Mandolin II

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There are three fundamental elements to music: Rhythm, Harmony, and Melody.

I once read where Quincy Jones said, "Rhythm is as old as time. It goes back to a heartbeat, and it's the first music ever made. Harmony is simply math. But melody, is a gift from God."

RHYTHM

Rhythm is the skeleton that postures melody and harmony. It is at the heart of expression, and it is often the difference between a musician that gets your attention and one that doesn't. Rhythm is mainly a right hand thing on the mandolin. In Western music -- certainly old-time, bluegrass, country, swing, rock-a-billy, and others -- 4/4 time is common, also 3/4 and 6/8. In these styles of music, often the back beat is accented. In 4/4 time, the back beats are 2 & 4, and the downbeats are 1 & 3. It's common for mandolin players to take breaks, solos and play fiddle tunes using a combination of quarter and eighth notes.

Quarter noter are counted: 1 2 3 4

Eighth notes are counted: 1 & 2 & 3 & 4

A note about the **pick stroke.** It's important to follow through with your stroke. Watch how a golfer or baseball player doesn't stop their swing after the ball is hit. They hit right through the ball. Think of your pick hand as a hammer hitting a nail. When hammering, you throw the weight of the hammer at the nail, not gripping the handle with a death grip, but with just enough hold for the thing not to fly out of your hand. Same goes for holding the pick. You throw the weight of your had at the strings, holding the pick just enough not to drop it. Follow through is important for the note to ring out. A loose grip is also an important part of tremolo.

The concept of throwing weight also pertains to **tapping your foot.** Not every musician taps their foot while playing. Some tap erratically, but still play in time. For some the physical expression of rhythm is a big part of their rhythmic success. When I tap my foot, it is usually on the 1 & 3 beats of the measure. I do not lift my foot on the opposite beat, but (back to the hammer analogy) throw the weight of my foot down to the floor on the beats they are counting. If rhythm is your weak suit, I think tapping and chopping (on the opposite beat) is good to do every time you pick up your instrument.

Picking eighth notes is called **flat picking.** The numbered beats are played

with a down stroke, and the "&" beats are played with up strokes, regardless of what your last stroke was or how many rests you played or what combination of eighths and quarters you played.

Try playing tunes you already know, accenting the 2 & 4 beats (they will be down strokes) and see if you can hear and feel the difference.

It is the same rhythm stroke that we use while playing chords (8 strokes, 4 down & 4 up). It takes more skill and precision when playing a tune, but playing the tune, while accenting the 2 & 4 will make a huge difference.

TONE

Tone is another aspect of playing music that separates the good from the best. If you are not a melodic or harmonic genius, then you can still be a worthy mandolin player if you concentrate on rhythm and tone. Every string instrument has a **"sweet spot,"** a place between the bridge and the end of the fingerboard where your pick generates the most pleasing tone, not too thin or strident, and not too ringy and filled with overtones. Find the sweet spot.

You might also consider the **type of pick** you use. Many mandolin players prefer a thick or heavy pick. There are countless to choose from. Buy many, sample many, and don't settle on one forever. As your skills increase your ability to achieve better tone will also increase, and the pick you chose way back when may be holding you back.

Most of tone deals with the right hand, but where you place the fingers of your left hand also can affect tone. Mando frets are small, but too close to a fret on either side can cause a muffled tone, especially when two or more notes are being played, as in a double stop or chord. One must also push the string down on the fingerboard with sufficient strength to avoid the dead, non-ringing tone.

MELODY

Melody is the mysterious lady of music. It's hard to exactly say why a simple three or four note sequence can be memorable, or evoke an emotional response, or send a message. It certainly speaks to the power of a good melody.

It is most in your interest to play good melodies. Don't be lazy. Learn them from reputable sources, try to learn things from the author, a definitive

recording, or from a stylist that plays in a definitive way. Don't be afraid to learn a tune or song a couple different ways, just to see the how they compare and vary, and don't be content with an "OK" version. Challenge yourself and shoot high. If you're learning a fiddle tune, try to learn it from a fiddler. If you're learning a vocal melody, learn the melody from the best singer you can find singing it.

In our kind of music, melodies are often in one (though sometimes 2 or 3) key. Determining the key a song/tune is in, gives you lots of information in which to figure out what notes may logically be part of the melody, what chords accompany the tune throughout (see Nashville # System), and what notes or double stops might fit nicely if you were to improvise.

As melodies flow and change, the notes of that melody harmonise with the other notes, and form a chord. The melody changes, and different notes harmonise with it – a new chord! Playing chords, double-stops, anything other than the melody, is harmony.

HARMONY

I think it's important to know the chords to a song, and often learn them first. It's also important to listen to the sound of the chord and try to hear the melody in your chord (or in your head while playing the chords). There are multiple chord positions (just look in the Mel Bay book!) for every chord. These different positions have different combinations of the same 3 or 4 notes in them, and these combinations are called **voices,** or **chord voicings.** The more chord shapes you know, the more you can group chords together that may make more musical sense. It makes playing chords more fun and more musical. I often play double stops, with open strings, and don't worry if I'm playing all 4 strings, muting some, or including a tone that was unintended, but does not offend (makes life interesting).

NASHVILLE # SYSTEM

How notes group together is the math part of music. This is where a little knowledge of theory comes handy. This chart is to help you make sense of music/chord theory. It may look confusing, but it will make more sense the farther along you are. It is your guide to finding out which chords equal which numbers in any given key. It is also a way to figure out which single notes are needed to make up any given chord. Don't be overwhelmed. This is not something you need to memorise, but more something to refer to to help answer questions as your practical knowledge of the mandolin grows.

Here are the degrees of the scale that make up a few common chords.

