Conversational Bluegrass Banjo

By Ritchie Mintz

Speak Fluent 5-String And Pick Like A Pro

Complete Instruction Guide Includes CD
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Conversational Bluegrass Banjo

Introduction

This book is exactly how I’ve taught hundreds of people to play the banjo since the mid-1960’s when I was 15 years old. I have spent countless hours writing out rolls and chords on yellow pads for three generations of banjo enthusiasts. Now through the miracle of digital technology, those yellow pads are this book. It’s like taking private lessons with me for a year!

The 5-string banjo is a deeply mysterious instrument that only makes sense when you enter into its own ironic world. It is the only instrument I have ever come across that has the highest string right next to the lowest string. Think about that. That’s why the banjo only sounds right when it is played like a banjo. Gather ‘round, because that is exactly what you will learn here.

This book is like nothing I’ve ever seen before. There is no music to read, not even tablature. It teaches by the Right Hand Rolls, which are the words, sentences and paragraphs that we call songs. In this book, you will learn the vocabulary of this language so that you can “speak” Conversational Bluegrass Banjo. Also included is an instructional CD where you can hear me playing the techniques and songs of this book.

My life’s vital mission is to leave behind a record of how I play so that anyone interested can do it too. Music is magic. But behind all magic is a trick. This book contains my best tricks. These tricks are the training wheels of playing Bluegrass Banjo. Learn them and you will be able to ride on your own. Then, the sky’s the limit.

Whether onstage, in a backyard jam or around a campfire, everyone loves good banjo playing. It is a happy instrument that some people say is what makes bluegrass music sound bluegrassy. Whether you are a rank beginner or an accomplished musician looking to expand into other instruments, this book is for you.

**Web Special !!!** As a public service and as my contribution to good banjo playing in the world, I freely offer you pages 9-14 of *Conversational Bluegrass Banjo*, the chapters on The Right Hand Rules and The Left Hand, Melody and Fraction Notation. This will give you an idea as to the framework of playing 5-string banjo and what it is like to follow along in the book (plus your first Right Hand Roll for free!). It also has some tips and tricks that are valuable on any instrument.

*Ritchie Mintz*
Right Hand Rules of 3-Finger Banjo Picking

First Rule: The banjo is not a 5-string guitar

Rolls – The Keys to the Kingdom
Right-hand guitar techniques do not translate to the 5-string banjo. On the guitar, the thumb keeps the beat by playing rocking bass. This means that the right thumb strikes the bass strings on the downbeat and the offbeat while the index and middle fingers (or even the ring finger and pinky) play the melody notes.

But, notice that on the 5-string banjo, the highest string (# 5) is right next to the lowest string (# 4). On the banjo, if you attempt to “keep rhythm” with a rocking-bass thumb, you will be constantly alternating between extremely high notes and extremely low notes. This does not work and it is not banjo picking. If you want to play the banjo like a banjo, you must learn the rolls.

Note Groupings
For the most part, there are eight notes to a banjo-picking roll. To make these eight-note rolls easier to learn and play, I divide them into three note grouping categories. If you were just listening to someone playing these different patterns in a song, you would not be able to tell them apart unless you knew what you were listening to. Playing the rolls trains the ears.

The three note grouping categories are mostly a learning tool that makes the banjo-picking rolls sound less like a shower of notes, less of a mystery to the ear and easier to learn. Each of the rolls you will learn will be in one of these three note grouping categories:

3,3,2 – This means that the eight notes are distributed as three notes, three more notes and then two notes. Written as a generic roll, this would look like: XXX, XXX, XX.

4,4 – This means that the eight notes are distributed as four notes and then four more notes. Written as a generic roll, this would look like: XXXX, XXXX.

