

GT155

Country Essentials 2

Banjo Rolls & Open Strings

This month Dario Cortese takes us in to the world of open strings and banjo rolls.

Welcome back to the second appointment with Country Essentials. Last month we've seen how a country guitarist can be influenced by an animal (chicken – chicken picking); this month we'll see how country guitarists can also be influenced by humans, in particular other players like banjoists.

Banjo is an instrument with 4 or, more common, 5 strings played with fingerstyle technique using steel thumb-pick and two finger-picks (index and middle). This particular picking hand approach let the players execute incredibly fast arpeggios across the strings with accurate timing and tone.

If you're new to the banjo just listen to players like Earls Scruggs or Bela Fleck. Their technique and ideas are just incredible.

During the many years of country music history, guitar players have found a way to incorporate the same approach and in some way 'emulate' the sound of a banjo. This technique is usually executed in a few different ways:

- Cross-Picking: this is how the bluegrass players would play a banjo roll using a flat pick only.
- Hybrid: this is probably the most common one: pick + middle + ring fingers.
- Fingerstyle: this is usually the favorite approach for solo guitar pieces (Chet Atkins, Doyle Dykes, etc). Consists in thumb-pick + fingers

Due of the speed of banjo rolls we'll be focusing only on the last two approaches.

What exactly is a banjo roll?

Well, firstly just listen to the first example on the CD and you should have a clear idea of the sound. Secondly, in theory means play one note per string across

three adjacent strings. Of course it can be more than three strings but it's not very common in country music (it's common in fusion – Brett Garsed uses 4 strings rolls). The roll can be either ascending or descending and usually it's a small repetitive melodic cell (ex 2 and 3).

So at the beginning, guitarists applied the banjo roll idea on the guitar with just minimum variations from the actual 'banjo-rolls'. We had to wait till players like Chet Atkins expanded the idea on scales and licks. In fact a very common approach nowadays is to play scales (major, minor, blues, etc) using banjo rolls and open strings whenever is possible. In the examples you'll find quite a few common scale played in a very uncommon way. There are thousands of scales with open strings and it would be impossible to fit them all in. The best approach would probably be to 'steal' some of the ideas presented in the next couple of pages and experiment moving things around.

There seems to be a difference between the new country school and the old traditional one when playing scales with banjo rolls. The new cats hardly let the strings ring altogether while and more traditional players would let everything ring out. There is no right or wrong, it's just up to you and your taste. It would be a good idea to be able to execute both and choose either one depending on the song.

In the last 20 years the banjo roll ideas has still been expanded further. Brad Paisley has been an innovative player for many different aspects one of which is the use of open strings. Brad seems to combine very often a shape of a scale or a chord with open strings. The exiting thing is that the open strings are not always the most 'obvious' notes for the chord he's playing over and this create a strong tension (open strings) and resolution (note from the scale pattern or chord shape) which was very unusual before he came out.

Ex 1: This is the most typical banjo roll. This example is in E and features the note from the chord (R-3-5) plus the b5 as approaching note. Use pick (or thumb-pick) on the G and D strings and play all the rest 'rolling' the fingers.

♩ = 120 - 160

E

T
A
B

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Ex 2: This example shows how guitarists have incorporate the banjo roll idea. The example is in the style of Chet Atkins and Albert Lee and it's built around the tritone (3 – b7) of each chord. The pick takes care of the G string while the fingers play the top two strings

♩ = 120 - 160

E⁷

A⁷

T
A
B

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Ex 3: A variation of the previous example featuring 'reverse rolls'. This is in the style of Albert Lee and Steve Trovato.

♩ = 120 - 160

E⁷

A⁷

T
A
B

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Ex 4: If you tried to play the previous example you might have found the need of a technique exercise to get the fingers going. This example is the perfect exercise for both ascending and descending (reverse) rolls. Make sure you follow the fingerings for the picking hand carefully.

