

Hot Licks for Bluegrass Tenor Banjo

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The sixth article about fingerstyle tenor banjo here on Banjo Sessions is the follow-up of the fourth article from June 2010 focused on bluegrass rolls. Now I will present some bluegrass licks for fingerpicked DGdg tenor banjo – there will be covered the lead-in licks, the fill-in licks for G, C, and D chords, and also some ending licks.

Lead-in licks

At the beginning of the tune or banjo solo there are usually incomplete measures (pick-up measures) which serve several purposes: they call for attention, they set the tempo (when starting the tune) and they lead the ear to the melody at the beginning of the first full measure. If we are in the key of G major, the melody typically starts on some G chord note – D, G, B, d, or g. The licks are presented in the pair of measures, the first measure being the lead-in lick, the second measure representing the first full measure of the tune/solo. To save the space I show only the first note of that measure, but in reality it obviously continues with some roll. Below the tab is right hand fingering (T, I, M), above the tab the left hand fingering (i, m, r, L).

A) Example 1 – lead-in licks to low D note on the open fourth string. First three pairs of measures show different approaches to the walking line played by thumb on frets 2-2-1-0 of the fourth (D) string. Either there is nothing else, or there are alternating index and middle fingers between the thumbs, or finally there is drone d string added as the doublestops (pinches). You can apply these approaches to another walking line on frets 3-2-1-0. The final lick is different; in fact it is part of the frequent fill-in lick shown later in Example 7.

Example 1 Lead-in licks to low D note

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B) Example 2 – lead-in licks to G note, which is either on the open third (G) string or on the 5th fret of the fourth (D) string – the latter approached by the slide from 2nd, 3rd, or 4th fret of D string. First two licks differ by that 2-5 slide to the G note but this implies also the difference in left hand: while in the first lick the 2nd fret is held by index finger, in the second lick it is held by middle finger which then performs the 2-5 slide. The third lick shows again the use of pinches. Try also to use the 3rd fret on D string for bluesy sound instead of the 2nd fret (not shown). You may apply all these approaches to the fourth lick with the shorter walk-up to the G note. Next pair of licks uses stepwise walk-up without or with the 4-5 slide to the G note. Third line starts with the lick which uses the descending line. Final lick is the same as the one in Example 1 – it can lead both to low D and to G note.

Example 2
Lead-in licks to G note

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Example 2 shows three systems of lead-in licks to the G note. The first system consists of three measures: the first measure has fingerings *i* and notes 0, 0, 2 on the G string; the second measure has fingerings *m m* and notes 0, 0, 2, 2-5; the third measure has fingering *i* and notes 0, 0, 2, 0. The second system also has three measures: the first has *i* and notes 0, 2, 0; the second has *i r* and notes 0, 2, 4, 0; the third has *i r r* and notes 0, 2, 4, 4-5. The third system has two measures: the first has *r m i* and notes 0, 4, 3, 2, 0; the second has *m i* and notes 0, 2, 3, 0, 2, 0.

C) Example 3 – lead-in licks to the B note on the 4th fret of the third (G) string. It is usually approached by the slide either from the 2nd fret or from the 3rd fret. Try also the slide from 2nd to 3rd fret (to the Bb note) and decide which slide (2-3, 2-4, 3-4) do you prefer. First lick uses just two quarter notes; next two licks use the 0-2 hammer-on without or with the pinch. The following lick is slight variation. Final lick uses more stepwise walk-up to the B note – the 2nd fret is held by middle finger here, because it performs the following 2-4 slide.

Example 3
Lead-in licks to B note

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Example 3 shows three systems of lead-in licks to the B note. The first system has four measures: the first has *m* and notes 0, 0, 2; the second has *i* and notes 0, 0, 2; the third has *m* and notes 2, 4; the fourth has *i* and notes 2, 4. The second system has four measures: the first has *i* and notes 0, 0, 2; the second has *m* and notes 0, 2, 4; the third has *i* and notes 0, 2, 0; the fourth has *i* and notes 0, 2, 0; the fifth has *m* and notes 2, 4. The third system has two measures: the first has *m* and notes 0, 0, 0, 2; the second has *m* and notes 2, 4.

