



CHOP TALK

One of the first things a beginning mandolin player hears about is the venerated “bluegrass chop” chord. Beginners, and others with long memories, remember thinking that this chord was devised as a torture device. Stretching that little finger all the way up there seemed impossible. Perhaps it was designed to weed out those without true ambition in an effort to keep the ranks of good players from swelling too much. (Like the way Morse code kept the ham radio bands from being overrun with CBers?)

I figured it was about time I gave you my two cents worth on the subject of chopping, so here goes:

The first thing that comes to mind is that I hear an awful lot of beginners (and some longtime players) that only have one way of playing backup. That is to hold one of the 4-finger chords and make one forceful whack downwards, across all 8 strings, on the offbeat. Hard and loud.

Some folks seem to delight in seeing how loud and obnoxious they can make that chord. Much talk among jamming mandolin players is about how much “bark” they can whip from their mandolins.

Having some studio experience recording mandolins I can tell you with scientific certainty that the “chop” of a mandolin is incredibly powerful compared to the individual strings played during melody solos. The near-simultaneous sounding of all 8 strings creates an amplitude (volume) spike that will drive the meters beyond the red zone. Invariably the gain will have to be adjusted down for rhythm chops compared to normal soloing or distortion will result. (This is assuming the distance from the microphone remains constant during the recording.)

If you don't buy my assertion that a mandolin chop is very powerful it may be because you are always standing behind it and sometimes facing an army of banjos. Try handing your mandolin off to someone else and stand in front of it.

This power is often misused. Whack, whack, whack, as hard as we can. It is made worse when there are a couple of mandolin players all playing that same chord shapes in the same positions and all whacking away at the same time. (In fairness to mandolin players they are not the only culprits! You will see troupes of banjo players often doing the very same thing when playing so-called backup.)

To me backup means back down! In terms of volume. It also means to support. It doesn't mean to clobber someone in the ears.

I think, since we play 99% of our chops using downstrokes, we would be wise to let gravity do the work. I find that the sound is more pleasing to the ear if the speed of the pickstroke is about the same as the rate at which your right hand would freefall toward earth. There are two main muscles that control the up and down movement of the right hand during a big, wide chop. A lot of players yank the pick downwards using the tricep on the back of the upper arm. Then they use the bicep to raise the hammer for the next blow.

This type of opposing muscle action leads to the two muscles fighting each other. Played this way you must first pull down with the triceps just after you release the bicep. Pick slams into the strings. Next, you must stop pulling down with the tricep as the bicep puts on the brakes. The pick stops and is then lifted by the bicep. The pick is lifted and it all starts over again. (*continued on next page...*)

Chop Talk continued...

If your muscle timing is not perfect the tricep may start the “yank” before the bicep lets go. So you just use more force with the tricep. Same goes for the upstroke if you fail to time the release of the tricep before you raise the pick via the bicep.

All of this back and forth can lead to the muscles working too hard and fighting one another. Try this little experiment:

Sit down with your right arm resting on your right leg. Make a fist with your right thumb sticking up. Grab your right thumb with your left hand and lift the right arm up about a foot. Let your right arm hang like a dead weight. Now let go and let your right arm drop like a rock.

Did you try to catch it? Try to allow the arm to fall so you can feel what it is like to lower the arm using gravity rather than using muscles to power it down.

Do this a few times until you feel the sensation of a dead weight dropping. Now, stand up and try the same thing. If you don't do anything to stop the arm from falling it will end up at your side. We don't

want to play that way because it is a lot of wasted motion in bringing it back up for the next stroke. So, we must turn on the bicep to catch the falling arm around waist height.

Getting this timing right is the key to relaxed, gravity influenced chopping. Tighten the bicep too soon and you slow the drop. Tighten too late and your arm drops too far. Notice, this important fact! The tricep is not involved at all! It does nothing to cause the arm to drop. It does nothing to raise the arm either. It doesn't have to be “turned off” to allow the bicep to do its braking and return trip thing. That is a more efficient way to play.

To me this is less tiring and produces a more natural sounding chop. I don't know if the speed of a falling right arm is the perfect speed to set 8 strings in motion, one after the other, but it sounds better to me. Less distortion. Less clutter. Less “whack.” But, the hand must be in free-fall. If you brake with the bicep you get a slower brushing effect and this is cool too for a different sound. But the holy grail, the immortal chop, to me, sounds best when played at that speed and with the natural amount of force determined by gravity.

B.L.

YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE LICK RECYCLING PROGRAM...

Here, for your reading enjoyment and musical edification, is the the complete selection of licks submitted by the hundreds of readers of this newsletter in response to my my fruitlessly attempted “Lick Recycling Program.”

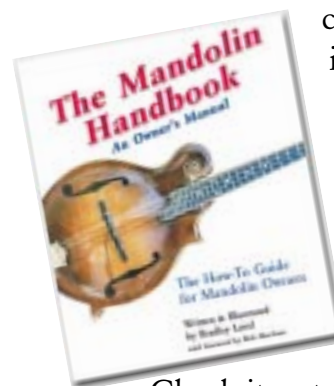
?

Not one lick was tabbed out and submitted in the course of three months. I guess it was just another of my dumb ideas that failed. You probably thought I was kidding, but I wasn't. Don't worry though. I have more dumb ideas where that one came from! It is only through the enthusiastic pursuit of new dumb ideas that true progress results. Quote me on that.

MandoUniversity News • Winter 2007
©2007, Bradley Laird

NEW BOOK: The Mandolin Handbook

My latest book is like the owner's manual that they never gave you. 80 pages of information on mando history, care, setup, adjustment, tuning, accessories, repair. Perfect reading material for your ceramic and tile reading room. Interesting tales of destroyed instruments. Do it yourself projects. How to deal with grouchy repair people. Fun to read and useful.



Check it out on my website at:
www.mandouniversity.com