Travis Picking on the Irish Tenor Banjo

By Mirek Patek

This is the third article that presents fingerstyle opportunities on tenor banjo from the perspective of playing melody together with some rhythmic and harmonic accompaniment on the same instrument. Most part of my article in December 2009 issue of Banjo Sessions was devoted to the styles where melody is picked mainly on the bass pair of strings of the tenor banjo and the treble pair of strings is used for rhythm&harmony. In bluegrass style the rhythm&harmony is provided by index and middle fingers "rolling" the eight notes in the space between the melody notes. In clawhammer style the downbrushing ring fingernail(pick) keeps the rhythm on the even beats 2 and 4, while the index finger uppicks the drone after these downbrushes. The article in February 2010 issue of Banjo Sessions brought the melody from bottom pair to the treble pair of strings, while still keeping that downbrushing ring fingernail(pick) on beats 2 and 4. Thumb played bass notes on odd beats 1 and 3.

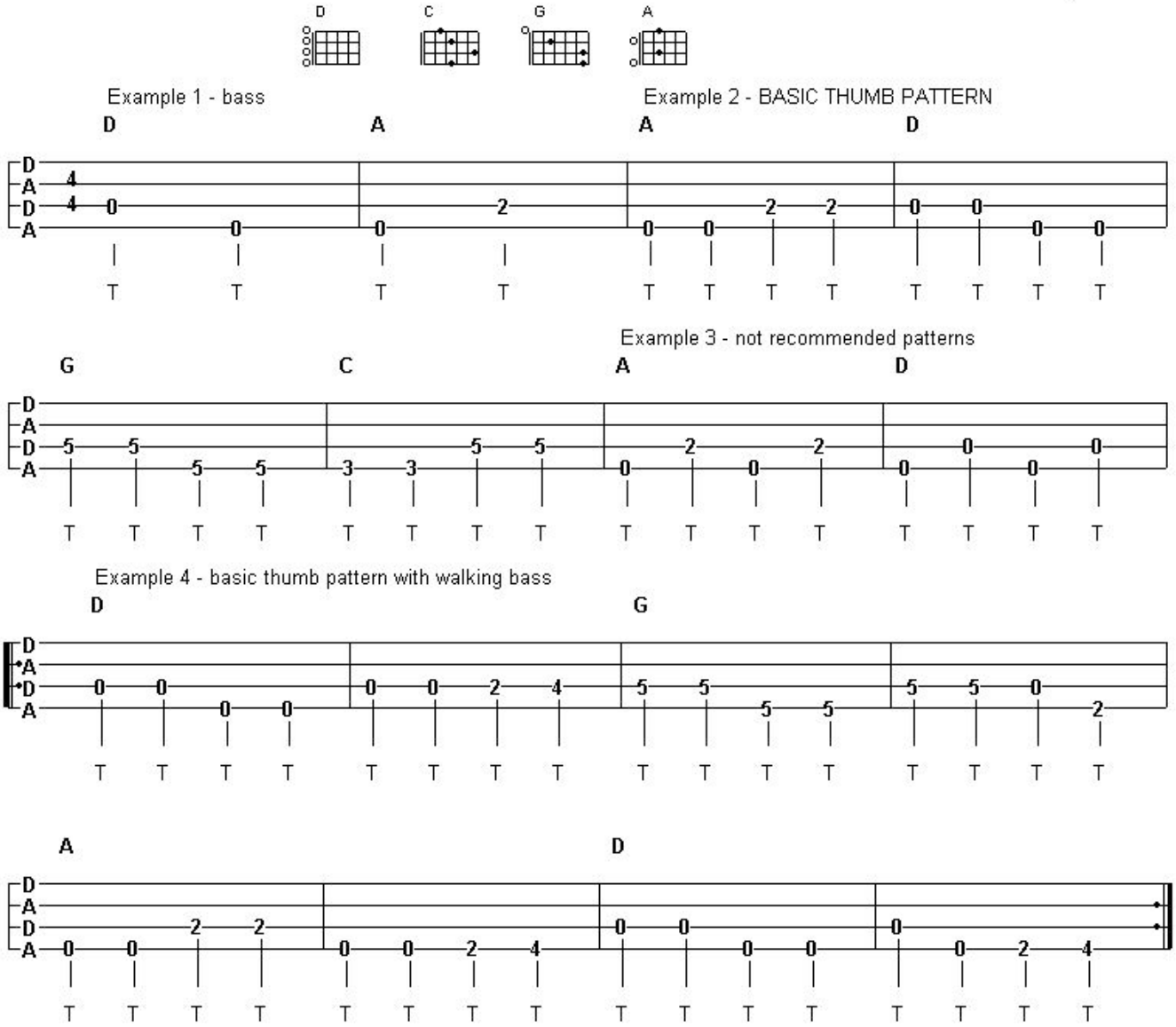
Today we will keep the melody on treble strings, but the ring fingernail will be sent to vacation again and thumb will be in charge of picking all four beats per measure. In fact, this is kind of adaptation of Travis picking style to tenor banjo (search the cyberspace for the information about Merle Travis and Chet Atkins). As always, I recommend to use the "5-string banjo" fingerpicks on thumb, index and middle fingers. The tenor banjo tuning will be the same as in the February 2010 article: open D tuning ADad, derived from low Irish tuning GDae by retuning outer strings by two frets – no change of strings is necessary. Tenor banjo players who use CGda tuning are asked to retune to open G tuning DGdg (and to transpose the chord and string names discussed below). Note that the strings are numbered from the thinnest one to the thickest one. Generally, this article is written for tenor banjo players interested in Travis picking sound, or for 5-string banjo players who possess also the tenor banjo as a second instrument and who do not hesitate to use their fingerpicking skills on tenor banjo.

