

Basic Picking-Hand Exercises by Ron Hinkle

As I have learned more and more single-string jazz patterns on the plectrum banjo, I have become increasingly aware of the picking-hand intricacy required. While you can “get by” with haphazard, devil-may-care technique, some things just *require* more precise control. Compare this with the “bowings” that Classical violinists and cellists use; the first step in learning a new piece of music is in annotating the most-efficient bow movements (in pencil of course, as the next conductor may have a different approach!). This is high-level, exceedingly-difficult stuff; we banjoists can learn a thing or three from the Classical world!

Here are some exercises that I have been doing for a while to improve my picking technique and set myself up for success with jazz patterns. These will prepare you well for learning *Duo-Style* technique—the best picking-hand exercise I have *ever* found; try that one when you have these mastered. These are essentially lessons in down and up picking, and in skipping from string to string. It is naturally different from a tremolo, but will improve your tremolo technique as well.

Here is the first one; pay strict attention to the picking indications, and take your time. Start slowly and gradually build up your speed. You should of course use a metronome for all of these exercises (start at quarter note = 60 BPM). Play until you’re comfortable with it:

Picking-hand Exercise #1

Musical notation for Picking-hand Exercise #1. The exercise is written on a treble clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The melody consists of quarter notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. Picking indications are shown above the notes: downstrokes (V) for D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, and upstrokes (v) for B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. The exercise is divided into two measures by a double bar line. The bass staff shows the fretting hand with open strings (0) for the first six notes and the second finger (2) for the last six notes.

And now, #2; all I have done here is to switch the picking. The skill of skipping to an inside string with an up-stroke is essential to jazz improv technique. Start as slowly as you need to, and work up your speed. Strive for absolute accuracy; no fat-fingering or missed pickings allowed!

Picking-hand Exercise #2

Musical notation for Picking-hand Exercise #2. The exercise is written on a treble clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The melody consists of quarter notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. Picking indications are shown above the notes: upstrokes (v) for D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, and downstrokes (V) for B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. The exercise is divided into two measures by a double bar line. The bass staff shows the fretting hand with open strings (0) for the first six notes and the second finger (2) for the last six notes.

Next up is an exercise I used to do (back in my Army days); *Reveille!* You could think of this as a “wake-up call” (aka warm-up) for your right hand. I did not indicate picking because I want you do it both ways; *down-up-down-up* throughout, and *up-down-up-down* throughout. The *speed* is “however slow you need to” up to “as fast as you can play it.” The important thing is picking consistency; stay with whichever pattern you start with all the way through. Bugle calls in general are a great exercise; if you want more variety, do a web search for “bugle call sheet music.”

Picking-hand Exercise #3: Reveille

And lastly, here is the exercise I have spent the most time with in recent years. I have been working on a full-length composition using only this picking pattern; this is the first four bars of it. The working code name is “4-1-2-3-1-2-3-1” (the string numbers). Notice that the note on the 4th string changes; this is simply to add musical interest to what can be a boring exercise:

Picking-hand Exercise #4: 4-1-2-3-1-2-3-1

That’s it for now. I will be posting other exercises as I complete them. I also hope to do a slow-motion video of my picking hand.