

Peabody Strokes

As you know, I strongly advocate learning the techniques of the historic banjo “greats” as a method of improving your own playing, and of honoring the founders. This is standard practice for *all other* jazz instruments; why not the banjo? Are we not proud of our short history? Don’t you *want* to be as good as they were? This is not “hero worship”; it is the worship of the skills that they pioneered. Rather than think you should *imitate* someone else (sacrificing your own unique wonderfulness), think that you should be able to play the *kind of things they did* (to *add* their unique wonderfulness to yours, of course!). What better teachers than the originators?

I myself *prefer* the music of Harry Reser and Perry Bechtel, though Eddie Peabody is also one of my heroes (just like I *prefer* a Gibson style banjo over a B&D or Vegavox. Don’t hate me!). I spend a lot of time and effort working on single-string technique, but I have found it very helpful to work the Peabody strokes into my practice routine. They are a different physical action using a different set of muscles; as in *all* exercise routines, variety and balance are important.

More technically, these strokes are called the “Triplet Glissando stroke,” and the “Syncopated Split stroke.” I actually don’t use either one much in my own playing, for a very good reason; I don’t trust *myself* to stay perfectly in tempo, and I don’t trust *others* to interpret my rhythmic intentions correctly (even if I were to execute them perfectly). The conditions have to be just right before I am confident enough to try them! They are perhaps best reserved for a flashy solo, where tiny mistakes in time won’t derail a group or accompanist. The major reason for writing this lesson is to get so good at them myself that I overcome my fear of using them.

Common to both strokes is that the non-pick-holding fingers should be folded in, with no head contact. This is in contrast to the more-technical single-string picking, where the fingers *should* be in contact with the head. This is the difference between Peabody (no head contact), and all of my other heroes, who *all* use head contact. The major difficulty to overcome is going back and forth between head contact and no contact as needed in the course of a song. Rather than play an entirely-Peabody style arrangement, I want to be able to use any and all techniques at my disposal—in *real time*.

A closely related topic is pick choice: I am determined to do *everything* with one pick; the same medium-gauge, three-cornered pick that I use for Reser style and Classic style. This will facilitate the rapid-fire employment of multiple styles without having to stop and change picks. Besides, a soft pick—which would make these particular strokes “easier”—produces too much “slap” for my liking, and is not good for single-note picking. You may want to *start* with a soft pick for this, but I recommend graduating to a stiffer pick eventually; the *strength* and *finesse* required for doing so is one of the happy outcomes of these exercises! *If you don’t practice it, you won’t develop it!*

I have written these exercises in standard notation and TAB. I do not believe in chord diagrams; frankly, I doubt this exercise or these strokes could be effectively written with *only* chord diagrams. The ideal situation of course would be for banjoists simply to know how to read actual music; then, *anything* could be more-easily taught and learned! Some see TAB as a “crutch,” but at least it can be easily mated up with standard notation, *and* show you where to put your fingers to boot.

One of the difficulties in teaching (and thus learning) the banjo is that it is basically an “oral tradition” instrument; most players of my generation (50s and older) learned from another player, and not from a book. If you don’t have a teacher, tough luck! Most other instruments have the benefit of a standardized “classical education,” where you learn how to read music as an integral part of learning to play the instrument. Reading is not required in order to learn music theory, but they seem to go hand in hand. Not much classical theory goes into those oral tradition lessons!

Triplet Glissando

I am using all diminished chords for this part of the exercise; these unique chords repeat themselves every three frets, which mates up perfectly with triplets. Here it is:

1.

Triplet stroke with ascending diminished chords

Okay, I can hear you saying it: “*How am I supposed to read that?*” Don’t worry, I won’t leave you hanging! We’ll discuss it step by step, and be sure to watch the video. I am convinced that if you can learn the chord shapes (who doesn’t already know a diminished chord?) and understand the rhythms (the true difficulty), *anyone* at *any* level of expertise can play this. Let’s look at the Triplet Glissando stroke in detail:

1. Realize that the diminished chord shape is exactly the same all the way up the neck; all I’m doing is sliding it up one fret at a time. Look at the TAB! Just make sure your pinky finger is on the 1st-string fret indicated by the top number.
2. At a slow tempo—which I highly recommend mastering before picking up the speed—play each chord literally, strum all four strings both down and up (remember; fingers folded in, with no head contact), and pay strict attention to the down and up stroke indications. As you pick up the speed, everything will stay the same, but the chords will become more of an indefinite blur. At that point, you will be concerned only with starting and ending at the right place (on the proper fret) for each stationary triplet (beats 2 and 4)—and of course, *keeping proper time*.
3. Regarding triplets: If you have difficulty with the triplet rhythm (many *very good* musicians do!), deaden the strings and practice strumming the rhythm with a metronome until you feel comfortable. I demonstrate this in the video. It is very easy to rush when playing triplets (something us banjo players are notorious for anyway!), thus the danger of playing this stroke with a group; they are slower than you think (the triplets, not the other musicians)!