D) Example 4 – lead-in licks to the high d note, which is either on the open second (d) string or on the 7th fret of the third (G) string – the latter approached by hammer-on from 6th fret. First two licks use chromatic line with or without that 6-7 hammer-on at the end. Next lick uses the 0-2 hammer-on, while the final lick uses the chain of them including the 4-5 hammer-on with the little finger on 5th fret.

Example 4
Lead-in licks to high d note

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E) Example 5 – lead-in licks to the high g note played on the 5th fret of the second (d) string, often preceded by some slide. Watch the timing of the slide – it can start at the fourth beat of lead-in measure and finish at the first beat of next measure as in the first lick, or it can occupy two eighth notes of new measure as in the second lick. The third option is to play the 4-5 slide very quickly on the first beat.

Example 5
Lead-in licks to high g note

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G fill-in licks

While the goal of the bluegrass banjo should be to play the melody (in other words to incorporate the melody notes into the rolls and embellish them with slides, hammer-ons and pull-offs to such extent that the melody is still recognisable) there are moments when this is not the case. Either because there are no melody notes in the measures in question, or because somebody else plays the melody and what is necessary is the back-up maybe with some countermelody, or because I have decided to improvise outside the melody, or because I am on the jam session and I did not catch the exact melody yet and it's my turn and I have to play something to the chord progression (which I have already caught).

The 5-string banjo players use in such moments the licks played by Earl Scruggs and other banjo heroes; these licks can be learned either from the records or from the tabs in many books or DVDs available today. In the Examples 7-10 I have transcribed some of these licks and added some new ones tailored more to the fingerpicked DGdg tenor banjo limitations.

Generally, the left hand holds the chord (or partial chord) and inserts some catchy slide, hammer-on and pull-off on particular chordal as well as non-chordal notes. Frequently used non-chordal note is the sixth degree – note E in G major chord, note A in C major chord, and note B in D major chord. In case of G licks (the licks used over the G major chord) the task is simplified by the fact that the left hand does not hold any string to make a chord voicing. Therefore, the left hand can fully concentrate on slides, hammer-ons and pull-offs (grace notes) – Example 6 shows the most frequently used ones in G fill-in licks. The slides are usually played by middle finger or by ring finger (4-5 slides), the 2-0 pull-offs by index finger and 3-2 pull-offs by middle+index finger. The same fingers do the respective hammer-ons, in case of 6-7 hammer-on the left hand shifts up-the-neck and uses index+middle fingers.

Example 6
Grace notes in the G fill-in licks

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The diagram shows musical notation for three types of slides and two types of pull-offs/hammer-ons on a tenor banjo. The strings are labeled G, D, G, D from top to bottom.

- Slides to G note:** Three measures showing slides on the G string. Fingerings: m m r. Slides: 2→5, 3→5, 4→5.
- Slides to Bb / B note:** Three measures showing slides on the D string. Fingerings: m m m. Slides: 2→3, 2→4, 3→4.
- Slides to high g note:** Three measures showing slides on the G string. Fingerings: m m r. Slides: 2→5, 3→5, 4→5.
- Pull-offs:** Four measures showing pull-offs on the D string. Fingerings: i m i i. Pull-offs: 2→0, 2→0, 3→2, 2→0.
- Hammer-ons:** Four measures showing hammer-ons on the D string. Fingerings: i i m i m. Hammer-ons: 0→2, 0→2, 2→3, 6→7.

My June 2010 article was finished by the most frequently used fill-in lick, where the left hand plays the 2-3 slide on G string in particular part of the measure and there is the non-chordal note E at the 2nd fret of D string on the fourth beat – it is the first lick in Example 7. I recommend to pick the last note on the open d string always by your index (not middle) finger in order to have your middle finger ready for the option of open g string at the beginning of next measure. You may also play this lick in one of its simplified forms shown in the first line of Example 7 – with the quarter note on the first beat and/or without the open d string on the third beat and/or without the last open d string (omitting the last eighth note at all or playing it by pull-off from 2nd fret of D string).

