

Bluegrass Mandolin for the Complete Ignoramus!

by
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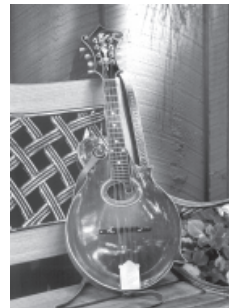
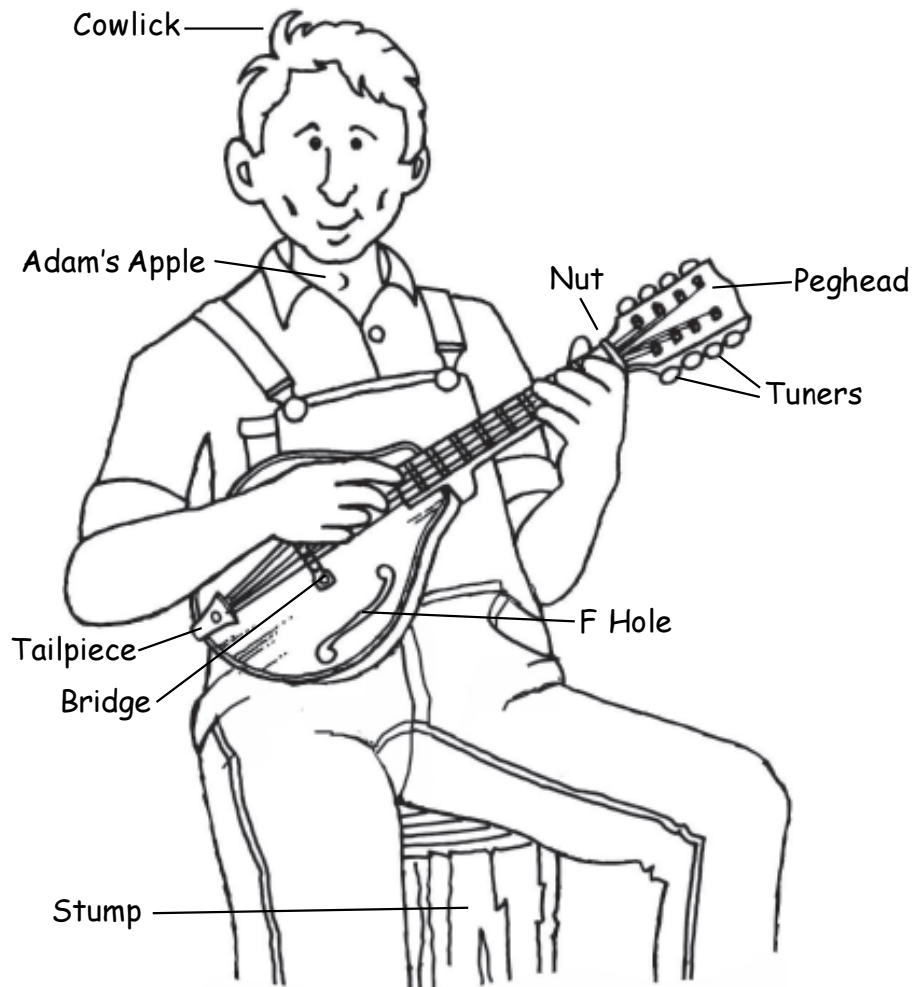


Photo by Martin Fox

Parts of a Mandolin(ist)



Come in the Door!

In my home state of North Carolina, I often say, "Come in the door!" when I'm welcoming someone into our home. You just never know when someone might come in through the window. So come in the door, and have a seat right over there. Your mandolin? Yes. Go ahead and get it out, because you can't play it in the case.

Before I teach you to play the mandolin, let me explain why I wrote this book for the so-called "Ignoramus." The title is nothing more than a not-so-clever marketing ploy designed to get you in the door. It worked! I'm guessing that you're a playful person who wants to learn the mandolin, but is intimidated by more formal teaching materials. As you've already noticed, I use a sometimes silly and casual approach. That's because if you're like me, you HATE being bored and you'd rather laugh than cry. I figure if you're laughing, you're having fun and if you also learn to play the mandolin, hey, that's a bonus!