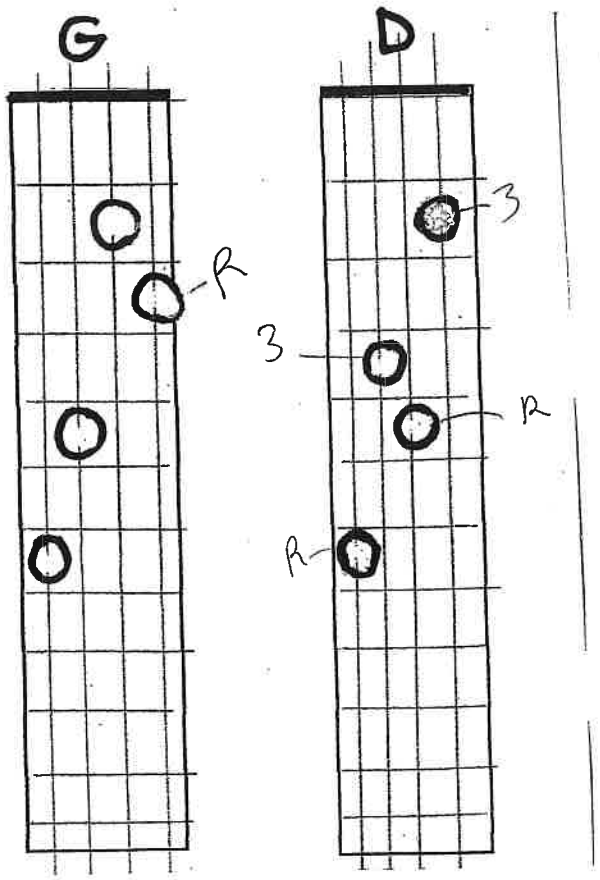
Major chord : 1 3 5 (triad)
Minor chord: 1 3b 5
Seventh chord: 1 3 5 7
Sixth chord: 1 3 5 6
Ninth chord: 1 3 5 2
Augmented chord: 1 3 5#

Though we play sevenths and minors, most of these other chords are not a big part of old-time music, but it's nice to know what you're hearing.

CHORDS

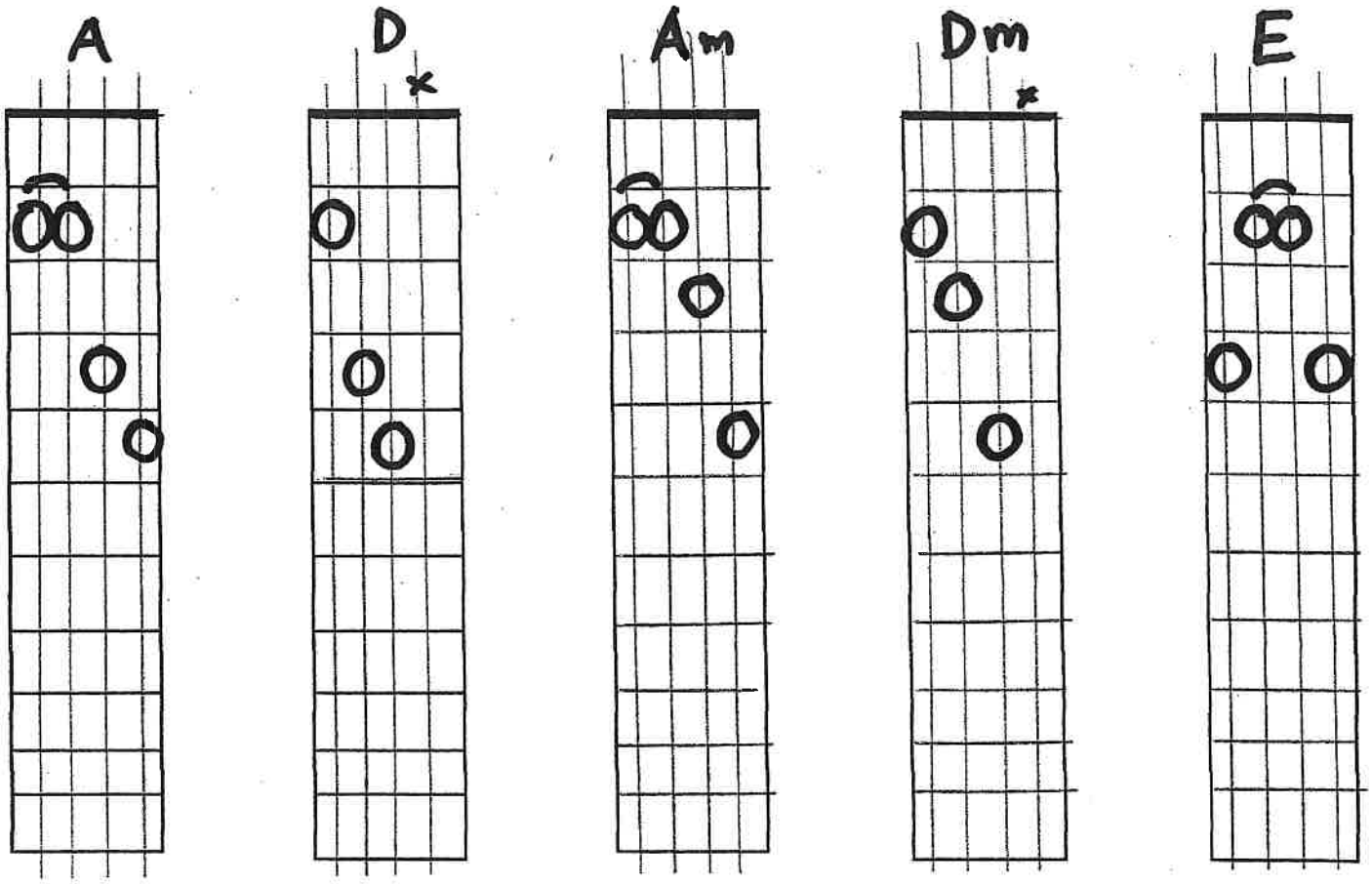
As we really only have 4 notes to play with at any time, chords are not as complex on the mandolin as they are on the guitar or piano. Also because of the uniformity of the tuning, chord shapes repeat all over the fingerboard. It's important to know which note in any given shape is the root note. If you do, then by knowing the scale (or looking at the chart) you can make any chord, anywhere.

Many mandolin players know, or should know, the **"Bill Monroe" G chord**, and the D chord. These two positions seem to fit together. Both of these positions are closed, meaning that they do not use any open strings. That also means that they are movable around the fingerboard, making new chords wherever you place them. They are a handful, but worth the effort.



