

# Circle of 5<sup>th</sup>s Patterns by Ron Hinkle

Play this now; don't *think* about it, just *play* it (follow the TAB and ignore all that scary stuff; it will show you exactly where to put your fingers, so, *put your fingers there and do it!*). If you need another hint, listen to the recording (computer generated to assure absolute metronomic accuracy):

8 C7 F7 Bb7 Eb7  
D 17-14 B 17-15 C 14-17 C 13-17 Bb7 15-12 Eb7 15-13 Eb7 12-15 Eb7 11-15

8 Ab7 Db7 F#7 B7  
13-10 13-11 10-13 9-13 11-8 11-9 8-11 7-11

8 E7 A7 D7 G7  
9-6 9-7 6-9 5-9 7-4 7-5 4-7 3-7

8 C7 F7 Bb7 Eb7  
5-2 5-3 2-5 8-5 10-7 10-8 7-10

8 Ab7 Db7 F#7 B7  
8-5 8-6 5-8 4-8 6-3 6-4 3-6

8 E7 A7  
4-1 4-2 1

There are so many teaching points wrapped up in this simple exercise; I hope I can decipher it all for you. I'm sure your ear found it to be logical, but what about everything else? Let's explore it, shall we?

By the way, I don't mean to "give things away"; in this case, I don't mean to spoil the plot of my upcoming book, *Beyond Chord Melody, Volume II: Jazz Patterns for the Plectrum Banjo*. I mean this to be a teaser for it; if you can do this exercise (and I sincerely believe you can), then the book will be of use to you.

## Teaching Points

**\*TAB:** I'm assuming here that you have played the exercise; if not, go back and do it please! I'll wait. . .

Admit it, unless you're a great music reader, you might not have even *tried* this exercise! All I know is, a few years ago, *I* wouldn't have! And if you don't cross that bridge into actually *trying* something (instead of just looking at it and feeling inadequate to the challenge; "tire kicking" I call it), what chance do you have of *actually improving*? No try = no improve; no improve = having to accept where you are in your journey to learn the banjo (and to continue to feel frustrated; "*I've tried everything short of practice and study, and I just can't seem to improve!*"). Despite wishing it so, I have no magic wand to turn you into a musician. I don't mean to sound condescending, but I know banjo players!

Did TAB make it easier? Of course it did; it makes it impossible *not* to learn! By the way, if you *can* read the notation, please follow the TAB anyway; it shows the intended fingerings. Is TAB then a "crutch?" Sure it is! But if it *is* a crutch, then show me *more* crutches, because *I surely do like to learn and improve on the banjo!* Writing it in conjunction with standard notation gives you a direct comparison between the two, giving you the opportunity to figure out what all those "little black dots" mean. I could not have shown this exercise so easily in "scale diagrams"; I'll admit that diagrams *can* make learning *some* things easier (without those fear-inducing little black dots), but no matter how effective, it ultimately cheats you out of an opportunity to learn to read music.

**\*Different keys:** Yes, this exercise goes around the Circle of 5<sup>ths</sup>—a "fairly-important" musical concept (understatement of the year); it shows one of countless simple ways to connect together single-string patterns (in this case, arpeggio patterns) in a practical, *useable* manner. I used key signatures instead of accidentals to clearly show that music modulates a lot. I am devoting a whole section of a chapter to this exact concept; there are countless variations, and every one of them makes for a great exercise.

So, is this a "practical" exercise? Well, do you know the song "5'2"?" It uses a Circle chord progression: C-E<sup>7</sup>-A<sup>7</sup>-D<sup>7</sup>-G<sup>7</sup>-C. Do you see those chords in this exercise? Then yes, it is practical; you could use these two patterns in actual music. Countless other songs use the same chord progression, or at least snippets of it. Most importantly though, it is an exercise in effective "voice leading" from one chord to the next.

**\*Chord tones:** Arpeggios are nothing but chord tones played one at a time in succession instead of together. The first great jazz guitarist—Eddy Lang—played (and taught) his arpeggios by holding chord shapes and picking each string (making it more a *picking* exercise than a *fingering* exercise). That doesn't work as well for the banjo, so we have to rely on the more modern method of fingering each note where we find it; this exercise is an example of that.

