

Cumberland Gap

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3-finger and 2-finger picking on tenor banjo

In this ninth article here on Banjo Sessions about the fingerstyle tenor banjo we will look in detail how to transcribe the classic Earl Scruggs' version of the traditional tune Cumberland Gap into DGdg tenor banjo. It turns out that this tune can be played both in 3-finger style (discussed so far in my previous articles) and in 2-finger style, where only thumb and index finger are used. In the up-the-neck part we will discuss how to transcribe the famous E minor left hand position to tenor banjo.

The tune consists of two parts – low or down-the-neck A part, and high or up-the-neck B part. (According to the terminological consensus down-the-neck means lower in pitch, i.e. close to the tuning pegs; up-the-neck means higher in pitch, in the fretboard areas closer to the bridge.) Both A and B parts contain four measures which, if both repeated twice, count in total to 16 measures. I will notate them in 4/4 rhythm (current common practice) instead of 2/4 rhythm used in the *Earl Scruggs and the 5-String Banjo* book. The tune is broken into the single measures in order to demonstrate the way of thinking during the transcription to DGdg tenor banjo (so you could replicate it on the other 5-string banjo tabs). The complete DGdg tenor banjo tabs for 2-finger and 3-finger picking styles are shown at the end of the article.

Part A, measure 1

In the first half of 1st measure there is the ascending arpeggio of four eighth notes picked by right hand. They are easily playable with three fingers on 5-string banjo due to its reentrant tuning (that's the term indicating the high string on thumb side; another example of reentrant tuning is the ukulele). The second note is doubled with another note played by hammer-on. On DGdg banjo played with three right hand fingers (T, I, M) we are facing two problems:

- 1) We do not have reentrant tuning so it is difficult to pick four ascending notes with three fingers.
- 2) One of the original notes is played on B string which is missing on DGdg tenor banjo.

Here are several ways of transcription to tenor banjo (each measure below is separate unit).

The image displays three musical staves representing different transcriptions of the first measure of Part A for a tenor banjo. Each staff shows the string configuration (D, B, G, D, G for the first; G, D, G, D for the others) and the corresponding picking pattern (T, I, M, T, I, M for the first; T, I, T, M, T, M for the second; T, I, M, T, M for the third). The second staff has a diagonal line through it, suggesting it is a less preferred or more difficult transcription. The first staff uses the original 5-string tuning and fingering. The second and third staves use a 4-string configuration (G, D, G, D) and show how the ascending arpeggio is adapted to the tenor banjo's tuning and string layout.

The first line starts with the original 5-string tab and continues with two measures of note-for-note transcriptions which differ in right hand fingering. You can see that due to the regular “bass to treble” order of strings on the DGdg tenor banjo, the ascending line would require either four right hand picking fingers (TIMR – not shown), or some uncomfortable crossing of the picking fingers (either TITM or ITIM). Another option is also not shown – to repeat the thumb stroke on D and G strings (TTIM); that would be possible in lower tempo. What is shown in the last measure of first line is the switch of open d and g strings, which breaks the ascending line and allows the use of TIMI picking pattern; there is no crossing of picking fingers, instead there is kind of “alternating index” pattern as the right index finger alternates between G and d strings.

However my preferred way of picking is in the second line – you see that I have omitted the note played originally on the open B string, and in the exact transcription on the 4th fret of G string. **The intention is to match the simplicity of the left hand job.** First measure in the second line shows the transcription, which keeps the original ascending line of notes with T-IM pattern, the second measure shows the switch of open d and g strings played with T-MI pattern. Finally, the last measure shows that it is possible to use just thumb and index finger – 2-finger picking style.

The hammer-on on the 2nd fret of D string is played by left index finger – it is indicated above the tab. It is essential to practice the correct timing of the hammer-on to obtain regular stream of eighth notes. In addition to the precise timing of hammering your left index finger down to the string, it is also important when the index finger is lifted out of the string, i.e. how long the hammered note E lasts. In this case I intend to lift the index finger before the third beat (before the open G string is picked). The second half of the first measure contains the quarter note plus quarter note pinch – just watch which right hand fingers are used. 3-finger picking on DGdg tenor banjo would typically use T + IM fingers, while 2-finger picking uses T + TI.

Part A, measure 2

The measure 2 is kind of rhythmic echo of the measure 1, as it contains again the ascending figure of eighth notes, followed by single quarter note and quarter note pinch. Similarly to the measure 1, I would omit the note originally played on open B string and play the T-IM right hand pattern only as shown in the following tab. The slide on the G string goes up to the 4th fret – to the B; keep the correct timing of the first eighth note, do not rush the slide. Note that it is not possible to revert the open d and g strings and play T-MI pattern here, because the following note is on d string and we do not want to repeat the successive notes on the same string if possible. The last measure shows the 2-finger right hand picking pattern. Left hand fingering is indicated above the tab.