The ultimate goal in Travis picking is to play thumb notes on 4th string (A) and 3rd string (D) by autopilot, depending on the chord, and to play more or less syncopated melody by index and middle fingers on treble pair of strings without thinking of particular picking pattern. Let’s talk first about thumb autopilot. The thumb plays the bass here, so the instruction for beat 1 and 3 is the same as it would be for the bass: play the root of the chord on beat 1, and the fifth of the chord on beat 3 (example 1 of the attached tab). What about beats 2 and 4? Guitar players with their six strings play here the brush or single note on some middle strings, but that is not practical for tenor banjo as it would leave just the limited space for the melody on the treble side.

My solution is: repeat the same note/string from previous beat 1 and 3 – the result is in example 2. This is the pattern that shall be burned deep into your muscle memory, and it takes time. In case of melody going down to the 3rd string (D) your thumb may temporarily play all four beats on the 4th string (A), but most of the time the thumb shall alternate in pairs: root-root-fifth-fifth of the chord. The example 3 shows the other pattern with the bass notes quickly alternating on bottom pair of strings, but you can see that in comparison to the example 1 the speed of the root and fifth alternation is doubled here, therefore I do not use this thumb pattern (just by mistake). My autopilot from example 2 (if executed correctly) keeps the right bass notes on the beat 1 (root) and beat 3 (fifth) and enables also some walking bass figures as shown in example 4.

Travis picking - thumb pattern

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



Now let's add some melody over that steady thumb. The melody is picked by index and middle fingers on the treble pair of strings. Autopilot rule for index finger is "stay on the 2nd string (a)", autopilot rule for middle finger is "stay on the 1st string (d)". Final rule for index and middle finger is "do not repeat the same finger for successive eight notes". Of course rules are here to be broken later but it is easier to start and progress by keeping them for a while. So - how the characteristic syncopated Travis picking patterns are created? Example 5 shows the melody of Will the Circle Be Unbroken, not syncopated at all. (I recommend to play many different songs this way before approaching the syncopation in order to fixate your thumb and index/middle fingers autopilots.) In the example 6 the second melody note of the first full measure is shifted ahead of the 3rd beat. The following measure fattens the sound by some added notes between the beats on 2nd string – and now it sounds like Travis picking! Similarly, in the example 7 the second melody note of the first full measure is shifted behind the 3rd beat. Again the following measure fattens the sound by some additional off-beat notes on 2nd string which gives us another Travis picking pattern.

You should practice different variants of these two patterns as shown in example 8 which varies the first pattern, and of course come up with more patterns, and play them over different chords – keeping the thumb autopilot on root-root-fifth-fifth of the chord. But the ultimate goal is to stop thinking in patterns and start to hit automatically that treble string the melody is calling for, and

