

Playing Melody with Bluegrass Rolls: Worried Man Blues

Introduction

This lesson is an intermediate tutorial for players comfortable with a variety of the common three-finger rolls used in Scruggs-style bluegrass banjo. Using the song “Worried Man Blues” as a model, I demonstrate how to incorporate a pre-composed melody into the rhythmic and harmonic texture of the rolls. The melody remains unaltered in all three variations. All of the melodic notes are present and occur in the same place rhythmically through all three arrangements. The variations are achieved through manipulating the direction and the groups of strings used for the rolls.

The Parameters

The melody notes, their place in the meter, and the chords remain constant in each version of “Worried Man Blues.” A simple rendition of the melody is played, with melodic notes placed only on downbeats. Variety is accomplished through changes in the droning harmony (i.e., changing the strings used for the rolls) and slight variations to the rhythm and articulations (see Variation 3).

Variation 1

Our first version of the tune is a very simple incorporation of the melody into a texture of forward and backward rolls. The first eight bars exclusively use forward rolls, bars 9 through 11 use backward variations, and the final four use either variety. Note that strings 1 and 2 are used throughout the arrangements to provide the droning harmony. The first string articulated in each roll is determined by the location of the melody note. For example, if the melody is on string 4, the roll will begin on string 4 and use the string grouping 124. This is the case in measure 1 and in measure 9. Both rolls feature the melody note (the open D) on beat 1 and continue to strings 1 and 2. The difference occurs in the use of the forward roll in measure 1 as opposed to the backward roll in measure 9. Finally, in this arrangement, one roll is used per measure.

Variation 2

Variation 2 is a bit more complex than the first. There is no longer the restriction to one roll per measure. Rolls may change direction or string groupings within one measure, as seen in measures 1, 12, and 13. Also, we are no longer limited to the melody note plus strings 1 and 2 in determining what string grouping to use. This provides a more diverse drone. String groupings 135 and 125 are used in measures 2, 3, 4, 11, and 12. Measures 5 and 8 utilize the middle strings, or the 234 grouping, for timbral and pitch contrast. Still, the melody remains unchanged. The difference between Variations 1 and 2 are a result of altering the non-melodic aspects of three-finger rolls.

Variation 3

Our final variation of “Worried Man Blues” is a significant departure from the first two iterations, yet it retains the same melody and chords with minimal alterations to the statement of the melody. In addition to varying the roll patterns, there is additional variety in the use of special effects such as slides and hammer-ons, the use of grace notes, and rhythmic variety through the incorporation of quarter notes.

In this version, rolls may change direction or string groupings within one measure. This occurs prominently in measure 5, which begins with a forward roll using strings 234 and ends with a backward roll on strings 124. Quarter note “pinches” on strings 1 and 5 are used in measures 2, 4, and 16 to provide rhythmic variety.

Grace notes are used to displace the articulation of the melody by a sixteenth note, and use distinctive techniques such as hammer-ons or slides. These also create variety by approaching the melody note from the note below. This occurs in measures 3, 11, 13, and 14.

Finally, hammer-ons, slides, and doubled-notes are used in a number of places simply as special effects. These are departures from the melody, some of which resemble stock licks used by many players. These are also used to fill space in which the melody is sparse, such as measure 9. Measures 5 and 10 make use of chromatic leading tones into melodic notes, both using the slide technique resolving to the melody. Measures 12 and 14-15 feature ascending chromatic passages using slides into a doubling of the open note on the string below.

Summary

The three variations of “Worried Man Blues” provide a template for fitting a pre-existing melody into the context of a series of roll patterns. The rolls can be varied by altering their direction or string grouping. Grace notes, leading tones, special effects, and rhythmic variations provide further variety to the arrangement. These devices can ultimately be used as a starting point for spontaneous incorporation of newly learned melodies or even for improvisation.