

Bluegrass Rolls for Fingerstyle Tenor Banjo

By Mirek Patek



This is the fourth article about fingerstyle tenor banjo here on Banjo Sessions – you may find the past ones in the December 2009, February and April 2010 issues of Banjo Sessions webzine. Today we will focus on the three-finger bluegrass picking on the tenor banjo in open G tuning DGdg (retuned from CGda by adjusting two outer strings only, in order to match the open G tuning gDGBd of 5-string banjo).

Let me quote from my first article:

„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.” I have also mentioned the option that the melody is lead by another finger – e.g. index finger when playing sixths on inner strings or middle finger when playing melody on high g string. In this article I will show the picking patterns (known as „rolls”) that I use when I fingerpick the melody on my DGdg tenor banjo in the bluegrass style.

Thumb lead rolls

These rolls are used when the melody is picked by thumb, while the index and middle finger just fill the space, outline the harmony and keep the rhythm. It means that the melody is located on the 4th (D) or 3rd (G) string picked by thumb, the index finger picks the 2nd (d) string and the middle finger picks the 1st (g) string. If the melody goes just for the moment to the 2nd string, we can still manage it with some thumb lead roll, but if it goes there for a longer period of time or if it goes even to the 1st string, we have to change the picking patterns to index lead or middle lead rolls discussed later.

We are in 4/4 rhythm and there are 8 eighth notes in one measure, in other words 4 eighth notes in half-measure, and we play in the key of G major. Let's look first at the possibilities of playing the non-syncopated melody – the melody which is located only on beats and not between the beats. First I will show the half-measure building bricks only – two of them are necessary for the full measure. If there is just one melody note (i.e. the half note) at the beginning of the half-measure, the 5-string banjo player would most probably play the so-called „alternating-thumb roll“. The possible rolls on the fingerstyle tenor banjo are shown in Example 1 – the first note on the open G string is the melody note. If I want to pick all the eighth notes, the roll of choice is TIMI. Frequently I omit the second eighth note to emphasise the melody note. It is also possible to play thumb and IM pinch instead of the roll. If there are two melody notes (quarter notes) in the half-measure, there are options shown in Examples 2-4 – you can see that the melody notes are picked by thumb.

Non-syncopated thumb lead rolls

Half-measure bricks

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Example 1 - one melody note in half measure

Example 1 guitar tab showing a half-measure brick with one melody note. The tab is written for a 4-measure sequence. The first two measures have a melody note on the 2nd fret of the 3rd string (G) and an open 1st string (D). The last two measures have a melody note on the 2nd fret of the 3rd string (G) and an open 2nd string (D). Fingerings are indicated by T, I, M, and L.

Example 2 - two melody notes

Example 2 guitar tab showing a half-measure brick with two melody notes. The tab is written for a 4-measure sequence. The first two measures have a melody note on the 2nd fret of the 3rd string (G) and an open 1st string (D). The last two measures have a melody note on the 2nd fret of the 3rd string (G) and an open 2nd string (D). Fingerings are indicated by T, I, T, M, T, M, T, I, T, I, T, I, T, M, T, M.

Example 3 - two melody notes with pause(s)

Example 3 guitar tab showing a half-measure brick with two melody notes and a pause. The tab is written for a 4-measure sequence. The first two measures have a melody note on the 2nd fret of the 3rd string (G) and an open 1st string (D). The last two measures have a melody note on the 2nd fret of the 3rd string (G) and an open 2nd string (D). Fingerings are indicated by T, T, I, T, T, M, T, I, T, T, M, T.

Example 4 - two melody notes with pinch

Example 4 guitar tab showing a half-measure brick with two melody notes and a pinch. The tab is written for a 4-measure sequence. The first two measures have a melody note on the 2nd fret of the 3rd string (G) and an open 1st string (D). The last two measures have a melody note on the 2nd fret of the 3rd string (G) and an open 2nd string (D). Fingerings are indicated by T, I, T, M, T, I, M, T, M, I, T.

Example 5 shows the use of first roll from Example 1 in simple half-note melody in the key of G and with the G-C-D-G harmony. In first two measures the index and middle finger play the notes from G major chord. This chord needs no fretting of 2nd and 1st string, as the open dg strings belong to the chord (for strumming the full chord all strings would be open – this can be written as 0000). So all your left hand fingers can focus on the melody played in the finger-per-fret approach – the index finger fretting the 2nd fret, middle finger the 3rd fret, ring finger the 4th fret, and the little finger fretting the 5th fret. In measures 3-4 left hand needs to hold the C major chord; this is executed by the index finger permanently fretting the 2nd string on the 2nd fret (indicated by capital font in the tab). Full C major chord would be 5520, but we do not want to hold it now as the 4th and 3rd string is reserved for melody. As the index finger is glued to 2nd string, only the remaining three fingers (middle, ring, little) are available for the melody on DG strings – that is why the 2nd fret of 3rd string is pressed by middle finger. If this is finger-breaking for you, you can temporarily swap the left index and middle fingers for that part. In measures 5-6 left hand holds the D chord; middle finger permanently frets the 1st string on the 2nd fret. Full D chord would be 0202 and in this particular melody also the 3rd string, 2nd fret can be held permanently by index finger. Only the index, ring and little fingers can fret the melody on DG strings – I fret the 4th fret of 3rd string by my ring finger, the less stretchy option is the little finger. You may find more chords in my page <http://www.mirekpatek.com> . (To make things simple, we stay in the chord of G major for the remaining examples in this article.)

