Frailing on Tenor Banjo

By Mirek Patek

Following the short initial presentation of clawhammer/frailing sound on the tenor banjo in my first article at December 2009 issue of Banjo Sessions webzine, this article is more detailed tutorial about frailing on tenor banjo. I have two goals here: first I will present the techniques which enable you to play your chosen melody in frailing style on tenor banjo, and at the end I will demonstrate how to transcribe the 5-string banjo tab of frailing style to the tenor banjo for those of you who use this tool for learning new tunes.

1. Banjo tunings for frailing

Old-time 5-string banjo players use various tunings in order to facilitate the left hand fingering and/or to utilise particular harmony of different open strings resonating during the tune. These four tunings are used frequently:
gDGBD – open G tuning, in the 19th century tutorials also known as „high bass tuning“
gDGCD – G modal tuning, also known as sawmill tuning or mountain minor tuning
gCGBD – classic banjo tuning, also known as „low bass tuning“
gCGCD – double C tuning

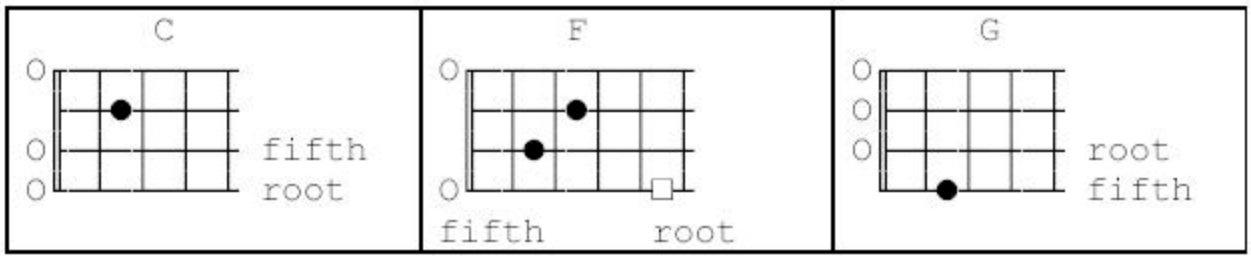
To rearrange these tunings for tenor banjo, two steps are necessary:
a) to shift the highest g string from thumb side to the treble one.
b) to omit the (original) second string – this way both the lowest and the highest strings are kept so the range of tenor banjo is the same.
Here is what happens – we have now just two different tenor banjo tunings:
gDGBD => DGdg – let‘s call it „high bass“ tuning
gDGCD => DGdg again
gCGBD => CGdg – let’s call it „low bass“ tuning
gCGCD => CGdg – again

If your standard tenor banjo tuning is CGda, you do not need to change strings on your banjo. The low bass tuning is obtained by retuning of your thinnest string (the 1st one) down by the whole tone. The high bass tuning is done by additional retuning of your thickest string (the 4th one) up by the whole tone. Dear Irish tenor banjo players – if your standard tenor banjo tuning is GDae, your low bass tuning will be GDad and your high bass tuning will be ADad. You can play every exercise from this article, but you will sound the fourth lower (you will be closer to 19th-century pitch of gut-strung 5-string banjo). However in this article I will stay in the CGdg/DGdg tuning.

The shifted g string causes the change of the right hand frailing pattern, and the missing string causes some additional work for the left hand – it will be explained later. Now let’s look at basic chords for frailing in low bass and high bass tuning. (While the frailing style is not based on playing chords, it helps to support the melody with the desired harmony notes.)

2. Chords in low bass (CGdg) tuning

In low bass tuning we play mostly in the key of C major, and the basic three chords are C, F, G.



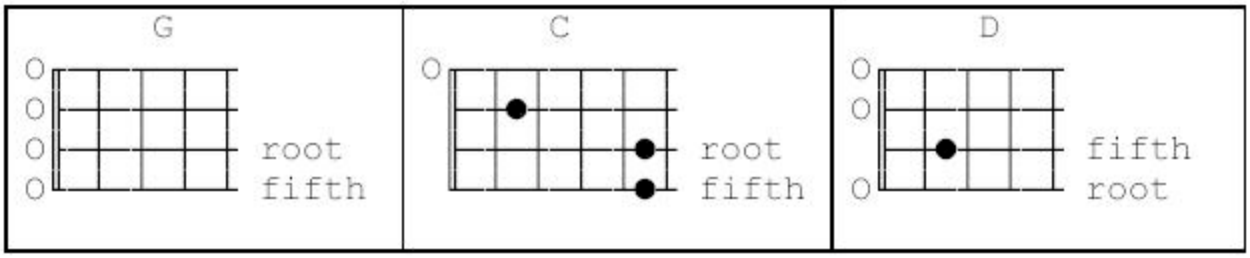
C = 0020
The 2nd fret of 2nd string is held by index finger. It means that this finger is sometimes not free for fretting the melody on another string.

F = 0230
The 2nd fret of 3rd string is held by index finger, the 3rd fret of 2nd fret is held by middle finger. Again, this limits the use of these fingers in playing the melody. Note that the open 1st string g does not belong to the F chord (which consists of the tones f, a, c), but in the old-time frailing style it is OK to have such non-chordal drone note.

G = 2000
The 2nd fret of 4th string is held by index finger.

3. Chords in high bass (DGdg) tuning

This tuning is useful for various keys but especially for the key of G. The basic chords in the key of G major are G, C, D.



G = 0000
Here we can use all left hand fingers for playing the melody.

C = 5520
This full chord is quite stretchy (it is played by ring, little and index finger) but in frailing it is not used in its complete form. There is just index finger holding the 2nd fret of 2nd string (0020), and somewhere on 3rd or 4th string there is played the melody.

D = 0200
In order to stay closer to 5-string banjo sound the 1st string is not fretted – the drone g string does not belong to the D chord (which consists from the tones d, f#, a) but as in case of F chord above it is OK. Or you can fret also the 1st string on 2nd fret (0202).

I have to add that another tunings are obtained from the above listed 5-string banjo tunings by using the capo – mostly on the 2nd fret. In that case the same capo is used on the respective low bass or high bass tenor banjo tuning.

