Bluegrass and Clawhammer on Tenor Banjo

By Mirek Patek

And now for something completely different: open tuned tenor banjo played by fingerpicks. Yes, if you retune the tenor banjo to match the strings of the 5-string banjo, and if you use the 5-string picking tool (fingerpicks and fingernails), you get the sound which is non-recognisable (at least to untutored ears) from 5-string banjo sound – bluegrass or clawhammer. It may seem heretical, but it is legal (at least in my part of the world – Czech Republic), so I would like to share with you some know-how.

A) Retuning

If your tenor banjo is normally tuned in CGda, you are very close to open-G tuning of 5-string banjo (gDGBD). Just retune the lowest C string up to D, and detune the highest a string down to g. New tuning DGdg contains now the same open strings as 5-string banjo, with exception of the B string.

The second tuning I sometimes use is CGdg, which is just one string different from the standard tuning CGda. With these two tunings (DGdg and CGdg) I emulate the 5-string banjo tunings gDGBD, gDGCD, gCGBD, and gCGCD.

If your tenor banjo is normally tuned in Irish GDae, you are very close to historic deep tuning of minstrel banjo. Just retune two strings of your tenor banjo to ADad (or just one to GDad tuning, which is used in Irish bouzouki). You can play all the tenor banjo tabs below; you will just sound the fourth lower.

What are the differences between 5-string tuning (gDGBD) and open tenor banjo tuning (DGdg)?

1) The short thumb string is now moved to the treble side, so it cannot be picked by thumb anymore, but with the middle finger (or index in case of clawhammer).

2) There is no B string; if we transcribe some tune from 5-string banjo tab, we have to do something with the notes located originally on B strings. If they are important, let us keep them and play them usually on G string (starting from 4th fret). If they are just fill-in notes, let us substitute them by some other notes usually on d or g strings.

3) When playing high up the neck, there are not present two strings with the same tuning (in 5-string banjo the 1st and 5th strings sound the same if pressed e.g. on the seventh fret). This fact and also the missing B string make the transcription of some Keith melodic style tabs difficult if not impossible. But that does not mean you cannot play any melodic style on DGdg tenor banjo – see the tab for Blackberry Blossom (yes, again).

4) Yes you can fret the high g string even down the neck because it goes all the way to the nut. As it is now the first string it often carries the melody up the neck.

B) Bluegrass picking

If you wear a plastic thumbpick and two metal fingerpicks on your index and middle finger you can pick the melody with one of your fingers and fill in the rolls by the others. While in 5-string banjo the thumb has to devote some time for picking the short string, in tenor banjo down the neck picking it can solely focus on melody. Index and middle finger then play the fill-in notes. When playing high up the neck, the melody is lead by another finger (e.g. index finger when playing sixth on inner strings or middle finger when playing melody on high g string).