Half-note melody in thumb lead roll

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Example 5

G i r C
lit. INDEX r m

T I M I T I M I T I M I T I M I T I M I T I M I T I M I

D MID. i r i G i m r lit.

Big part of the bluegrass banjo sound is related to the syncopation of some melody notes. They are shifted forward or backward by half-beat so they are located between the beats. Example 6 shows one measure of melody consisting of half note and two quarter notes – first the melody only, second the melody in rolls. The third measure shows the syncopated second note, which is shifted forward. Now the 8 notes in the measure are not divided to 4+2+2, but to 3+3+2. Typical way of playing such syncopated melody is by two forward rolls TIM and by TI at the end. Example 7 shows another syncopation of the same melody by shifting both the middle and the last note forward, which changes 4+2+2 into 3+2+3. The Example 8 shows the change of melody in two quarter notes and half note (2+2+4) by shifting the last note backward (2+3+3). Again the forward roll TIM is used for that „3“ bricks.

Until now we have used the forward roll TIM for the „3“ brick , but you can change the order of index and middle finger and play the backward roll TMI instead of one or more forward rolls TIM (Example 9). Also the „2“ brick can be played either by TI, TM, or by T followed by pause.

You may also syncopate the first melody note by starting the measure with different finger than your thumb. In that case you have to ensure that the previous measure does not end with the same finger. Example 10 shows what happens when you continuously roll the forward roll over the bar line.

If the melody goes for quick moment from the 3rd string to the 2nd string (which is normally occupied by your right index finger), it may still be played by thumb, which is shown in Example 11 on the two-measure part of melody of Wildwood Flower. In that case the melody note on 2nd string (played by thumb) should be surrounded by something else than 2nd string picked by index finger – either it is 1st string picked by middle finger, or the pause. Sometimes it is useful to switch to index lead for the moment – this is shown in the second part of of Example 11.

Syncopated thumb lead rolls

Full measure examples

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Example 6

Original melody

Original melody in rolls

2nd note shifted forward

Syncopated melody in forward rolls

Example 7

Original melody

Original melody in rolls

2nd + 3rd note shifted forward

Syncopated melody in forward rolls

Example 8

Original melody

Original melody in rolls

3rd note shifted backward

Syncopated melody in forward rolls

Example 9 - backward instead of forward rolls

Example 10 - syncopation of first note (of 2nd measure)

Example 11 - thumb lead of melody on 2nd string

Change to index lead in 2nd measure

Middle lead rolls

Middle lead rolls are used when the melody raises to the 1st string. For the examples 12-20 I have intentionally used the same melodies as in the thumb lead part, so you may see the similarity and symmetry between middle lead and thumb lead rolls and you may recognise that you may easily switch the melodies by the octave from lower pair of the strings to the upper one or vice versa. (The hint has been already shown in the last measure of Example 5 with the walking bass played in octaves on the same frets of respective strings.) However, there is one difference: I usually avoid the picking combination MIM in fast picking, therefore the thumb lead segment TIT would not

be transferred to middle lead as MIM. In that case I play the note between the middle fingers by my thumb – MTM. (This is also the reason why I did not show thumb lead TMIM roll in the Example 1.)

Non-syncopated middle lead rolls

Half-measure bricks

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Example 12 - one melody note in half measure

M I T I M T I M I T

Example 13 - two melody notes

M T M T M T M I M T M I M T M T

Example 14 - two melody notes with pause(s)

M M I M M T M T M M T M

Example 15 - two melody notes with pinch

M M I M M T M I M T M T M

For syncopation of middle lead melody I use mostly the backward roll MIT for the brick of „3“, but as in case of thumb lead roll one can use the forward roll MTI. For brick of „2“ I use MT or M with pause, not MI (as it would result in MIM which I cannot execute up to speed). The middle lead is especially useful in connection with the three-note chords played on 1st-3rd strings – this is not covered in the following examples.

Syncopated middle lead rolls

Full measure examples

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Example 16
Original melody

Original melody in rolls

2nd note shifted forward

Syncop. melody in backward rolls

Example 16 shows four variations of a melody on a guitar fretboard. The first variation is the 'Original melody' with notes on strings G, D, G, D at frets 0, 2, 4, 0, 2, 4. The second variation is 'Original melody in rolls' with notes on strings D, G, D, G at frets 0, 0, 2, 4, 0, 0. The third variation is '2nd note shifted forward' with notes on strings G, D, G, D at frets 0, 2, 4, 0, 2, 4. The fourth variation is 'Syncop. melody in backward rolls' with notes on strings D, G, D, G at frets 0, 0, 2, 4, 0, 0.