4. Picking and frailing tools

For frailing on my tenor banjo I am using three right hand fingers: thumb, index and ring finger (my middle finger with its fingerpick, while busy in my bluegrass picking, is unemployed in frailing style). Thumb is armed by plastic thumbpick, index wears the metal fingerpick and ring fingernail is covered by straight plastic fingerpick turned 180 degrees in order to cover the nail. Why I am using these gadgets when the frailing 5-string banjo players use bare hand? It is because I often combine different playing styles in one song and for the fingerpicking I use the 5-string banjo fingerpicks on my thumb, index, and middle finger. If you opt for not using the fingerpicks, just let your ring fingernail grow longer.

5. Quarter notes with thumb and ring fingernail

The bare bones of my frailing style on tenor banjo is playing the quarter notes by alternation of downpicking thumbpick and downbrushing (or downpicking) ring fingernail pick. While the thumbpick plays the single melody string, the ring fingernail should ideally be able to play
a) main melody string plus some brush on neighbour thinner strings – see Example 1
b) just the single melody string without any brush (that takes some practice) – Example 2
c) the brush without any emphasised melody note – if there are not two quarter notes, but just the one half note played by thumb.

The presented versions of Buffalo Gals are based on Ken Perlman's book Everything You Wanted to Know About Clawhammer Banjo (Mel Bay Publications, 2004).

The left hand fingering would normally be the finger-per-fret approach with index finger on 2nd fret, middle on 3rd, ring on 4th, and little finger on 5th fret, but sometimes some fingers are occupied by holding the fragment of the chord, so the other fingers have to substitute. During the C chord harmony in low bass tuning, the left index finger permanently holds the 2nd fret of 2nd string, therefore it does not play the melody notes. The melody on 2nd fret of 3rd string is thus held by middle finger. The left hand fingering is indicated in Example 2 by i, m, r, and lit. (for little finger) above the tablature.

Example 1

Buffalo Gals, thumb + ring fingernail brush

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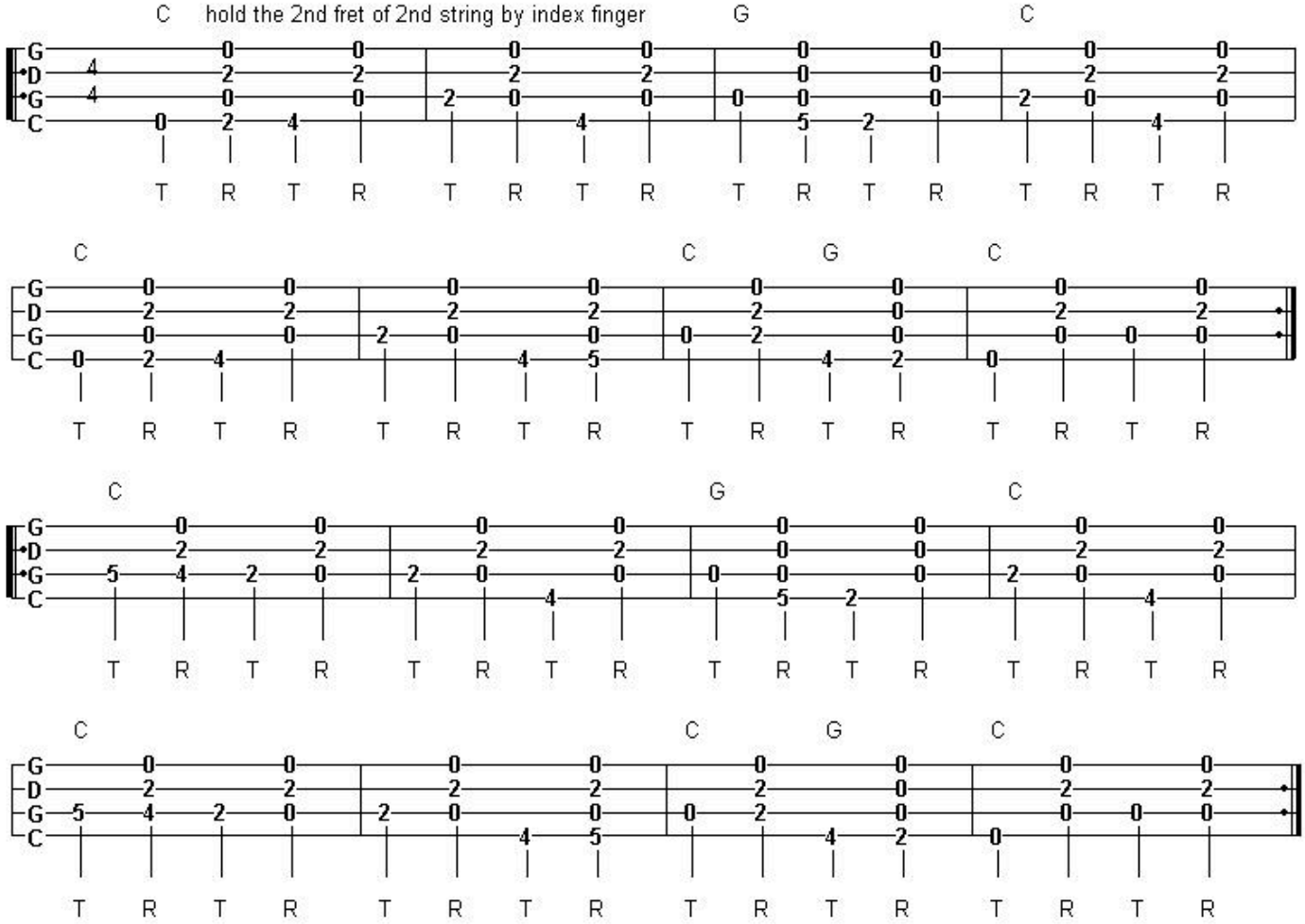
low bass (CGdg) tuning



Even if in the Example 2 there aren't (or shouldn't be) any big brushes above the melody notes, it is beneficial to hold the chord (it applies for C chord) by left hand, as the chord note (e = 2nd fret of 2nd string) can ring sympathetically.

