with the first melody note, fill the space between and allow the appropriate finger to arrive at the second melody note at the right time. Sometimes a three or four note partial roll will suffice, or even as little as a single eighth note. And, fortunately, sounding the second melody note a little early or late usually sounds fine and can even add a bit of syncopation (accents falling in unexpected places.)
- Remember that melody notes can be found on more than one string. If a particular note doesn't seem to fit neatly into any pattern, locate it on an adjacent string and try again. For example, if the first melody note is on the first string and you'd rather not start with a backward roll (which starts there), find the note three frets higher on the second string and use a forward roll. Often relocating a melody note will also allow you to access different chord tones or perhaps use an entirely new chord inversion.
- Speaking of chords, your left hand will need to keep track of the chord changes as well as the melody notes. Try to finger at least part of whatever chord is happening at the time (don't worry about fretting strings you don't plan on picking) and tailor your rolls to best outline these chords. Include as many of the available chord tones as possible, as opposed to unisons (two of the same note) or octaves, for a fuller sound. Although many of the melody notes will be part of the prevailing chord, you will need to alter chord shapes to fret non-chord tone melody notes or allow those on open strings to sound.
- Left hand ornaments like slides, hammers and pull-offs can actually make the right hand's job easier. They allow you to produce two different pitches with one pick stroke, handy especially at high

speeds or in demanding, note dense arrangements. They can also broaden your roll choices, again by relocating melody notes to more convenient strings. For example, the popular second to third fret slide on the third string (resolving to a B note) allows you to use rolls which don't start on the open B (second) string.

- As you proceed to the next few melody notes and into the next measures, keep in mind how rolls are typically situated within the beat scheme. Rolls like to start on the downbeats, especially the strong beats 1 and 3, eight note rolls on 1, four note rolls on 1 or 3. When rolls include quarter notes (more on them shortly) on beats 1 or 3, the eighth note flow often resumes on 2 or 4, sometimes continuing across the bar line into the next measure.

- Each roll should proceed comfortably from the one before it, without using the same finger or the same string twice in a row (cumbersome at faster tempos) which requires planning ahead. Using a particular finger for a note then discovering that you need that same finger for the next note is one of the biggest challenges for the right hand. The thumb is the most problematic. It plays melody notes on the fourth, third and second strings and is also solely responsible for the fifth string. To avoid entanglements, arrange your rolls so that they don't end with the fifth string when you need the thumb to start the next phrase.

- Phrases with several short melody notes often require alternating thumb patterns to access them all. The thumb strikes every other note, potentially four melody notes per measure.

- To be rendered faithfully, measures with six or eight melody notes require abandoning traditional rolls in favor of the melodic and/or single string styles.

- Eight note forward, reverse and backward rolls typically work better outlining sparser or longer held melody notes. Although a banjo can't technically hold or sustain a note like a vocalist can, we can play it repeatedly in the course of a roll or two to simulate a longer duration.

- Fudging is not only legal, it's pretty standard procedure. Leave out some melody notes in favor of maintaining smooth roll patterns as long as the melody remains recognizable.