Anyway, if you know which chord tone the arpeggio starts and ends on, the rest is literally "academic"—as in simply learning/memorizing where they are. This is probably my best argument for the benefit of learning and internalizing patterns. By the way, I'm glad that I have been constantly challenged to explain just why all this stuff is so darn important ("*why do I have to learn that?*"); I'm the type who needs to explain things, and searching for good answers drives my own improvement. I would never leave it at "*because I said so.*"

So, from the first note of the first measure, here are the chord tones in numbers: C<sup>7</sup> = 5-3-1-7, F<sup>7</sup> = 3-5-7-9, Bb<sup>7</sup> = 5-3-1-7, Eb<sup>7</sup> = 3-5-7-9. Need I continue? It's an alternating-then-repeating pattern, so they are all the same!

**\*Skipping the B string:** In *arpeggio* patterns, we often skip the B string; this particular pattern would have been more difficult with the inclusion of it. In *scale* patterns on the other hand, the B string comes in very handy. If you don't already know these details, then *both* arpeggios and scales will be harder to learn and thus more frustrating. My goal is to remove the barriers caused by *just not knowing*. "Just doing" is the cure for "just not knowing."

Notice the "shift" in the second change from C<sup>7</sup> to F<sup>7</sup>? I originally had a different fingering notated, but then I did a tenor version and realized I had done it wrong! Practice this transition slowly until you can do it without thinking. Now there is no string in between, so no skipping required. The interval between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> strings is a "Perfect 5<sup>th</sup>," as is the interval between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> strings. Use that awkward fact as an *advantage*—not an *impediment*.

**\*Playing single notes "over" a chord:** As I said above, playing the chord tones one after the other produces an arpeggio. If I had put "passing tones" in between those chord tones, the result would be some kind of scale. Being able to play single-note patterns over a chord progression is called "jazz." Done unconsciously, it is called "jazz improvisation." *Consciously learning* a whole bunch of patterns *first* (starting with scales and arpeggios) is the key to using them *unconsciously*. Hopefully you see—and especially *hear*—the obvious jazz implications of exercises like this; if not, then it's time to start listening closer to jazz recordings.

**\*Repetition:** By connecting these two different arpeggio patterns together and going all the way around the Circle (almost two times around!), you are provided with an interesting way to learn and practice them. Repetition is the key to memorizing and internalizing. If either lick had been presented in an actual song arrangement or improvisation, it probably would have happened only *once*—and you may have missed it!

I have gotten great benefit from these kinds of exercises; I think of them as "practice mantras." This is the type of thing that you can do over again and again while watching TV. Recent research shows that it takes an average of 66 days to form a "new habit"; we can condense that time simply by spending 10 minutes a day doing it *over and over again*. The way I look at it, when you can remember the pattern the next day, and/or do it without thinking, then it has become a habit. The *more* habits you learn, the more will be available to you to actually use in music. The more *good* (as in "correct") habits you can learn, the less likely it will be for *bad* habits to ruin your day (or at least your song). Thus, the real benefit of repeating patterns.

Once you have learned this pattern really well, start going faster and faster with it. Use a metronome to keep track of your progress and to keep yourself honest; if you can't play it *perfectly*, then it isn't time yet to go faster. The recording was set at quarter-note = 100 BPM.

**\*Hand position:** It is not possible to show good posture and position with any kind of notation! If I was sitting beside you, I could whack you on the knuckles with a ruler just like they did back in the day (before teachers worried about things like self-esteem)! Arpeggios are wonderful for learning proper finger use. Keep your fingers arched while playing this; the fingertips should barely lift off the strings—just enough to keep from buzzing.

This is another good reason for repetition; make it your goal to move your fingers as little as possible throughout this exercise. Playing quietly will also help you to concentrate on that; when we play loudly, we tend to exaggerate all of our movements. Of course, the ultimate goal is to achieve great hand position *regardless* of volume or speed. Efficient control is the key to playing fast, and to producing whatever volume you want!

## Conclusion

I could go on and on—and this is just one simple exercise! I hope it piques your curiosity in anticipation of my book. I'm not doing this to make money (oxymoron of the year: "Profitable banjo method book"); I'm doing this because I want you to become a better banjo player, and ultimately, because I want the banjo to become known for more than just simple chord melody pizza-parlor sing-along music! I want it to be the "modern jazz instrument" that it has *always* been more than capable of being.