A word on **closed vs. open** chords: both work, both sound good. Open chords ring more, where closed chords give more control over the duration of the sustain, or ring. There are applications for both. Many players think of the harmonic character of the notes in a chord, but a big part of the mando's sound is the percussive "thwack" that comes along with it. That's why it's often referred to as the snare drum of the band. You can only explore that aspect with closed chords.

Here are another couple of major chord positions that fit well together, also closed, and easy to convert to a minor chord as well.



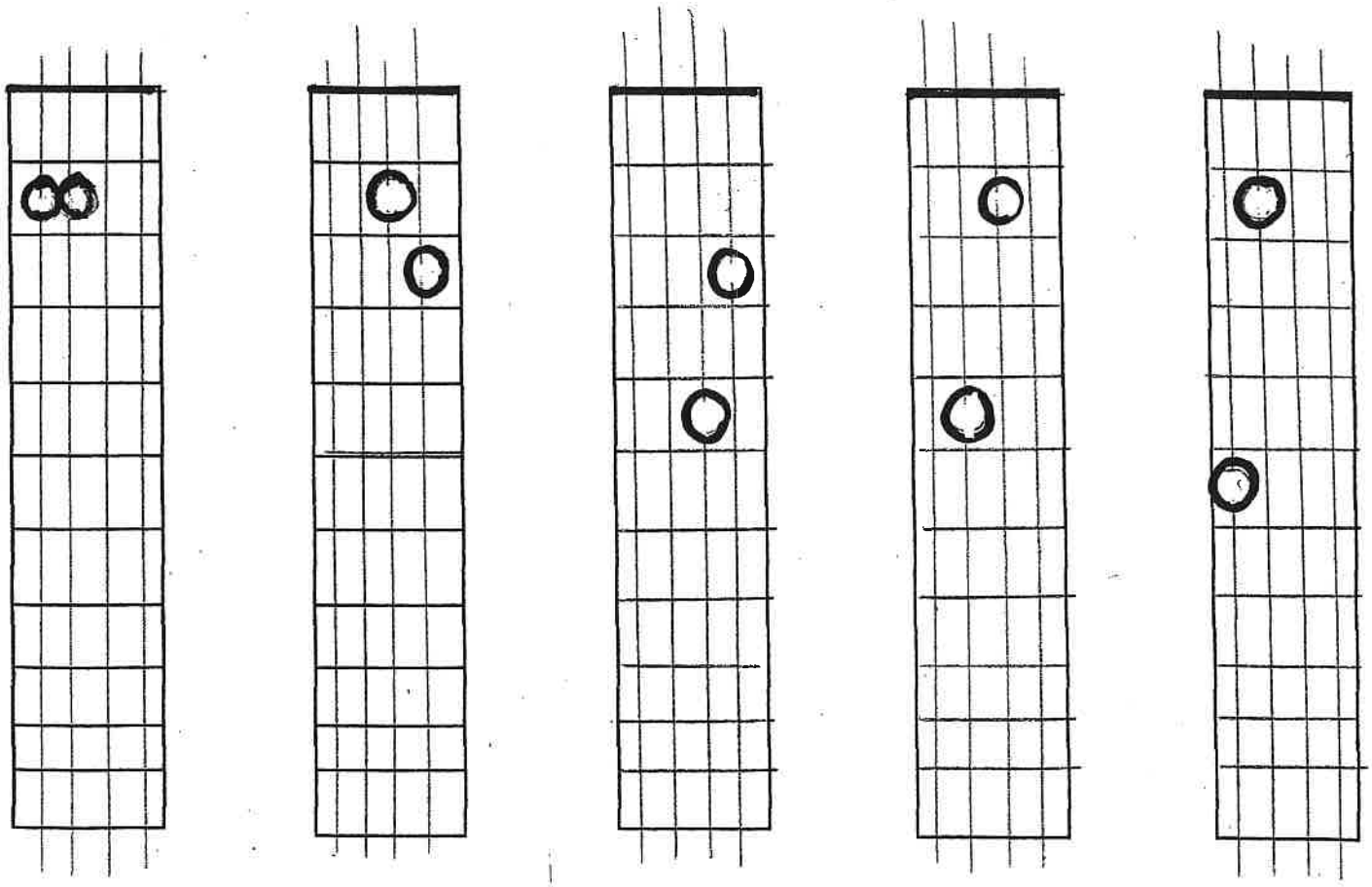
You can learn many other chord positions on your own or from chord books, but do not get overwhelmed with them. Start with a few reliable positions, and be able to move from position to position with ease. You should know the chords to be able to play in 5 or 6 keys.

DOUBLE STOPS

Now here is where things get fun. Double stops are two-note chords, played together. The mandolin is really made for these, and many of the sounds we know and love and have heard on record, are double stops linked together. Go back to the Bill Monroe G & D chords, and break then into two-note chords.

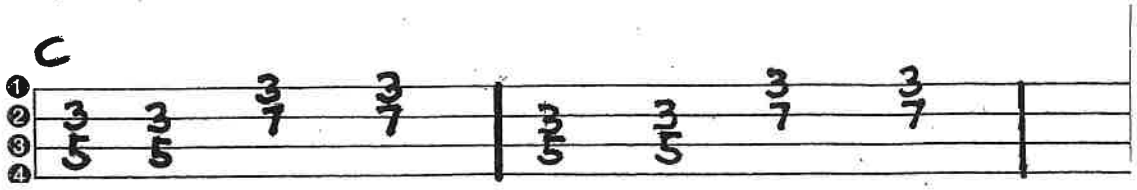
Each of these double stop positions contain some, but not all of the notes in the chord. Sometimes the root of the chord is not present but it still sounds like the chord when played with other instruments. There are certain double stops that link well with others, and are the building blocks of constructing a solo or break.

Here are several double stop positions to know.

