**4ths/5ths** by Ron Hinkle

My favorite 4th of July joke:

"He who drinks a fifth on the Fourth may not be able to go forth on the fifth" George Hunter

I am often asked by students and workshop attendees to explain the difference between the "Circle of 4ths" and the "Circle of 5ths." Short answer: *There is **no** difference!* This seems to be a great source of confusion, one which may cause a determined learner to dig deeper, but may also cause a less-determined one to give up and go on thinking that music theory is impossible to learn. I hope it causes curiosity.

Since I am actively pushing a music theory agenda (and trying to make it as learnable as possible), it is in my best interest (and the best interest of the banjo) to explain this as clearly as possible. So, here goes:

Simply put (read carefully), if you count the scale notes *up* from C to G, you have a 5th. If you count *down* from C to G, you have a 4th. By the same token, if you count *up* from C to F, you have a 4th; if you count *down* from C to F, you have a 5th. So, 4ths and 5ths are just two different ways to name the same thing. This is why I prefer to use the name "Circle of Keys!" See the illustration:
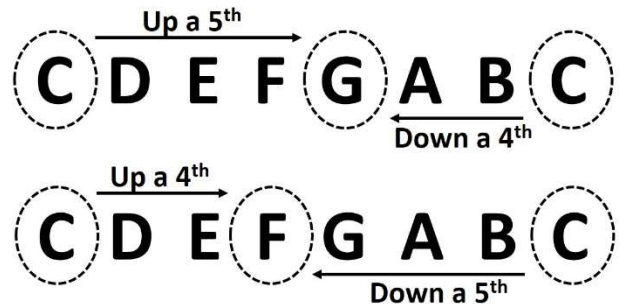

I believe I understand the true source of the confusion though. Forget the Circle for a moment: When discussing the "function" of the notes (and chords) of a scale, F functions as the IV in the key of C, and G functions as the V of the key of C. There is no *backward* counting involved! The F is the IV and the G is the V, *period!* Roman numerals (V = 5) are used to avoid confusion with all the other numbers used in music.

One of the most important concepts in music theory (and certainly in our banjo music) is the "V⁷ to I Resolution" (G⁷ to C at the end of a song in the key of C), which the circle maps out.

If you look at the circle shown here, you will notice that the G is one note to the right (or "clockwise from") of the C. Now, follow my logic here (moving counterclockwise): G⁷ is the V of C; C⁷ is the V of F; F⁷ is the V of Bb; Bb⁷ is the V of Eb; Eb⁷ is the V of Ab; Ab⁷ is the V of Db; Db⁷ is the V of Gb; F#⁷ ("enharmonic" to Gb— same note!) is the V of B; B⁷ is the V of E; E⁷ is the V of A; A⁷ is the V of D; and D⁷ is the V of G.

Because of the sheer importance of this concept, I tend to think that "Circle of 5ths" is the "best" name for this; "Circle of 4ths" just confuses the issue. The *IV* to I resolution is just not as important.
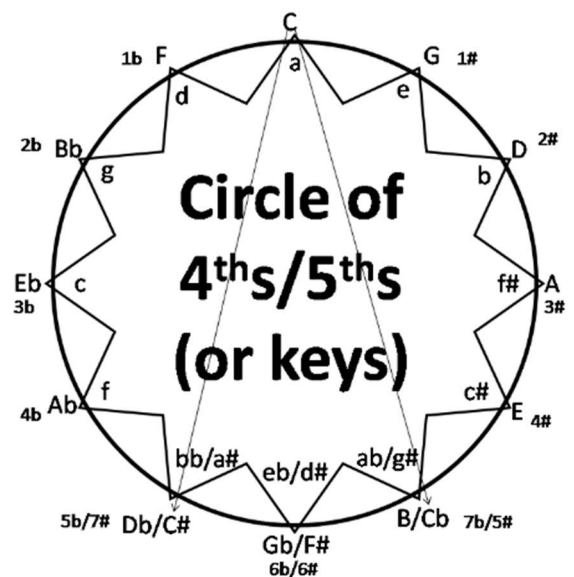
Many music theory concepts can *seem* confusing—and if you try to teach yourself, it can be even more so! Scratch the surface with a bit of research however—or have a teacher show you—and you'll find that underneath that scary exterior is *elegant, fascinating, **simplicity***. More often than not, music theory is "given a bad name" by those who don't understand it, and don't think it's worth the time to study.

This is a shame; the more you *allow yourself to learn*, the more fascinating music becomes, adding to the nerdy enjoyment of it! Also, the more you learn (and the more you become *engaged* in this glorious art form), *the better musician you become*; isn't *that* worth your time as a musician?