Plectrum Banjo Technique
The Importance of Scales to Music - Part 1

by Ron Hinkle

"Practice your scales!" I've often wondered how many young souls have been permanently scarred by these words, growled by a mean, taskmaster teacher with a ruler in his/her hands. Perhaps if the teacher had been more aware of just why scales are so important to music, he/she may have taken a kinder/gentler tack. Let me try the more gentle way.

Though this applies equally to *all* musical instruments, I am writing specifically about the plectrum banjo, which is considered to be primarily a *chordal* instrument. If you think only in chords though, you will never understand scales; if you don't understand *them*, you will never fully understand how music works. I first learned about scales by studying the clarinet, which of course, cannot play chords *per se*.

There are many different ways to approach this subject. The obvious ones are from a physical dexterity approach (there is no better way to exercise the fingers), or from a musical understanding approach (scales are the theory basis for all of music). In this article though, we will look at what I consider to be the most important, and most-often overlooked; the 'chord-function' approach. For brevity sake, I will limit this discussion to the key of C Major.

The chord-function approach is based on learning to hear how the individual scale notes function. What do you *hear* when you hear a Major scale, played one note at a time? If you have no *aural context*, all you'll hear is a bunch of unrelated notes wandering around aimlessly; with it, you will hear implied chords and musical direction wrapped up in each note (an important part of 'playing by ear'). So here's the aural context:

There are three basic types, or 'functions', of *chords*: *Tonic* (a C chord in the key of C), *Sub-dominant* (F), and *Dominant* (G7). The vast majority of music contains only these three chords (and variations); that's why they are the three chords the majority of us learned first (and are just about the limits of harmonic understanding most banjoists will ever develop). The same can be said for the individual notes of the scale: **C** *is the* Tonic; **D** *functions* as a Dominant note; **E** *functions* as a Tonic note; **F** *is the* Sub-dominant; **G** *is the* Dominant; **A** *functions* as a Sub-dominant; and **B** *functions* as a Dominant.

Let's look at the Tonic-function notes first: Play a C on your banjo (second string, 1st fret); *in the key of C*, this is 'home,' and is 'at rest.' This is true as long as you are *hearing* the key of C; hear another key in your head, and C is no longer home. Next, still hearing C, play an E (first string, 2nd fret); this is also Tonic-function, but not quite as restful. As long as the two notes are home together, E is comfortable. Now play the two notes *together*; *ahh*, now that's a comfortable, harmonic home! The two notes are said to be 'consonant' (*and no two notes are more so*). Together they form a Major 3rd 'harmonic interval.' Play a C and *Eb* (first string, 1st fret) together, and you have a *Minor* 3rd — the obvious starting point of Minor keys.

Now, let's look at the Dominant-function notes: All three Dominant notes (G, B, and D, in that order of importance) are 'restless,' and have a strong desire, or 'tendency,' to want to return home, or 'resolve', to C. While keeping the C in your head (hum it if you can), play a G (open third string); there is a lot of 'tension' there. The note is just *not* happy there, and strongly desires to come home (if heard in the context of a *complete* C chord—C-E-**G**—it can *seem* comfortable enough; take away the two Tonic-function notes though, and the G is left out in the rain). Play these two notes in succession (take your time): G, then C. Do it slowly several times to hear the 'resolution.' Now play a B (open second string): Because it is only a half-step away from the C, there is even more tension, or in this case 'dissonance'. It *really* wants to come home! The B is called the 'leading tone'; it *leads* to the tonic (C). Play those two notes in succession; again, play

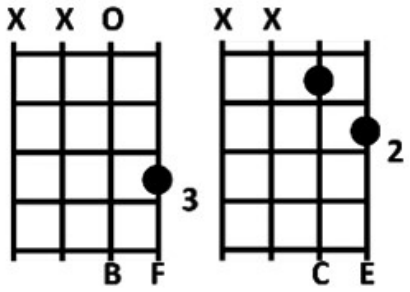
them slowly several times, listening to the resolution. Now, play a D (open first string); not quite as tense, but still you can tell it wants to resolve back to the C. (play D to C).

What happens if you play *all three* Dominant-function notes *together*? Well. . .let's try it: Play an open G chord (open third, second, and first strings played together). This may sound restful by itself (which it *would* be—*in the key of **G**!*), ***but***: remember we are in the key of ***C***, so hum the C (if you can!) while playing the G chord. That should sound *terrible* to you, with all that tension and dissonance going on. The point here is in learning to understand and appreciate the dissonance (the context) because *your ear* knows what's coming next (resolution to the Tonic, of course). Now, go ahead and resolve the G-B-D tension to the C-E combination.

The remaining two notes — F and A — are Sub-dominant notes; that means they are less restful than the Tonic notes, but not quite as tense as the Dominant notes. I like to think of the F note as a 'sub-key' (with A as its co-Tonic); they are a bit trickier than the other notes. The F naturally wants to resolve a half-step down to the E (remember, a Tonic note). The A meanwhile, wants to resolve to the G — which is of course the Dominant note — but in this case, the G can function as either Dominant, *or* Tonic (in that complete C chord mentioned above — C-E-G), depending on where it occurs in the music.

Here's where it gets interesting (in case it wasn't already): In the key of C, the F note *also* plays a very important role in the most-restless chord in music; the Dominant *seventh* chord. It is the 'seven' in the four-note Dominant-Seventh chord (spelled G-B-D-**F**)!

This leads us to the most important 'tension resolution' in all of Western music; the V7 — I. You only need two notes at a time to complete this phenomenon; B/F resolves to C/E. The B and F together form a 'Tritone'—the most *dissonant* of all intervals, and again the C and E together form the Major 3rd — the most *consonant* of all intervals. Learn to hear/recognize this 'Tritone Resolution,' and you are on your way to understanding how music works! Warning: If you *don't* hear what I'm talking about in any of this, then you've missed the point! Take it slowly until you *do* hear it.



In conclusion, let me re-emphasize the main point: Each note of the scale has a musical function; learning to hear those functions will make scale practice more obviously important and will make music more interesting to listen to and play. Try as I might to keep this concise, it is still a two-article subject at least. In my next article, we will explore the 'chord-function scale' and introduce the more modern Modal Scales.