

Boil Them Cabbage Down - Up the Neck on Tenor Banjo

In this article we are returning to the topic of bluegrass sound on the DGdg tenor banjo (see the previous articles in December 2009, June 2010, October 2010 and April 2011 issue of Banjo Sessions) as we will further explore the up-the-neck area of the tenor banjo and find the fretting-hand positions for picking the harmonized melody in the higher register. The high g string will stay open in order to emulate the sound of three-finger picking on 5-string banjo. The folk song Boil Them Cabbage Down will be used for demonstration of different ways of harmonization of the up-the-neck melody in thirds and sixths.

Exploring the fretboard

You should be able to find where the notes which are played down the neck are located if you move the melody to the up the neck area – note that “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. Ultimately one should learn the placement of all the notes on the fretboard (this recommendation applies for every stringed instrument), I am showing here just the G, A, and D notes as the first reference points for DGdg tuning. First two measures of Example 1 show where are the G’s on the DGdg tenor banjo – you can see there are two options for the low G, four options for the high g, and two more options for even higher g. Notice how the fret numbers are the same on the 1st and 3rd string (as both of them are tuned to G just one octave apart) and on the 2nd and 4th string (tuned to D one octave apart). One remark about the notation – the sound you hear is actually one octave lower than the note written in the staff (hence the 8va sign below the G clef) – this is accepted practice for guitar and banjo notation.

If you have the 19-fret neck on your tenor banjo, you can find the same amount of options also for the tone A – see the measures 3-4 of Example 1. Assuming that your open strings are tuned correctly to DGdg, if you do not hear the same notes e.g. on the 2nd, 7th, 14th, and 19th fret of the respective strings (as shown in the middle of 3rd-4th measure of Example 1), it is the indication of wrong setup – e.g. bridge position, nut height, neck profile, fret placement. Finally, the measures 5-6 show the allocation of D notes on the DGdg tenor banjo neck. (The notes produced by harmonics/chimes are not covered here.)

Example 1
G, A and D notes over the neck of DGdg tenor banjo

Tab by Mirek Patek
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The image shows a musical score for a tenor banjo in DGdg tuning. It features a treble clef with a sharp sign, a 4/4 time signature, and a 4/4 time signature below the staff. The staff shows a melody line with notes and rests. Below the staff are four strings labeled G, D, G, D. Fret numbers are indicated below the strings: 0, 5, 12, 17, 2, 7, 14, 19, 0, 7, 12, 19.

Boil Them Cabbage Down – down the neck

The melody of Boil Them Cabbage Down in the key of G played down the neck on tenor banjo in DGdg tuning is shown in the Example 2.

Example 2
Boil Them Cabbage Down in G
melody down the neck

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The first diagram shows a 4-measure sequence on a G major chord. The strings are G, D, G, D from top to bottom. Measure 1: 4, 4, 4, 4. Measure 2: 5, 5. Measure 3: 4, 4, 4, 4. Measure 4: 2, 2.

The second diagram shows a 3-measure sequence on a G major chord. The strings are G, D, G, D from top to bottom. Measure 1: 4, 4, 4, 4. Measure 2: 5, 5, 5, 5. Measure 3: 4, 4, 2, 2, 0.

For practice purposes let's put the melody to the single roll through the song – this roll is called FMB roll after the Foggy Mountain Breakdown tune by Earl Scruggs. While in the Example 2 there are four melody notes per measure (dividing it into four bricks of 2+2+2+2) or two melody notes per measure (dividing it into two bricks of 4+4), the Example 3 shows that the FMB roll streamlined the number of melody notes to three, and the third one is syncopated – played off the beat. So the melody divides the measure into three bricks of 2+3+3.

Fretting hand details: the melody on the 4th fret is held by ring (not middle) finger; no other fingers are needed in that measure as the open 2nd and 1st strings belong to the chord G major. When the melody is harmonized by the C major chord, the 2nd fret of d string is held by index finger and the 5th fret (the melody) by the little finger. In the D chord the melody is held by index finger and the first g string is fretted on the 2nd fret by middle finger – you may play the unfretted open g string if you wish to emulate the 5-string sound more closely.

Note that the whole melody is located on the third string, in other words there are always two higher strings available for index and middle finger picking, it means that the melody is played exclusively by the thumb. The final measure contains the thumb + pinch rhythmic figures; the second thumb note is just the bass note (the fifth of G chord).

Example 3
Boil Them Cabbage Down
 in "FMB roll" only

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The image shows two systems of musical notation for 'Boil Them Cabbage Down'. Each system includes a treble clef staff with a melody of eighth notes in G major (one sharp). Below the staff is a guitar tablature for the first two strings (G and D). The tablature uses fret numbers (0, 2, 4, 5) and fingerings (T for thumb, I for index, M for middle) to indicate the 'FMB roll' technique. Chords G, C, and D are marked above the strings. The first system covers 12 measures, and the second system covers 8 measures.