2,3,3 – This means that the eight notes are distributed as two notes, three notes and then three more notes. Written as a generic roll, this would look like: XX, XXX, XXX.
Domain of the Right Hand
Scruggs-style banjo rolls are played with the first three fingers of the right hand. Each finger is allowed to play only on certain strings:

- Thumb (1): The thumb is finger number 1 and plays strings # 2, 3, 4, 5
- Index (2): The index finger is finger number 2 and plays strings # 2, 3, 4
- Middle (3): The middle finger is finger number 3 and plays only string # 1

Inside Strings and Outside Strings
Strings # 2, 3 and 4 are the inside strings.
Strings # 1 and 5 are the outside strings.

Looking above at the domain of the right fingers, notice that the middle finger (3) only plays on an outside string (string # 1).

Notice also that the index finger (2) only plays the inside strings (strings # 2, 3 and 4).

The thumb (1) is the only right finger that is allowed to play both inside strings (# 2, 3, 4) and an outside string (# 5).

This is confusing. If I were to write “1”, you would know to strike a string with your thumb but you would not know whether to strike an inside string (# 2, 3 or 4) or an outside string (# 5). So, to clarify this confusion, I will always designate when the thumb (1) is supposed to play an inside string by calling its note 1-in.

When you see 1-in, that means the thumb is supposed to play its note on the 2nd, 3rd or 4th string.

When the thumb (1) is supposed to play the 5th string, I will designate that note as 1-out. When you see that the thumb is supposed to play 1-out, that means to strike your thumb on the 5th string.

2-3-2 Not Allowed
2-3-2 means index-middle-index. This is an awkward pattern that is difficult to play strongly. So, instead, we play a shift. A shift is where we substitute a thumb (1-in) for the second 2.
Thus, instead of 2-3-2, we play 2-3-1

I have noticed throughout my long years of playing and observing, that the world’s best banjo players shift. This means that they do not play 2-3-2. They substitute the thumb and play 2-3-1-in.

**Rhythm**

Tap your foot in 2/4 time. It is very important to keep time and, although it is awkward at first, tapping your foot is the best way to keep in rhythm. Tapping your foot in 2/4 time means that you are tapping your foot in half-time to the music. This is important because Bluegrass music frequently moves so fast that it is impossible to tap in 4/4 time, which is every beat.

As I write out the rolls, I will mark the note where your foot should tap with an *accent* (`). This is the *downbeat*. This is where your foot should come down. The accents help coordinate the right hand picking with the rhythm of the music.

**Bounce**

My favorite banjo players all play with *bounce*. Playing with bounce is a trick of rhythm. Although there are eight notes to a roll, each note should not get equal time value. If you were to play eight equally-timed notes to a roll, it would sound staccato and mechanical. To play with strength, spirit and character, you must divide the timing of your notes in a very special way. You must *syncopate*.

Syncopation means that some notes ring longer than others and some notes ring for a shorter period of time. The exact timing of good banjo picking is extremely complex. To properly represent this complexity on paper would involve some sophisticated music notation (as in *reading music*). But, my banjo method does *not* require the ability to read music. Instead, there is a *trick* that makes it all easy. Can you say *Chattanooga*?

**Chattanooga** -- You do not need to read dotted-64th notes to play good, bouncy, jaunty banjo rolls. All you need to do is time the notes to sound like the word *Chattanooga*. 
Notice that in the natural pronunciation of the word, the four syllables do not receive equal time value. If they did get equal value, it would sound like Chatt – a – noo – ga. But when said in a normal conversational voicing pattern, the word Chattanooga has its own lilting rhythm. Some of the syllables last longer and some last shorter.

Chattanooga -- This is how your rolls should sound. Just time the notes like you say the word Chattanooga and your rhythm will be right-on. This is the trick to playing with bounce.

Listen to the included instructional CD to hear the exact timing of this very important rule.

Roger Sprung – my banjo grand teacher
From page 13

The Left Hand, Melody and Fraction Notation

Throughout history, music has been written in “notation”. We all know notation as notes written on a staff of five lines and four spaces. Music for most instruments is written on the treble clef. For bass instruments like the bass fiddle, the music is written on the bass clef.

