

BEGINNERS' BANJO WORKSHOP 2009

BACK-UP

New banjo players generally spend nearly all their practice time learning tunes, but when playing in a band or a jam session most of time we aren't playing a solo but are playing back-up, with the aim of enhancing the ensemble sound. What should we be playing behind vocalists and the other instruments?

Here are some tips:

- The first and most important thing you need to learn in order to play effective back-up is **how to recognise and play the chords** of the tune that the group is playing. Consider:
 - Do you understand the role of chords in a tune?
 - Can you quickly move between the most common chord positions on the banjo (G, D and C in the key of G)?
 - How might you train yourself to recognise chord changes in unfamiliar tunes? (By ear; or by recognising chord shapes on the guitar).
- When there's **singing**, the banjo can do a simple vamp (if a mandolin isn't already doing this), or some rolls which avoid the melody but follow the chords. At the ends of lines when there's no singing some licks can be played to fill the gaps.
- During **mandolin** solos the banjo can take over the vamping from the mandolin.
- **Fiddle** solos give banjo players the biggest scope for back up. They can play rolls, just vamp or even sometimes play the melody along with the fiddle.
- When the **guitarist** takes a break the main aim is to be really quiet so as not to drown out the guitar. It's ok to not even play at all.
- Occasionally the **bass** will take a solo. Usually the whole band will play just the first beat of every bar, or every second bar.
- **Dobros** have a similar sound to banjos so a simple vamp might be enough, or quiet rolls. If you play near the bridge the sound will be crisper and help to separate the sounds of the two instruments.

Remember that the aim of back-up is to improve the overall sound but not distract attention from whoever is meant to be in the limelight at the time. Good listening skills are the key.

The next page contains tablature for a few useful back-up patterns—vamping, repeated rolls, and some more complex patterns—across the most common chords (G, D, and C).

-Peter Somerville