

Bluegrass Rhythm Guitar

Bluegrass music seems to be taking an upswing in mainstream popularity recently (Thanks in no small part, I am sure, to wider audiences introduced to the style by the likes of Ricky Skaggs, Alison Krauss and Union Station, and Del McCorry); so the time is right to examine the subtle and critically important role of the acoustic guitar in a typical bluegrass rhythm section while bluegrass rhythm guitar is relatively narrow in stylistic scope, it can be quite rewarding when a band is really in sync (laying down a solid rhythm part is very satisfying on a visceral level when things are cooking), and even though the general stylistic parameters are, for the most part, clearly defined, seemingly, endless variations spawn from the most common basic patterns creating exciting, spontaneous opportunities for individual expression. Armed with a brief overview of the style, a bag full of valuable tricks, and a little practice with "Lonesome Road Blues," "all the Good Times are Past and Gone," and "Soldier's Joy," you should feel quite comfortable jumping into the bluegrass fracas.

The antecedents to what we commonly call bluegrass rhythm guitar were firmly established way back in the 1920s by early string band pioneers such as Riley Puckett (guitarist with Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers) and b country acts such as the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers. These early examples were nothing radical: they were

simply an alternating bass style with the bass runs that made common sense walking up and down into chord changes. The biggest step in the evolution toward a true bluegrass rhythm guitar style took place in the Bill Monroe band of the mid 1940s with Lester Flatt on the guitar. Monroe trimmed the fat out of the rhythm section, creating a sleep, stream-lined approach capable of supporting tremendous velocity with relative ease. With the acoustic bass providing the harmonic foundation and mandolin (or some other instrument such as banjo or fiddle taking its place) providing the back beat on the "ands" between the bass notes, the essential rhythmic fabric of the bluegrass band was established (this was a wide departure from the traditional string-band instrumentation where the acoustic bass was absent and the acoustic guitar did the job of supporting the entire band). The fifth-gear quality of a good bluegrass rhythm section which achieves this fluid drive with the little internal resistance or friction is enhanced by the acoustic guitar which is free, since it no longer has to support the band from the bottom up, to augment the basic sound with runs, phrases, and chords with create flow and motion and which fill in the mid-range portion of the spectrum between the bass and the high-pitched mandolin.

A whole lot of bluegrass guitar is played out of the G major position where G is the I chord, C is the IV chord, and D is the V chord, and when playing A major, Bb major, B major, and C major (some of the most common keys in the bluegrass style) is necessary, a capo is

used so the open, ringing strings and easy runs of the G major position can be employed. The basic Bass-strum lick on a G major chord is a good place to start. I should say before we get going that this entire article is written with the use of a flat pick in mind. Lester Flatt actually used a thumb pick and a metal finger pick on his index finger, but this technique has never been widely implemented. You can do with a flat pick almost everything Flatt did, and you can do a bunch that he could not do with his set up. The rudimentary bass-strum, boom-chuck lick in 2/4 is the backbone of this style (example 1).

From this you can start to fill the sound up (when it is needed) by adding some up strokes (examples 2, 3, 4).

When the tempo gets pretty quick (as in =132 or so), the strum part of the basic bass-strum pattern needs to be an up stroke (example 5); this takes excess stress off the backbeat and keeps the groove from getting bogged down as if you were trying to go too fast in a lower gear.

This little trick is not widely known, even in experienced bluegrass circles (I learned it from Benny Martin, the great Bluegrass fiddler who worked with both Bill Monroe and the Bluegrass boys and Flatt and Scruggs and The Foggy Mountain Boys), but when you hear the difference that it makes, all of a sudden you will say, "Wow! That's why Flatt and Scruggs sounded the way they did." Which of these various picking patterns to use at any given

time depends on factors such as tempo and the subjective feel you are trying to create. Experience dictates which direction to go.

Generally, the dynamics of the bluegrass rhythm guitar call for the heavy down beats on the bass notes and softer strums on the back beats (the opposite of swing styles) with accentuated runs and punches at the end of vocal phrases and at cadences to punctuate a song's structure. Also, standard variations on the basic root-fifth type of alternating bass establish two-measure phrases which create a nice flowing quality on top of the acoustic bass (example 6, 6, and 8). Notice also the hammer-ons into the low G note.

Walk ups and walk downs into chord changes are quite common (examples 9-21). Obviously, many other chord changes happen on a regular basis, but in the interest of space, I have limited these examples to G to C, C to D, G to D, D to G, and C to G.

Another primary tool for a bluegrass guitarist is the "G run" which, in one incarnation or another, is all pervasive. Lester Flatt is probably the man who originally developed the G run, but it quickly morphed into a myriad of variations (examples 22-25).

G run create accents both in the middle of longer vocal phrases and at the end of lines and can be extremely effective when used appropriately. Overuse of the G run is possible, but all you need to do is listen to a few good records to get a feel for its tasteful use. In

addition to Flatt, check out recordings of Jimmy Martin, Clarence White, or Tony Rice, just to name a few of the best.

I should say a word or two about the most common gear found in the typical bluegrass guitarist's hands. The C. F. Martin D 28 rosewood dreadnaught has always been and probably always will be the first choice bluegrass guitar; its rich, robust bass and dark, thick timbre and ideally suited for the role which the guitar plays in a bluegrass band (I wonder how much of the style actually developed around the sound of the D 28 as opposed to finding the right guitar for the style).

Obviously, other guitars can work well (I currently use a 1950 Martin D 18 with a particularly strong bass for a mahogany guitar), but a firm, punchy bass and a big box are really necessary in order to play honest-to-goodness bluegrass. Most folks use phosphor bronze or bronze strings and heavy picks.

"Lonesome Road Blues" gives us an opportunity to practice some of the most common bluegrass rhythm guitar techniques in the context of a medium to medium-fast (=126 or so) song with typical bluegrass chord changes (example 26) for the sake of clarity, this and the next two examples employ pretty basic picking patterns, but once you have these solid, implement as many of the variations as you can in order to find out what works and what does not in a given situation.

Although not as common as 2/4, 3/4 songs and instrumentals come up often; so, "All the Good Times Have Passed and Gone" (example 27) gives us a good opportunity to work out on an up-tempo number (=160). As you figure this one out, you will see that the 2/4 licks from the previous examples must be altered in the subtle ways in order to fit the 3/4 groove that are not necessarily automatic. The licks look similar on the page but actually feel quite different when you play them.

Finally, I have included the fiddle tune "Soldier's Joy" (example 28) in the key of D Major. Fiddle tunes make up a significant percentage of most bluegrass musicians' repertory, and D is probably the most common fiddle key. D major is also a common key for some vocalists, and the runs in D major connecting the I (D), the IV (G), and the V (A) are a little different from these in G major.

Developing the proper rhythmic sense and pulse only comes with experience, but hopefully these examples will give you a pretty solid basic vocabulary so you can go straight to the more subtle and rewarding dimensions of bluegrass rhythm.