Personally, I never got the hang of reading music. And I’m not alone. Many people feel the same way and it stops them from playing. Then, in the 1960’s, a new way of writing music for instruments emerged. It was called *tablature*. Tablature (“TAB”, for short) was advertised as the way of “reading music without reading music”. But, for me, it was no better. It only substituted one form of music reading for another. I still found it very hard to read TAB.

I knew that if I wanted to instruct rookies to play banjo *by ear*, that I would have to concoct a way to convey music notes without reading it from lines and spaces. So, I invented *fraction notation*.

The reason I like fraction notation is that, when combined with the banjo picking rolls, it *speaks to the right hand*. This is important because both music notation and TAB *speak to the left hand*. To play from TAB, you must first interpret from the lines and spaces which string is being played and at which fret. This tells you where to place your left fingers on the fingerboard to play the note that is being indicated. To me, especially for banjo, this is backward and confusing.

So, I learned and teach banjo by *the rolls*. This makes a song into a series of modular, pre-learned, eight-note, right hand finger patterns (rolls) instead of a series of separated notes to be searched for by the left hand. The fraction notation appears below the right-hand fingers of the roll that is being picked and it tells those right fingers where to find the correct string. Once you know which string to pick, the fraction notation tells you how far to shorten that string by selecting the correct fret. By combining the right-hand rolls with the fraction notation, it gives you an easy way to “roll” your way through the melody of a song.
In fraction notation, the top number is the string to be picked and the bottom number is the fret to be played on that string.

Example: \( \frac{2}{0} \) means second string open (not fretted)

\( \frac{2}{1} \) means 2nd string, 1st fret

\( \frac{2}{3} \) means 2nd string, 3rd fret

\( \frac{3}{0} \) means 3rd string, open (not fretted)

\( \frac{3}{2} \) means 3rd string, 2nd fret

\( \frac{3}{4} \) means 3rd string, 4th fret

\( \frac{4}{0} \) means 4th string, open

\( \frac{4}{2} \) means 4th string, 2nd fret

\( \frac{4}{4} \) means 4th string, 4th fret

Let’s look at an example using the first roll that is to be taught and learned – the Incomplete Forward Roll.

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\text{out} & 2 & 3 \\
\text{out} & 1, 2 & 3 \\
\text{out} & 2 & 1, 2 \\
2 & 0 & 2 \\
2 & 0 & 2 \\
4 & 0 & 4 \\
\end{array}
\]
If you look closely and remember the Right Hand Rules (Domain), you will notice that all of the “3” notes are the middle finger (3) playing on its only allowable string, the 1\textsuperscript{st} string.

out

All of the 1 notes are the thumb (1) playing on the only outside string it is allowed to strike – the 5\textsuperscript{th} string.

This leaves only the index finger (2) to wander across the three inside strings (# 2, 3 and 4). The fraction notation in the example above tells the right hand to play these notes on the 2\textsuperscript{nd} string, open (0 = unfretted).

When you combine the rolls with fraction notation, it gives you an easy way to roll through a song and pick out the strings and frets that have the melody of the song imbedded within.

\textit{from page 55}

\textbf{Law of Modular Substitution -- Equals Plus Equals Are Equal}

I call this book \textit{Conversational Bluegrass Banjo} because the right hand rolls are like phrases and sentences of a language. When we speak and write, we string phrases and sentences together into paragraphs that tell a story. Bluegrass banjo picking is the same way.

I have said that right hand picking rolls are \textit{modules}. Imagine that you are moving from one house to another and you are loading your possessions into a pickup truck. All of your boxes are the exact same size and shape. One box is filled with dishes, another with silverware, another with clothes, another with kid toys, etc. Since all the boxes are the same size and shape, each box is a \textit{module} that takes up the \textit{same amount of space} as any other box.