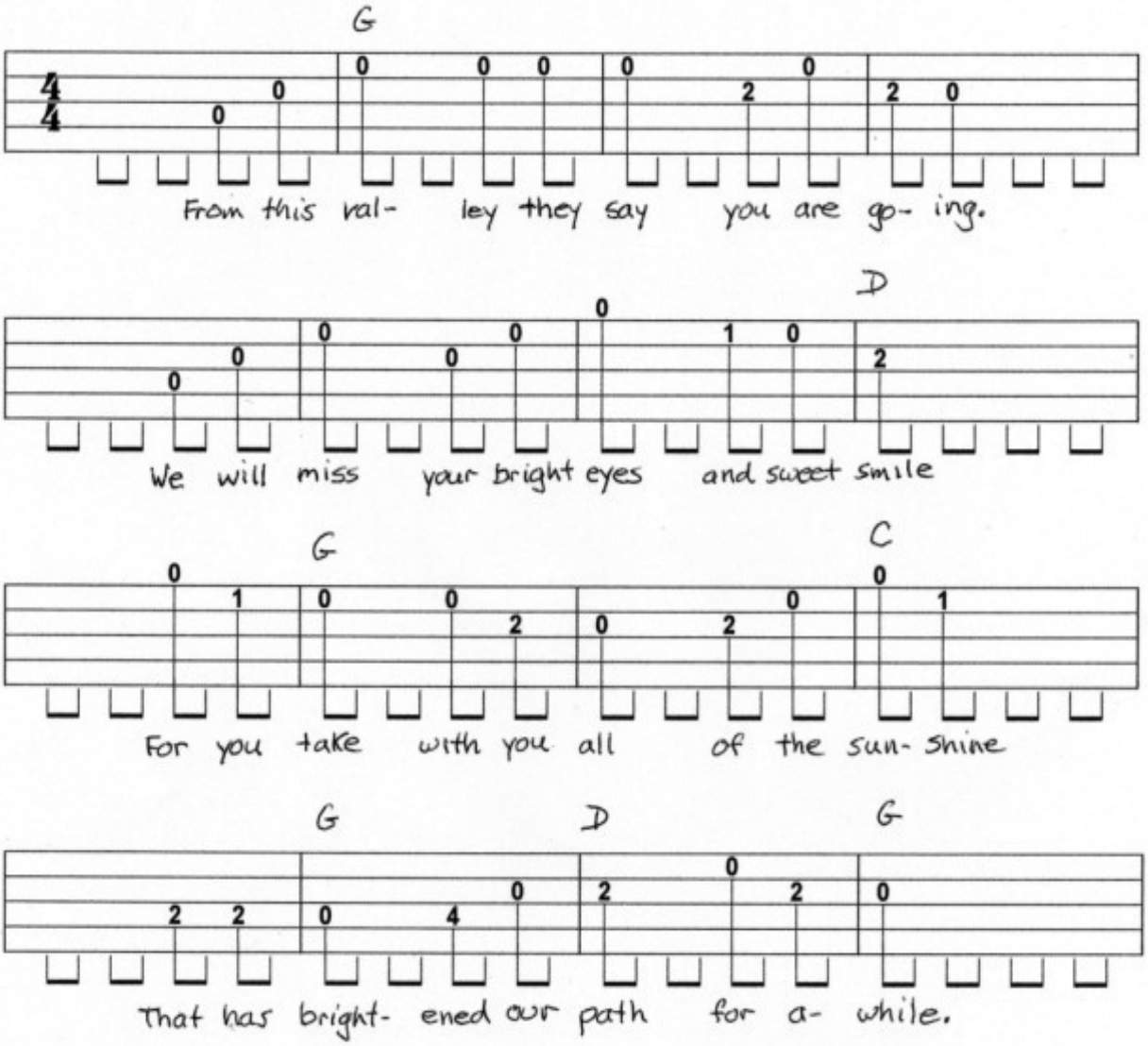
- At the same time, don't be afraid to break the roll and use quarter notes. Quarter notes last twice as long as eighths or one beat each. To allow space within a roll for a given note to sound as a quarter, simply leave out the eighth note which follows it. Quarters can function much like punctuation, dividing the flow into distinct phrases. Use quarter notes to emphasize strong melody notes or for melody notes that don't fit comfortably into a roll. Pick-up notes typically involve quarters as do scale fragments. Achieving a natural sounding blend of eighths and quarters may take some experimenting; too many quarters sounds choppy, not enough sounds like a run-on sentence. Note: using quarters often means you'll be left with a spare beat to be filled before it's convenient to start a new roll. Common "filler" strategies include playing the fifth string alone as a quarter note, the fifth and first strings together as a quarter note "pinch" or consecutively as eighth notes.

- Avoid relying too much on one roll which can sound rhythmically repetitive. Eventually you'll want to start thinking beyond simply accessing melody notes and start changing picking direction for variety and syncopation.

- Finally, ask yourself "What would Earl do?" Learning his classic arrangements is the best education in the use of rolls. A dozen Scruggs tunes contain roll solutions to almost any melodic challenge you'll encounter in bluegrass. The trick is to go beyond rote memorization, to recognize measure by measure how specific rolls are tailored to capture the melody. Then you can use these solutions in arrangements of your own.