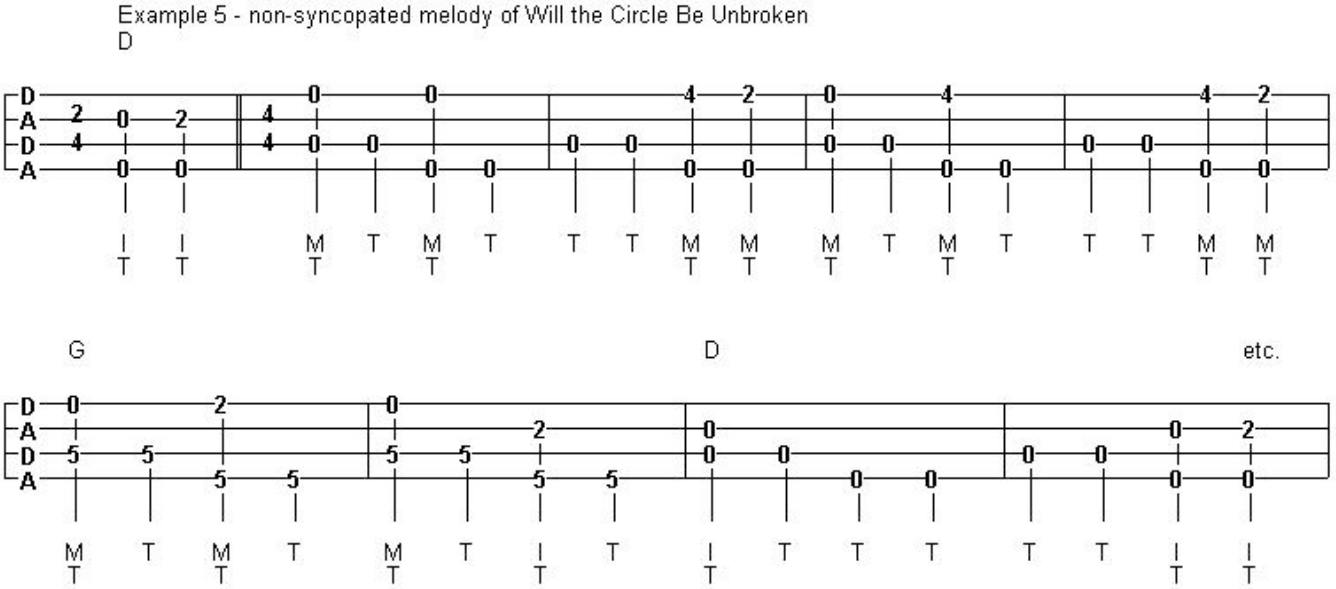
also in the right time – on the beat (the pinch by index or middle finger plus thumb) or off the beat (by the alternation of thumb and the melody finger).

You can also play the picking patterns with index + middle finger pinch on the treble side. Example 9 shows two measures starting with simple boom-chick but then superimposing the three-beets-long segment (twice) at the treble side over thumb autopilot. Example 10 shows the patterns with the repetition of the middle finger as an example of breaking the non-repetition rule – play it slower and with some bounce. Note that there are two-beats-long and one-beat-long segments which can be varied and you can put the stress on different parts of the measure by combining the bricks from example 9 and 10.

Travis picking - add the IM fingers

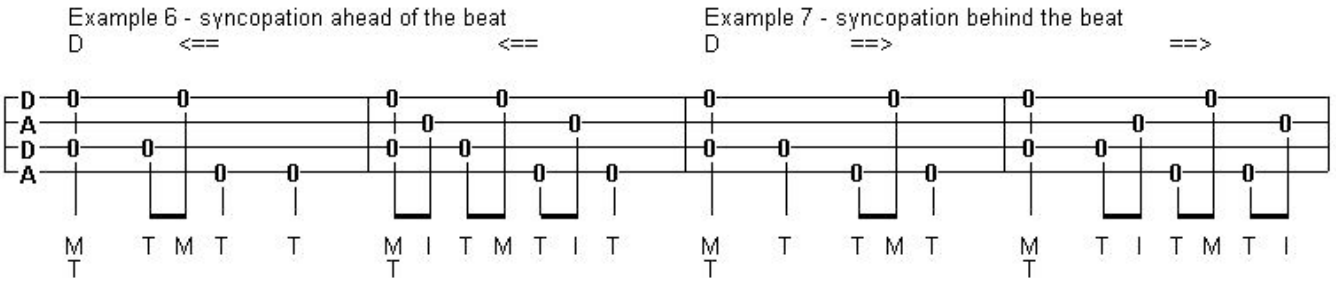
Tab for ADad tenor banjo by Mirek Patek
www.mirekpatek.com