Part A, measure 3

In the 3rd measure there are again two occurrences of the open B string but now they are treated differently. The first one is just played on the 4th fret of the G string and causes no problem. But the second one is followed by another note on the G string, and in order to avoid the right hand picking of successive eighth notes on the same string, the pair is played by the pull-off. I use the 3-2 pull-off by middle finger here, instead of 4-2 pull-off with ring finger. The last measure shows the 2-finger approach with the change of the fourth note in order to avoid thumb-index crossing.

Part A, measure 4

There are different measures for each repetition. Assuming there would be two repetition of the four-measure segment, the first repetition would end with the stream of eighth notes, while the second repetition would end with the exact copy of 1st measure (with quarter note pinch). So let's show just the measure 4 of the first repetition.

The first half of the measure is the same as in the measure 1 – it is treated the same way, including the timing of the hammer-on of index finger as discussed above; only the preferred transcription is shown in the tenor banjo part of tab below. The second half of the measure – if connected to the preceding high g note – creates the descending line of four notes which is uncomfortable for the tenor banjo without reentrant tuning. I do not prefer to cross the right hand fingers (MTIT) as shown in the second measure of the first line. The last measure of the first line presents the option when the open d-g-d strings are switched to g-d-g. Note that the open d string is played by right thumb in order to avoid MIM right hand pattern and to use MTM instead. This is discussed in my June 2010 article at <http://banjosessions.com/?p=60>.

My preferred option is to change the syncopation of the note on the open G string (shift it from the off-beat forward to the third beat) and play the TMTI or TITM pattern as shown in the first half of the second line. While in the 1st measure of the second line there is kind of parallel motion of the lower notes on the beats and upper notes on the off-beats, in the 2nd measure these two “voices” depart in the contrary motion – that's why I prefer the latter approach. The second half of the second line shows the 2-finger approach.

The image displays three musical staves. The first staff is a guitar staff with strings D, B, G, D, G from top to bottom. It shows a sequence of notes: open D, 0 on B, 0 on G, 0 on D, and 2 on G. Picking patterns T I M T M I T M are indicated below. The second staff is a tenor banjo staff with strings G, D, G, D from top to bottom. It shows a sequence of notes: 0 on G, 0 on D, 0 on G, 0 on D, 2 on G, 0 on D, 0 on G, 0 on D. A diagonal line is drawn through the first half of the staff. Picking patterns T I M T I T I T M T M I T I are shown below. The third staff is another tenor banjo staff with strings G, D, G, D from top to bottom. It shows a sequence of notes: 0 on G, 0 on D, 0 on G, 0 on D, 2 on G, 0 on D, 0 on G, 0 on D. Picking patterns T I M T I T M T T I T I T I T T I T I are shown below.

After the measure 4 there follow again the measures 1–3. The measure 4 in the second repetition (i.e. measure 8) mirrors the measure 1 of part A and brings us to the upper part B. I count the start of B part as measure 9.

Part B, measure 9

The upper part of Cumberland Gap on the 5-string banjo uses the E minor left hand voicing on the 9-8-9 frets of G-B-d strings, embellished with the notes on 10th and 11th frets of B string. As the DGdg tenor banjo lacks the B string, generally it is not easy task to transcribe these E minor position licks and usually the result is not the note-for-note copy of 5-string sound. The 8th fret of B string brings high g note, equal to open g string or 12th fret of G string. But the challenge lies in the transcription of the embellishment.

One option is to stretch the left hand with the index finger on the 9th fret of the d string, ring finger on the 12th fret of the G string, and little finger sometimes fretting the 14th fret of the G string; the little finger is requested to execute also the choke here. This is shown in the first line of the following tab, both in the 3-finger picking and 2-finger picking version. Note the reversed order of the g notes at the beginning of the measure in 2-finger setting to avoid crossing of the picking fingers – the sound is the same. The left hand can be accustomed gradually to the stretch by using the capo that shortens the fretboard; of course the left hand must shift accordingly.

The first staff shows a sequence of notes on the D, B, G, D, G strings with fret numbers 0, 8, 9, 11, 10, 9 and picking pattern T I M T I M T M.

The second staff shows a more complex sequence with fret numbers 0, 9, 12, 14, 9, 14, 12, 14, 9, 14 and picking pattern M T I M T I T I T I T I T I.

The third staff shows a sequence with fret numbers 0, 9, 8, 7, 12, 9, 8, 7 and picking pattern M T I M I T I M T I T I T I T I.

