

What's in Your Case? A Case Study.

Every now and then I open my case and am astonished to see the collection of odds and ends that end up in there. I thought it might be interesting to open the case up and talk about what is in there and why. Even before the case is opened you can see that I have a bunch of stickers and my name plastered on the case in giant letters. Ugly, yes. But, it serves a good purpose. One night I was at a jam session and left the scene, mando case in hand, and only as I tossed it into my backseat did I notice that it was not my case! That got me thinking how easy it would be for someone else to walk off with my mandolin by mistake. So, the next day I stuck my name on the case.

When opened, my case has a strange collection of interesting contents. It probably looks a lot like your collection. There are some mystery items that I have no explanation for, such as the temporary tattoo, a business card from some insurance guy, a bright green feather from a "boa", lint balls and general crud accumulation. That kind of stuff I try to ream out about twice a year or I can't get the lid closed.



But, inside this pile of stuff (which all does fit in the case) are some downright useful and essential items. Here is a list of what I found in my case today along with a little commentary:

1. My Mandolin - I mention this item because I once got halfway to a gig and realized I had an empty case. My mandolin was at home laying around on the couch or something. If you do nothing else, at least verify that the thing is inside before you walk out the door.

2. Nail Clippers - Used for obvious reasons from time to time. Can also be used as some sort of all purpose tool if you are creative.

3. Emery Board - I don't think I have used this more than once or twice ever, but I have it. The ability to sand on something could be very handy.

4. Spare Strings - Of course you need these. I usually have one or two complete sets and whatever oddball partial sets are laying around.

5. Wire Cutting Needlenose Pliers - Good for chomping off the string ends. The needlenose end can be used when a string breaks at the tuner capstan and you can't get that little piece out of the hole. Can be used to re-bend your tailpiece cover to make it fit right and it will even open a beer bottle in a pinch.

6. Electronic Tuning Device - I carry a cheap Korg. I have three or four different models all over the house, but carry the Korg.

7. Extra AA Batteries - For the tuner, or a friend's tuner if they need them. I keep them in a little leather "purse" so they don't accidentally drain themselves by being nestled in among loose mandolin strings, metal tools, etc.

8. Super Glue - I carry a tube of this adhesive and have used it a few times over the years. You never know how you might be able to use this. I once had a bit of pearl inlay fall out of my banjo neck and fixed it 2 minutes. Loose binding can be tacked down. It is one of those things that you will never need if you carry it but wish you had it the moment you don't.

9. The "Drug Store" - I carry a few Aspirin, Tylenol, Immodium AD, and the like. This can help you personally or some ailing fellow musician and make an otherwise miserable gig something more bearable.

10. Laminated Photo of Bill Monroe - I have always carried one of these in all my mandolin cases. Keeps me humble.

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All that junk actually rides in my case. Most of it crammed into the "storage compartment."

What's In Your Case - Continued

11. A Picture of "Your Sweetie" - Correction. I carry a picture of my sweetie, not yours. I am not sure exactly how this helps the situation but I know it does.

12. Business Cards - Have them with you! Stick them on the speakers, lay them around here and there. Keep all the band members stocked with a few in their pockets at all times. This is the cheapest and best form of advertising ever devised. Don't look like an idiot while you dig for them. Snap one out when asked. And smile. That guy interrupting you during your fabulous mandolin solo to ask for a business card is the guy who pays for you to be able to play that mandolin! Smile and hand him the card.

13. Pens and pencils - Keep a few with you. Sharpies to autograph CDs and photos. Make changes to set lists. Get someone's phone number. Got to have them.

14. Craftsman Deep Well Socket - This is what I use to play slide.

15. Picks - Good grief there are picks everywhere in there! Most of the plastic ones are shot. I keep the good ones in two old leather coin purses.

16. A Small Piece of 600 Grit Sandpaper - I use this to smooth up a gouged pick from time to time.

17. A Guitar Capo - Now you might really wonder why I have that in my case. I don't use it on the mandolin. But, having a spare on hand can help when some less prepared guitar player can't find his capo. Do you really want to play Old Joe Clark in G? Lend him the capo and you will both be happier.

18. A Bandana - Stolen from a gig. So many uses I can't describe them all.

19. "Multi-Purpose" Tool - I carry a little thing that has six various tools folded into one handle. Swiss Army screwdriver of sorts.

20. A Humidity Indicator Card - I give these away in my piano tuning business so they are present as a "piano tuning business card" and also provide a means of keeping tabs on the humidity in the case. I have a few homemade humidifiers I employ about twice a year but don't habitually carry them around.

Be prepared and you can often avert minor disasters and just make your life easier. Case closed.

A Reader Question

"Beginners don't know how to identify the sound of a minor, augmented, etc. I sometimes think that I still don't know these sounds correctly even after all the years I've played. What do you think? I know exactly the line of thinking I'm trying to pursue. Let me know if I haven't conveyed that to you properly. If I have, let me know what you think. Wayne."

Wayne:

In the book (Mandolin Master Class) I go through the "how to construct" for most chord forms. Not as a "memorize this shape and put your fingers there" method but rather I relate each chord to the notes of the major scale. But, that is the explanatory material in the text. I am realistic enough to know that most bluegrass players will not often use a Db half-diminished chord or a G#sus4/add9 so when it comes to the CD I stick with the majors and minors. In the book I didn't dive too much into the specific art of "hearing changes" though I hint around at it while talking about hearing melodies. Let me describe one of the exercises I do with my students in person (that might make it into Book 3) that has helped in the hearing of chord changes.

