

Hi fellow mandolians! Well, another month has gone by and it is again time to assemble this month's MandoUniversity News. I hope that you are enjoying it and finding it useful. The price is certainly right! To date there are 110 subscribers to this newsletter. And nobody, knock on curly maple, has asked to be removed from the list. I despise junk email and I hope, if nothing else, this newsletter brings some relief from all that garbage you get that you never asked for. At least this garbage is delivered at your request.

I want to say thank you to everyone who has purchased and explored the two books that I put together. I have received lots of good feedback from readers and that is helping to adjust the direction of the third book that I am now working on. Send me your two-cents worth if you have ideas. To those of you who are on the newsletter list but do not have either book, I hope you will give them a try.

While I am talking about the books let me suggest something that you probably already know. The books only work if you understand them and use them. I guess that is true for every "how to" book ever written. If there are parts of Mandolin Master Class that you skimmed over because it didn't make sense on the first read take some time and go back and re-read the material. My main advice to users of Mandolin Training Camp would be: 1) Are you actually playing the exercises? and 2) Have you begun the work of transposition? Reading the book is a good thing to do. Playing what is presented a couple of times is a better idea. Playing the exercises until you can scream through them is ever better.

OK, you didn't sign up for my free monthly lecture so let me get on with the meat of this issue...

Bradley Laird

## Nashville Numbering System

I saw a posting on Mandolin Cafe the other day that said something like "Laird's book also explains the Nashville Numbering System." When I read that I thought "Well, not exactly." The system of representing chord progressions by using numbers is explained in Mandolin Master Class. But, the system I explain is the use of Roman numerals to represent chords. This is the system used in most music theory courses. The "Nashville Number System" is similar but has some unique "shorthand" that I thought it might be interesting to discuss.

If this entire discussion of numbers representing chords is not familiar to you may I suggest a good book that covers it... yep, Mandolin Master Class. I would go through the entire explanation here but since most subscribers have the book I will not bore them with it again. I will hit upon the basic principles that were explained in the book so you are not totally lost, however.

Here is an example of a chord progression written as Roman Numerals:

**I IV I V7 I**

If this chord progression were being played in the key of C the chords would be: C F C G7 C

Here is the quick and dirty explanation of why this is so:

When we use numbers to represent chords in a particular key we start by laying out the notes of the major scale of the key we are talking about. The notes of the C major scale are:

C D E F G A B C

If we give each note of the scale a number we get:

I II III IV V VI VII I  
C D E F G A B C

So, in the key of C a I chord is C, D is II, etc. If you had a chord in between one of the scale notes we use flats or sharps to indicate which chord we mean. Therefore, a C# chord would be called I#. An F# chord would be called IV#. Of course F# could also be called Gb(flat). (See the book if all that blows your mind.)

Dm would be IIm, Am7 would be VIIm7, etc.

This system of Roman numerals shows the order of the chords as they appear in a song but does not show how long you should play each one. In order to show how many beats each chord gets we would need to lay out some sort of page showing measures and part measures of time. (Continued)

## “Nashville Numbering System” continued...

One way to do this would be to take a piece of standard notation staff paper and mark off all the measures found in a song and then just write the chords over the measures where they appear. No notes on the staff just blank measures with chord indications. That would work.

The “Nashville Numbering System” (as explained to me) is an even more compact “shorthand” for showing the chord progression AND the timing. Here is a brief explanation of the system.

Numbers are used to indicate the chords in the same way as when using the Roman numeral system. But, instead, the more common “Arabic” numeral is used... like 1, 2, 3, etc.

So, a chord progression that was I IV V I becomes 1 4 5 1. Just that one little change already makes it a little easier to understand.