♩ = 120 - 160

E

m m r m m r m m r m m r m m r m m r m m r m m r m

T
A
B

0 2 2 2 1 2 1 0 1 0 0 0 0 1 0 1 2 1 2 2 2

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Ex 5: Example 5 A shows a very common shape for the G Major scale. In Example 5 B you'll see how the scale has been transformed from a country player point of view. The rule is, always use an open string if available. Please note that the result is that all notes are picked.

♩ = 120

T
A
B

3 5 2 3 5 2 4 5 2 4 5 3 5 2 3 2 5 3 5 4 2 5 4 2 5 3 2 5 3

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♩ = 120

T
A
B

3 0 7 3 0 7 4 0 7 0 5 3 0 7 3 7 0 3 5 0 7 0 4 7 0 3 7 0 3

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Ex 6: This is the A Major scale in one of the many positions available with open strings. This one features legato technique and it's very common especially on acoustic instruments.

♩ = 120

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Ex 7: This is the C major scale in one of the many positions available. The best approach would be to analyze how these last three examples have been created and apply the same idea to other scales and keys.

♩ = 120

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Ex 8a: So far we've seen major scales but in country music the most common scale would be the Mixolydian mode. This example shows the A Mixolydian scale in one of the positions available. Most of the notes are picked.

♩ = 120

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Ex 8b: This example shows again the A Mixolydian scale in another position available. This one features legato techniques so it should sound a bit smoother.

♩ = 120

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Ex 9: This example shows the A Blues scale using open strings. As you can see this is a very unusual fingering for such a common scale. The result is that the scale sounds a bit different and leads into different ideas and approaches.

♩ = 120

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Ex 10: This is a lick which combines the blues scale with the Mixolydian scale previously seen. This example is in the style of Brent Mason.

♩ = 120

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Ex 11: This lick is in the key of E and combines the banjo rolls (picked) with legato lines. Again this is a result from the combination of Blues and Mixolydian scales.

♩ = 120
E

T
A
B

0 3 4 7 4 0 7 4 0 6 7 6 7 8 9 0

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Ex 12: This is a very traditional lick in the key of G. The lick combines legato with banjo roll.

♩ = 120
G

T
A
B

10 12 10 11 12 12 7 8 0 8 9 0

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Ex 13: A bit of chicken picking in combination with the banjo roll. This is a very common ending lick for banjo.

♩ = 120
C

T
A
B

8 5 3 5 3 4 0 1 2 0 1

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Ex 14: A lick in the key of D featuring rolls and legato. This is again in the style of Brent Mason.

♩ = 140

D

T
A
B

5 7 0 3 5 0 2 3 4 0 3 2 0 0 2 0 0

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Ex 15: This is a lick in the key of E which combines again legato and open strings.

♩ = 140

E

T
A
B

9 7 8 7 0 7 6 0 5 6 7 0 2 1 0 3 2

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Ex 16: This lick shows the Brad Paisley approach. Can you recognize the G minor pentatonic shape? Brad often thinks in this way, combining a very common shape or chord with the open strings.

♩ = 160

G

T
A
B

3 0 6 0 3 0 5 0 3 0 5 0 3 0 5 0 3 0 6 0 3

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Ex 17: This example is again in the style of Brad Paisley and shows how his approach can become quite complicated. These kinds of lick sounds awful when played at slow tempo so don't worry if it sounds all 'wrong' when you're studying it. It'll sound better when speed up.

♩ = 160

C

T 8 0 10 8 9 10 0 4 3 0 5 6 7 7 4 0 4 0 4 3 0 1 2 3

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TONE SETTINGS

Any guitar with single coil and clean valve amp will get you close to the typical country twang but if you're serious about this music you need to get a Telecaster and a Fender Deluxe Reverb (22 Watts) amp.

You might also want to get a compressor (Keeley, Dynacomp MXR, Boss CS-2 Japan) and some kind of echo (Boss DD-2, Analog Aqua Puss, Line6 DL-4). To record the examples for GT I've used a 69' Tele into the Pod XT.