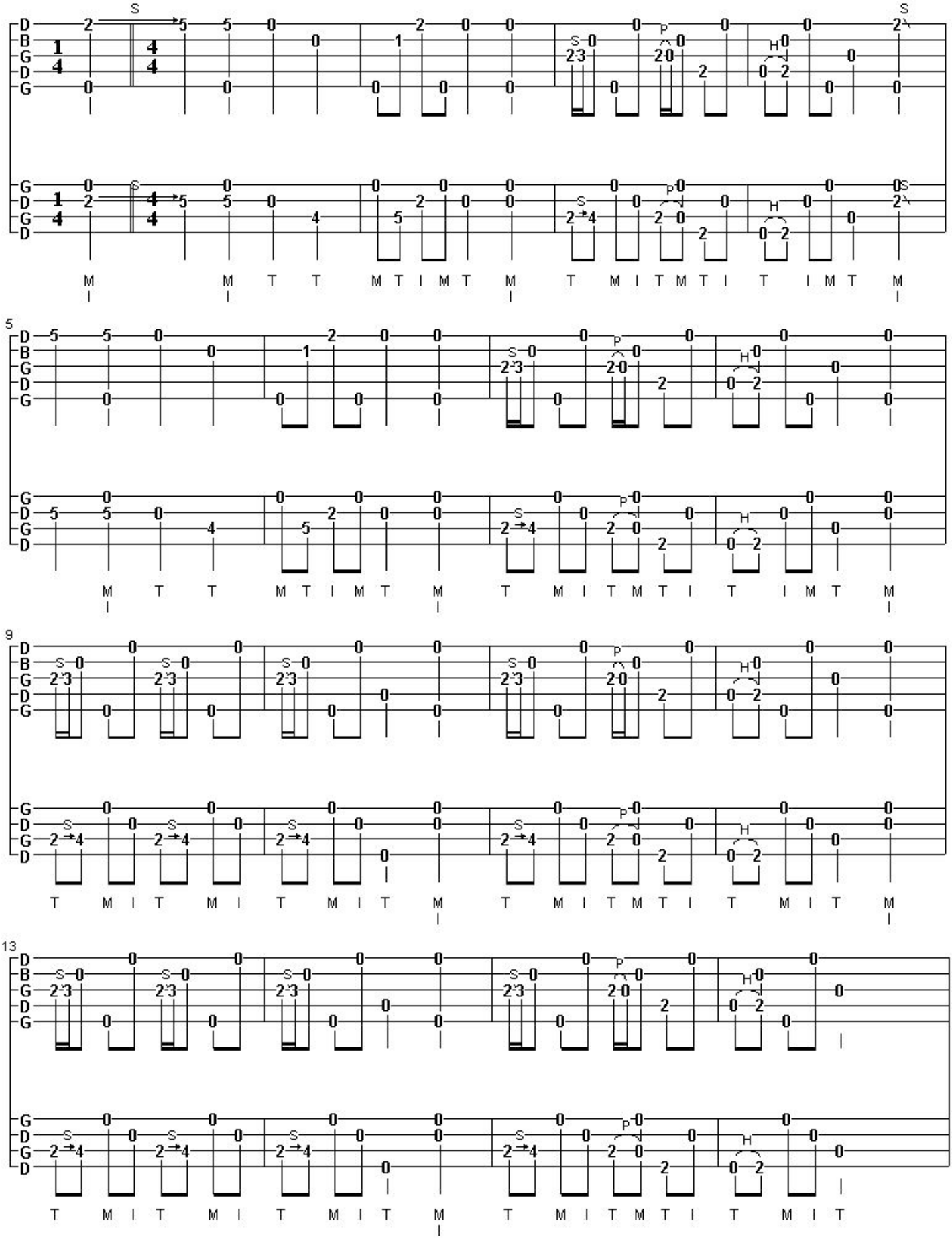
Below is the tab of Cripple Creek in bluegrass style – actually two tabs in one. For the demonstration purposes I show the 5-string banjo tab and my tenor banjo tab next to each other. You can see how I have altered some measures of tenor banjo tab. The first half of the third full measure lacks the clash between Bb note and open B string as I do not have one. My slide goes up to the 4th fret and my picking hand does not pick any string – the other option would be to pick the open d string by the TIMI pattern. In the second half of the third full measure I substitute the open B string by open g string. In the fourth full measure I just omit the B note without any substitution.

YouTube Video of Cripple Creek:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dwV-tCN6jmA

Cripple Creek - bluegrass style

gDGBd 5-string => DGdg tenor banjo

5-string banjo arranged by Earl Scruggs
DGdg tenor banjo tab by Mirek Patek
www.mirekpatek.com



C) Clawhammer

Five-string banjo players execute the bump-ditty pattern by Middle-MiddleThumb (or Index-IndexThumb) pattern using bare fingernail and thumb. On the tenor banjo it is played by Thumb-RingIndex pattern. And by Ring I mean downbrush by ring fingernail through several strings, or ideally just downpick to one particular string (but this takes lot of practice). I wear “bluegrass” fingerpicks on thumb, index and middle finger, and on my ring finger I currently use a reversed fingerpick called Freedom Pick to protect my nail.

Note that the 5-string banjo players play the notes on the beat with the same finger (some with middle, some with index) while in the tenor banjo I alternate thumb and ring finger. This affects also the movement of the wrist – it goes in the opposite way and in half speed comparing to the wrist of 5-string clawhammer player. During the bump-ditty the 5-string player’s hand goes Down(Up)DownUp – twice down, twice up. My hand on tenor banjo goes Up [reactively as my thumb picks down], (nowhere on the pause), Down[as my ring finger partly claws and partly flicks out of the palm], Up[as my index fingerpicks plays the g string]. And this last Up movement continues to the first Up movement of the following bump-ditty. It means I play during the bump-ditty one Up, one Down and bit of next Up.