Now, about timing. Maybe because most “country” songs are in 4/4 time (4 beats per measure) the system states that a single number means to play that chord for 4 beats. So here is a simple tune in the key of G:

1	1	4	1
1	1	5	1

You would play G for 8 beats, then C for 4 beats, then G for 12 beats, then D for 4 beats, then G for 4 beats. Now, what if you have less than 4 beats to deal with? If a measure has 2 beats of one chord and 2 beats of another chord it is indicated as a fraction like this:

1	1	-	1
		4	

This song (if played in G) would be: 10 beats of G, 2 beats of C, then 4 beats of G. A minus sign would indicate a minor chord:

1	2-	1	5
1	4	-	1
		5	

This song would be 4 beats of G, 4 beats of Am, 4 beats of G, 4 beats of D, 4 beats of G, 4 beats of C, 2 beats of G, 2 beats of D, and finally 4 beats of G.

Is this starting to make sense? Just remember: whole numbers get 4 beats, fractions get 2 beats each, and minus means minor.

OK, so what about the times when a chord gets less than 2 beats? Well, if a chord gets 1 beat you divide the fraction even further:

		1/4	
1	1	-	1
		5	

This song (if played in G) would be: 4 beats of G, 4 beats of G, 1 beat of G, 1 beat of C, 2 beats of D, 4 beats of G. So, the upper part of the fraction is two beats and they have been split so that 1 beats goes to the 1 chord and 1 beat goes to the 4 chord.

If a chord gets 3 beats, the system starts getting even funkier. If you had 3 beats of G followed by one beat of F (in the key of G) would would write it this way:

1'''
-
4

Those 3 little “hash” marks means play the 1 for 3 beats. OK, when I got this far trying to learn this system I said to myself “That’s cool. I know at least something about the Nashville numbering system.” But, I have never really adopted it. I suppose if someone used it for some period of time it would become extremely easy to understand.

There is more to the system than I have tried to explain here, like how to indicate “stops”, repeats, etc, but I hope you at least have the picked up the idea that the “Nashville Number System” is a different animal than the Roman numeral system.

I am a big advocate of using numbers to represent chords, especially, when capos come into the picture, but regardless of the system you use to write out chords just remember this little idea: You are always in the key of ONE. (OK, most of the time.)

Just to show you why I don’t really go for the “Nashville System” take a look at the first part of Blackberry Blossom written out that way:

1/5	4/1	1/5	4/1
-	-	-	-
4/1	2/5	4/1	5/1

I am not knocking the system but that seems pretty complicated. Maybe I am just not that practiced and comfortable with the system. Or I could just be a little slow. Regardless, any system of referring to chords by the numbers is, in my view, better than always calling them out by letter names. Especially when, 2 minutes into learning the tune, the singer decides to “move it up.” Know what I mean?

# My Mando Rig Explained

After last month's article concerning microphone setup and monitors I got a couple of questions from people inquiring about the equipment that I use. I think it might be an interesting exercise to run down all the components that I employ and discuss how and why I use them.

Machines. That's what they are. Even a pick is a simple machine... a lever and a very tiny inclined plane. Machines are just intermediate devices to aid in the communication of my ideas to someone else's head. Here is the complete chain of machines from my brain to the listener's (in case they are actually listening) brain at a typical gig:

Starting with the pick:

Lately I have again been using a tortoise shell pick about the size of a quarter and worn nearly round. At times I will grab a Fender Heavy or sometimes a Medium and then use the rounded corners.

Pick is connected to the strings:

I have been using Martin M-400 mandolin strings for over 15 years and I like them. Gauges: 10, 14, 22, 34 I think. A lot of people consider that a pretty light set but my mandolin likes them and so does my ear. And I do play hard! I whack that beast with merciless vengeance and they hold up. Sometimes I play easy and they sound good then too. Opinions. Everybody has one and they all... I change strings about once a month, don't like the sound of a really bright new string, and break about 3 strings a year teaching 18 students, practicing and playing about 90 gigs each year.

Now the box:

My mandolin is a 1985 Flatiron Artist that I bought in 1985. I have beat the snot out of that thing and the only thing to ever go wrong has been the eventual failure of one of the tailpiece string hooks. One popped off last year and I "shared" hooks for a month or two until I stuck a replacement on there. The tailpiece is the standard sheet metal "Gibson" type. I see no reason to switch to a cast tailpiece. This mandolin to me gets better each year. I will never play another mandolin. I found my mandolin. Steve Carlson made a good one and it found me. It's a good match and I will forever sing the praises of this Montana Flatiron. Deep, warm, can be brutally loud, can be sweet, takes a lickin' and keeps on picking. Take a whopping and keeps on choppin! Loar who?