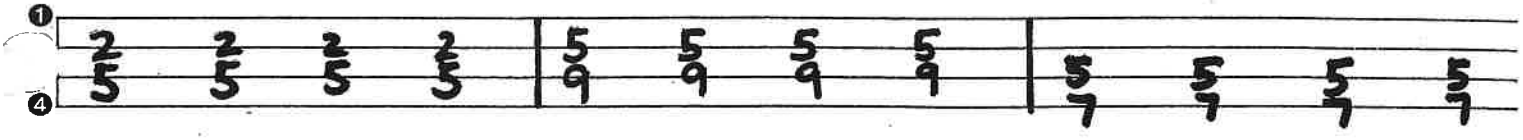


It is not critical to know which degrees of the triad are in each double stop (though it doesn't hurt), but it's important to know what chord a certain double stop, played in a certain spot on the fingerboard, aligns with or is a part of. Double stops, just like chords, can be played all over the fingerboard.

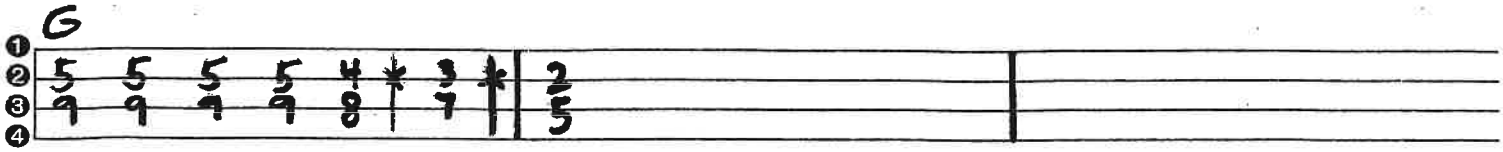
Here are a few double stops that I feel link nicely together. Practice these to where they come easily and to where they begin to sound musical. Only then will you be able to find a home for them in a song or solo.



Here are three double stops that are all Gs:



Here is the Dylan "Rainy Day Woman #1 2 & 3 5":



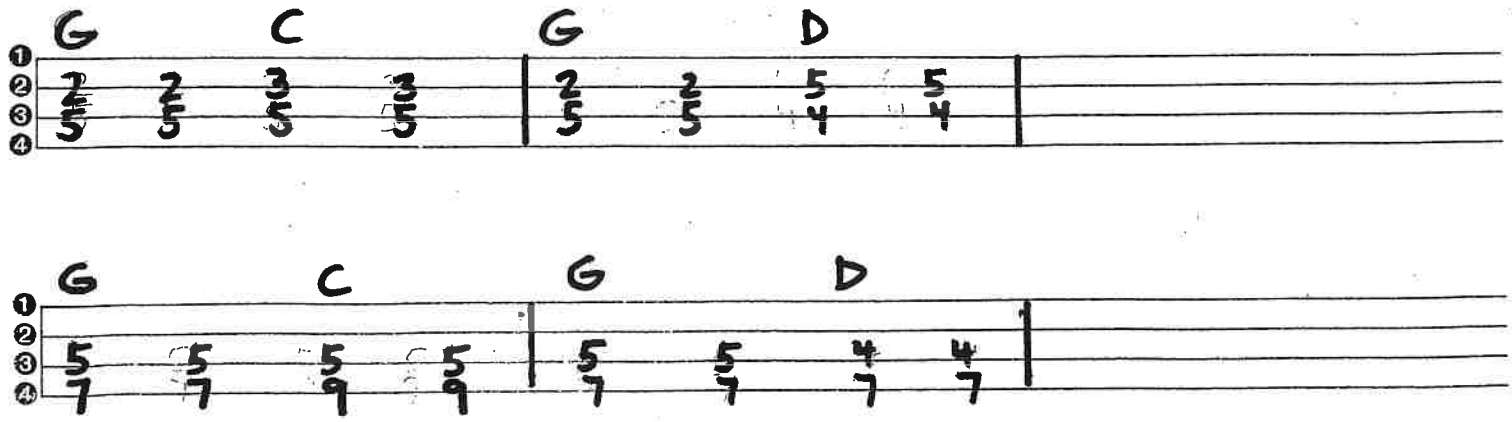
The same lick can be used for G-C-& D, just by starting on a different set of strings.

And the Jimmie Rodgers yodel lick:

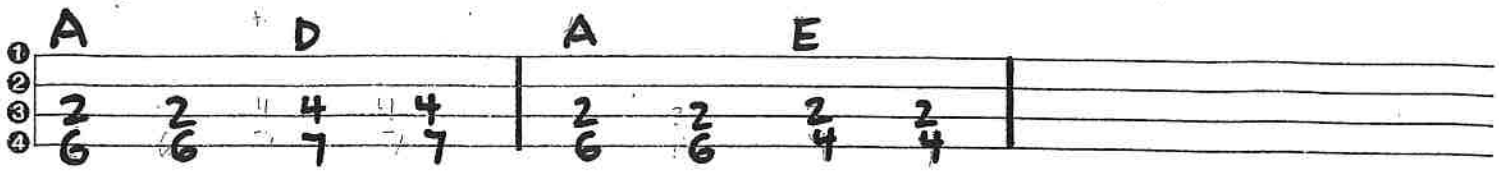
An easy way to use these double stops is to learn several "G" double stops (assuming the key of G), and the same for C & D. When the melody goes higher but stays on the same chord, play a higher double stop. If it goes higher and changes chords, go higher and play a double stop for that new chord. Don't think too hard. You may not be hitting the melody note exactly, but it may sound pretty good, and you've got two chances to hit the melody note. If you don't, then you're playing harmony, and the right melody note is a double stop away. I don't mean to make it sound quite so easy, but by moving around your fingerboard, you are learning to make sounds and are becoming more aquatinted with where those sounds are generated on your fingerboard.

Certain double stop positions, if played as the root of the key, can easily be changed to be the IV chord or the V chord.