Example 2

Buffalo Gals in C, thumb + ring fingernail single note

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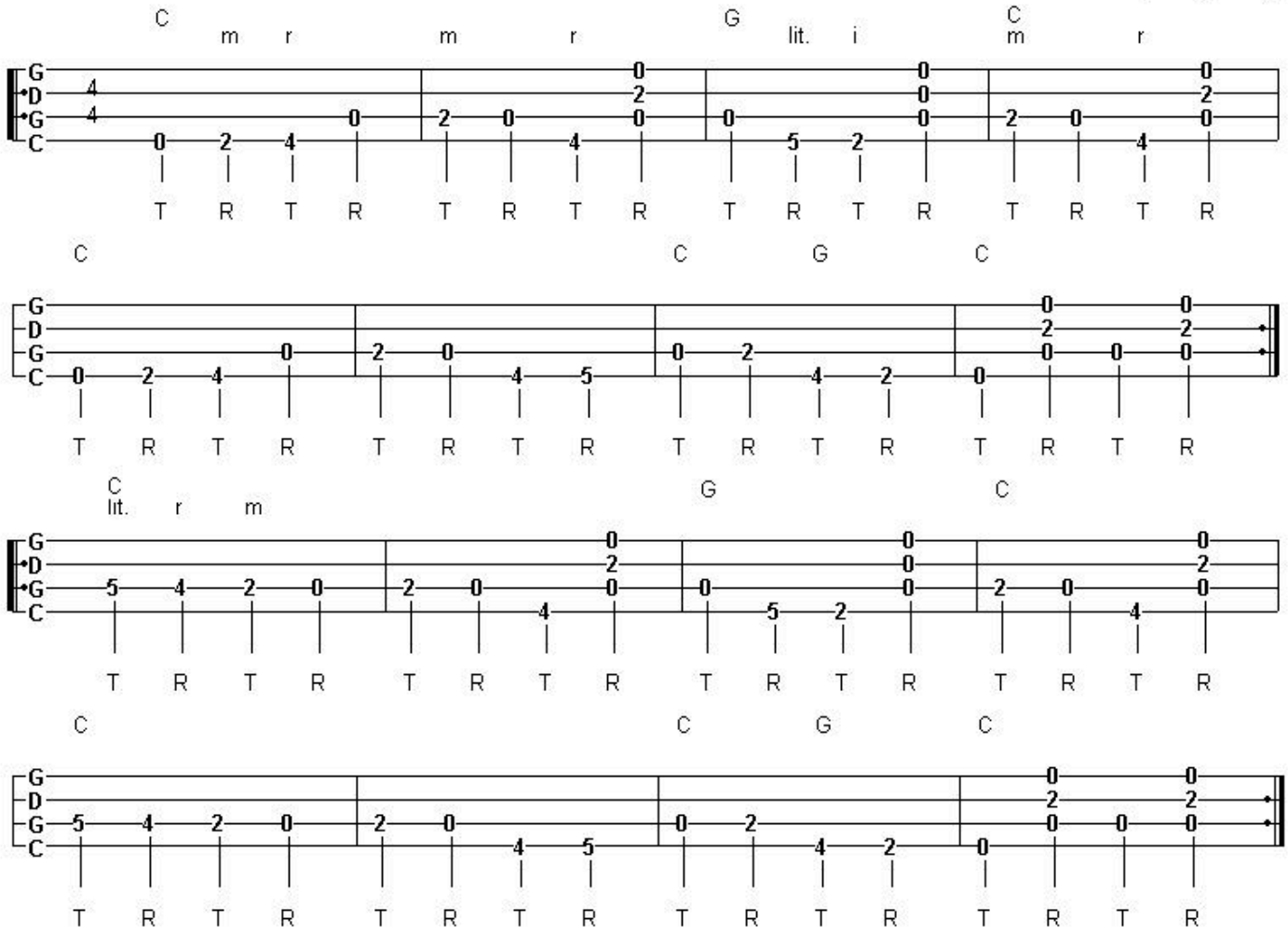
low bass (CGdg) tuning



Examples 3 and 4 show the same tune in the key of G, in high bass tuning. Note that I have chosen to fret 2nd fret of 1st string during the chord D, but you may try to leave the g string always open.