Let me put you at ease by saying that I've spent the last 45 years figuring out how to make learning to play a musical instrument EASY. In fact, around Asheville, North Carolina, people whisper that, "Wayne Erbsen can even teach a FROG to play music." I started writing instruction books for beginners way back in 1973 when I published my first book, *How to play the Banjo for the Complete Ignoramus!* Since then, I've done over two dozen instruction books and songbooks that have taught folks just like you to play.



Photo by Wayne Erbsen

Let's be clear about one thing. **THIS BOOK IS FOR THE TOTAL AND ABSOLUTE BEGINNER.** 'Course, if you're only a quasi or semi-beginner, we'll let you in the door too. To squeeze the most out of this book, you DON'T have to know how to read music, be able to tap your foot, know your chords or be kin to Bill Monroe. All you need is the itch to learn to play your mandolin. The rest will be easy. Trust me.

Do You Have the GUTS to be an Ignoramus?

I can count on forty fingers the times someone has looked at one of my books for the Ignoramus, and said, "THAT'S ME." If you picked up this book when you saw the title and said, "That's me," this IS the book for you. If you're wondering whether you have the smarts to be an ignoramus, let me assure you. **THIS IS AS SIMPLE AS A MANDOLIN BOOK GETS.** You are in the right place. Now, Turn the page.

Important Stuff!

If this book doesn't get you started playing the mandolin, I'll eat my hat. Before you ask me to start chewing, be sure to read the vital information on this page. In the meantime, excuse me while I put on my bib.

First, note that your book comes fully equipped with a CD where I play all the scales and the twenty-eight tunes that are found in this book at a moderately slow tempo. All through the book you'll see an illustration of an old gramophone with numbers inside. The numbers tell you the track numbers on the CD that correspond to the music in the book. NOTE: If you open the CD with your computer, you'll find Word files with the complete lyrics to all the songs.



The book is arranged so that on the following pages you'll find vital information on tuning, how to hold your mandolin and how to hold the pick. Then I'll carefully explain how to read tab or tablature and you'll see how easy it is to play the G scale. Even easier will be your first tune, "Joy to the World."

Each song in the book is laid out on two facing pages. At the top of the left hand page, you'll find a short history of the song. This will come in handy when you're introducing the song on stage. (I'm not joking!) At the top right hand side of this page is a chart showing you where to find the notes for this song (see left). You'll then be shown how to play the simple melody (ICE COLD LICKS), a slightly more advanced arrangement (WARM LICKS), and for those brave souls, HOT LICKS. At the bottom of the page you'll find a box with tips on playing harmony notes.

	Index	Ring
A	B	
D	E	G

On the right hand page is the tab and music of the song, complete with the chords, and as many of the lyrics as can fit on the page. Just to the left of the title at the top of this page is the key the song is in. What is a key? A key gives you such vital information as what scale and chords are used in the song. As we progress through the book, we'll learn songs in the keys of G, A, F, C and D. Keep in mind that the songs in each key are arranged alphabetically to make them easy to find. You'll soon notice that there are many more tunes in the key of G than any other key. Why? When you start jamming with other beginning bluegrassers, you'll see that G is their favorite key. So when the day comes when you unfurl your mandolin to start jamming in the popular key of G, you'll be loaded for bear.

As you play through the tunes in the book, you'll soon realize that most of the tunes are simplified down to the bare-bones melody. The nonessential notes have been left out, and all that remains is the skeleton of the tune. In order to read the tablature or music, it is vital that you memorize the names of the open strings of the mandolin as well as all the notes of the scale you are fixing to play.



Tablature or "Tab" for Ignoramuses

If you are a true and total beginner who doesn't read music, I have good news: all the tunes in the book are written out in an easy-to-read tab system that I invented. A line of tab will be right above a corresponding line of music, so if you sorta read music, you can look at both the tab and the music.

Take a look over at page 13 and almost half way down you'll see an example of the tab. It consists of four horizontal lines which represent the four pairs of strings on the mandolin. The E, or highest string, is found toward the top of the page and the G, or lowest string, is toward the bottom of the page. You'll notice that each string is marked on the left with its name. A letter on the string tells you the name of the note to play on that string.

