

Introduction

Traditional improvisation is usually one of the most perplexing subjects a dedicated bluegrass mandolinist must address. Where to start? Should one just play anything that comes to mind? Even if seemingly good bluegrass ideas come along, what about the problem of reinventing the wheel? Is it better to work on songs or on instrumentals? Which ones? Are some keys more productive than others? Since Bill Monroe is so very important, should one take an aspect of his style and use it as a basis for improvising on a tune or song? Does the work of other professional mandolinists than Bill really matter?

So the questions go. The answers are, of course, somewhat complex, but this book will help you to make a solid beginning. I have taken an instrumental tune (there is a song as well, “Little Beggarman”, whose words go along with this melody) that is a perennial bluegrass favorite, and have written highly characteristic variations which, if carefully played and *considered*, will lead you directly to the right sound and technique.

My purpose here is to impart comprehension of true bluegrass improvisation while at the same time giving instruction in archetypic configurations of motivic development and reorganization. If I had written out my own particular artistic conceptions gained by many years of playing and study, the music would have been more individuated and specific than what might be termed ‘standard bluegrass’; so I have concentrated on universality and clarity, focusing on the sounds, motives, and techniques that any bluegrass mandolin player should know - with Bill’s concepts always very strongly in mind of course.

The tune is in Mixolydian mode (major third degree, major sixth degree, flat seventh degree), and the appropriate modal key signature is used throughout. Although I have put in more courtesy accidentals than is usual, it is ultimately up to the reader to make sense of the passages that could, in Monroe bluegrass usage, be perhaps played with either major or minor thirds. In the Monroe style the third degree of the scale often changes very quickly, and this feature is an important and highly characteristic artistic subtlety. Your sight reading and musical logic will improve by working with such passages. Watch the C sharps and C naturals carefully, and remember that the key signature is F sharp - C sharp - (G natural); the C naturals and G sharps are the real accidentals.

Although a few passages, e.g. measures 112-114, 216-218 and 260-263, are specifically intended to teach certain abstract artistic concepts, much of the music is highly typical for ‘regular’ Monroe style mandolin, and is of course intended for slow practice and careful contemplative learning. *However, these variations do play very well up to speed.* Try memorizing one in particular and then playing it at a fairly fast tempo to gain some understanding of how it feels to play Monroe mandolin in performance.

This music is almost all in the first position, with the same or similar motives constantly weaving throughout, and this is to get you to concentrate on the way things are done in Monroe bluegrass *as living art*. The alternative would have been to impart new and sometimes complicated fingerboard concepts that could act as stumbling blocks and engender frustration by the fact that they could not be immediately applied and adapted.

The chord progression does not always remain exactly the same, specifically in measures 32-34, 48, 50, 65, and 132-133. Such small alterations sometimes occur spontaneously in true bluegrass in accordance with perceived changes in the meaning of the melodic line, and I thought you would enjoy a few characteristic examples of this recondite aspect of the music.

Take your time and study the concepts in each variation.

LM

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This book is dedicated to Buddy Merriam.