KEY OF G

Red River Valley Melody



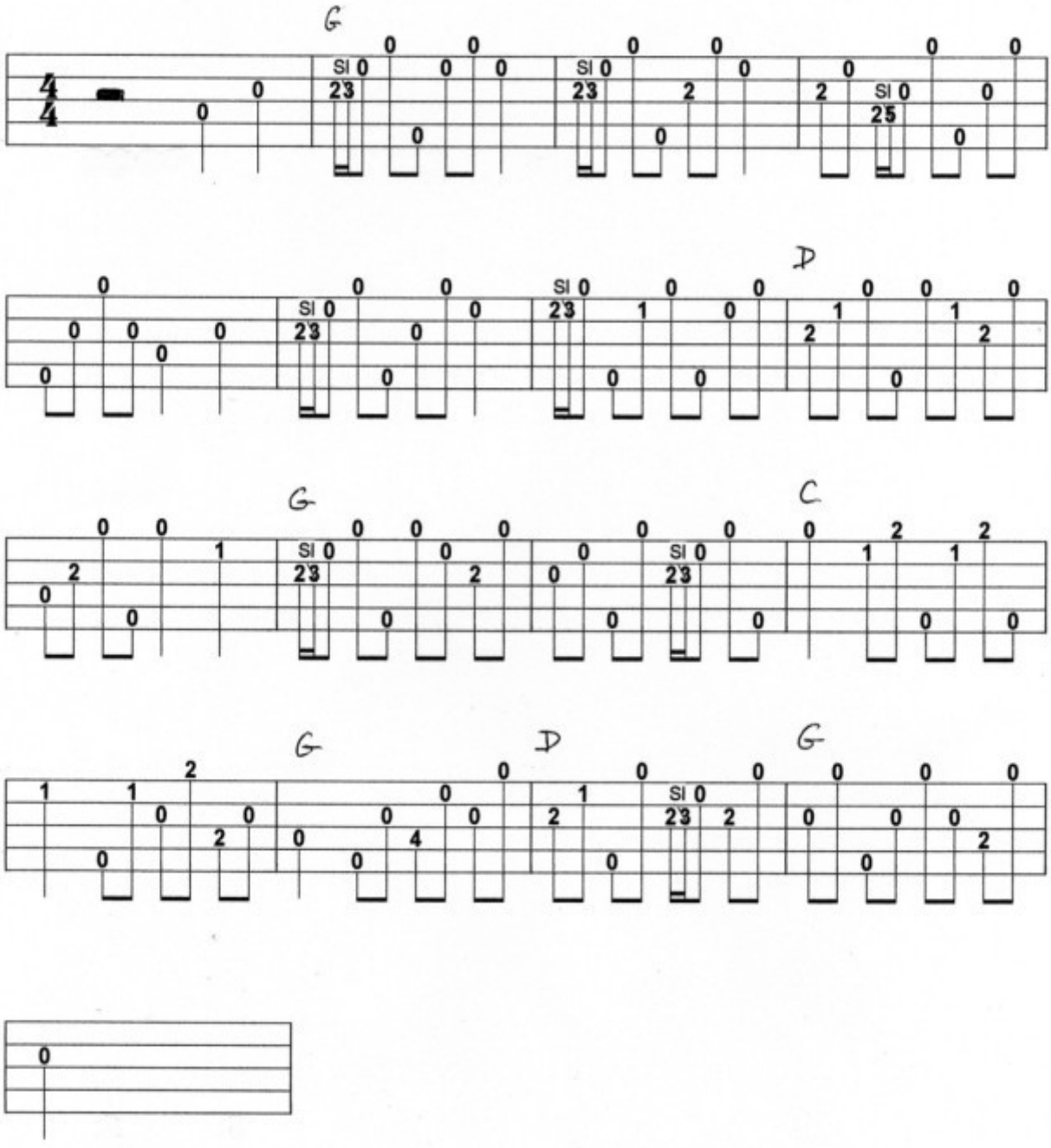
Note: Rather than express the exact duration of the melody notes as in traditional musical notation, this tab simply shows where they show up within a roll-like flow of eighth notes.