Example 3

Buffalo Gals in G, thumb + ring fingernail brush

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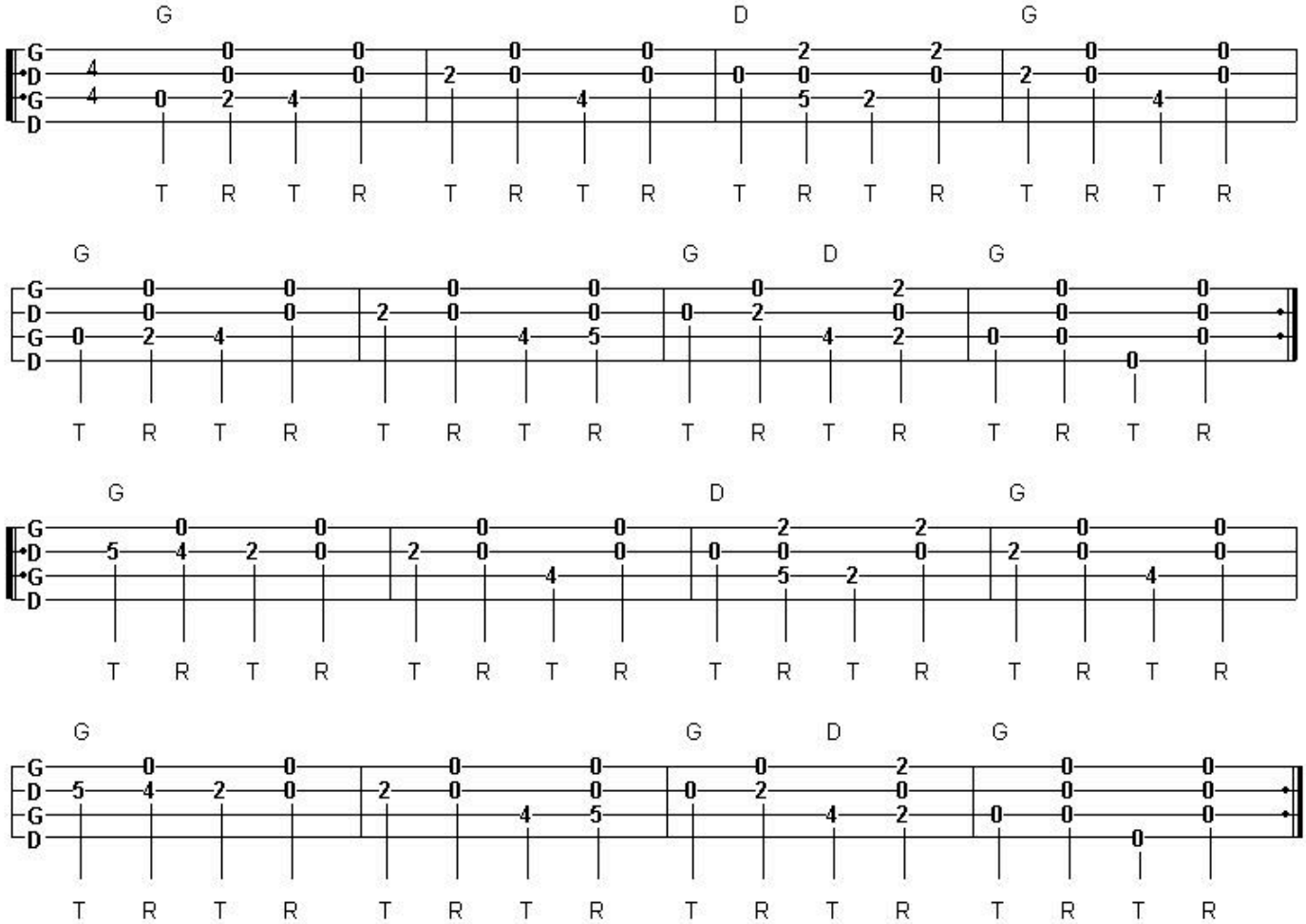
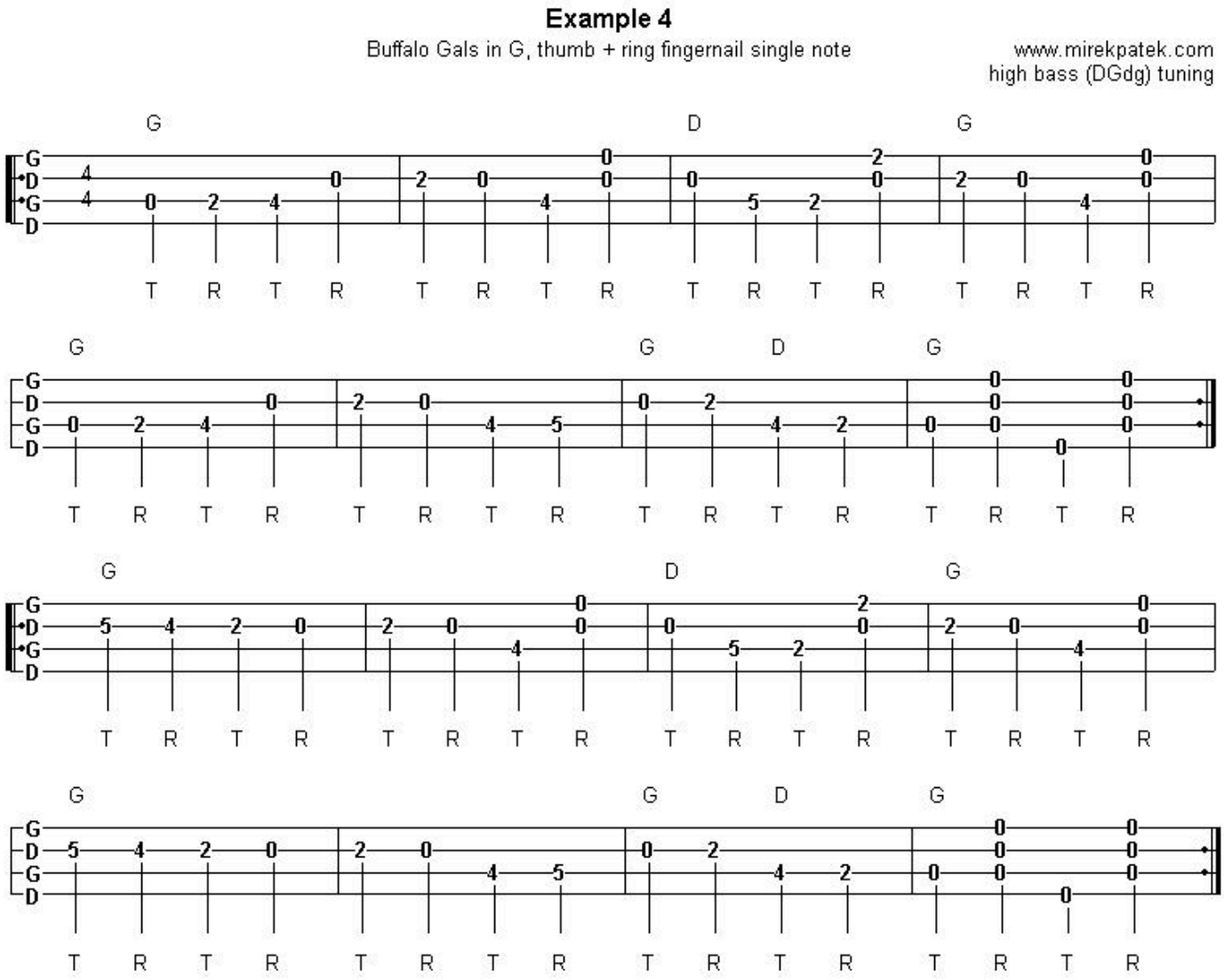
high bass (DGdg) tuning





Note that during the downpick of ring fingernail pick, part of the right hand movement is the „knocking motion“ of the whole wrist, and part is the „flicking“ the ring finger out of the palm. In case of single notes, there is bigger share of knocking than in case of brushes, where the flicking is substantial.

6. Adding the index finger – bum-ditty rhythm

To match the basic rhythm of frailing 5-string banjo, let’s add the up-picking of index fingerpick on the drone g string after the ring fingernail stroke. The result is the quarter note and two eighth notes, also known as bum-ditty rhythm. To save the space, I will show it only in the key of G – see Example 5. Note that the D chord is now voiced 0200 with drone g string.

