

Single String Style - Part 1

Bob Altschuler

Scruggs, melodic and single string are the three major three-finger banjo playing styles, and each takes a different approach. Scruggs style is based on right hand rolls combined with left hand slides, hammer ons, pull offs and chokes. Generally, some or most of the melody notes are played, and spaces around them are filled with ornamental background notes. Melodic style, on the other hand, is based on scales with notes picked on alternate strings, with all of the melody played. It is especially suited to playing note for note fiddle tune melodies.

Single-string style is based on scales and scale-based melodies, as is melodic style, but a crucial difference is that consecutive notes are played on the same string for single string style. That is why single-string tablature looks much more “linear” when compared to Scruggs or melodic tab. Left-hand fretting positions are also different from Scruggs and melodic styles. As with melodic playing, every note in single string style can be considered part of the melody. Single-string picking is similar to flat-picking on guitar, except that instead of using a flat pick, two (or sometimes three) right hand fingers alternate to pick notes.

You can play entire breaks using single-string style or combine it with Scruggs and melodic playing to add variety to your leads and backup. I really like the sound of single-string licks, and I have been incorporating more of them into my playing.

Single-string picking is not as fluid as Scruggs or melodic styles, but it gives power and drive to breaks because of the “choppy” way it is picked. A very useful characteristic about single-string licks in closed positions (no open strings) is that you can move them anywhere on the neck for different chords. This can also be done with Scruggs and to a limited extent with melodic style, but single-string is more versatile for moveable positions. Of the three main picking styles, Scruggs is the most right-hand based, single string is more left-hand based, and melodic falls in between.

Single-string style was first heard in bluegrass banjo in the playing of Don Reno and Eddie Adcock in the 1950s and 1960s. These two banjo icons mixed single-string techniques with roll-based Scruggs and other three finger styles. Single-string playing was heard long before that in other styles, such as classic banjo of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Single string technique has taken a back seat to Scruggs and melodic picking, but it has been gaining in popularity. Many current players are adding single-string style to their repertoire. Noam Pikelnny, Tony Trischka, Alison Brown and Bela Fleck are just some of the well-known banjoists playing a significant amount of this style in both bluegrass and other types of music (jazz, for example). Single-string style, as with melodic, is particularly useful for playing melody notes in fiddle tunes. Tony Trischka’s new “Master Collection of Fiddle Tunes for Banjo” published by Mel Bay has a number of tabs containing single-string picking in addition to melodic style. Single-string style is also very well suited for playing jazz and other non-bluegrass music.

Watch the You Tube video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbrhbmX2OxQ> of Noam Pikelnny playing some fine single-string style mixed in with melodic in “Cherokee Shuffle,” along with Andy Falco and Tony Watt.

The tab below shows single-string exercises, examples of scales, a moveable lick and sample G licks. The G licks without open strings are moveable around the neck for other chords. Single-string technique differs from Scruggs and melodic picking and takes getting used to, but it’s worth the time and effort. Start playing at a slow and even pace and pick up speed as you become comfortable with it. Remember to start with your right thumb and alternate thumb and index fingers as you pick the notes. Part 2 in the next issue will have more information about single-string style plus more licks and a tune to show you how it works.

Until then, happy picking!

Single-String Style

by Bob Altschuler

Exercises- alternate right hand thumb and index fingers

Musical notation for exercises 1-4. Each exercise consists of a four-measure phrase on a single staff. Exercise 1: 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0. Exercise 2: 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0. Exercise 3: 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0. Exercise 4: 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0. Below each phrase are four vertical stems, each with a circled 'T' and a circled '1' underneath, indicating thumb and index finger alternation.

Musical notation for exercises 5-8. Each exercise consists of a four-measure phrase on a single staff. Exercise 5: 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0. Exercise 6: 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0. Exercise 7: 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0. Exercise 8: 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0.

Musical notation for exercises 9-12. Each exercise consists of a four-measure phrase on a single staff. Exercise 9: 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0. Exercise 10: 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0. Exercise 11: 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0. Exercise 12: 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 0 0.

G scales- alternate right hand thumb and index

Musical notation for exercises 13-16. Exercise 13: 0 2 0 1 | 0 2 4 5 | 4 2 0 1 | 0 2 0 0. Exercise 14: 0 2 4 0 | 2 0 0 1 | 0 2 4 0 | 2 4 5 0. Exercise 15: 0 2 4 0 | 2 0 0 1 | 0 2 4 0 | 2 4 5 0. Exercise 16: 0 2 4 0 | 2 0 0 1 | 0 2 4 0 | 2 4 5 0. Labels 'C scale' and 'D scale' are placed below the second and third measures of exercise 14 respectively.

Musical notation for exercises 17-20. Exercise 17: 5 7 4 5 | 7 5 7 5 | 5 7 9 5 | 7 9 7 8. Exercise 18: 5 7 9 5 | 7 9 5 7 | 7 9 5 7 | 7 8 5 7. Exercise 19: 1 3 2 3 | 5 7 9 10 | 1 3 2 3 | 5 7 9 10. Exercise 20: 0 2 4 0 | 2 0 2 0 | 0 2 0 2 | 0 2 0 2. Labels 'G- moveable D pos lick', 'C- same lick', 'D- same lick', and 'Sample G licks' are placed below the first four measures of exercise 17 respectively.

Musical notation for exercises 21-24. Exercise 21: 7 8 9 7 | 7 9 7 8 | 7 8 7 9 | 7 8 7 9. Exercise 22: 12 13 14 12 | 12 13 14 12 | 12 13 14 12 | 12 13 14 12. Exercise 23: 2 3 4 2 | 2 4 2 3 | 2 3 2 4 | 2 4 2 3. Exercise 24: 0 2 0 2 | 0 2 0 2 | 0 2 0 2 | 0 2 0 2.

Musical notation for exercises 25-28. Exercise 25: 0 2 0 1 | 1 0 2 0 | 0 2 0 2 | 0 3 0 3. Exercise 26: 0 3 0 3 | 2 0 2 0 | 0 3 0 3 | 2 0 2 0. Exercise 27: 3 1 0 3 | 1 0 2 0 | 3 1 0 3 | 1 0 2 0. Exercise 28: 0 2 0 1 | 0 2 0 1 | 0 2 0 1 | 0 2 0 1.

Musical notation for exercise 29. Exercise 29: 9 7 5 9 | 7 5 9 7 | 9 7 5 9 | 9 7 5 9. Exercise 30: 9 10 12 9 | 10 12 9 10 | 9 10 12 9 | 9 10 12 9.

About the Author



Bob Altschuler lives in upstate New York and has played bluegrass banjo since 1970. As a banjo instructor, his 25 years of experience includes teaching many students at Banjo Camp North, where he has been the Beginner Bluegrass Track Coordinator since 2003. Bob's training and work as a public school teacher sharpened his teaching abilities, and helped him become a patient and sought after banjo instructor (his day job is now with the NY State Retirement System).

Bob performs with the Dyer Switch band at concerts and festivals across the Northeast, Midwest and South, and recorded "American Airwaves" and "Family Business" CDs with the band. His banjo playing has also been heard on Northeast Public Radio and on television and radio commercials. You can contact Bob at arobanjo@aol.com, or through the Dyer Switch website at www.dyerswitch.com.