Example 5 - non-syncopated melody of Will the Circle Be Unbroken

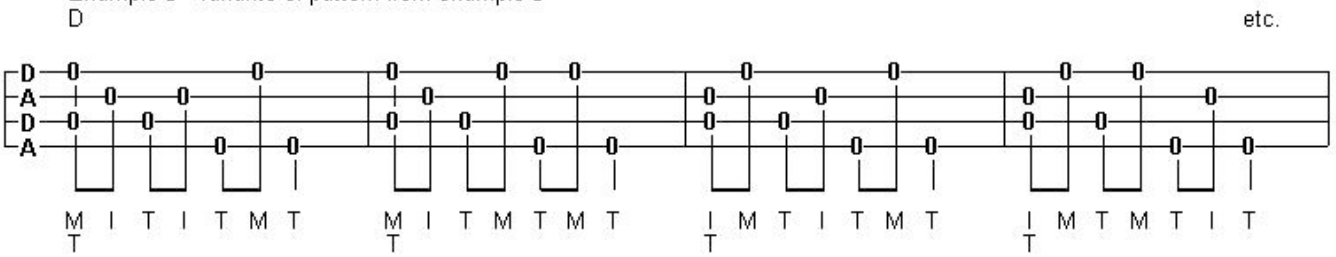


Example 6 - syncopation ahead of the beat

Example 7 - syncopation behind the beat

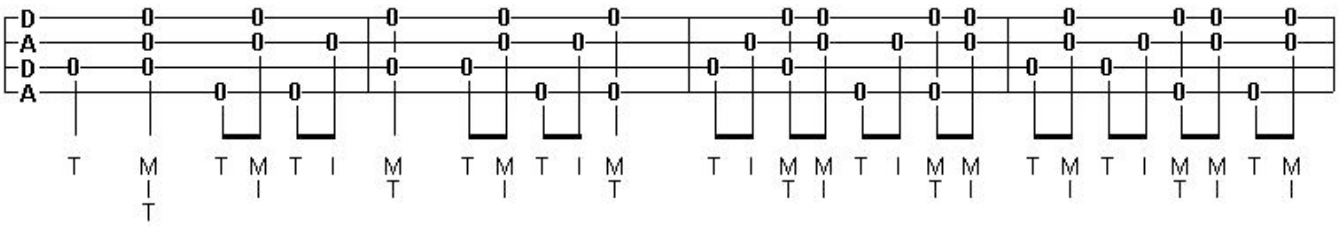


Example 8 - variants of pattern from example 6



Example 9 - pattern using IM pinch

Example 10 - middle finger repetition



In order to find instantly the melody, one should practice where the melody notes would be played over different chords, and by which left hand finger – watch the numbers in circles in further examples. Remember, thumb is on the autopilot but it needs to hit the correct bass notes, which occupies some of left hand fingers. The easiest job is over the D chord (0000) as the bass notes are on open strings and left hand can be fully concentrated on melody – find your own examples. In case of A chord (0202) – see example 11 – the left index finger is busy by holding the bass note E on 2nd fret of 3rd string so you have just the other three left hand fingers for melody. When the melody goes up the neck, the barre chord (7777) held by left index finger is useful. In case of G chord (5520) – see example 12 – the down-the-neck melody has to be played by index and middle finger as the ring and little fingers hold the bass notes on 5th fret. In the middle of the neck again the barre chord (5555) is useful, and for even higher melody the chord (10.0.10.9) is available, with the correct bass notes on the opposite strings and with the little finger left for melody on the 11th and 12th frets. The last tab example 13 shows the way of playing the melody notes on neighbour eights: instead of playing both notes on one string (the second note being also picked, or being played by hammer-on, pull-of, slide), you can try to allocate these two notes to different treble strings, if possible.

Travis picking - melody over chords

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

Example 11 - melody over A chord

Barre by index finger

Example 12 - melody over G chord

Barre by index finger

Reversed bass strings

Example 13 - what to do with the melody on one string?

The same melody distributed on different strings

Let's finish the three part series of fingerstyle tenor banjo tutorials with the melody of Will the Circle Be Unbroken played in four different styles:

1) Frailing (or clawhammer) pattern with some folk guitar strums – see December 2009 issue of Banjo Sessions
2) Pinch & frail pattern with the melody on treble side, presented in February 2010 issue.
3) Basic Travis picking – the topic of this article.
4) Thumb lead bluegrass picking, discussed also in December 2009.

Download TablEdit Files of the the examples which can be viewed by anybody by free TEFview downloadable at http://www.tabledit.com/tefview/, so to hear what is written in the tab.

http://BanjoSessions.com/apr10/ Travispicking_tab1.tef

http://BanjoSessions.com/apr10/ Travispicking_tab2.tef

http://BanjoSessions.com/apr10/ Travispicking_tab3.tef

YouTube Video of Travis Style on the Irish Tenor Banjo:
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.