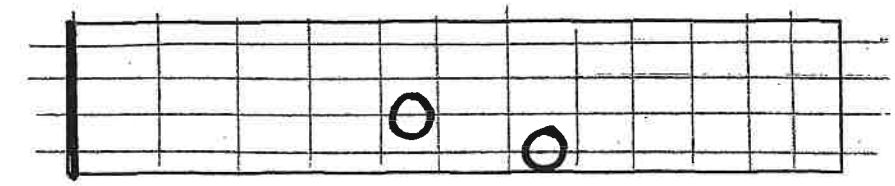
Here's an example in G:

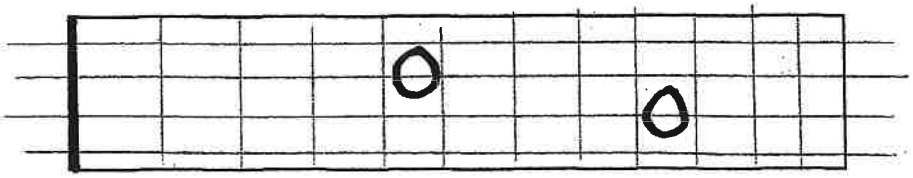


Here's another in A:

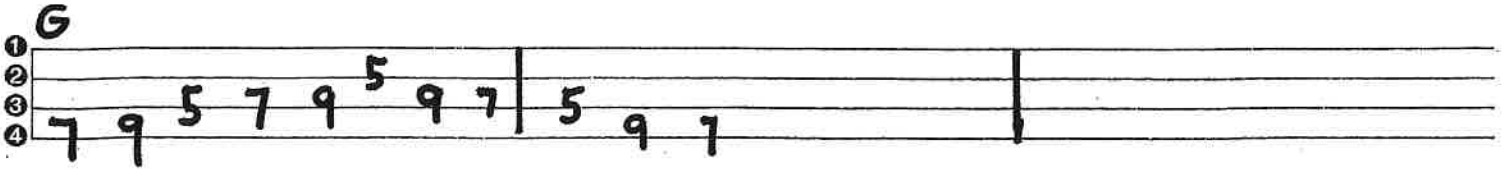


Let's play some eighth note runs out of a couple of these double stop positions. Here are the two positions.



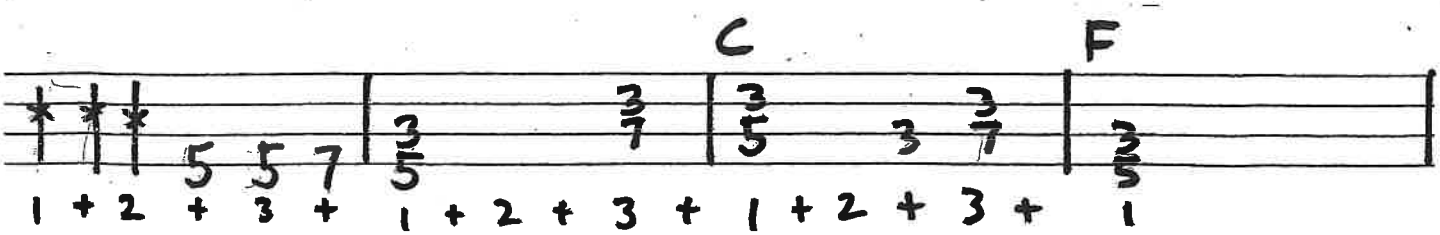


Here's the run.



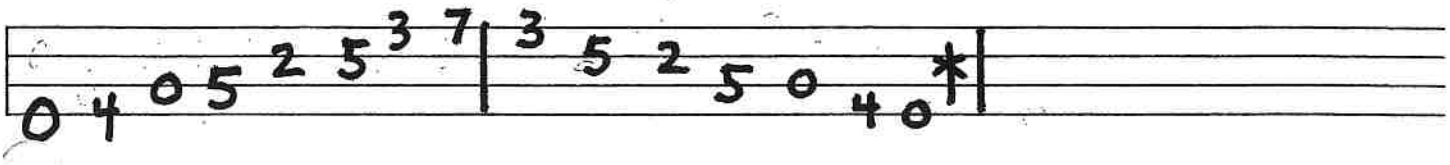
Build on it yourself and see if you can play the melody to a familiar song somewhere up the neck in an unfamiliar key.

Here's an example of a turnaround intro to White Dove, 3/4 time, Key of F, using the same two double stops.



It's fun to play the notes of the triad, to see what you can come up with, to familiarise yourself with the tones, and to gain a little muscle memory. The more you do it for different chords, the more you can see the pattern take shape. Many things you learn can transfer to other parts of the fingerboard.

Here are the notes of the G triad:



One good exercise for playing triads is to choose a chord (so find the 1-3-5, if it were G, it would be G-B-D) and start playing bugle tunes, reveille, taps, the thing they play before horse races, all bugle songs. They only use the 1-3-5 notes of one chord. Then play them in another key (or chord).

MULTILEVEL THINKING

Pulling it all together is not easy.

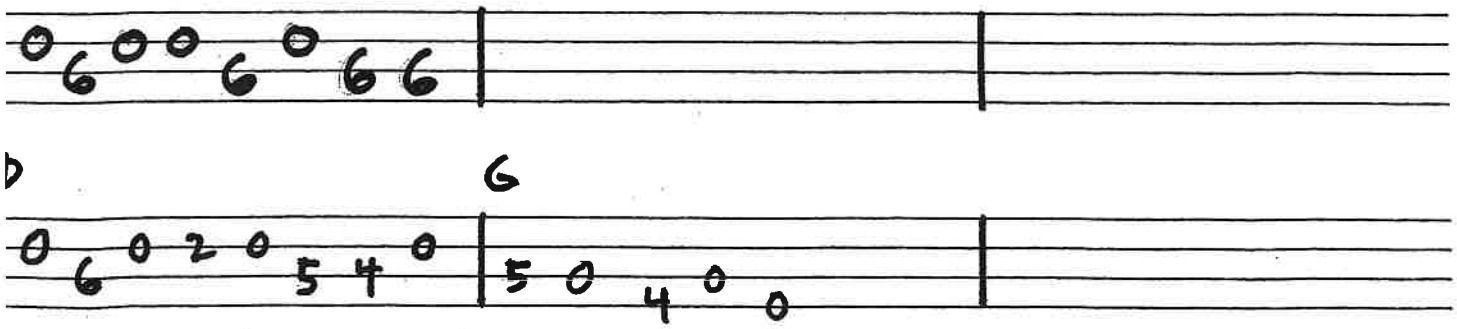
Sometimes, in the course of a song, tune, or solo, you're thinking about the chord you're playing over, sometimes it's the exact melody note, sometimes it's a double-stop that jibes with the chord, sometimes it's your hand positions, sometimes it's the sounds you're making, sometimes it's something you've learned, say a lick, fill or ending.

