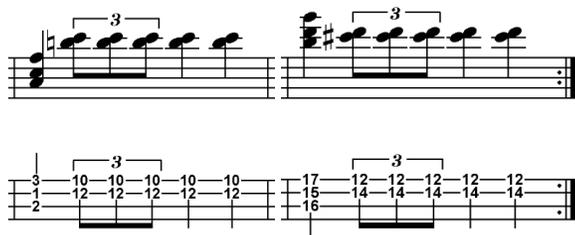


## Pickin's, by Harry Reser: For Plectrum Banjo

Here is the piece that really got me started on my technique kick about seven years ago. I was trying to learn *Pickin's* on the plectrum banjo; it is not a terribly difficult piece, but the scale runs in the Trio section just stymied me! I knew *how* to play scales of course, but I had never spent any time actually *practicing* them. What should have been a simple thing drove me to write a book primarily about the importance of adding scales to your technical bag of tricks. Writing that book (*The Plectrum Banjo: Beyond Chord Melody*) was the best thing I have ever done, and it has led me to being able to play Harry Reser today. I have Harry (and Juergen Kulus by extension) to thank for it. . . or should I say my *shame at not being able to play his music* to thank for it! If there was ever a reason to practice scales on the plectrum banjo, *Pickin's* is it.

Harry recorded it three times, once with a band, once with piano and saxophone, and once with just piano accompaniment; each is a little different, not just in instrumentation, but also in the way he played the banjo part. In all three recordings, it sounds like plectrum *voicings*, but then it sounds like tenor banjo *tone*. In the band recording, however (the one this transcription is based on), he does something that is practically impossible to do on tenor—but *very easy on plectrum*; he plays a minor 2<sup>nd</sup> (once in the key of F, once in G: See example below). I know this seems like flimsy “proof” of the tuning, but it is all the proof I need (there are some other minor clues as well).

I also realize this seems like nit-picky stuff, but we're talking about a very important banjo distinction, in my opinion; *was it tenor or was it plectrum?* They are two very different instruments, with very different capabilities, reputations, and playing expectations. To begin with, in light of the silly-human competition between the tenor (Reser) and plectrum (Peabody) camps (which bordered on outright hostility “back in the day”), I see this as a divisive issue that needs to be confronted and put to rest.



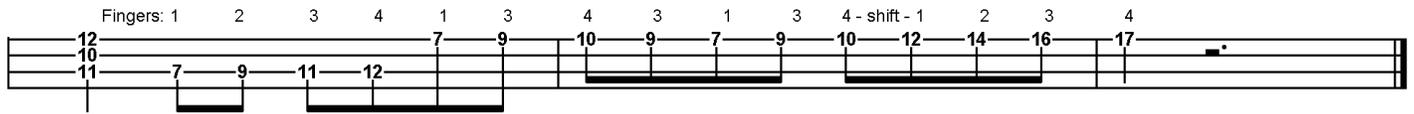
More importantly though, I see this as a question of *capability*; is it *possible* to play *Pickin's* (and other tunes in the Reser style) on plectrum? Absolutely yes! Not only is it *possible*, I believe it should be *common knowledge* and part of the “standard repertoire!” This music should not be seen as the domain of the supremely gifted; hard work—on the proper things—will identify and overcome many weaknesses. It does not take a genius on the level of Harry Reser to play this music; *Juergen and I are doing it*, and if **we** can do it, we know lots of others can do it too. We are *supposed* to learn from the “ancestors,” and literally “stand on the shoulders of giants”; how else do you move the banjo—and *yourself*—forward? Reser is *our* favorite giant; he and a few others showed the way (**90 years ago!**), and I think we should follow.