TIMING: The timing in the tab matches the timing of the music. If you don't read music, no problem! Here's all you need to know. Each line of tab is divided into measures, which are the spaces between the "fence posts." At the beginning of the first line of music it will say 2/4, 3/4 or 4/4. The number on top tells you that each measure will either get two, three or four beats. Each beat is one tap of your foot (down and up). In the example below, look at the first line of the Carter Family song, "Keep on the Sunny Side of Life." The first two notes are both eighth notes. Your foot would go DOWN on the first eighth note and UP on the second. Then you'll see two notes with a single vertical line attached to it. Those are quarter notes and they each get one beat. For each quarter note, your foot would go DOWN-UP. In measure two, there are two pairs of eighth notes, so your foot would go DOWN or UP on each note. In measure 3, you'll see a D note with two lines attached. The two lines tell you it's a half note and gets two beats. This D note connects with a tie to a D note in measure 4, so the D note would get a total of three beats, or three DOWN-UPS with your foot.

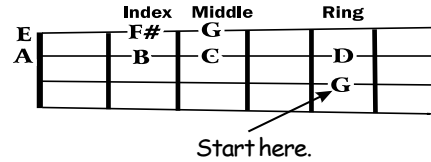


		G		C		G			
		1		2		3		4	
E									
A	2								
D	4	D	E	G	B	A	G	E	G
G						D		D	G

Above the tab is a "G" and a "C" which are your chords. Take a look at page 15, to find vital information on playing the chords. On page 78 are simple rhythmic chord positions to play while you are singing and strumming the rhythm.

The Key of G

The **G** scale will be your new best friend. Start the scale with the **G** note on the D string with your ring finger. (D string at the 5th fret).



The G Scale
G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G

Diagram showing the first two octaves of the G scale on the guitar neck. The first octave starts on the D string at the 5th fret (G) with the ring finger. The second octave starts on the open G string. The notes are G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G.

Diagram showing the first two octaves of the G scale on the guitar neck. The first octave starts on the D string at the 5th fret (G) with the ring finger. The second octave starts on the open G string. The notes are G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G.

Musical notation showing the first two octaves of the G scale in treble clef, starting on the D string at the 5th fret.

Here is the complete G scale, starting on the open G string. Play it forwards and backwards.

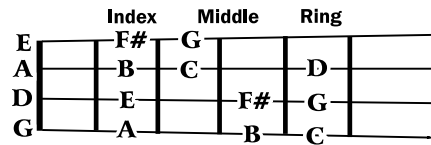


Diagram showing the complete G scale on the guitar neck. The first octave starts on the D string at the 5th fret (G) with the ring finger. The second octave starts on the open G string. The notes are G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G.

Diagram showing the complete G scale on the guitar neck. The first octave starts on the D string at the 5th fret (G) with the ring finger. The second octave starts on the open G string. The notes are G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G.

Musical notation showing the complete G scale in treble clef, starting on the open G string.

NOTE: Attached to each note in lines one and two, above, is a vertical line that tells you that each of these notes is a quarter note that gets one beat. It makes no difference if the line is attached to the top of the note (as in the G on the far left) or hanging down from the note (as in the G on the far right.)



Down the Road

It never fails that "Down the Road" is a hit with my mandolin students. That's because it's one of those songs that simply sounds great, and that's how we're going to play it: simply. The first bluegrass version of this tune was the hot 1950s recording by Flatt & Scruggs, but they didn't sing a chorus. In the early 1960s, the Greenbriar Boys came along and added a chorus, which they probably made up. The song is actually much older than the Flatt & Scruggs recording. Uncle Dave Macon recorded a rousing rendition on July 25, 1928, that he called "Over the Road I'm Bound to Go." The melody is basically the same as the tune "Ida Red," which was first recorded by Fiddlin' Powers & Family on August 19, 1924.

	Index			Ring	
	B			D	
D	E			G	

ICE COLD LICKS: Just play the melody. Be sure to play the quarter notes with a DOWN stroke and each pair of eighth notes with a DOWN-UP stroke of your pick.