Example 5

Buffalo Gals in G, bum-ditty rhythm

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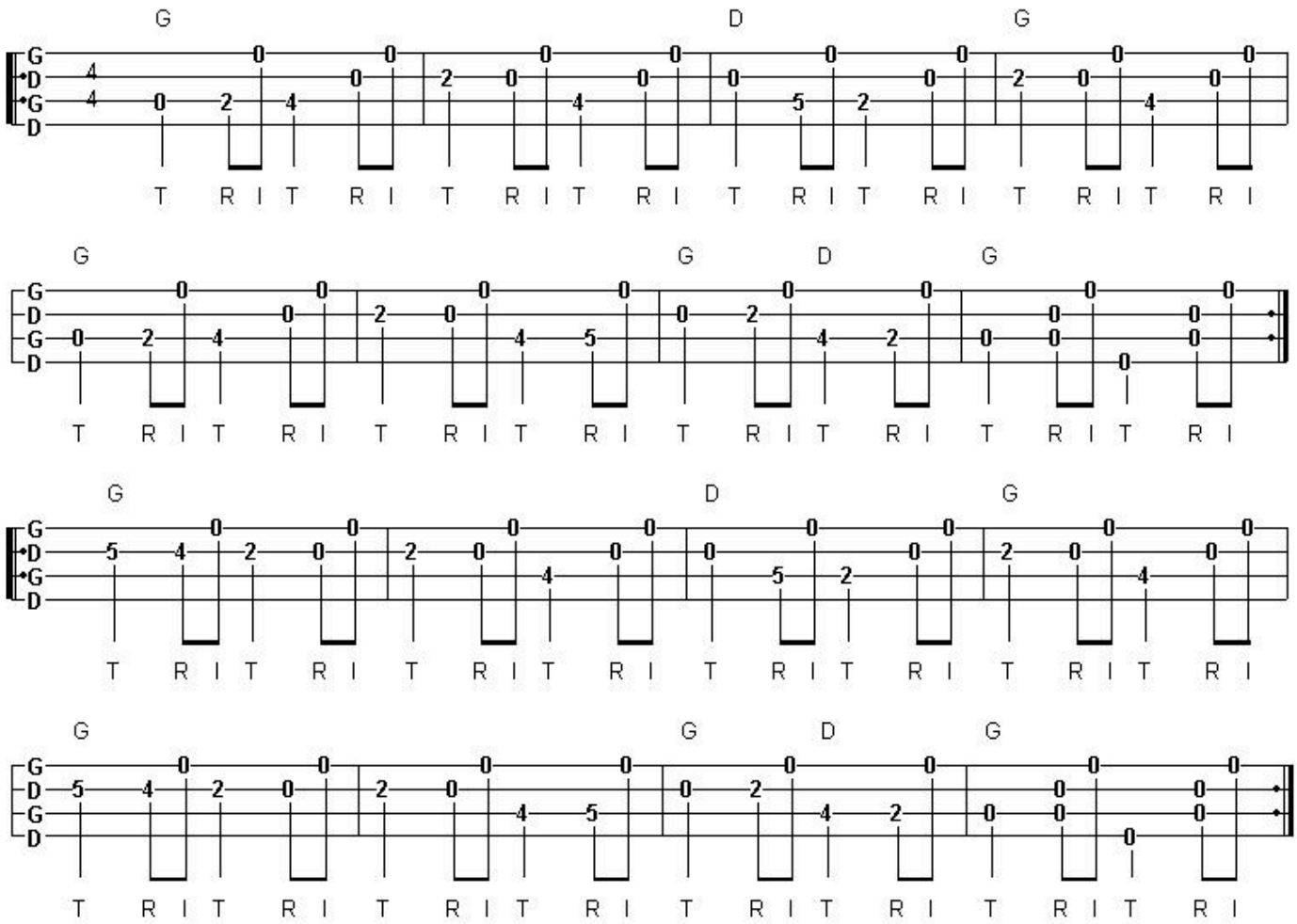
high bass (DGdg) tuning



The uppicking stroke by index finger is not made just with the flection of the finger, but it contains some part of lifting the whole wrist. The wrist continues to lift also during the thumbpick stroke (thumb in fact reactively pushes the wrist up by picking the string down), in order to be prepared to the knocking motion for the ring fingernailpick downstroke. The lifting/knocking wrist helps to keep the rhythm and adds the power to the stroke.

All the above is valid for the 4/4 rhythm, where are two bum-ditty rhythms per measure. In case of 3/4 waltz rhythm, I play bum-dit(ty)-ditty, in other words the beats are played by thumb, ring, ring and the drone note is sometimes omitted especially after the 2nd beat.

7. Adding the left hand notes

While the quarter melody notes are played by regular right hand movement – alternation of thumbpick and ring fingernail pick – if we need to play some melody notes inbetween (eighth notes), in frailing style on tenor banjo we have to use left hand techniques. [We do not have such tool as „drop thumb“ when the 5-string banjo players can play some eight notes between the beat with their thumb dropping from 5th string to some long string.] If the additional eighth note is on higher fret (closer to the bridge) of the same string which has just been played by thumb or ring fingernail, we can use **hammer-on** (Example 6, measure 1) where left hand finger literally hammers the string to the fretboard. If we need to play additional fretted eighth note on different string that has just been played by thumb or ring fingernail, we will use so called **alternate string hammer-on** (ASHO) where the left hand finger hammers to that another string. (Example 6, measure 3). If the additional eighth note is on lower fret (closer to the nut) or on open string that

has just been played (and fretted), we will use **pull-off** (Example 6, measure 2) where the left hand finger which just fretted the string is pulled sidewise to the palm and it pluck the string. Note that if the pull-off is to fretted and not open string (as the first pull-of in measure 2), both fingers – middle on 3rd fret and index on 2nd fret – have to be placed to the fretboard in the same time before the pull-off. Finally, if we need to play additional eighth note on open string different from the one which has just been played, we will use so called **alternate string pull-off** (ASPO), where the available left hand finger plucks sidewise the other string (Example 6, measure 4, I would use the index finger). Similarly to pull-off to fretted string, the left hand finger executing the ASPO has to be placed in advance – in the same time when the right hand thumb or ring fingernail makes a stroke. Finally, there is the **slide** with fretting left hand finger, which also enables to produce an additional note (not shown). Anyway, I recommend you to find some detailed tutorial of these techniques on the web.