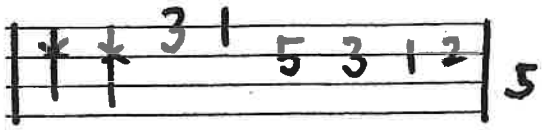
For me, it's all these things. I use all these tools to navigate a solo. My best advice is to not get too consumed with any one of these aspects of playing, to where tunnel vision keeps you from seeing and hearing the others. In a way, you need to be able to remove yourself from playing your instrument, and *listen* to yourself play, and listen to your contribution to the ensemble (be it a jam, band, etc.). A lot of your choices are based on what others are doing during the song. Sure you need to practice specific things to get to where they come fast and naturally, but that's not playing music. The joy of making music comes when you can relax and mix up your skills and knowledge and enjoy the musical outcome.

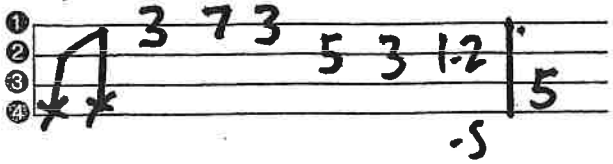
Remember, we all have strengths and weaknesses. What comes easy to one person, might not come easy to another. If you learn using vision (reading notation, tab, chord charts, etc.) then spend more time on ear training, and learning hand positions. If you've got a good ear, but get lost easy, then a little effort toward understanding theory will go a long way. Strengthen your weakest link.

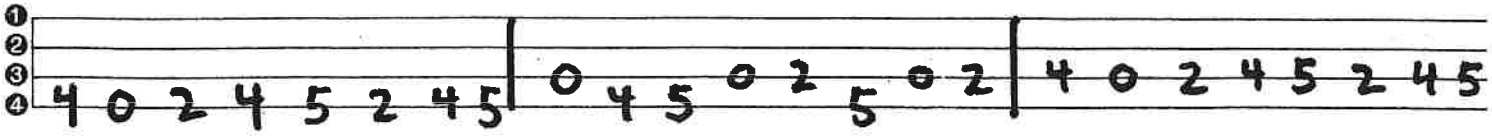
PICK TWISTERS

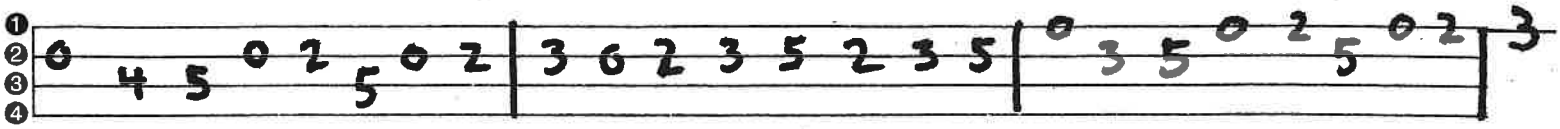
Here are a few pick twisters to play to help with the up & down thing. Also a few favorite licks just for fun. Remember - FUN!