WARM LICKS: After you're comfortable playing the basic melody of "Down the Road," you're ready to use the mandolin rhythm I call the "Watermelon." I call it that because it has four quick 16th notes that correspond to the four syllables of the word "wa-ter-mel-on." Besides that, I've been eating my share of watermelons lately.



Let me show you how the Watermelon works. Look at the first four notes of "Down the Road," which are G, G, G and E — all quarter notes played on the D string. Since each quarter note gets one beat, tap your foot four times and say out loud, "G, G, G, E." Every time you say one of the letters, your foot should hit the floor and come up. Now tap your foot four times again, this time saying "watermelon," with each foot tap. To play the Watermelon on "Down the Road," fret the D string at the fifth fret, which will give you a G. With your pick, go DOWN-UP, DOWN-UP three times on the G note and one time on the E. Congratulations, you've just played four Watermelons.

HOT LICKS: Once you get the Watermelon under control in measure 1, you can use it to play on any or all of the quarter notes in this or practically any song. Even better, you can alternate the Watermelon with any quarter note. For example, on the first four notes of measure 1, try alternating the Watermelon with just a single note, which for fun we'll call a "Spam." First, say "Watermelon, Spam, Watermelon, Spam," tapping your foot once for each word. Then play it that way on the mandolin. When you can do that, reverse it, saying and then playing "Spam, Watermelon, Spam, Watermelon." Presto! You're improvising.



RED HOT LICKS: You can use Echo Notes to dress up the naked quarter notes of "Down the Road." Any time the melody is a G on the D string, you can play an open G as a drone. On the E notes you can also play the G as a drone. (Page 74.)



Key of G

Down the Road

Tempo: Bouncy

Chorus

G 1 Em G 2 D G

Down the road, down the road, I've got a sugar babe down the road.

3 Em G 4 D G

Down the road, down the road, I've got a sugar babe down the road.

Down the road about a mile or two
Lives a little girl named Pearly Blue.
About so high and her hair is brown,
Prettiest thing, boys, in this town. (Chorus)

Anytime you want to know
Where I'm going down the road.
Get my girl on the line,
You can find me there most anytime. (Chorus)

Every day and Sunday too
I go see my Pearly Blue.
Soon as you hear the rooster crow,
You can see me heading down the road. (Chorus)

Every time I get the blues
I walk the soles right off my shoes.
Don't know why I love her so,
That gal of mine lives down the road. (Chorus)



Harmony Notes

All the melody notes of "Down the Road" are on the D or A strings. To play the harmony of any melody note on the D string, simply play the G string open. For melody notes on the A string, you'll find the harmony by playing the D string open.



How to Jam

Playing unaccompanied mandolin is a joy not to be sneezed at, but even better is jamming with other pickers and singers. If you're like most beginners, you can't imagine the day when you'll be good enough to actually play music with other humans. The fact is, you may be ready right now. The worst case scenario is that you might have to read this page first, and then you'll be set to play with other folks.

Playing music with other musicians generally means using just two skills: 1) chopping chords while keeping the rhythm and 2) playing the melody or the lead. On page 15 we talked about how to play the chop and on page 78 is a page of simple chords to play while chopping the rhythm. When the day comes and you work up your nerve to saunter up to an ongoing jam session, sidle up to a friendly looking person and whisper these words out of the corner of your mouth: "Say, what key is this song in?" They'll probably say *G* or *A*, but you never know what might come out of their mouth (especially if they're chewing tobacco!) Then sneak off to a quiet corner and secretly open to page 72 of this book. In the first vertical column of this chart, you'll find all the keys you're likely to find in a bluegrass jam. What you need to know is that for any key, most bluegrass songs will only use three chords. These chords have been given Roman numerals by some wise person: I, IV and V. So for the key of *G*, for example, the I chord will be *G*, the IV chord is *C* and the V chord is *D*.