If you need to play several of these licks chained together, you may try some variations created by moving and/or multiplying the 2-3 slides on the G string as it is shown in Example 7 from the second line onwards. Some of these variations contain surprising syncopation. In case of repeated 2-3 slides you may try to use hammer-ons instead. You may also use 3-2 pull-offs instead of some 2-3 slides (not shown).

Example 7 Variations of THE fill-in lick for G major chord

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The image displays five variations of fill-in licks for a G major chord on a DGdg tenor banjo. Each variation is shown on a four-string staff (G, D, G, D) with fret numbers and techniques (T, M, I, S, P) indicated below. The variations are as follows:

- Variation 1:** Starts with a measure containing a 4-fret hammer-on on the G string and a 0-fret pull-off on the D string. The subsequent measures use a 2-3 pull-off on the G string and a 2-fret hammer-on on the D string. Techniques: T I M T M I T I | T M T M I T I | T M T I T I | T M T I T.
- Variation 2:** Starts with a 0-fret pull-off on the D string. The subsequent measures use a 2-3 pull-off on the G string and a 2-fret hammer-on on the D string. Techniques: T I M T M I T I | T I T I M I T I | M T I M T I T I | M T I T I M T I.
- Variation 3:** Starts with a 0-fret pull-off on the D string. The subsequent measures use a 2-3 pull-off on the G string and a 2-fret hammer-on on the D string. Techniques: T T I M I T I | T T M I T I | T M I T I T I | T I T I M I T I.
- Variation 4:** Starts with a 0-fret pull-off on the D string. The subsequent measures use a 2-3 pull-off on the G string and a 2-fret hammer-on on the D string. Techniques: T I M T M I T I | T I M I T I T I | M T M T M I T I | M T I M T I T I.
- Variation 5:** Starts with a 0-fret pull-off on the D string. The subsequent measures use a 2-3 pull-off on the G string and a 2-fret hammer-on on the D string. Techniques: T T I T I T I | T I T M T I T I.

Other fill-in licks for G major chords are shown in Example 8 (each measure is separate lick). Note the rhythm of hammer-on + pull-off in the third lick – the note made by pull-off is on the beat. Two licks starting the second line, especially the second halves of the measures, show two rhythmic ways of transcribing the frequent 5-string lick which uses the open B string just before or after the 3-2 pull-off on G string. As we do not have the B string on DGdg tenor banjo, there is played the open d string instead. The second line continues with two similar licks; the difference is in the index finger placed on the 2nd fret of d string, which prevents the middle finger to perform the slide. That's why the second lick uses the 3-4 hammer-on played by ring finger instead. The last five licks use the 6-7 hammer-on on G string, which is the transcription of 2-3 hammer-on on the missing B string. Sometimes the close transcription would require repeated jumps up and down the neck to catch 2-3 and 6-7 frets of G strings – in that case I opt for another lick. The last lick shows how could be transcribed the 3rd fret on (missing) B string followed by 2nd fret on d string – because of the unreachable 7-2 span on G-d strings of tenor banjo, the “melodic” approach is chosen and there is played open d string followed by 9th fret on G string.

Example 8 Other fill-in licks for G major chord

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The musical notation for Example 8 consists of four systems, each representing a different fill-in lick for the G major chord. Each system includes a treble clef staff (G, D, G, D strings), a bass clef staff (D, G, D, G strings), and a line of rhythmic notation below. The notes are indicated by letters: 'i' for index finger (2nd fret), 'm' for middle finger (3rd fret), 'mi' for middle and index fingers (3rd and 2nd frets), 'm r i' for middle, ring, and index fingers (3rd, 4th, and 2nd frets), and 'L' for little finger (5th fret). The notation includes various techniques: hammer-ons (H), pull-offs (P), slides (S), and hammer-pull-offs (HP). The rhythmic notation uses 'T' for eighth notes, 'M' for quarter notes, and 'I' for rests.