The other option is shown in the second line. There is no stretch of the left hand; instead there are several position shifts – observe that the shifts are performed when the open g string is played so the left hand has some time for the shift. The voicing keeps the “finger-per-fret” rule – in the first half of the measure the 12th fret of G string is held by left little finger (indicated above the tab in capital L in order to avoid confusion with capital I) and the 9th fret of d string is held by index finger. Then the left hand shifts for the second part of the measure to the area of frets 7-9, and at the very end it shifts to new doublestop at 9th fret that is played in the following measure 10 discussed below. Concerning the right hand, the second part of the measure 9 is modified into index-lead picking pattern ITIM and the off-beat notes are changed. The end of the second line above shows the 2-finger picking tab with another modification of the second half of the measure.

Part B, measure 10

This measure contains no embellishment so it can be transcribed note-for-note into the DGdg tenor banjo. The first line shows the stretchy approach corresponding to the first line of previous tab; the second line would be the follow-up of the measure in the second line of previous tab. Because all the 8th frets of B string are transcribed to open g string, the result is always kind of 2-finger picking sound, even if performed with three fingers. Note that in 3-finger tabs for tenor banjo the 9th fret of d string is played by right thumb, not index finger – the MTMTM right hand fingering is easier than the MIMIM one. I have chosen my middle and ring fingers for the left hand fingering in the 2nd line (1st measure, 3-finger picking version) because this approach enables to fret also other notes of the G major (E minor) pentatonic scale with left index and middle finger on 7th and 9th frets of D and G strings, while ring finger holds the 9th fret of d string (and g string is open) – try it by yourself.

The last measures in both lines show the 2-finger picking version. There is different left hand fingering of the last measure of the second line (9th fret of d string is held by index finger) because the next note in the measure 11 (12th fret of G string) is held by the little finger.

The measure 11 copies exactly the measure 9 so there remains the last measure 12.

Part B, measure 12

The first half of the measure 12 is the same as the measure 10. In the 2-finger picking version of the second line, on the contrary to the measure 10 there is not necessary to hold the 9th fret of d string by index finger but to keep the uniformity of the left hand voicing I have put index finger there too. The second half of the measure 12 contains quarter note and quarter note pinch. So here is the last partial tab for 3-finger and 2-finger picking on DGdg tenor banjo.

Complete tabs

Finally, here are complete tabs for Cumberland Gap, first for 2-finger picking, then for 3-finger picking. I have chosen this order to follow the hypothetic development of picking from simple thumb + index up-picking to more complex patterns, which involve the middle finger. That is how the evolution paced in the rural fingerpicking of 5-string banjo. For the sake of clarity there is no repetition or prima/seconda volta signs and full 16 measures of the tune are shown.

Cumberland Gap three-finger picking

Tab for DGd₄ tenor banjo by Mirek Patek
Based on Earl Scruggs' version
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Tab 1: i m i i r i m i i

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

Tab 2: i m i i r i m i i

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

Tab 3: L i m r i m r r m r L i m r i m r L i

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

Tab 4: L i m r i m r r m r L i m r i m r L i

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

Appendix: right hand variations of measure 10 and 14

You can see that the fourth line in the complete tabs is exact repetition of the third line. Of course you can add some variation here, e.g. in the measure 10 (repeated as 14) where the left hand holds the doublestop of fifth at 9th fret of G and d strings (notes e and b, which make E minor triad together with open g string). One of possible variations is the use of different right hand pattern (let's talk about 3-finger roll here). Note that immediately before and after the measure 10 (and 14) there is picked the open g string with the middle finger. As we want to avoid the repetition of right hand finger, there would work whatever right hand pattern which does not begin and does not end with middle finger. To avoid uncomfortable MIM right hand sequence, the alternate pattern neither should start with IM nor end with MI.

Here are 92 different measures for substitution of measure 10 and 14 (the original one is included as #5). I have limited the selection to the patterns which contain balanced number of strings G, d, and g in the measure (every string is picked 2-3 times). Some of them nicely climb up and down; others are more leaping. TIM fingers are allocated to their respective Gd₄g strings, with one exception – to avoid MIM picking sequence discussed above, thumb frequently drops down to the d string. Relying on your ear as the primary judge, pick-up your favorite arpeggios of E minor chord from the list, and use them in the B part of Cumberland Gap.

49 50 51 52 53 54

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

55 56 57 58 59 60

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

61 62 63 64 65 66

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

67 68 69 70 71 72

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

73 74 75 76 77 78

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

79 80 81 82 83 84

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

85 86 87 88 89 90

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

91 92

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