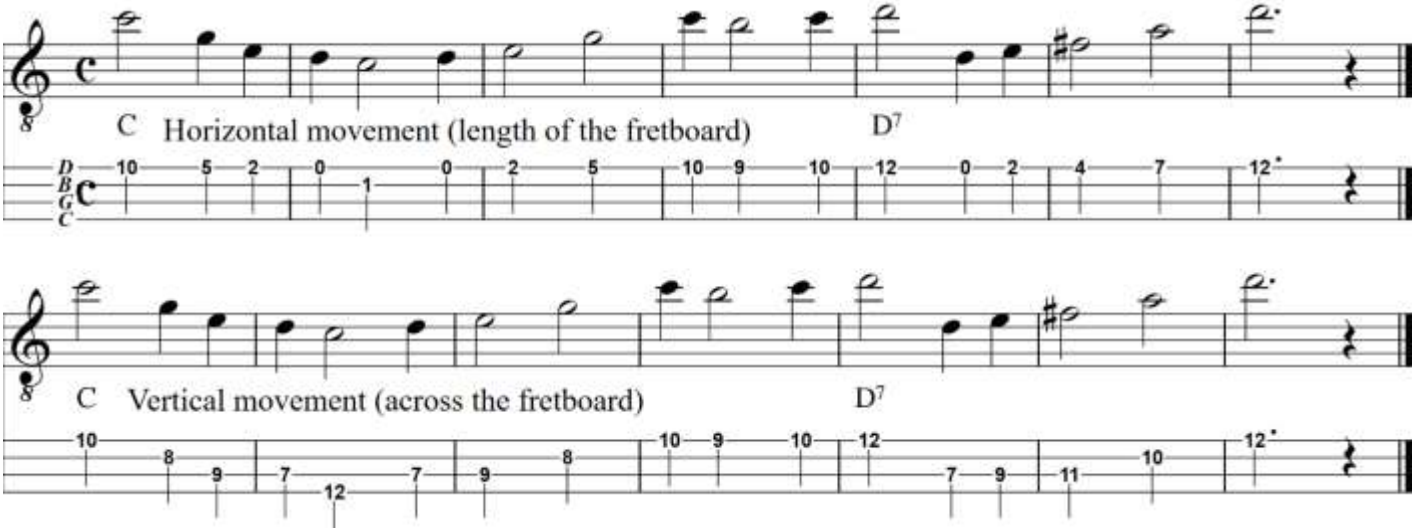
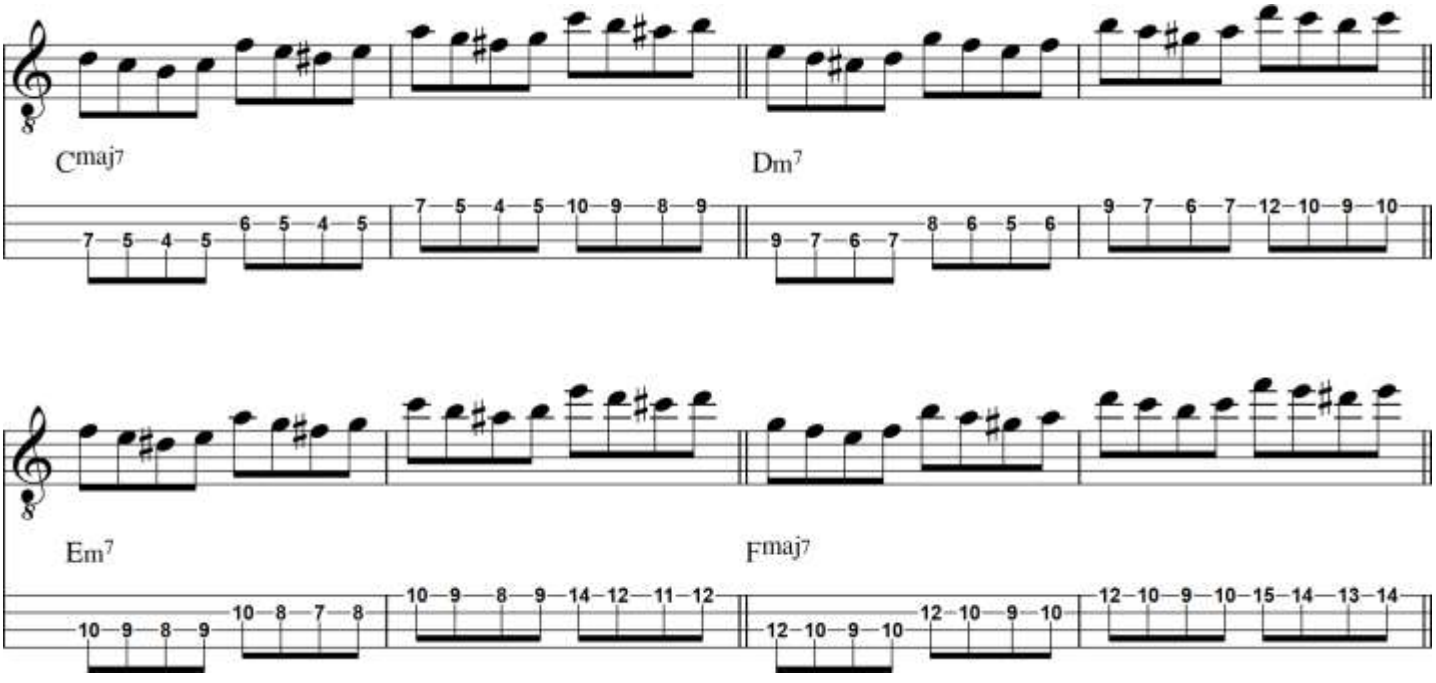
One String Exercises: by Ron Hinkle