But anyway, those darn scale passages. . . Let's face it; if you have never *practiced* them, they will be difficult on *any* instrument! Turns out—on the plectrum banjo—there are actually many different possible fingerings for those runs (each one is the same physical scale pattern, but in different keys); I was having difficulty deciding which was the “easiest” and thus the most logical. Then Juergen explained it, and I said “*Oops! I didn't try that one!*”

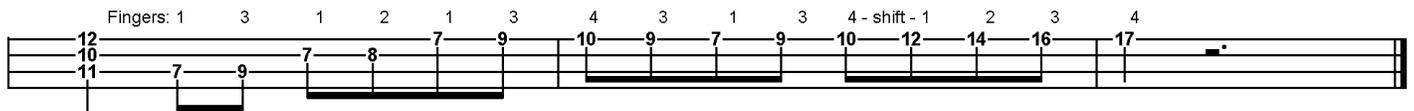
It is well worthwhile to spend a bit of time on the subject of scales as they apply to *Pickin's*. Here is the pattern—“4-3-4”—that we believe is the most *logical*, based on comparative ease of playing:

By the way, this is a good moment to point out the usefulness of Tablature (the bottom staff); with it, we can easily show the exact fingering that we *mean*, so pay strict attention to it! The finger numbers have been added to aid you in learning what is surely the most-difficult thing for non-scale-playing plectrum banjoists. The picking is consistent down-up-down-up throughout. As I said, knowledge is one thing, *practice* is another; consider *Pickin's* to be your scale workshop—*your incentive to learn and practice them*.

**Warning:** Here is where I go “Full-Nerd!” This is so fascinating to me that I can hardly contain my nerdy excitement! Harry Reser *did not* write a method book or leave any specific instruction for the plectrum—*so nobody can claim certainty*—but in Juergen’s early days of Reser study, he had the opportunity to interview banjoists who had worked closely with Harry. They told him that Harry played the plectrum using tenor banjo scale technique, as adapted from his childhood violin “position” training (Harry played many instruments *extremely* well). This would entail *skipping the B string* in scale passages (the G and D strings are a “5<sup>th</sup>” apart in tuning—like the tenor); if true, this would make the fingering like this:



Because I’m a plectrum specialist—and I know all my scale patterns now—this seems unnecessarily awkward, but it is certainly doable (just “takes practice”). Additionally, in my conversations with Juergen, I learned that Emile Grimshaw (a British contemporary of Reser) published a plectrum arrangement, and *he* notated it like this (uses the B string):



Back before I knew much about plectrum scales, I was trying patterns that were different from *any* of these! Through the process of trying to figure it out on my own (there being no method book coverage of the subject *at the time*), I became *amazed* at the sheer versatility of the plectrum tuning (“versatility” being shorthand for “there’s always more to learn!”). There is literally more than one way to skin a cat (or play a scale), and the more you know (and the better you know your instrument), the more choices you will have available to you. Our best advice for playing this particular passage? *Learn them all* and use the one that works best for *you*; they are all “correct!”

I hope you can see why I harp so much on instrument knowledge and technique (and the hard work that goes along with it)! There simply is *no shortcut* to high-level playing on *any* instrument—the plectrum banjo is certainly no exception. *Is Reser worth the effort?* I’ll let you provide your own answer to that; you know ours!

Here is one more thing to point out, which also “proves” to me that *Pickin’s* was recorded on plectrum. Here’s a snapshot from the published tenor banjo sheet music (the 8<sup>va</sup> means to play it up an octave); do you see the E note (circled)? This would require an up-stroke on the second string, which is very difficult to do, especially while moving to the next position—so difficult that *even Reser didn’t do it!* Even though the D (the last note of the second measure) is very playable as written, he used the same note-substitution technique in both places, probably for the sake of playing continuity. Here is how he actually played it in his recording:



See the X’s in place of the notes? This notates that he actually played an open D note (as shown in the TAB), but he did it so fast that the *casual* listener would assume he played the *written* notes—so

fast that the notes *hardly sound*. Modern Jazz musicians/writers call this “ghosting” the note: it’s not really there—but *it is*. This makes the lick much more practical. Clever man, our Mr. Reser; as astounding and exacting a musician as he was, he still employed tactical “short-cuts.” To my mind, this earns him even more respect than I already held for him!