Example 6

Hammer-ons, pull-offs

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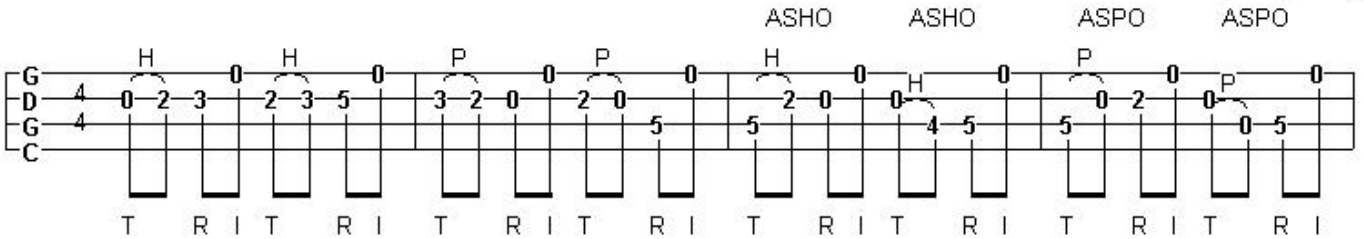
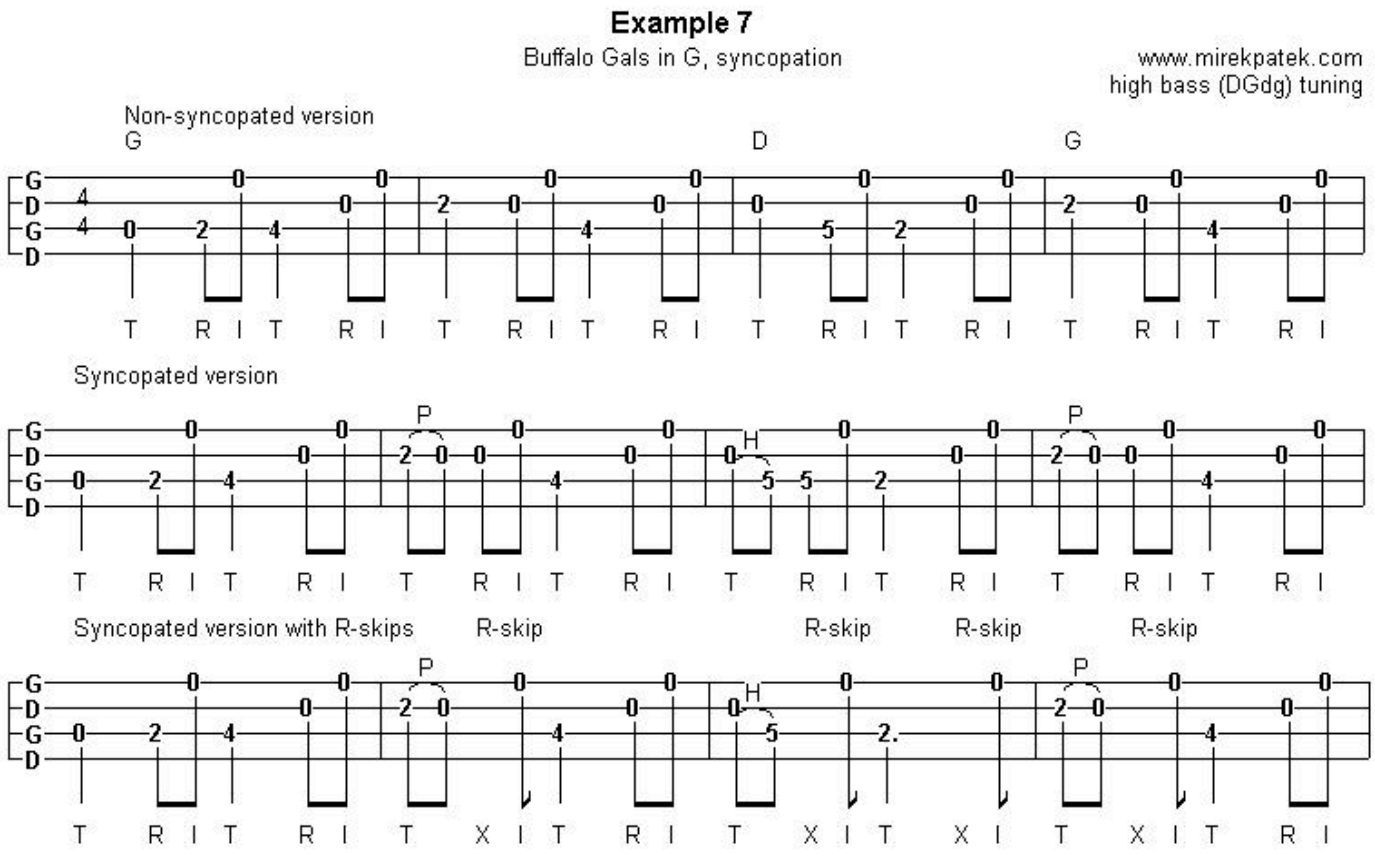
low bass (CGdg) tuning



With the above described left hand techniques we can play some melody note after the thumbpick stroke as it is shown in Example 6, but also after the ring fingernail stroke, in the moment when the drone g string is played. In the latter case we may leave out the drone g note, or we may play both notes together.

8. Syncopation with left hand notes

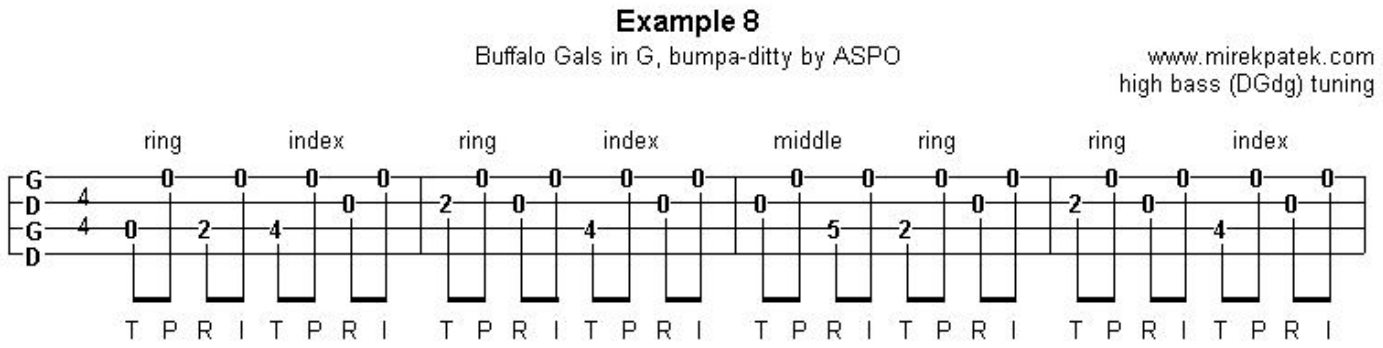
In the previous part it was shown how the left hand notes can add new eighth melody notes inbetween the quarter notes played by right hand. But the left hand notes can be used also for syncopation – shifting the original melody notes out of the beat. Look at the Example 7 with four measures of Buffalo Gals, first version non syncopated (taken from Example 5), second version syncopated.