Key	I	II	IV	V	VI
A	A	B	D	E	F#m
B	B	C#	E	F#	G#m
C	C	D	F	G	Am
D	D	E	G	A	Bm
E	E	F#	A	B	C#m
F	F	G	B ^b	C	Dm
G	G	A	C	D	Em

When approaching a jam session, always position yourself so you are facing the most intelligent looking guitar player in the group. With one eye, keep a bead on their left, or chording hand. Learn what a *G*, a *C* and a *D* look like on the guitar. When they change chords, you change chords. With your other eye, watch their right hand. If they know what they're doing, their right hand will play one of the low strings on their guitar, and then they'll strum down on the higher strings. With any luck, their rhythm will be One-TWO, with the accent on the TWO. The Two is when you chop your chord. If the guitar player is impossible to follow, then tap your foot to the music while saying "One-TWO" Chop only on the TWO. How do you know what chords to play if there's no guitar to follow? The verse of most bluegrass songs will generally start and end on the I chord. It'll change to the IV or V chord in the middle, but then it will often come back to the I chord. Remember to keep good rhythm with your chop, even if your chording fingers are hopelessly confused. With a little determination and persistence, you'll soon be a jammer.



Mandolin Rhythms in 2/4 or 4/4 Time

1. THE TREMOLO is the most "mandoliny" of all the rhythms we can play on the instrument. To play the Tremolo, your pick will rapidly go DOWN-UP over and over. Most of the motion should be in the fingers, not the arm. Be sure to keep your wrist loose. Think of the Tremolo as a throttle that can affect the emotion of a song just by speeding it up, or slowing it down. Your goal should be to have a fast Tremolo so you can really make a song drip with emotion.



2. THE HOT DOG. This dandy little rhythm is a way of playing two notes which sounds like "hot dog." Play the "hot" with a DOWN stroke of your pick and the "dog" with an UP stroke. Try it on any note of your mandolin, while saying "hot dog, hot dog" as you pick it. (Make sure no one hears you saying this.) Each Hot Dog is the same as two sixteenth notes. Whenever you see a song in the book with two eighth notes, you can substitute a Hot Dog for each of the eighth notes. For example, look at "Shady Grove" on page 43. The first two notes in measure one are eighth notes. Instead of playing those eighth notes as written, substitute a Hot Dog for each of the notes. In music lingo, you're merely playing four sixteenth notes instead of two eighth notes.

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E
A 2
D 4
G



3. THE GALLOP has the rhythm of the word "do-hickey," and takes up one beat. The timing is long, short-short. Your pick will play DOWN, DOWN-UP. Your foot would go DOWN on the first note (which is the melody note), and DOWN-UP on the two quick notes.

E
A 2
D 4
G



4. THE PORCUPINE sounds like the rhythm of the critter: "Porcu- pine." Go DOWN-UP-DOWN with your pick. Your foot goes DOWN-UP on the pair of eighth notes ("por-cu") and DOWN on the last note ("pine.")

E
A 2
D 4
G



Mandolin Rhythms in 2/4 or 4/4 Time

5. THE WATERMELON. Go DOWN-UP, DOWN-UP with your pick. The rhythm sounds like "wa-ter-mel-on." Your foot goes DOWN-UP-DOWN-UP. The four notes can be played evenly, but you can also accent the first of the four notes, (**wa**-ter-mel-on) or the third note (wa-ter-**mel**-on).

E
A 2
D 4 G G G G
G



6. GOING T' TOWN. This lick sounds like "going t' town." Be sure your pick goes DOWN-UP-UP-DOWN. Your pick should hit DOWN on "go," UP and "ing," UP on "t'" and DOWN on "town." This lick takes the place of a half note, or two quarter notes.

E
A 2
D 4 G G G G
G



7. ECHO NOTES: Instead of playing any quarter note, you can choose to play two eighth notes. We'll call the second eighth note an Echo Note because it echos the melody. Any note of a chord can be played as an echo. The chart below shows you the three notes that make up some common chords. The root, third, and fifth notes are all in harmony with each other and any of these three notes can serve as an echo of the melody. Try this out in measure one of "Little Maggie," page 34.

E
A 2
D 4 G G
G



Chord	Root	Third	Fifth
A	A	C#	E
B	B	D#	F#
C	C	E	G
D	D	F#	A
E	E	G#	B
F	F	A	C
G	G	B	D