Boil Them Cabbage Down – up the neck

Let's find the melody in the up the neck area while staying in the same key of G and in the same harmony of G, C, and D major chords. One option is to stay on the same (third) string and to shift the melody by twelve frets up as shown in Example 4.

Example 4
Boil Them Cabbage Down in G
 melody up the neck on 3rd string

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The image shows two systems of guitar tablature for 'Boil Them Cabbage Down' in G major, focusing on the melody on the 3rd string. The first system shows four measures: G4, G16, G16, G16, G16, G17, G17, G16, G16, G16, G16, G14, G14. The second system shows four measures: G16, G16, G16, G16, G17, G17, G17, G17, G16, G16, G14, G14, G12. Vertical lines indicate the fret positions for each note.

Example 5 shows how this up-the-neck melody is put into the FMB roll with 2+3+3 syncopation. Let me stress again that it is just for practice purposes; in reality one should vary the rolls to avoid monotony and to find the appropriate syncopation of the melody notes. As the melody is played by thumb only, you can use other thumb-lead rolls shown in my June 2010 article here on Banjo Sessions. So – in order to fit the G, C, and

D chords in their respective places, also the notes on the 2nd string will be fretted (twelve frets up versus the Example 3), while the 1st g string will stay unfretted to mimic the short g string of 5-string banjo.

Example 5
Boil Them Cabbage Down
up the neck in "FMB roll"

Tab by Mirek Patek
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The image shows two systems of musical notation for a piece in G major, 4/4 time. Each system consists of a treble clef staff with a melody of eighth notes and a guitar staff with fret numbers and a 'T I T I M T I M' roll pattern below it. The first system has four measures with chords G, C, G, and D. The second system has five measures with chords G, C, G, D, and G.

Thirds on D-G and G-d strings

Looking at the fretted strings in the Example 5, you can see and hear that we have just harmonized the melody with the upper interval of third (or fourth in case of D chord). The Example 6 should help you to find them; it is the overview of available thirds in the key of G, as well as the available thirds and fourths for G, C, and D major chords – on all strings except the 1st one, which will be played open to emulate the 5-string sound. Generally I would recommend you to read a bit of music theory in order to understand what the thirds are, why they are major and minor, and why the chord notes are sometimes harmonized by third and sometimes by fourth. Or you can use your ear as well.

Note that some thirds can be played both on the G-d and D-G pairs of strings. Compare their positions and their shapes (hint: on the middle pair of strings they are always stretched by two frets more than on the bottom pair of strings). Practice them separately (e.g. only the doublestops on G-d strings) and incorporate them into the rolls shown in my June 2010 article.

Example 6
Thirds in the key of G major
(high g string reserved for drone)

Tab by Mirek Patek
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Compare the doublestops on G-d versus D-G strings

Thirds (fourths) in G major chord ...in C major chord

...and in D major chord

Boil Them Cabbage Down – another up the neck version

While in the Example 5 the harmony of third (or fourth) belonging to the G major scale and actually containing the chord notes of particular chord (G, C, or D major chord) was located **above** the melody, the following examples show the situation when the respective harmony of third (or fourth) is **below** the melody. First we need to move the melody from the third string (as in Example 4) to the second string – see the Example 7.

Example 7
Boil Them Cabbage Down in G
 melody up the neck on 2nd string

Tab by Mirek Patek
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As the second step the melody will be incorporated into the roll with the same 2+3+3 syncopation as before. But contrary to the previous examples, now we do not have two higher strings for index and middle finger available – there is just one (1st g string) for the middle finger, so the melody will be played primarily by index finger. The exception is when the melody is surrounded by the notes on the 1st string, which would call for the middle-index-middle (MIM) sequence of picking hand. This is difficult in higher tempos for me so in these cases I play the melody with my thumb which drops from its usual position on the 3rd string to the 2nd string – the result is middle-thumb-middle (MTM) sequence.

Example 8
Boil Them Cabbage Down
 up the neck on the 2nd string, in the roll

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You can see that while the very first note is picked by thumb, the first notes of following five measures are picked by index finger – because thumb picked the previous note. However, the third note in these measures is picked by thumb to avoid the MIM sequence. Finally, the sixth note in these measures is picked again by index finger. It means that the melody located on the second string is played alternatively by index, thumb, and index finger. I know it is weird at the beginning. But actually, this sequence of the picking hand fingers (**IMTM**

TIMT) is the one which is played by 5-string banjo players when they pick *their* FMB roll, as they have their g string on thumb side. If they are able to learn this pattern, why shouldn't you.