Red River Valley Slow
Download the MP3:
RedRiverValleySlow.mp3 from http://BanjoSessions.com

Red River Valley
Download the MP3:
RedRiverValleyS .mp3 from http://BanjoSessions.com

KEY OF G

Red River Valley Arrangement



Arranging ***Red River Valley***
Roll choices measure by measure

Line 1

Bar 1: quarter note pick-up notes on beats 3 +4
Bar 2: *Forward II*- quarter note on beat 4 (helps break up string of B melody notes)
Bar 3: *Forward II*
Bar 4: *Forward I*- 2nd and 3rd notes on alternate strings (melody notes)

Line 2

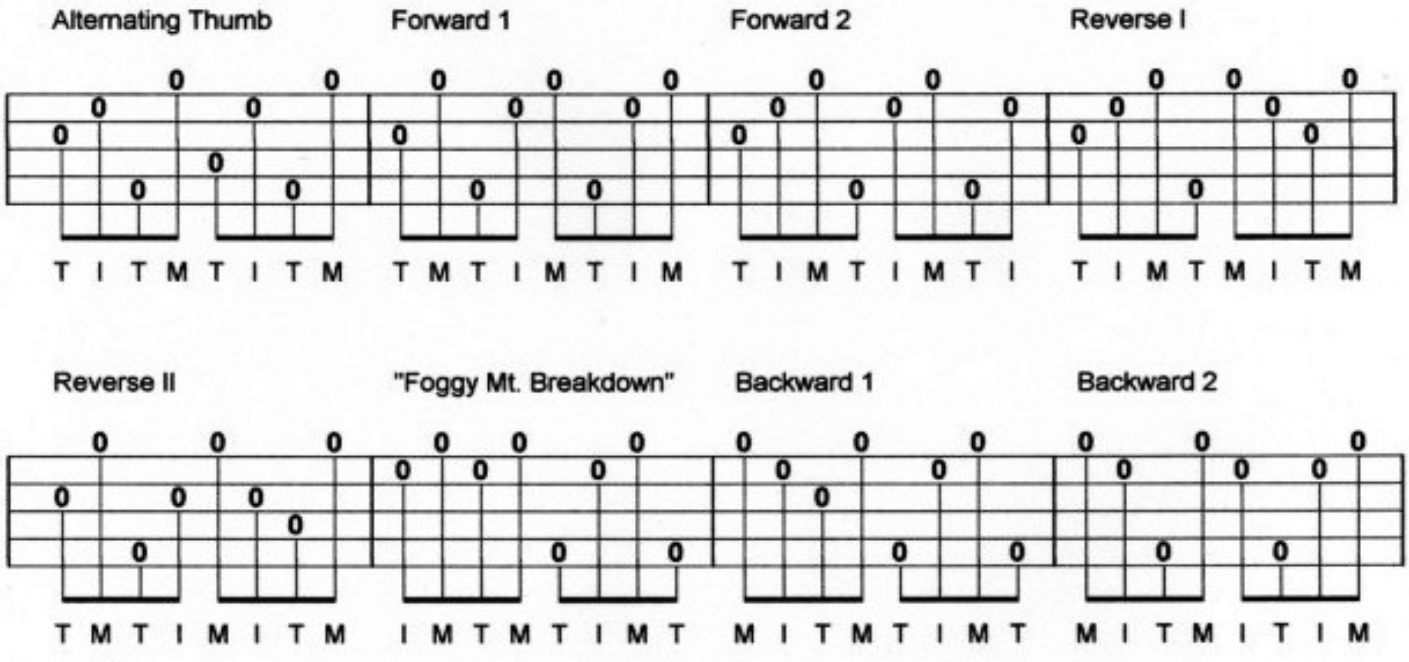
Bar 1: partial *Reverse II*; quarter notes on beats 3 + 4
(pick-up notes for next measure)
Bar 2: *Forward II*- echoes line 1 bars 2 + 3
Bar 3: *Forward I*
Bar 4: *Reverse I*

Line 3

Bar 1: ½ *Forward II*; quarter notes on beats 3 + 4 (pick-up notes)
Bar 2: *Reverse I*
Bar 3: ½ *Alternating Thumb*; ½ *Forward II*
Bar 4: *FMB*- starts with quarter note (strong melody note)

Line 4

Bar 1: *Alternating Thumb* variation- quarter note on beat 1
Bar 2: *Alternating Thumb* variation- quarter note on beat 1
Bar 3: *Alternating Thumb*
Bar 4: *Reverse II*



Bruce Stockwell has played 5-string banjo for forty years, performing progressive folk and bluegrass with brothers Barry and Al as the Stockwell Brothers. Two albums with Mike Auldridge and Phil Rosenthal as Old Dog introduced them to the national scene in the late seventies. Bruce is profiled in the January 2005 issue of Banjo Newsletter and won the Merlefest Banjo Contest the following spring. He teaches bluegrass banjo at his home in Putney VT and at Banjo Camp North in Groton MA.

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