The third version in Example 7 shows right hand technique which further enhances the syncopation – the right hand (playing on the beat as usual) purposedly misses the strings. This way the previous syncopated note is better heard and emphasised. As there was skipped the ring fingernail stroke, I call it R-skip – it is marked by X in the tab. The last but one occurence of R-skip in third version of Example 7 shows another possible use of this technique – after the half note melody, which is then also emphasised. You may of course skip also the thumbpick stroke (T-skip), which is not presented here.

9. Bumpa-ditty rhythm

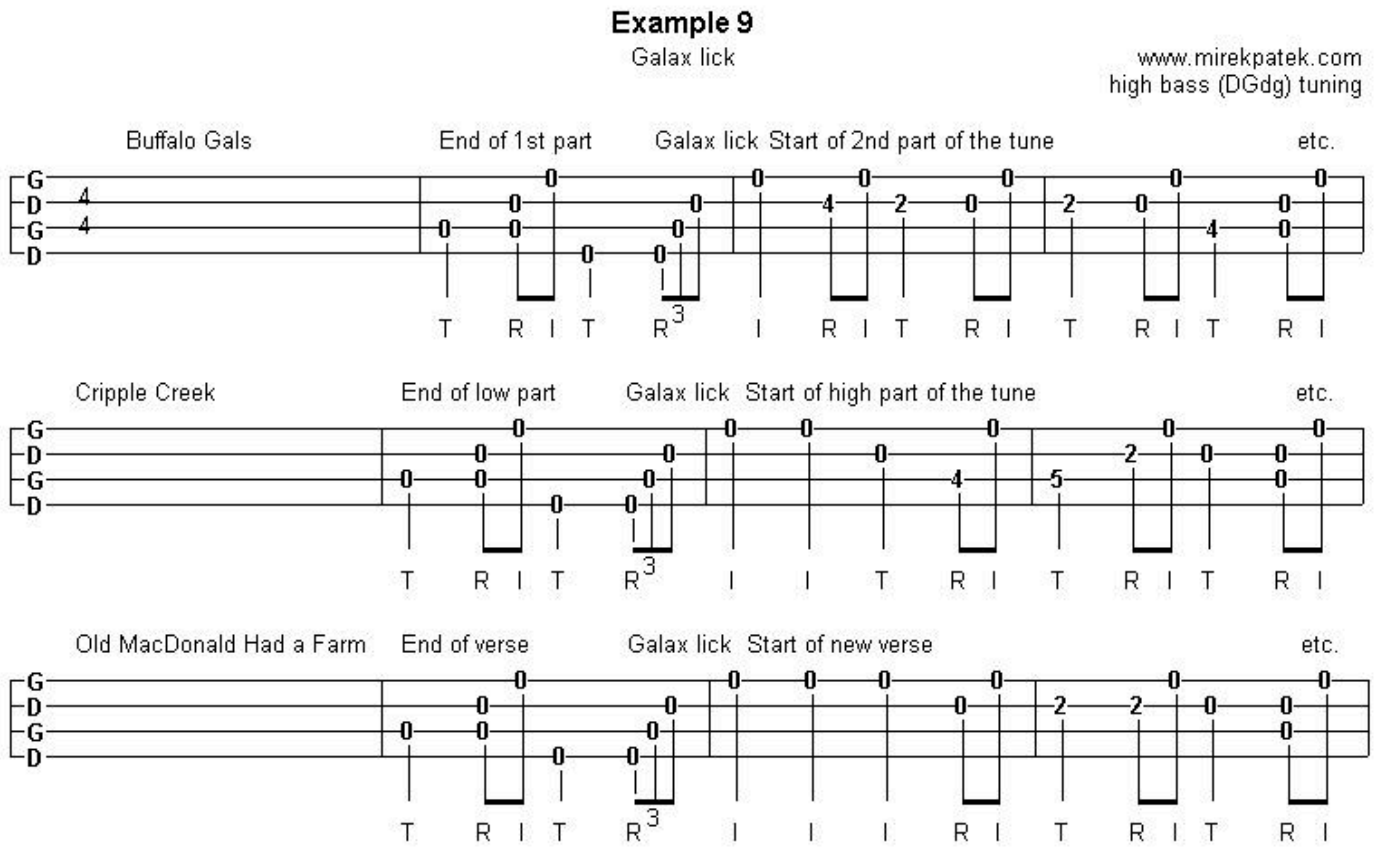
One specific use of alternate string pull-off is the immitation of 5-string bumpa-ditty rhythm. While in bum-ditty rhythm (T-RI pattern) there is the drone g string picked only after the ring stroke, in the bumpa-ditty rhythm the g string is played after both right hand strokes – the result is regular stream of eighth notes. It could be possible to play both g strings by index finger (TIRI pattern), but for me it works only in slow tempos. In quicker tempo I play the first g string by alternate string pull-off (TPRI pattern). This ASPO should be practiced by different left hand fingers, because in the real situation it needs to be performed by the available finger which is not occupied by playing the melody note before or after the ASPO. Example 8 shows four measures of Buffalo Gals in bumpa-ditty rhythm (this is just etude for practice, not suggested way of playing). The fingers above the tab are suggested left hand fingers for ASPO. Note that they have to be put on the fingerboard in the same time when thumbpick makes the stroke. Do not put them down so forcefully otherwise unwanted hammer-on will be heard. To prevent the hammer-on it may also help to put the pulling finger exactly on the fret or just next to the fret closer to the bridge. If your melody stays on 4th-3rd strings, you may also try the ASPO on the 2nd string instead of the 1st one (not shown).



Another option of playing bumpa-ditty rhythm is by TITI pattern which lacks the frailing ring finger. The result is in fact so called two-finger picking which is another legitimate old-time 5-string banjo technique. When I frail my tenor banjo I naturally insert into the default frailing T-RI pattern some passages of two-finger TITI pattern for emphasised quarter note melodies. As I play such TITI pattern (with the index on the drone g string and thumb on some melody string), my thumb and index are not moving separately, but they are partly fixed in the desired distance (depending on the distance between picked strings) like the jaws of pliers, and some part of the movement is done by rotating wrist. This way the power of the T-RI strokes does not escape in the TITI parts.