Let’s say that on one trip, you decide not to take the silverware because you need to transport the clothes first. So, you unload the silverware box from the truck and, in the exact same place and space, you substitute the clothes box. Even though the new box has completely different stuff inside it from the old box, it takes up the same amount of space. You have just demonstrated the \textit{Law of Substitution}.
In exactly the same way, this is how we substitute one roll (or part of a roll) for another. In the Law of Substitution, we can remove any module we want from any space of time and insert (substitute) any other module that has the same space and time. In mathematics, this is called *Equals Plus Equals Are Equal.*

In banjo picking, we build up a *vocabulary* of musical words, phrases and sentences that are modules that we can swap and switch at will as long as each module takes up the same amount of time. When you tell a story to a friend, maybe you have noticed that you might begin a sentence without having chosen every word in advance. You might start a sentence without knowing in advance exactly which words you will be using at the end of the sentence. This leaves us a lot of latitude about how exactly we tell our story.

This is precisely how I play the banjo. Over the years, I have built up a large musical vocabulary. That is how I am able to play a song and never play it exactly the same way twice. The larger story (song) is the same each time I tell (play) it, but my words and phrases (roll modules) might be different each time. As long as I always *substitute equals for equals,* I will always be okay.

You might not have thought about it in exactly this way, but in doing this, you are already demonstrating your first flirt with the Modular Law of Substitution.

Up to this point, you only know *one way* to play the songs we have covered. **But,** let’s look at what you have learned so far and see that you already know enough musical phrases to substitute equal modules for equal modules. This will be your first *banjo conversation.*

![Bill Monroe – The Father of Bluegrass Music (1911-1996)](Image)

Photo by Steve Tanenbaum, Circa 1963
Putting It All Together

My hope here is that I have done much more than just teach a few old tunes. I hope that I have provided a framework that explains the soul of the 5-string banjo so that you can figure out stuff on your own. I hope that in the future when you see or hear someone playing the banjo, you can hear the rolls, recognize them and understand what is being played. When that happens, it will be your banjo Magic Moment.

I hope you can hear organized rolls and patterns within the music instead of just a shower of notes. I hope that by learning organized patterned rolls, your fingers will learn what flows and what leads you down blind alleys. Of course, playing music is a life-long endeavor. My most fervent wish is that you can learn on your own from here.

Practice your vocabulary and have it handy at all times. Pick your leads deliberately with snap and bounce and authority. Get good tone out of your instrument. Always be in tune. Be a good listener. Pay attention to the rhythm and play in time; don’t slow down or speed up. Honor the other lead players and the singers by blending your volume so as not to drown them out. Play the whole neck including the lower, middle and upper frets. Play tasty backup that enhances the music without taking over. Remember that the banjo is an instrument that is hard to underplay and easy to overplay. Find the sweet spot and stay in that pocket.

When you first heard and fell in love with the sound of the 5-string banjo, you probably heard what seemed like thousands of banjo notes dancing in the air, with melodies somehow imbedded within. It seemed so magical and mysterious. Where did all those notes come from? How, you wondered, did banjo players ever learn to do that? Now you know.

And now you know that the picking rolls, left hand techniques and the licks and tricks taught in this book are the language of bluegrass banjo. Learn them and you will reach a point where you no longer have to think about all that. You will be able to look ahead and just play. When that day comes, you will know that you are speaking fluent 5-string. That’s when you’re pickin’ like a pro!

And in the future, when people come up to you and ask how you got to be such a great banjo player, please tell them what you learned from this book.

See you ‘round the bend, my friend. 

- Ritchie
Included Instructional CDs
I play the music of this book on the CDs in the order it appears in the book. I play all of the rolls with their signature features. You can listen as I play the parts of each song and then the whole of each song all put together.

In each example on the CDs, I announce the name of the musical passage and the page where it is found in the book. That way, you can read in the book the progression of the musical skills you are learning and then hear them on the CDs. Each lesson, song or section is a separate cut on the CDs so you can listen to them in the order of the book as you learn and then go back to any section at a future time.

If you should ever lose the CDs, contact the Austin Pickin Ranch at our website to order or download a new one.  
www.AustinPickinRanch.com

Author

Ritchie Mintz picked up a guitar at age 8 and banjo at 12. He was teaching both by 15 and has taught hundreds of people to play. Ritchie has played in many bands in Boulder and in Austin, most notably The Towne and Country Revue. Ritchie is the author of Bluegrass Bass.

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