I start out with a sheet of cardboard with 3 circles printed on it. One circle is marked I, one marked IV, and one marked V. You could have guessed that I bet. I have them put the instrument away so they are not distracted by trying to play. Then I turn my back to them so they can't see my instrument and I play little simple chord progressions. I tell them to put a finger on the "I" and then when something sounds different they make a guess as to whether it went to the IV or the V. I might play I V I V I V I V a while to get that V in their head, then I IV I IV I IV, etc to get the IV going. Then I start mixing them up. I watch over my shoulder to see if they are sticking their finger on the right chord.

After that we do the same thing with the instruments. I usually do this stuff for a few weeks in a row, about 15 minutes of it at each lesson. We gradually hit other chords and also do the exact same thing sitting and listening to recorded music.

I try to help them hear "the cues" that are so often found in the bass line that give you hints as to where the chord progression is going.

We also, and some students dread this, sing. I have found that for most people the chord progressions come much more naturally when they are singing than when just playing rhythm. A lesson might go like this: I sing them a melody of some song they don't know. No instruments at all. Nothing too complicated, just try to get the basic lines of the melody learned. Then the first challenge is to choose the first chord (the I). Find it. That takes some explaining and fooling around. Or perhaps that melody will get shifted to find the chord. Either way. Get the key established. Then I have them sing the melody and just attempt "some chords" without any instruction or help. Most people are very good at hearing when a chord is wrong, so a little trial and error and they are soon finding chords that seem to "fit". The important point I try to make is that the chords are there to support the melody, not the other way around. Trying to learn to hear chords with the absence of a melody is like shooting in the dark. Having a melody makes it much easier. And a bass line makes it even easier.

Anyway, Wayne, this whole ear-training and learning to recognize the changes is something I am working on organizing into a coherent text, but it is not dealt with to any great extent in the first book (Mandolin Master Class). I am still fooling around, trying different teaching methods, and trying to figure out how it is that I am able to do it (most of the time) and then trying to figure out how to help someone else be able to do it. To figure out how to put it in print takes some time, heavy duty analysis, and lots of testing. Incidentally, all of the material in the first book is tested. My guinea pigs, I mean students, have all been dragged through this material over and over and I have seen the positive results. I can say something like "you know, that 5-6-1-2-3-5-6 thing we did..." and they know what I mean.

Hey, I almost wrote another book just now. OK, I better stop blabbering here and take the dog outside before his patience and bladder gives out.

If you have questions send them to me: autobug@aol.com

Bluegrass Keys and Your Priorities For Practice

In both of my books (Mandolin Master Class & Mandolin Training Camp) I suggest that one of your goals should be to learn to play in all keys. So many of us started playing the mandolin in only two or three keys. To make the leap out into other keys can really enlarge your understanding of the instrument and your utility as a player.

That said, I do realize that there are some keys that are just not going to come up much in the bluegrass world. So, let's look at some priorities for practice.

I have been playing bluegrass a long time and I think only once or twice in all of these 3 decades have I ever played a song in the key of F#. The presence of banjo players almost assures that you won't see that key very often. In the real world of bluegrass here are the keys that you will see, more or less in order of the frequency I have observed them being used:

G, A, D, C

Those keys seem to be the big four. After those you will begin to see the appearance of:

B, Bb, E, and F

Tuning issues, open strings, and habit all go into the creation of this group of 8 keys that are most commonly used in bluegrass.

Here are the missing 4 keys that are almost never encountered in bluegrass:

G#, C#, D#, and F#

I am not saying you will never play those chords. You will. If you are playing a I-IV-V progression in the key of B you most certainly will play the F# chord as it is the V chord in that key.

Faced with 12 major keys it can be overwhelming for the intermediate level mandolin player to tackle all of them at once. Both of my books include materials to help you in this direction but if a person had to start somewhere here is my basic prescription:

1. Learn the Major Scales for G, A, Bb, B, C, D, E and F. If you can do those, even for just one octave, you will have a much easier time playing tunes and improvising.

2. Practice scales, arpeggios, pentatonic scales and chords over a I-IV-V progression in the key of G, A, F and E. Why do I suggest these 4 keys? Above I stated that nearly all bluegrass music will be played in one of 8 keys. If you play the I, IV, and V chords of G, A, F, and E you will have played the I chord for all 8 of those keys! Here is a chart to make this clearer:

The 8 Common Bluegrass Keys:

G A Bb B C D E F

The I IV V chords for 4 keys:

G	C	D
A	D	E
F	Bb	C
E	A	B

If you practice pentatonic scales for all 8 of those chords you can then improvise (by one method) in all 8 of those keys.

One benefit of this practice mentality is that you will find that much of what you learn to do in these 4 keys can be transposed into the other 4 keys fairly easily. You may have wondered why I didn't suggest learning the key of D and the key of C. Well, if you learn to play in A on the 1st and 2nd strings you have just learned D too! Just move it down one string. So, the upper octave of A is just like D in the middle.

The same is true for the key of G and C. Play a G scale starting on the 5th fret of the 3rd string. Now play a C scale starting on the 5th fret of the 4th string. Same basic stuff.

After you mess around with this awhile you will find that the notes for fingerings for the key of E are just like the low octave of A and the high octave of B. So, anyway, all of this aside, don't put off learning to function in all the keys just because it is overwhelming at times. Start somewhere. Start with those 4 keys and when you begin to work on the other keys you will find a lot of similarities and discover that you already can play most of it.

In the second book (Mandolin Training Camp) there are pages and pages of exercises all written for a I-IV-V progression in the key of G. In learning these you are already learning some C and D material. In the book I suggest that you begin transposing the exercises into other keys. Why not use the 3 keys I offer here: A, F and E. That is a good starting point when you are beginning to get comfortable with the key of G.

Note: If this discussion of "I-IV-V" and "keys" and so forth doesn't make sense to you I suggest the first book "Mandolin Master Class" which covers all of this.



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