The tailpiece cover always rides in my case. It is pain to get on and off and so it stays nice and shiny in the plastic bag. I don't think I have had it on in at least ten years and now with the replacement tailpiece it probably doesn't fit right anyway.

The bridge is the stock base that Flatiron used. Around 1987 I stuck a Fishman bridge transducer on it but kept the original base. I had to enlarge the holes a bit on the

Fishman top so it would go on and the bridge top leans a few degrees towards the peghead and it's funny that nearly everyone who closely eyeballs my mandolin says something about it. That slight leaning. But, I just forget it and play it. I doesn't seem to be a significant problem and it never moves perceptibly.

The fingerboard on my Flatiron has a very slight radius. A friend of mine (Tony Duck) bought one of the same models a few months before me at the same store in College Park, GA (Jackson's Music) and it had a much more pronounced radius. I like mine better. But, he likes his better.

The frets have been replaced twice since 1985 by my bandmate and luthier Bob MacIsaac. I think he uses a "guitar size" fret but I never really asked him precisely what the size is. They are pretty beefy compared to the old vintage frets I have seen. I have always had the same size frets in the mandolin. The frets are seriously due to be done again and when the gigs slow down in December I am handing it over again. He may do a partial refret this time with the same wire as last time since the fingerboard is still looking right.

I skipped mentioning the endpin. The original was an ebony friction fit as God commanded all mandolins should have. But, when the Fishman went in I had Bob put in an endpin jack and it has worked flawlessly for years. For the curious, the wire leaves the back side of the bridge, dives into the lower F hole and is soldered to the jack. I have never had a buzz, rattle, or any sort of problem with that setup. At first I looked at that tiny wire and assumed I would rip it out by accident but it has never happened. It is located in the perfect place that gets very little physical abuse.

The nut is mother of pearl and has never been changed other than my initial tweaking of the slot depth. The tuners on my mandolin are stock and work fine still after 2 decades. The truss rod has been adjusted perhaps 4 times in 20 years and does it work without issue or complaint.

My action is about "in the middle" not too high, not too low. Figure out that. I don't feel like going and taking measurements right now. I will do that later. I do have a bit of a slope with the bass side about "a bit" higher than the treble.

Strap:

I use a 1/2 wide, homemade leather strap. One hole in one end, looped through itself and around the scroll. 3 holes in the other end so I can adjust if I feel like it. I always wear the strap over my left shoulder and across the back. I want to do it over the right like all good bluegrassers, but screw it. I can't play like that.

Continued on Next Page...

On to the microphone:

Microphone? What about that Fishman? Well, here is the deal. 25 years ago I used an SM-57 and nothing else. That was OK except I was beating up the front of the instrument and I would whack the end of the mic with my right hand sometimes. So I decided to go wireless and put in the Fishman.

I never liked the tone of the Fishman 100%. I thought the attack was too pronounced and the lively woody flavor turned to rubber bandy mush. At noisy gigs it was very helpful but everytime I listened to a recording of the thing I was shocked to hear how different it was from the mandolin sound I knew that instrument could produce.

I also used to use a volume pedal to boost the solos and kill the loudness on my overly aggressive chopping. But that was a big hassle.