As in case of Example 5, try another rolls – one example may be **TMTIMTIM** roll syncopating the melody on the 2nd string in 3+3+2 (look at Example 8 and imagine that the eight-note roll starts at the third note). For some backward rolls look again to my June 2010 article on Banjo Sessions. The final two measures use different rolls – they are taken note for note from the Tony Trischka's version in his book *The Complete 5-string Banjo Player* (Oak Publications 2007, page 69) for the demonstration of artistic approach not fixated to the particular roll pattern but striving for best sounding chain of notes. Speaking about Tony Trischka, he presents in his workshops the other intervals suitable for the harmonization – the sixths. So, let's explore them too.

Sixths on D-G and G-d strings

Similarly to Example 6, the following Example 9 is the overview of available sixths in the key of G, as well as the available sixths and fifths for G, C, and D major chords – on all strings except the 1st one, which will be played open. Note that in case of the D chord, there is also the sixth with the lower note C which is part of D7 chord (frets 5-7 and 17-19 on G-d strings). Practice various chains of sixths on one pair of strings – going stepwise up, down, or skipping some of them in regular pattern. And compare the Examples 6 and 9 to see that the sixth and third intervals are their own inversions – if you transfer the bottom note one octave up to higher string (or the upper note one octave down to lower string) the interval inverts to the other one. In DGdg tuning the shapes of corresponding third and sixth remain the same, they are just inverted – compare e.g. the third on frets 5-4 of D-G strings with the sixth on frets 4-5 of G-d strings (and again with the third on frets 5-4 of d-g strings if you fret the 1st string too).

Example 9
Sixths in the key of G major
(high g string reserved for drone)

Tab by Mirek Patek
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Compare the doublestops on G-d versus D-G strings

Sixths (fifths) in G major chord ... in C major chord

...and in D7 chord

Boil Them Cabbage Down – up the neck version in sixths

Starting from the Example 7 with the melody on the 2nd d string, let's find the matching sixths **below** that melody (for the given chord) on the G-d strings from the pool shown in Example 9. And let's incorporate them into some roll – you can use the same roll as in Example 8 (or some other), but here will be shown the backward roll with 2+3+3 syncopation of the melody (except the final two measures). Note that in the last but one measure the doublestop of D7 chord (frets 5-7 on G-d strings) comes already before the middle of the measure – you may try to retain the doublestop of G chord (frets 7-9) in that moment instead and switch to 5-7 at the very end of the measure only; compare the different syncopation of the melody.

Example 10
Boil Them Cabbage Down
 harmonized in sixths, in the backward roll

Tab by Mirek Patek
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The image displays two systems of musical notation for 'Boil Them Cabbage Down'. Each system consists of a melody line in treble clef and a guitar tablature below it. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The first system contains four measures with chords G, C, G, and D7. The second system contains five measures with chords G, C, G, D7, and G. The tablature includes fret numbers (0, 7, 9, 10) and a backward roll pattern indicated by 'I T I T M I T M' under the strings. The melody line shows eighth and quarter notes with stems pointing down.

Boil Them Cabbage Down – another up the neck version in sixths

Returning to the melody on the 3rd string (see Example 4) and using the sixths and fifths **above** the melody (from the pool shown in Example 9) the result is the final Example 11. For the most part there is used the forward roll with 3+3+2 syncopation of the melody. Feel free to use another thumb lead rolls. The last two measures are again different, with the barre by the index finger at the 12th fret in the very last measure.

Example 11
Boil Them Cabbage Down
 harmonized with upper sixths, in the forward roll

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The musical score consists of two systems. Each system has a melody line in treble clef and a guitar tab below it. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The melody is a simple eighth-note pattern. The guitar tab shows fret numbers (0, 16, 17) and picking patterns (T, I, M, T, I, M, T, I) for the forward roll technique. The piece is divided into two systems, each with four measures. Chords G, C, and D are indicated above the tab.

Next steps

I have presented in this article four different up-the-neck versions (third above the melody – Example 5, third below the melody – Example 8, sixth below the melody – Example 10, and sixth above the melody – Example 11) of one tune in one key of G major. Obviously, the goal is to use this approach in other tunes (learn the fretboard) and later also in other keys – especially C major with the C, F, and G chords as the high g note on open 1st string fits both C and G chords and it is OK with F chord too. For the keys of A major or D major I would place the capo on the 2nd fret.

Enjoy!

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 fingerpicks on his 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. More info at www.mirekpatek.com

Mirek Patek proudly plays the Czech made tenor banjos [Janish](#) (boosted by [Prucha](#) 5-string bridge with 4 notches in Crowe spacing) and [Capek](#) .