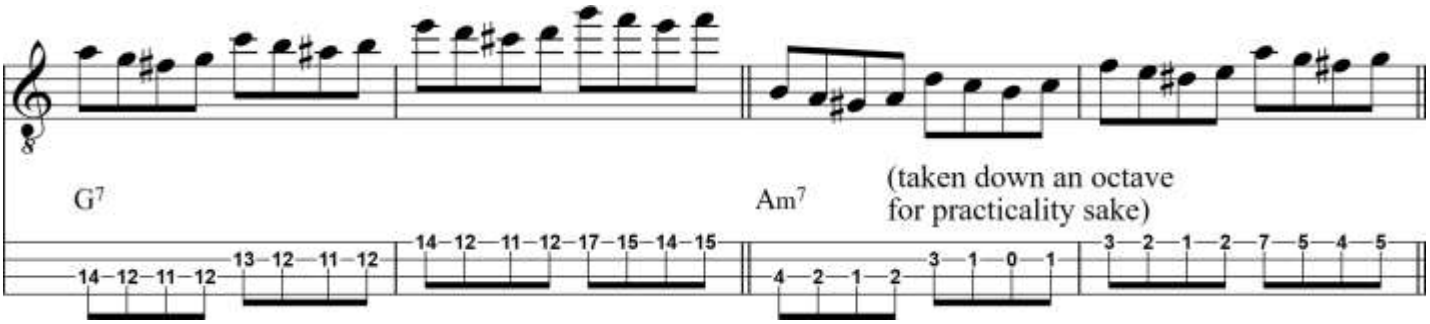
Most songs popular in the four-string banjo world cover a note range of an octave and a half at the most; some of the simpler ones cover as little as *five* notes (*When the Saints Go Marching In*, for example). Playing a single-note melody on the plectrum banjo is a difficult prospect for those trained only in Chord Melody. There are two ways you can accomplish it; play the melody notes exactly where it occurs in the chord (horizontally, as in Chord Melody), or *across* the fingerboard in a tighter, more-efficient fret range (vertically). Let me illustrate this to make it clearer, using the first 8 bars of *Four Leaf Clover* (by the way, this is also a clear illustration of the usefulness of TAB; without it, how would you know *where to play the notes?* On the plectrum banjo, there is *more than **one** place!*) Play these now:

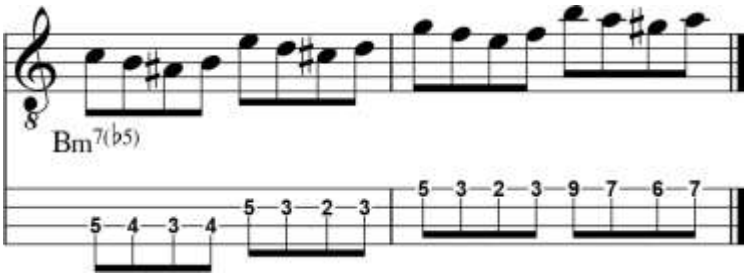


Being able to *efficiently* play single-string melody on the plectrum is a sign of how well you know your fingerboard; it should follow that knowing your fingerboard well is an important step *away* from Chord Malady dependence, and *toward* jazz improvisation! I could write out many other examples that would illustrate the concept, but that is not the subject of this lesson; this is only the "attention grabber" for it. Besides—especially if this is a new thought for you—it will be more effective for *you* if you figure it out for yourself, using this song as an example.