Here is now my current setup and I am very happy with it:

I plug the Fishman into a wireless transmitter on my belt. That signal level is set for where I like the rhythm chop to be. Perhaps a bit under that level. Then on a gooseneck attached to my vocal mic stand is my AKG C-1000S condenser mic running to its own channel on the board. On solos I am in that mic and the Fishman is on too. During 90% of my rhythm I am on the Fishman only. I have the AKG positioned so I have to move into it to take solos so it isn't overly loud when I am singing and can't move

around much. The wireless allows me to jump all over the place when I am not singing and go visit the fiddle player at the other end and so forth. I have fiddled with the EQ and have adjusted both signals so I am happy with the overall system. At gigs where there is a quiet, listening audience I usually don't mess with the Fishman or the wireless and just work the AKG. At festivals or when someone else is running sound I usually pack the AKG along and use it if they will let me, but if they have good mics I just let them do their thing and live with it. Sometimes they have better mics and it is interesting to get to field test them. If all they have for the mandolin is a Radio Shack dynamic mic or an SM-58 I whip out the AKG. (And the oversize adapter which you must carry.)

For monitors I use a floor monitor that has a 12" and a horn. I think it is a 12". Could be a 10". Some of the band have gone to in-ear monitors and I tried them and didn't like them. But, it is probably one of those things that I just need to work with a while. I do notice that Bob often has one in and one out dangling. And sometimes he is not wearing it at all and "mooching" off my floor monitor.

Well, that's enough of this. I will skip the PA system and speakers, etc. If you are curious let me know and I give you my thoughts and experience in that department. Perhaps there is something here that is interesting or enlightening in some way. I am sure your story is equally enthralling.

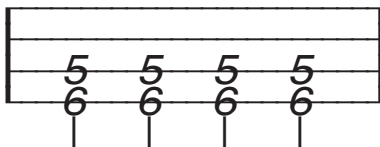
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## The Two Finger Blues Trick

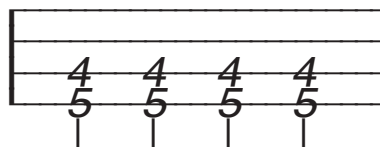
I almost hate to give this little trick away. I should charge at least 5 bucks for this because I have found it to be so useful over the years. Well, heck, it's almost Christmas so consider this my gift to you. I refuse to wrap it, however.

First, let me say something about rhythm chops. I love to play on the lower strings. The G and the D strings. Most of my bluegrass chop is there. Don't get me wrong, I like the treble side too, but I love the low end. OK, now that I said that let me explain this little trick. Let's say a tune has the I, IV, I, V, I progression and you are tired of banging all those four finger chop chords. Let's also say that you think some bluesy dominant 7th chords would sound good. And let's also say that you are in the key of A. Try this:

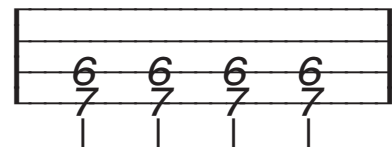
Play this for the I chord (A7)



Play this for the IV chord (D7)



Play this for the V chord (E7)



I think it is really cool that you can just scoot your fingers down one fret and get the "heart of the sound" of the D7 chord. Then slide em up one fret and you get the E7 sound. And in the middle is the A7 sound. Play around with that idea some. Figure out what the notes names and scale tones for those 3 double stops are. Why does it work so well? How can you use it elsewhere on the fingerboard. Try tossing these in during the next bluegrass tune you play in the key of A. How did it work out? Can you figure out how to use this for the key of D? Food for thought, people. Food for thought.

# The Sundown Waltz

Bradley Laird

mm=110

Mandolin

The score is written for mandolin in treble clef, key of D major (two sharps), and 3/4 time. It consists of seven staves of music. The first staff begins with a whole rest followed by a dotted quarter note D4, an eighth note E4, and a quarter note F#4. The second staff continues with a dotted quarter note G4, an eighth note A4, and a quarter note B4. The third staff has a dotted quarter note C5, an eighth note D5, and a quarter note E5. The fourth staff has a dotted quarter note F#5, an eighth note G5, and a quarter note A5. The fifth staff has a dotted quarter note B5, an eighth note C6, and a quarter note D6. The sixth staff has a dotted quarter note E6, an eighth note F#6, and a quarter note G6. The seventh staff has a dotted quarter note A6, an eighth note B6, and a quarter note C7. The piece concludes with a final whole rest.

D G D

A7 D A7

D G D A7

D D G

D Em A7

D A7 Bm G

D A7 D