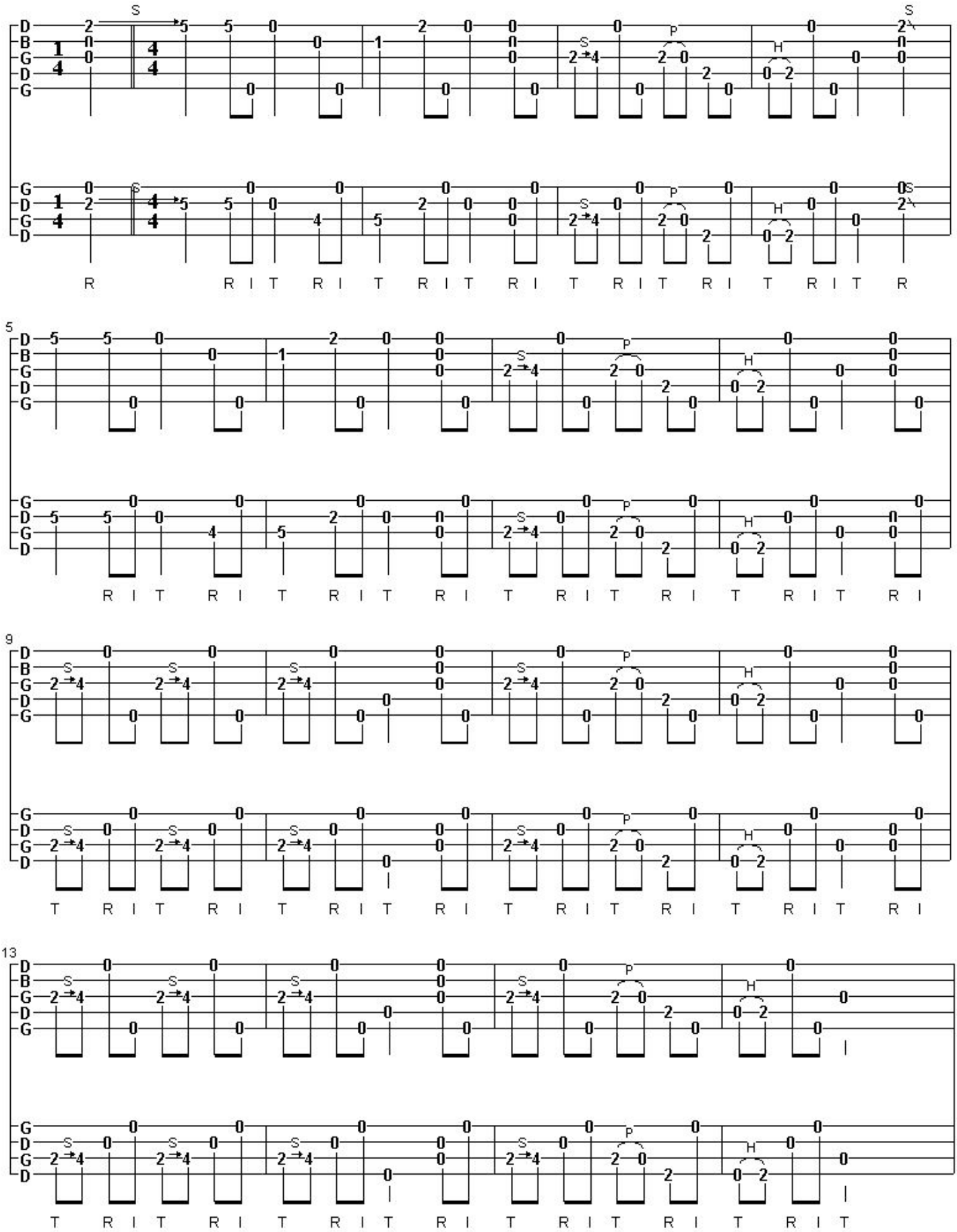
As I cannot use anything like drop-thumb, I have to play all the notes between the beats by left hand technique (hammer-on, alternate string hammer-on, pull-off, alternate string pull-off, or slide). Also in case of bumPA-ditty rhythm the additional second note is played by left hand technique, even if it is on open g string. The other option is to use two finger TITI pattern.

Below is the Cripple Creek in clawhammer style – again, two tabs in one. Well, I made the tenor banjo tab first and then the 5-string one, so I cannot demonstrate how I went about the difficulties of various drop thumb – I am keeping this topic for some future article.