C fill-in licks

Of course there are many other G licks, but let's move to C licks – licks played over the C major chord. Here the left hand is limited as it needs to hold the chord: index finger almost permanently holds the 2nd fret of d string and little finger normally holds the 5th fret of G string. If necessary, the 5th fret of D string is held by ring finger. So what can we do? Index finger can play the hammer-on 0-2, slide 1-2 or pull-off 2-0 on d string, With the help of ring finger on 4th fret of G string, the little finger can play hammer-on 4-5 on G string. If we lift the little finger from the 5th fret, the middle finger can reach the 2nd fret of G or D strings (including the 0-2 hammer-on or 2-0 pull-off). Some C chord licks are shown in Example 9. At the end there are two-measure licks which use the alternation of forward and backward rolls, as well as the walking bass to next chord (the first lick goes again to C chord, the last lick goes to G chord). You may play also the C7 chord during that kind of lick if you put your middle finger to the 3rd fret on G string (not shown).

Example 9 Fill-in licks for C major chord

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The musical notation for Example 9 consists of four systems of guitar-style tablature for a 5-string tenor banjo (DGdg). Each system shows fret numbers on the strings (G, D, G, D) and corresponding picking patterns (T, M, I, L, H, P, S). The first system has two measures with patterns like T M T I M T I and T M T M T I M T I. The second system has two measures with patterns like T I T I M T I M and T I T M T I T M. The third system has two measures with patterns like T I M T M I T I and T M I T I M T. The fourth system has two measures with patterns like T M I T I M T and M I T I T M T I T.

D fill-in licks

In case of D licks (licks used over the D major chord) we can press the g string on 2nd fret to get the chordal note a – this is something which is not possible on 5-string banjo in the down-the-neck area. Instead of the transcription of 5-string banjo licks with non-chordal open g string I prefer to play that a note held permanently by middle finger. Left hand index finger normally holds the 2nd fret of G string, it can do the 0-2 hammer-ons and 2-0 pull-offs on D, G, or d strings and also 1-2 slide on G string. The rest has to be performed by the ring finger, which can serve the frets 3, 4 of D, G, and d strings (again including hammer-ons, pull-offs and slides), with a little help of pinky on 5th fret of G string (note C) for D7 sound. As we have the root of the chord at the bottom (open D string) and the range of octave + third to the high f# at the 4th fret of d string, we have endless possibilities of guitar-like runs and banjo licks played by right thumb and packed into rolls by index and middle finger. Some of them are shown in Example 10. The whole first line comprises one lick with the up-and-down run, the shorter version of ascending run is shown in the two-measure lick in the second line. Then there are two versions of the lick which differ in the second half of the measure: the first lick of this pair is repeatable as it ends on different string than it starts. The two-measure lick which starts the third line is similar to the last two C licks shown in Example 9. Then there are two versions of the lick which starts with the D-d octave motive picked by right thumb. Similar D-d-d octave motive is used in the last two licks on the fourth line; the first one is tailor-made for the DGdg tenor banjo, and it is apparently inspired by the second one, which is closer transcription of original 5-string banjo lick – you see the open g string there.

Example 10
Fill-in licks for D major chord

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Endings

The Example 11 shows just three of many possible endings – the first one spans over the whole first line and it contains that famous "shave and a hair-cut – two bits" motive. The 4-8 doublestop on d-g strings is played by index and little finger, the latter making the bend (choke) on 8th fret of d string. The second ending takes two measures and uses the G fill-in licks discussed before, and the final one uses the pinches (doublestops) of partial D and G chords; the final octave doublestop 0-5 needs to be muted afterwards as it contains open G string, the other option is to use 4-5 doublestop of minor sixth B-g. The up-the-neck licks and endings will be discussed sometime in the future. Enjoy!

Example 11
Endings

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YouTube Video of examples: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWprbP-EDwM>