Example 17
Original melody

Original melody in rolls

2nd + 3rd note shifted forward

Syncop. melody in backward rolls

Example 17 shows four variations of a melody on a guitar fretboard. The first variation is the 'Original melody' with notes on strings G, D, G, D at frets 0, 2, 4, 0, 2, 4. The second variation is 'Original melody in rolls' with notes on strings D, G, D, G at frets 0, 0, 2, 4, 0, 0. The third variation is '2nd + 3rd note shifted forward' with notes on strings G, D, G, D at frets 0, 2, 4, 0, 2, 4. The fourth variation is 'Syncop. melody in backward rolls' with notes on strings D, G, D, G at frets 0, 0, 2, 4, 0, 0.

Example 18
Original melody

Original melody in rolls

3rd note shifted backward

Syncop. melody in backward rolls

Example 18 shows four variations of a melody on a guitar fretboard. The first variation is the 'Original melody' with notes on strings G, D, G, D at frets 0, 2, 4, 0, 2, 4. The second variation is 'Original melody in rolls' with notes on strings D, G, D, G at frets 0, 0, 2, 4, 0, 0. The third variation is '3rd note shifted backward' with notes on strings G, D, G, D at frets 0, 2, 4, 0, 2, 4. The fourth variation is 'Syncop. melody in backward rolls' with notes on strings D, G, D, G at frets 0, 0, 2, 4, 0, 0.

Example 19 - forward instead of backward rolls

Example 19 shows four variations of a melody on a guitar fretboard. The first variation is the 'Original melody' with notes on strings G, D, G, D at frets 0, 2, 4, 0, 2, 4. The second variation is 'Original melody in rolls' with notes on strings D, G, D, G at frets 0, 0, 2, 4, 0, 0. The third variation is '2nd + 3rd note shifted forward' with notes on strings G, D, G, D at frets 0, 2, 4, 0, 2, 4. The fourth variation is 'Syncop. melody in backward rolls' with notes on strings D, G, D, G at frets 0, 0, 2, 4, 0, 0.

Example 20 - syncopation of first note (of 2nd measure)

Example 20 shows a melody on a guitar fretboard with syncopation. The first measure has notes on strings G, D, G, D at frets 0, 2, 4, 0. The second measure has notes on strings D, G, D, G at frets 5, 0, 4, 2. The third and fourth measures are empty.

Index lead rolls

Finally here are some examples of index lead rolls. I usually do not use them for longer part of the tune; I stick either with the thumb lead or middle lead rolls – in case of the middle lead as the primary way, the index lead is useful when the melody falls from the 1st string to the 2nd one. The specific exception is playing the sixths on the inner pair of strings with the thin g open. In that case I use the backward roll ITM (Example 24).

Index lead rolls

Half-measure and full measure examples

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Example 21 - non-syncopated index lead rolls

Example 22 - 3-3-2 backward roll

Example 23 - 2-3-3 backward roll

Example 24 - sixths on 3rd-2nd strings

From roll to lick

Returning back to the thumb lead rolls, I have to add that when the melody note (played by thumb) is on the 4th string, you can shift the index and middle fingers from their normal position on 2nd and 1st string closer to the thumb, that means to 3rd and 2nd string. Final Example 25 shows the transition of the roll shown in the last measure of Example 6. First we change the second forward roll TIM to the backward roll TMI, then we shift two MI notes of that roll to the lower strings. Finally, we add the left hand slide and the result is the most frequent lick you can hear on the 5-string bluegrass banjo – but now you can play it on DGdg tenor banjo! Look at my webpage <http://www.mirekpattek.com> for other „hot licks“ transcribed from Scruggs style 5-string banjo to DGdg tenor banjo or come back to see them in some upcoming article on Banjo Sessions.

Birth of most frequent fill-in lick

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Example 25
Original forward roll

2nd forward roll TIM changed
to backward roll TMI

Two MI notes shifted
to lower strings

Added left hand =>
famous fill-in lick

About the Author



Mirek Patek from Prague, Czech Republic started in 1999 the fascinating expedition to the terra incognita of fingerstyle tenor banjo tuned in open G tuning DGdg, which matches the open G tuning and range of 5-string banjo. He adopts the techniques from bluegrass banjo, frailing banjo, guitar, and ukulele. He uses three „banjo“ fingerpicks on thumb, index, and middle fingers for fingerpicking plus the fingernailpick on ring finger for frailing and strumming. His ultimate goal is to legitimize this playing style on tenor banjo tuned either to DGdg or to Irish ADad.

Mirek Patek proudly plays the Czech made banjos [Janish](#) and [Capek](#) .