Syncopated Split Stroke

Now for the fun part! This stroke—executed with joyful abandon but improperly—has been the root cause of many a “train wreck,” especially in jam sessions. The player attempting this—besides being well-practiced in it—must have a rock-solid sense of time, and a strong belief and trust in his/her fellow jammers (or not care about adding/skipping beats, like some I’ve heard). This is supposed to *sound* free-wheeling, but it does nobody no good if it actually *is* free-wheeling; there is a controlled “method to the madness!”

Here it is; they are simply descending C chord inversions. Notice the strumming; **down-down-up**, etc. It is very easy to confuse this stroke with triplets, especially by looking at them in notation. I have modified the beam-grouping to more-clearly show them in groups of three; this grouping highlights the syncopated nature of the stroke, but they are “straight,” non-sung eighth notes—*not triplets!* The stressed notes provide the syncopation. The Xs in place of notes means to mute the strings with your fretting hand; move to the next chord during this muting.

C Syncopated split strokes

Notice the quarter-note “click track” at the bottom; that of course shows where the beat is. In a nutshell, “*a group of three on the beat > a group of three off the beat > on the beat > off the beat > etc.*” That is what makes it “syncopated” (and what makes it difficult).

I have found it helpful to learn to count it, then eventually to count and play it at the same time. Here is the mathematical formula; I have underlined the all-important rhythmic stresses, and separated the groups of three with dashes; when counting it out loud, say the stress out loud and whisper the rest. Count straight eighth notes first to get your bearings, then add in the stresses. Notice how the syncopated pattern is escaped from at the end of the second bar; learned and predictable escape routes are a very important consideration in syncopation. Tap your foot to keep the beat:

1 & 2- & 3 & -4 & 1- & 2 & -3 & 4 &

It is also very helpful to play along with the provided MIDI tracks. Start at the slowest speed and work up as your comfort level increases. The secret to playing this fast is to be able to play it *perfectly at slow speed*. Slow and accurate easily trumps fast and furious for developing precision!

Now, here is the combined Triplet Glissando and Syncopated Split strokes:

1.

Triplet stroke with ascending diminished chords

C Syncopated split strokes

The notation shows a guitar exercise in 8/8 time. The first part consists of a triplet of eighth notes with ascending diminished chords (7-9, 10-11, 12-13, 13-14, 15-16, 16-17, 18-19, 20-21) over two full beats. The second part shows syncopated split strokes, where the bass string is played first, followed by the other three strings. A click track is shown at the bottom.

Now, here is a cool variation; I have added a syncopation into the Triplet Glissando stroke. Now the diminished chord ascends in three equal segments for two full beats each:

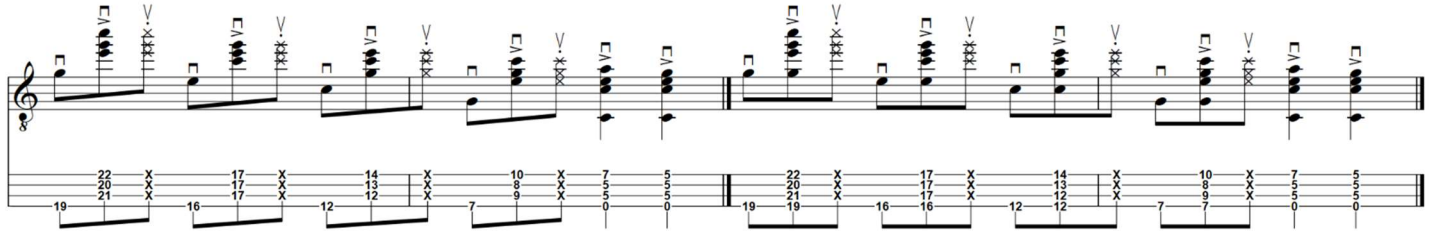
2.

The notation shows a variation of the triplet stroke from exercise 1. It includes a syncopation in the triplet glissando stroke, where the diminished chord ascends in three equal segments for two full beats each. The notation includes a click track at the bottom.

Practicality? Actually, I have found only one place to play this *exactly as is* (but that’s all you need!): Measures 3-6 of *World Waiting for the Sunrise*. Otherwise, it is mainly an exercise, a vehicle to introduce the strokes; rather than need a song to do it in, learn it as a skill that can be thrown in as your imagination demands. The individual strokes can be used anywhere you have a diminished chord or a major chord; there are countless possible variations! I show a couple other practical variations coming up.

