

Texas-Style Rhythm Guitar

Over the past few decades Texas contest-style fiddling has made inroads into most regions of North America, and wherever it goes, so goes its partner, Texas-style rhythm guitar, which, in its role as accompaniment for the highly evolved fiddle style, has developed in its own right into a sophisticated subgenre of folk guitar. An interesting situation exists in which fiddlers and guitarists, each having a life of their own, so to speak, work together in a symbiotic relationship where the head and backup blend into a complete, unified texture of melody, harmony, and rhythm. As one might expect, in addition to its special purpose in fiddle music, Texas-style rhythm guitar, in one form or another, has wide-ranging application in a myriad of divergent styles.

The music of Texan Bob Wills has left an enormous impact on country music in general, and in his home state, old-timey fiddling, following the lead of pioneers like Eck Robertson and Benny Thomasson, quickly absorbed the jazzy influences in western swing with its emphasis on intricate, hot lead lines and swing rhythm. The guitarists accompanying these fiddlers, using, as far as I can tell, the early swing greats such as Wills guitarist and arranger Eldon Shamblin for inspiration, soon developed as country swing style employing walking bass lines and passing chords. Shamblin forged a new approach which combined the sophisticated harmonic and melodic structure of jazz legend Charlie

Christian with the country sensibilities necessary to back an old-time musician like Wills. This sound, with varying degrees of commitment to jazz, has become the basis for contest-style rhythm.

One of the more difficult requirements in Texas-style rhythm is deciding exactly which chords work and which do not. Many times the common substitutions can cause quite a bit of dissonance, but this usually works out fine because the fiddle and the guitar are going to the same end even if they take different paths while getting there. Indiscriminate alterations to the basic progression, though, result in boring patterns which obscure the individuality of a given melody. Learning how to approach each tune in all its stylistic subtlety can only be achieved through experience.

"Sally Goodin", the quintessential contest fiddle tune, serves as an excellent place to start our investigation; the moves here are fundamental to the style and can be employed to great effect in hundreds of tunes. We will work there in A major, the most common key for "Sally Goodin", but these same bass lines and chord substitutions can be transposed easily to any key. The melody below is almost as basic as possible, and the accompanying chord progression demonstrates the essential, unadorned harmonic rhythm with V7 (dominant) to I (tonic) cadences being the only movement that is absolutely required on the part of the rhythm section (as a matter of fact, this is precisely the way most any bluegrass or old-timey version would go).

To this most basic version we shall add the subdominant (IV) in measures two and five of both of the tune's parts.

The resulting progression serves as the foundation on which we shall build two standard chord sequences, one starting with an ascending bass line and the other descending. By connecting the fundamental changes in example two with passing chords and inversions and b extending the length of the V7, we are able to construct an interesting bass line which creates momentum and direction; a good bass line should have melodic integrity in itself.

While a strong bass line and solid passing chords can do much propel the music, more important is generating the right kind of groove, and this depends on good timing and proper articulation. The lowest note on each chord form should be plucked by itself on the downbeat (the one and two of each measure) and should, for the most part, remain ringing until the strum of the full chord on the backbeat (the "ands" in between the downbeats), which should be staccato with the pick moving as quickly through the strings as possible (all strokes are down).

Jamming with musicians who already have a feel for this groove is the best way to develop it yourself, but practicing alone with a metronome should definitely play a large role in your learning. Anything which fits, however remotely, into the swing category should be practiced with the metronome on the

backbeat; so the clicks are in between one and two and so on (see example four). When you really get locked in, you will more than likely drown out the clicks with your strum. Start at whatever tempo is slow enough for you to play these sequences perfectly, all the way through without stopping. From here you can gradually increase the beats per minute until you are comfortable at the required speeds (about 96 to 120 is common in Texas-style hoedowns).

These passing chords and moving bass lines have a number of uses outside the straight-ahead contest style; so experiment and see what works well in whatever context they may seem appropriate.

Discography

Following are a few albums which should be fairly easy to purchase and which demonstrate pure Texas-style fiddling and accompaniment (in addition to the normal six-string guitar, you will hear tenor guitar and piano playing in this same fashion).

Benny Thomasson: fiddling from the Big State, Country 724.

Texas Hoedown, Country 703.

Texas Fiddle Favorites, Country 707.