10. Galax lick

This is the frailing 5-string banjo technique which brings the drone g string from off-beat to the beat for some moment. Here the frailing finger makes slower brush over the strings, so each of the string is heard separately. This slow brush takes not the space of eighth note as usual, but lasts for quarter note, so the following (thumb)stroke on g string comes surprisingly on the beat. You can mimic this technique also on the tenor banjo – it comes handy when the melody on the tune equals to open g string and instead of playing the 5th fret of d string you may play Galax lick. Because the ring fingernail brushes over 3 strings, rhytmically it plays a triplet. Then the index finger picks once or repeatedly the g string on the beat. Look at the Example 9 - Buffalo Gals has one beat on g string, Cripple Creek has two beats, and Old Mc'Donald Had a Farm is with three beats on g string. Take care to return correctly from Galax lick to bum-ditty (do not switch the thumb and ring fingernail strokes).

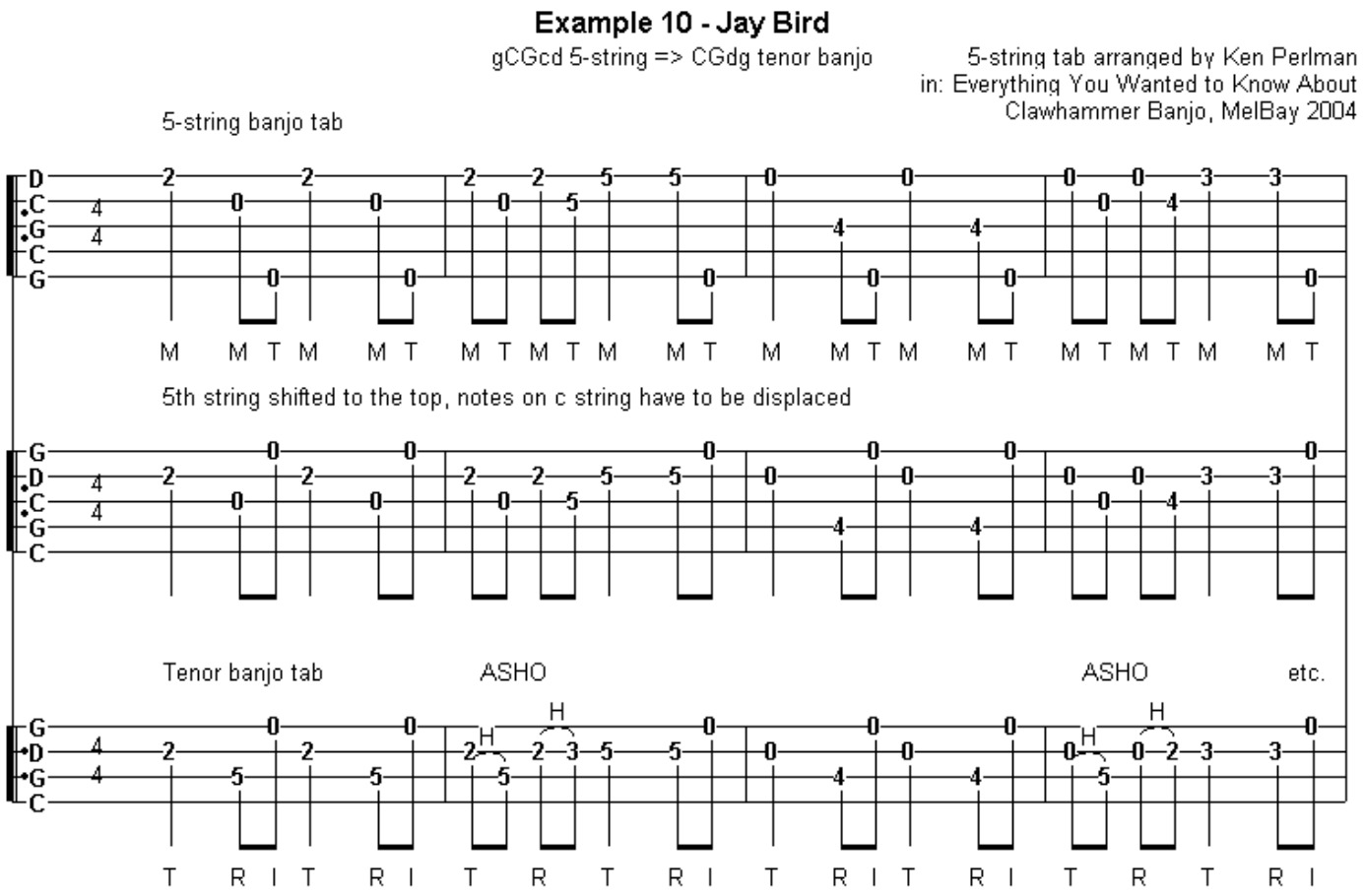


11. 5-string banjo frailing tab transcription

Let's close this tutorial with one example of transcription of 5-string banjo frailing tab to tenor banjo. For demonstration I will use short segment from the above mentioned Ken Perlman's book Everything You Wanted to Know About Clawhammer Banjo (Mel Bay Publications, 2004, page 15). First line of Example 10 shows the original tab of Jay Bird – first four measures. Ken Perlman's frailing finger is middle finger (M), and fifth string is of course played by thumb (T). In the 2nd and 4th measures there is used the drop thumb technique, where thumb drops from the short 5th string down to the long string.

First we have to determine the tuning. Tab of Jay Bird is in aDADE, which is gCGCD, capo 2. The fourth string C indicates that the tenor banjo tuning will be low bass CGdg tuning, capo 2. And the second string c indicates that we will heavily use the 5th fret of our G string, played by little finger – there the open c string notes will be moved.

The second tab line is non-existing instrument made by the first step of the transcription – the high g string is shifted from the bottom of 5-string banjo tab to the top and becomes the 1st string. Now one of the strings has to be omitted: in the original tab it is the 2nd string, in the transient tab on the second line it is the 3rd string, tuned in c. The result is shown in the third line. In the first measure the open c strings are moved to 5th fret of G string (held by little finger) and they are played by right ring fingernail. The open c string in the second measure is fingered again by little finger on 5th fret of G string, but as it is between the beats it is played by ASPO (see part 7 above) without the help of right hand. Yes, ASPO by the left little finger needs some practice. Next off-beat note in the second measure – the 5th fret on the original c string – moves to the 3rd fret of our d string. As it comes after the 2nd fret, it is played with hammer-on by left middle finger. Similar changes are done in the 3rd and 4th measure.



YoutTube Video of examples: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HyCUQHn1OmM

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.