While a sincere effort has been made to transcribe the *entire* piece exactly as he played it, there are a few things that he played slightly differently on repeated sections (including one wrong chord!). We don’t believe these were conscious variations, so they were not notated; we take the “first time through” as the definitive interpretation. Besides, we have to leave *you* just a bit of listening challenge; if you find the differences and want them notated, we will change it.

So, without further ado, here is *Pickin’s!* Enjoy, and please don’t hesitate to ask us for help.





♩ (1)

*D.S. al Coda (1)* *Piano intro: Play if unaccompanied.*  
*D.S. al Fine*

7 7-7 7-7 7-7 5 3 5 17 17 16 16 15 15 14 14 12 12 12 12 12  
 6 5-5 5-5 5-5 1 6 15 15 14 14 13 13 12 12 10 10 9 9 12  
 4 3-3 3-3 3-3 2 4 15 15 14 14 13 13 12 12 11 11 10 10

**C** Trio

Fingers: 1 2 3 4 1 3 4 3 1 3 4 1 2 3 4

12 12 12-12-12 12 12 12-14-16 17 17 17-16-16 16-14  
 10 10 10-10-10 10 10 13-12-10-12-13 17 17 15 15 15 15  
 11 11 11-11-11 11 11 11 7-9-11-12 10-12 16 16 16 16 16 16

Fingers: Same as before

14 14-14-14-14 14 14 14 14-16-18 19 19 19-18-18 18-16 16 16-16-16-16 16  
 12 12-12-12-12 12 12 12 15-14-12-14-15 18 18 18 18 18 14 14-14-14-14 14  
 12 12-12-12-12 12 13 9-11-13-14 12-14 18 18 18 18 18 14 14-14-14-14 14

*8va*

Fingers: Same as before

16 16 16-18-20 21 21 21 20 20 20-18 18 18-18-18-18 X  
 14 14 17-16-14 16-17 16-18-20 19 19 19 19 19 16 16-16-16-16 X  
 15 11-13 15-16 14-16 17-16-14 16-17 20 20 20 20 20 17 17-17-17-17 X

Note: X = play the open strings but don't let them ring.

16 14 16-14-14 X 13 11 13-11-11 X 9 9 9 9 9 12 14 12 14 12-14 12  
 14 14 14 14 11 11 11 11 11 7 6 6 6 6 7 13 13 13 13 13 13  
 13 13 13 13 9 9 9 9 9 8 7 7 7 7 8 11 11 11 11 11 11 7 9 11-12 10-12

13-12-10-12-13 12-14-16 17-17-17-16-16-16-16-14 14-14-14-14-14-X 12-12-12-12-12-X 12 10 11-7-9-11-12 10-12 13-12-10-12-13 12-14-16

14-14-14-12-12-12-12-9 9 9-9-9-9-8 7-6-7-9-10-9-10-12 14-13-14-15-16-15-16-0 14-16-14-0-12-14-12-0

\*See note at bottom of page:  
2 1 2 2 2 1 2 2 2 1 2 2 0 1 3 1 0 1 3 1 0

10-12-10-0-9-10-9 12 10 11 7-9-11-12 10-12 13-12-10-12-13 12-14-16 17-17-16 17-12-12-12-12-12 14-14-14-14-14-14

7 7 7 10-10-10-10 14-14-14 16-16-16-16 14-14-14-12-12-12-12 10-10-9-9 5 5 7 10-10-10 13-13-14 14-14-14 12-12-12-12-12 9-9-9-9 5 5 9 9 9 14-14 15-15-15 12-12-12-12-12 10-10-10-10

12 10 11 7-9-11-12 10-12 13-12-10-12-13 12-14-16 17-17-16 17-17-16 17-18-18 17-16-16

*D.C. al Coda (2) w/ intro*

\*Juergen and I agree that Reser played this run all on the first string, but there are different ways to play it. Experiment and play your favorite!  
Examples: 2-1-2-4-shift-2-1-2-4-shift-2-1-2-3-4-3-4    2-1-2-3-4-3-4-shift-1-2-1-2-3-4-3-4    2-1-2-shift-1-2-1-2-shift-1-2-1-shift-1-2-1-2