The actual subject of this lesson is playing exercises all on one string (horizontal movement). Let me show the exercise that I am going to use for this; this lick is based on one that Django Reinhardt used a lot (the first two bars). I have taken it a step further by adapting it to the Modal set (notice how it goes *vertically* in a chord-standardized pattern):





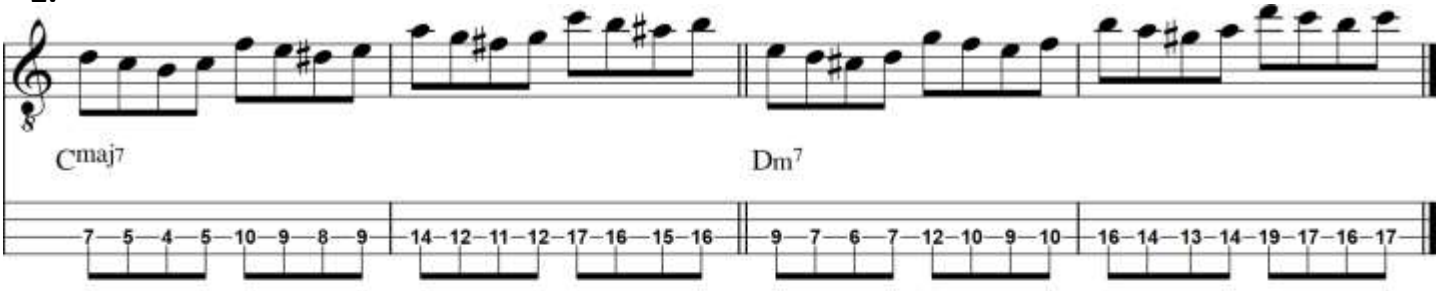
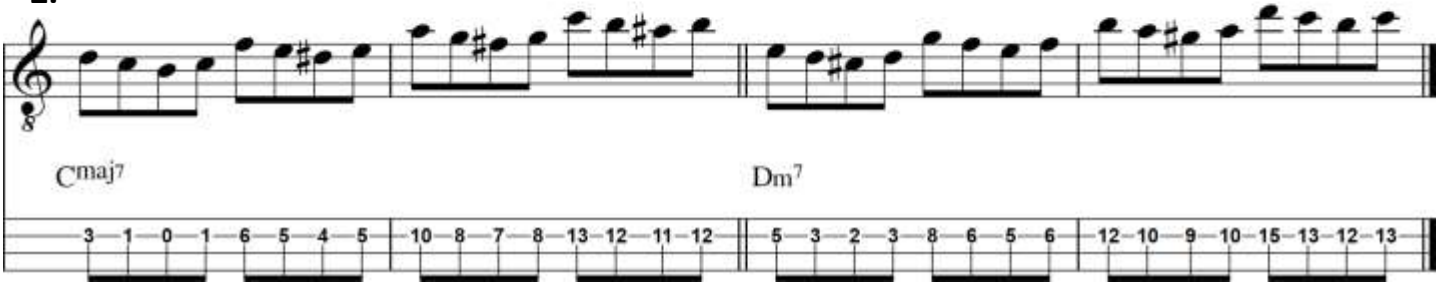


Side Note: Many single-note patterns can be easily applied to the Modes! Invent a lick, and try it. This of course multiplies its usefulness by 7 times.

Now—at long last—I get to the gist of the lesson! I have observed that the best players on any stringed instrument see their fretboard in a very different way from us mere mortals. Rather than see it in relationship to chords, they see it in relationship to the individual tones of each string. As such, they can take *any tuning* you care to give them, and quickly figure out where to play the proper notes (and how to properly shape their chords—based on the *combination of tones* they want, and not necessarily the chord *name*), *without* consulting a "chord diagram" chart.

The thought occurred to me that—*opposite* of the examples given above (vertical movement)—what if we played an exercise horizontally, *all on one string?* This would force you to truly learn the lick and each individual string; instead of having the chord shape to guide you (a good skill to have in itself), you would have to rely on your fretboard knowledge (not to mention the finger speed and accuracy required to do it). So, what the heck? *Let's try it!* The two-bar lick given above is perfect for this; here it is (only the CM7 and Dm7), all on the third string (1.), and second string (2.) (ain't TAB great?). This is all I will give you; it should be enough to get you going. See if you can figure out *the whole Modal set*, and *on the 4th and 1st strings as well*; once this is achieved, it shouldn't really matter *where* you play it. You could even play around with different vertical string *combinations* to maximize your options and set you up better for what comes next:

1.



2.