

The Theory of Bluegrass: Wildwood Flowers

There comes a time when you stop and think, “If I hear that banjo lick one more time, I’m going to...” You know the one – the first three measures of Foggy Mountain Breakdown, repeated in a plethora of banjo solos.

But what are our alternatives? If improvisation doesn’t mean acquiring more banjo licks and plugging them to make ‘different’ solos, what *does* it mean?

A while back, I described playing rolls over the current chord in a song, while reaching out for notes from other chords to find the melody and improvise creatively. Cross pollinate all your roll patters with the many chords available, and the possibilities begin to grow. Start grabbing notes from adjacent chords or the appropriate scale, and you can play the myriad solos until the cows leave home.

Let’s use the song *Wildwood Flower* (as recorded by the Carter Family) in C for an example. Figure 1 shows a way to imagine the fingerboard. The C chord is shown in black, and the adjacent notes are also from the C scale. Those that are part of the F and G chords are labeled as such. This provides an easy way to remember which notes will work.

Start by trying to find the melody down by the nut, in the lowest C position. It’s easy if you just play the C chord, and

find adjacent notes that are part of the F and G chords where needed.

The melody starts on the low D string, which you have fretted on the second fret. Then you’ll have to move that finger to the third fret, or bring

the ring finger up instead (but hold as much of the C chord as possible!) Then on the G string you play it open (part of the C chord), then use the middle finger to fret it on the second fret, and so on through the song.

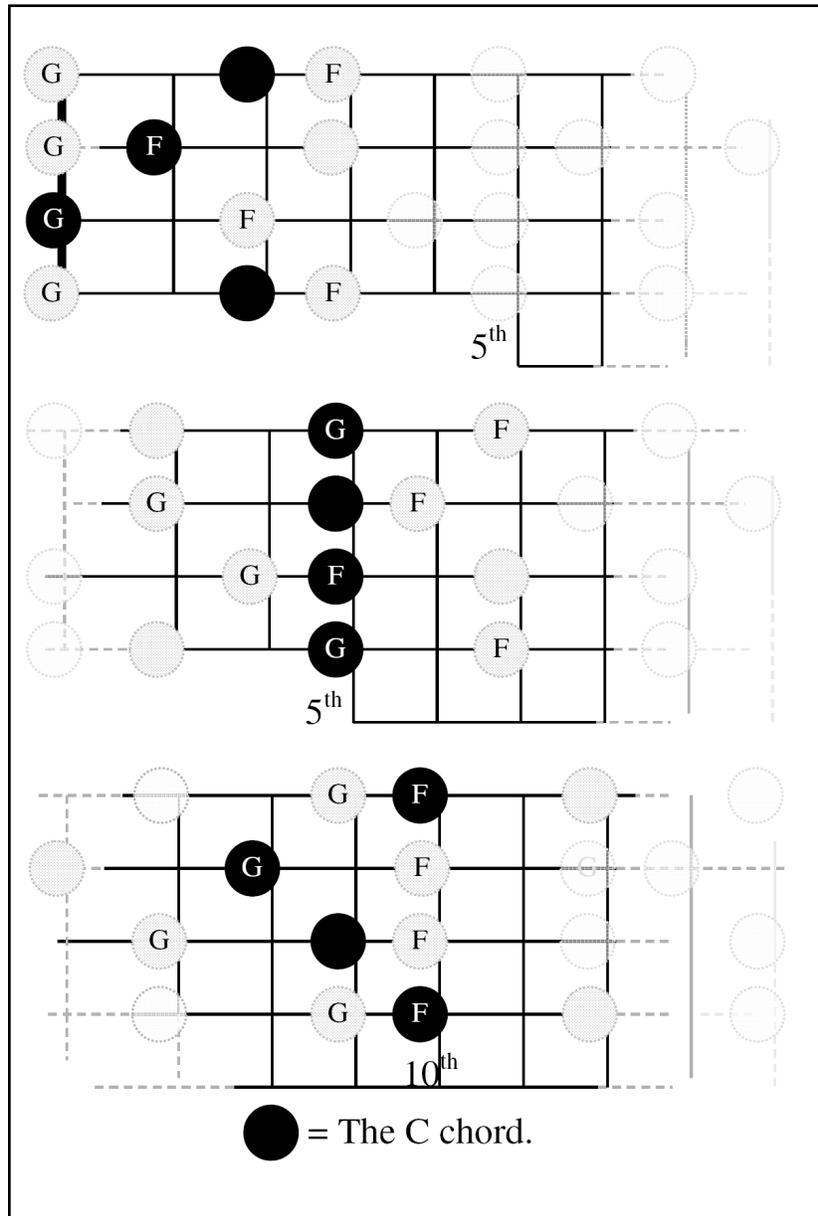


Figure 1. Three different positions of the C chord, marked in black. The adjacent notes are from the C scale, and can be pictured and easily remembered since they are part of the F and G chords.

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But we banjo players don't want to just play a simple melody, we want *drive*, we want *rolls*! The first line of Figure 2 is a tab demonstrating how to approximate the melody of Wildwood Flower using just forward rolls, the C chord, and those notes stolen from nearby F and G chords. Pretty cool! But that ain't the half of it.

Use the charts in Figure 1, find the other C positions, holding the entire C chord as much as possible, shifting only when necessary. Lines two and three show how to once again use just the forward roll and the other C positions to play the first line of Wildwood Flower.

But that still ain't all! Line four changes the feel with the familiar alternating thumb roll, then comes one of my patented *popcorn rolls*, putting some swing into it. Line six has double string hammer-ons lines seven and eight move to other keys... There is literally no end to this. Just hold the main chord, play every roll you know - cherry picking notes as you feel moved - there is literally no end to this.

For those tired of playing only the first line of this song, Figure 3 provides a tab of the entire tune, with completely different roll patterns, and consequently a different musical feel for each.

Measures 2 and 3 start things off with an unnamed roll - call it what you will. Measures 5

Wildwood Flour Carter

Banjo

This one is in F! 5th string is A

And now in A! 5th string in A

Figure 2. Tablature showing just some of the endless ways to interpret the first line of Wildwood Flower.

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and 6 are more popcorn rolls, 7 is a twisted alternating thumb thing. Just for fun, I even include that tired old Foggy Mountain lick in measure 10, but in C this time. Then to make up for it, the measure in

F uses yet another twisted roll that folks may not have heard before. Hold the barred F chord, stealing one note from the G... Measures 13 and 14 are good examples of just doing whatever weird roll will

get you the sound you want. Add all of these roll patterns and licks to your repertory, but play them in your own way. Long live the banjo.

By Matthew Snook

Wildwood Flower

Carter

Banjo

Chords: C, G, F

Figure 3. Tablature for the entire song, Wildwood Flower.

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