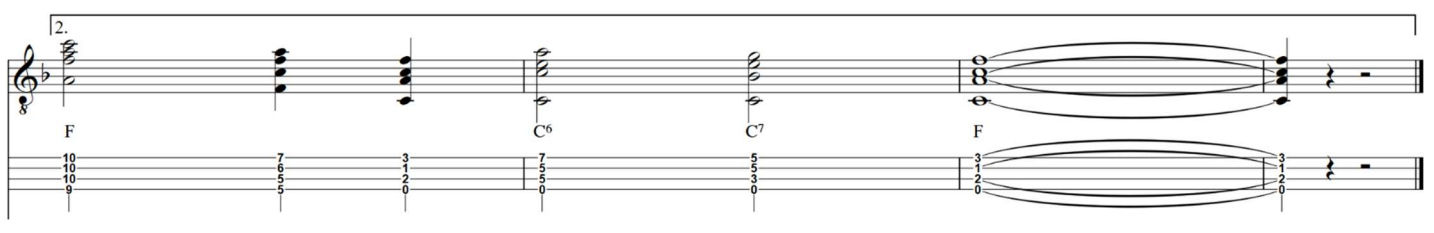
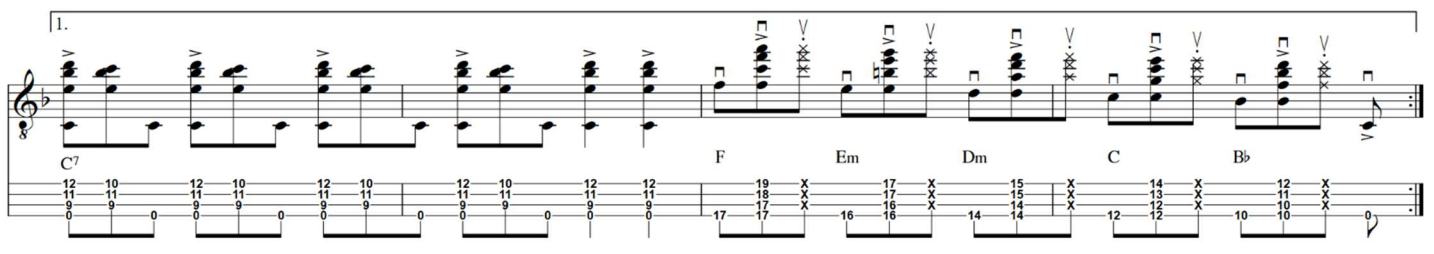
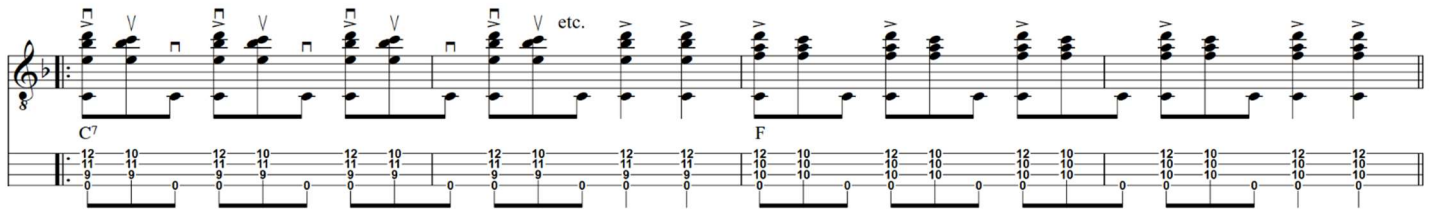
Before moving on, I would like to delve a bit deeper into the split stroke. Technically, to be a true “split stroke” (syncopated or not), it should be played like the first two bars (below); play the bass string first, then the other three, in one smooth motion (literally *splitting* the stroke into two parts)—best done with the fingers on the head. But the *Peabody* split stroke is played like the last two bars; play the bass string, then play all four strings (fingers off the head). This “double-down” motion is what gives the stroke it’s “snap”; it’s a similar motion to shaking out an old-fashioned thermometer. Watch the video to hear the difference. They are both usable strokes of course; the first one is more controlled (and is indeed easier to control), and the second is wilder and more exciting (and harder to control).

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of practicing this with a metronome, or with the MIDI files (unless of course, you have no concern for staying in perfect time)!



There are many ways these strokes can be used; you will find recorded examples from many artists, not the least of which is Eddie Peabody himself. Master them, and use your imagination!

I would like to show one more; this is *based on* (not exactly as he did it) a stroke that Brad Roth did in the *Banjo Mania* recording of *Swanee* (last 16 bars of the song). I have modified it a bit and added to it to show another approach to the syncopation. Here it is; I'll explain more after:



Bars 7 and 8 are the same syncopated split stroke. Bars 1-6 are only slightly different; the difference is that I moved the stressed chord-stroke a half-beat forward, to the downbeat. This of course changes the counting pattern! The resulting beat pattern is known as a “street beat.” The C string is actually allowed to ring through the whole thing—a Peabody trademark (strum all four strings as much as possible). I had to write *something* for it, so there it is (perhaps proving the difficulty of committing these strokes to paper).

Now, on to the original *Peabody Stroke* lessons; *this* lesson is meant to be a precursor to them.