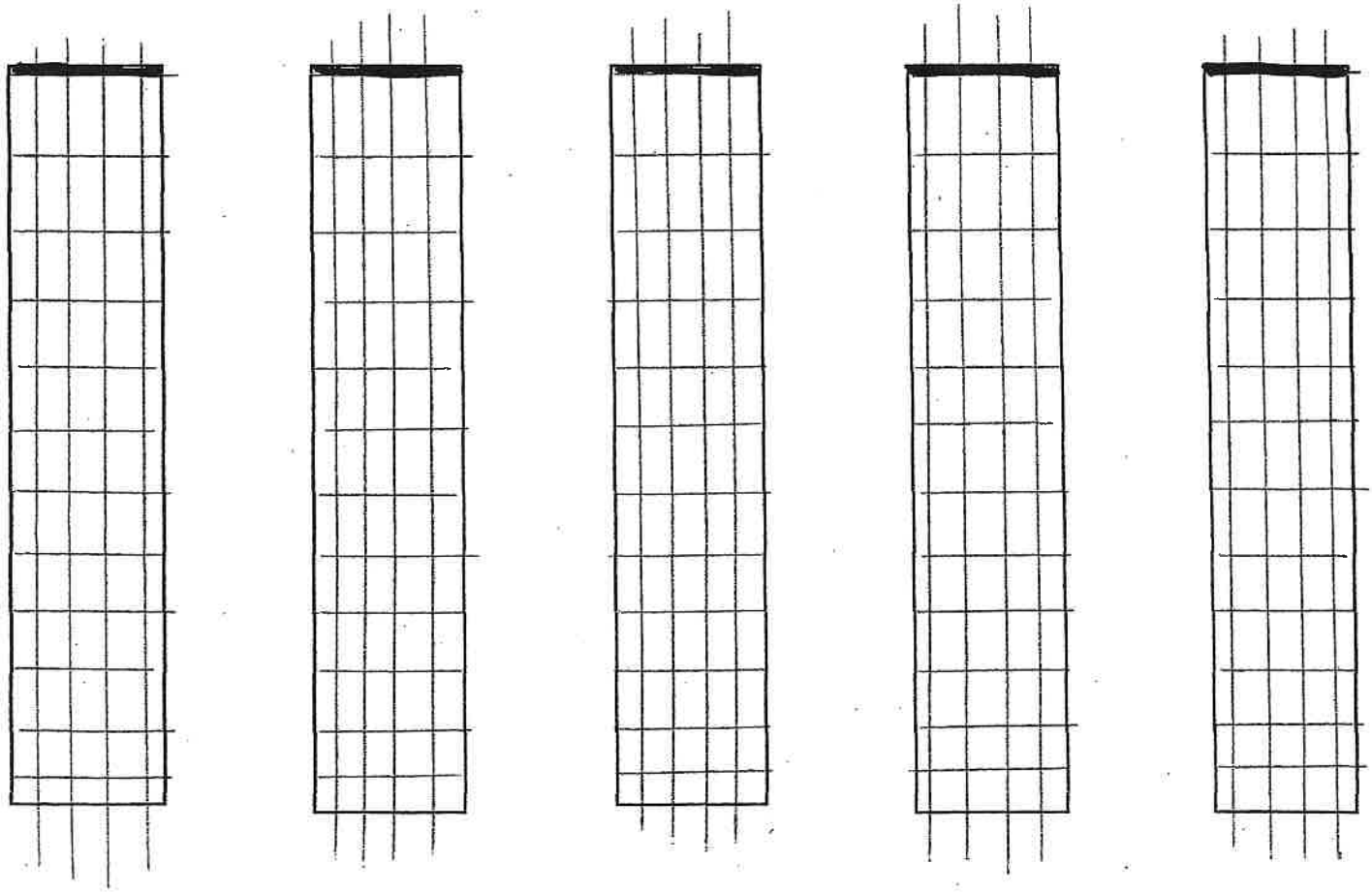


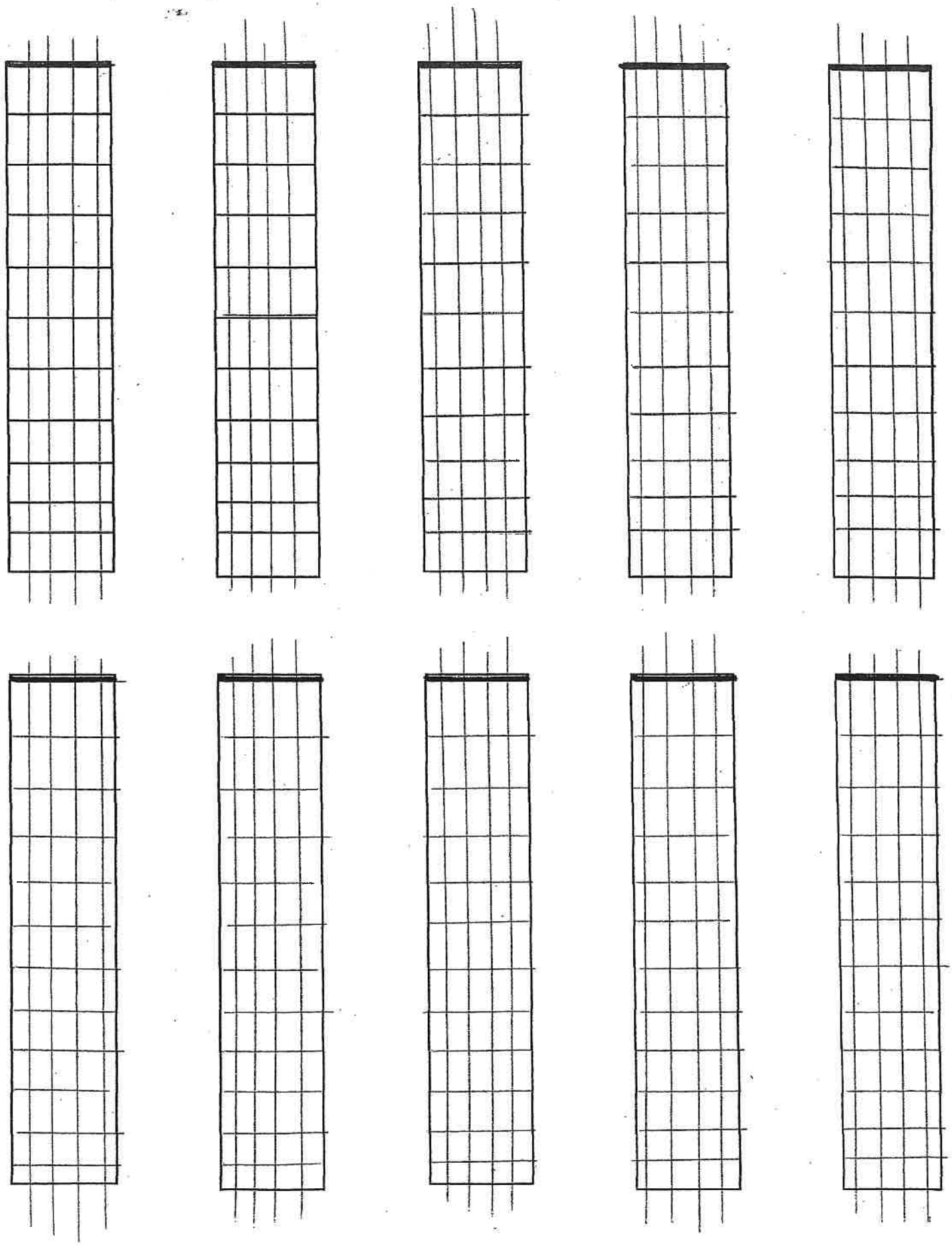


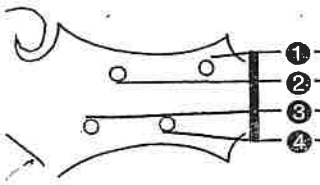








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