Cripple Creek - clawhammer style

gDGBd 5-string => DGdg tenor banjo

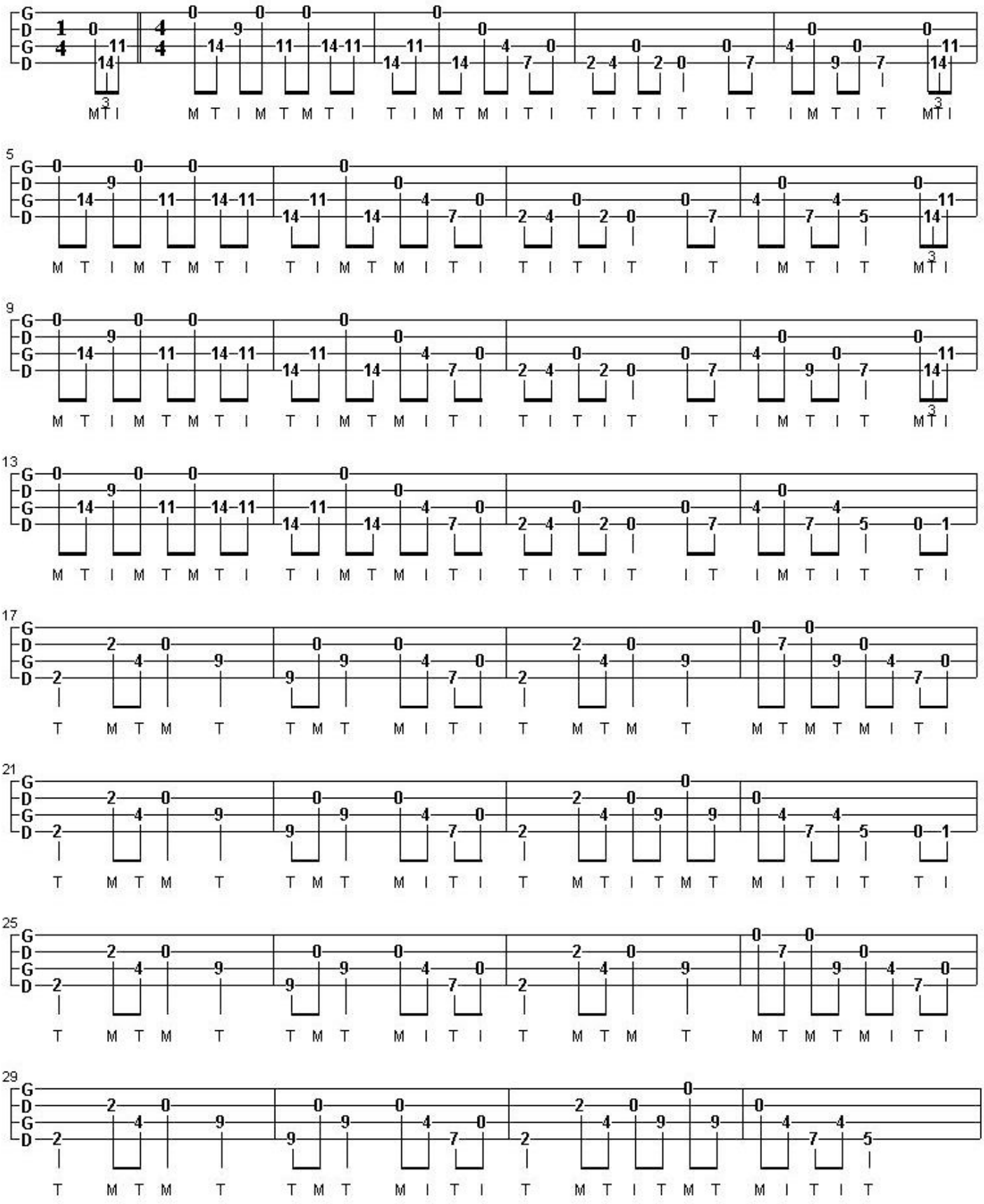
5-string banjo tab by Mirek Patek
DGdg tenor banjo tab by Mirek Patek
www.mirekpatek.com



D) Melodic style – with few words I am offering below Blackberry Blossom in Keith melodic style as evidence that the fingerstyle tenor banjo can enter also this territory.

Blackberry Blossom - melodic style

Tab for DGdg tenor banjo by Mirek Patek
www.mirekpatek.com



YouTube Video of Cripple Creek:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54PS6xaRTKw

Enjoy.

About the Author

My name is Miroslav, I am called Mirek. Surname Patek means Friday in Czech.

I have (unforunately :-) no connection to the Swiss Patek-Philippe company, even if made the clock too - the musical clock!

Born in 1969, live in Prague, capitol of the Czech Republic. I am educated as MD and MBA, married, have two sons.

I played 10 years mandolin, in 1999 tried the Holoubek custom made resophonic mandola (open tuned, played with fingerpicks) which redirected me to the fingerpicked DGdg tenor banjo.

My main instrument is Janish tenor banjo tuned most of the time to DGdg. My second banjo Capek is mainly tuned to CGdg so I can manage the C tunes on frailing banjo.