

The Theory of Bluegrass: In Defense of the Capo *by Matt Snook*

Imagine a festival jam, the night air finally cool enough for comfort, the moon just up and you're settling in for a long one. Into the flickering lantern light steps a stranger. "Mind if I sit in?" You point him to an empty seat, and from a well-worn case he pulls a fine hand-crafted resonator guitar, tunes the string and looks up, ready to go. Why the heck, you wonder, does he only have one string? "Well," he says, "I've found that all the notes are right there on that one string, and a person really doesn't need any more now, does he?" "Oh, sorry," you reply. "Did I say that out loud?"

You can imagine your own ending to this story, but my point is simply that you would find such antics a little strange. Who in their right mind would not use everything their instru-

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ment had to offer? Ah, but some dobro players, though they might not clip off five of their strings, *do* handicap themselves by *refusing to use a capo!*

Now, banjo players don't have that hangup. They will happily talk capo all day. Guitar players, same thing – bluegrass pickers, anyway. Actually, one of my favorite guitar players routinely uses *more than one* capo to get the effect he wants – a drop F or G tuning. On the other extreme are the mandolinists, and occasionally a guitarist will thumb his nose at capo use. But the poor dobro community is sorely divided.

Now I might be able to dismiss the whole issue with some cliches like "different strokes for different folks," or "it takes all kinds," but some sensitive reso pickers carry around a lot of

angst, apologizing as they position their capo for their favorite Hank Williams tune, or whatever. The anti-capo crowd can be more than a little condescending toward what they see as a "crutch," insisting that its use indicates a lack of ability.

But wait! Why do they use all six strings? Surely our jammer was correct – all tunes can be played on one string (ask the mandolinists about Chris Thile's and Mike Marshall's G-string escapade). And I suppose that with practice, he could do it "with one hand tied behind his back," as my Grand-dad used to say. But *why handicap yourself?* In case you haven't noticed, there are no bonus points given out for going without. It's supposed to be all about the music.

Consider a couple of standard dobro "licks." In Figure 1 you'll see a tab with two tried and true riffs in G. As long as we stay in G, we're all in it together. But as soon as the fiddlers want to play Beaumont Rag in F, or the vocalist chooses C#, the no-capo crowd will be restricted to playing closed positions and looking down their noses at the capoed cadre who still have their *complete repertoire of closed and open position moves – in every key!* Refusal to use a capo is just a way of *limiting your options*. Which of us is so good that we can afford to do that?!

Still not convinced? OK, next we have a move so simple that I can get people playing it during their very first dobro lesson, and yet it can't be played in A by even the most dexterous of professionals without a capo. The second line of Figure 1 shows a lick created by Mike Auldridge, using a forward roll over the IV chord but leaving the first string open. While those with one hand tied - or no capo - can play this roll only in G, any humble player with a capo can find this smooth, driving

roll in whatever key they like.

You've probably noticed the common component here. Any music involving open strings is *dependent* upon that open tuning. *Duh*. So all the sans-capo pickers have done is limit themselves to those sounds available from closed positions. And this on an instrument which can use ringing open strings, double-stopped unisons, etc. to great effect.

Why would anybody intentionally limit themselves? Especially when it is *so easy* to make up pretty cool dobro music that can't be played without a capo. Let's look at one last example. In Figure 2 is the tab to a dobro break in E, capoed at fret 2, for the Merle Haggard song "You Don't Have Very Far To Go." While many great sounds can be found in a closed posi-

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tion E, they are only a fraction of the possibilities. This example is merely one of an infinite number of simple breaks that simply cannot be played without a capo! And remember, even with the capo all of the closed position moves are still available – the best of both worlds! Limiting yourself just to prove a point may earn you points in somebody's book, but it sure won't help your playing.