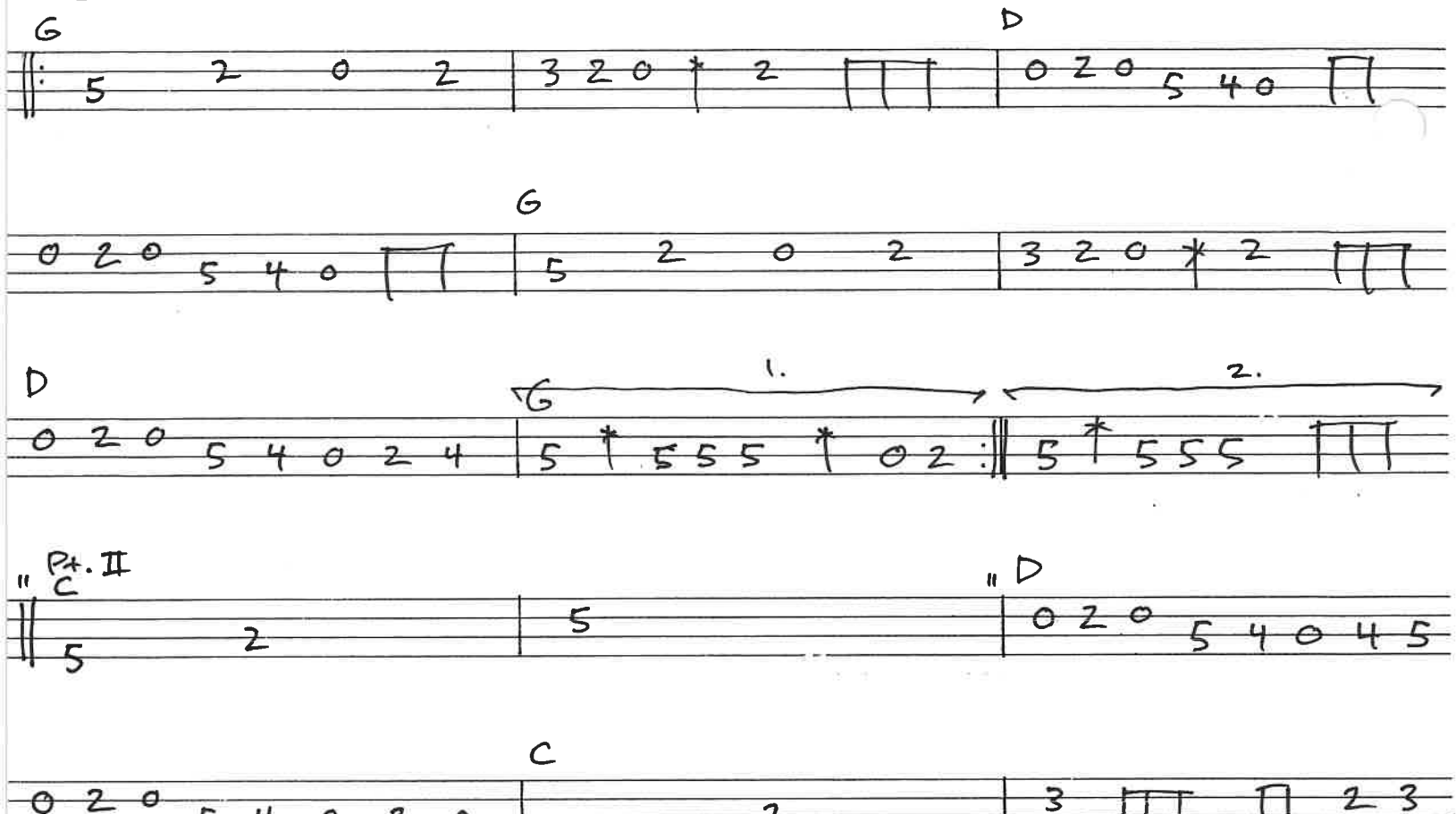
Nail that catfish to a tree - G

PT. I



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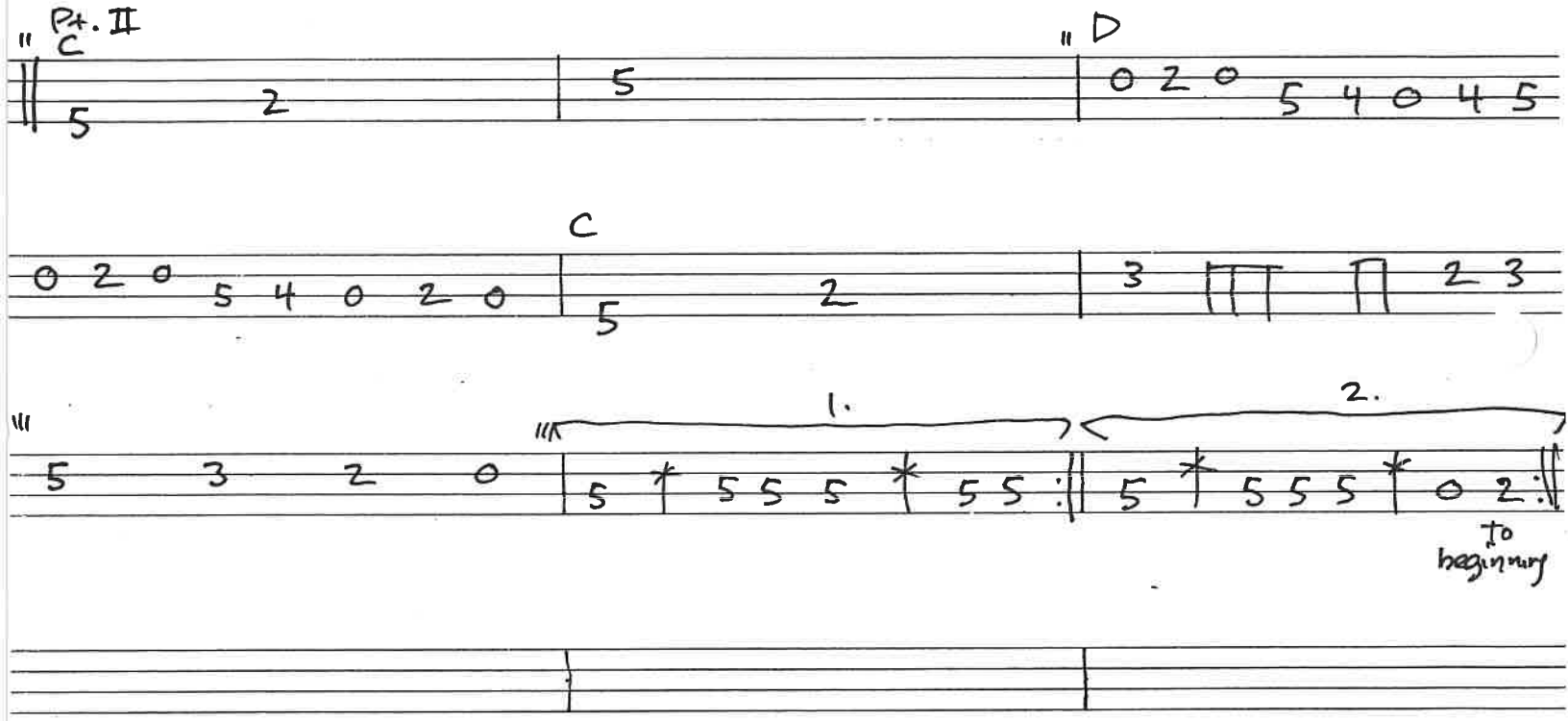

Substitute