



LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

Let's Talk About the Key of D, and Comfort Zone

Pete Wernick

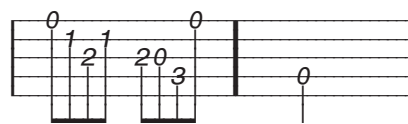
and hooked the 5th string to do so...and played chords D G A.

(2) And then is there also a way of playing in D by capoing at the 2nd fret,

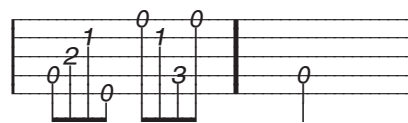
Bluesy Licks in D

G tuning, with 5th string to A, or F# (try both)

Bluesy Lick #1



Bluesy Lick #3



hook the 5th string at the 7th fret and play out of the C position?

That's right. Those are two popular ways of playing in D.

Are there many ways to play in the key of D?

There are two other popular ways. One is *D Tuning*, where the 3rd string is lowered to F# and the 2nd is lowered to A. If the 5th string is retuned (could be to A or F#), that's then called *D Tuning*. It makes an open D chord, and of course all the fingerings are then different.

The other popular way is to raise the banjo's tuning *seven* frets using a capo way up the neck, with 5th string raised seven as well, to a high D—and playing as though in G.

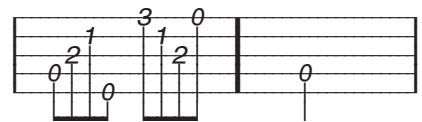
I seem to have a problem translating during a jam to do the (2) option

Many players have that problem, as they are just not used to a D/G/A set of chords, and may think every song should end on G! In a new layout there is a need for more vocabulary, especially D licks focused on the open 1st string or 4th string, both D notes. Having two root notes on reachable open strings is a really nice plus for this tuning.

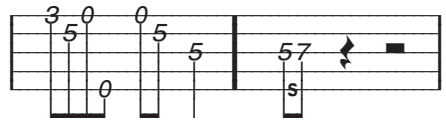
It seems easier for me to do (1) but when and why would use the (2) option?

Some songs, notably *Soldiers Joy*, allow for some convenient open strings to make the melody more playable in C, so if I'm expected to play a lead on that tune, I'll capo 2 and use C/F/G positions. If I'm

Bluesy Lick #2



Bluesy Lick #4



What better topic for the first column of the year than one that makes a lot of banjo players squirm?

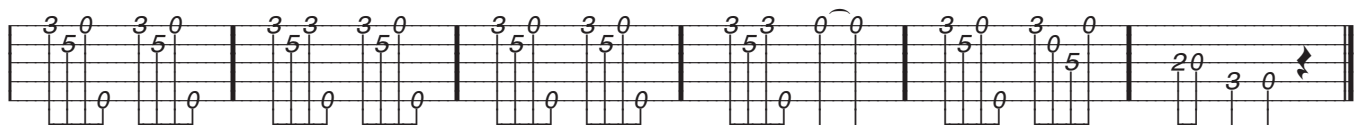
The key of D presents a number of options for banjo players, and some of the best options pierce some folks' comfort zones.

Okay, let's talk "comfort zone" for a minute: Think back to some of your best learning experiences. Perchance, did any of these take you out of your comfort zone? That is sometimes what's necessary to make a breakthrough. While it can chafe a bit at first (I have a comfort zone too!), I'm encouraging you to grit your teeth and take some time exploring D—without a capo. Some excellent sounds await!

Vicki from California writes:

(1) *I saw you going into the key of D*

Bluesy Lick #5



Excerpts from the tablature with the DVD "Make Up Your Own Solos, DVD #2, Keys of D, E, F, and Up the Neck in G".

playing just rhythm, I love having both open D strings to fill out the chord.

I usually do (1) because it gives me the low D string, which is a great note to have. (2) doesn't have that low D.

My new video "Make Up Your Own Banjo Solos," DVD #2 (*Keys of D, E, F, and Up the Neck in G*) is about playing in keys other than G. It shows a lot of stuff to do in D with no capo. That is being released by Homespun this month, my tenth instructional DVD! The tabs shown here are from the video.

Regarding the other alternatives among the four ways of playing in D:

Some people use D **tuning**, which involves lowering both the 3rd and 2nd strings. Scruggs plays *Rueben* in that tuning (with 5th string tuned to F#) and it can be powerful. But using that tuning also involves relearning the fingerboard and different chord shapes, so I'd rather "learn some new vocabulary in G tuning" over "learning a new language" of D tuning.

Capoing the neck seven frets is pretty drastic and does have both down and up sides. The upside is the really intense high pitch, and... so is the down side. There is no chance for tonal variety. It's all high. On a single song once in a while it may work as a special effect of sorts.

One advantage of learning "key of D in G tuning" is that it opens up the fairly common keys of E and F if a capo is used. To play in F, capo the 3rd fret (with 5th string raised 5 frets, to C) and play as if in D.

Staying with G tuning for the main four strings allows a full application of the player's knowledge in that tuning, the mainstay of banjo as we know it.

On bridge height and action

Ed from Oklahoma writes:

Pete,

I enjoy your articles in BNL. There is always something I learn to advance my skills. I have a question. At a jam last week another picker told me if I put a 5/8" bridge on my banjo it will increase the volume. I have a 1/2" bridge. My strings at the 12th fret is 1/8 " off the fret board. Would the 5/8" bridge increase my volume and how much would the string be raised? —Ed

Ed,

Almost all bluegrass banjos are set up with bridges of at least 5/8" height. It does make a positive difference for volume and often a larger sounding tone.

Of course the string height would rise, and my best guess is that since going from 4/8 (1/2) to 5/8 is a 25% gain, the action would also gain 25%, or 1/32", *maybe*. Best thing to do is get a 5/8 bridge and find out. They're not that expensive, so it's a pretty low-cost experiment. You will then have the results (more volume and higher action) right there to observe, and can make your choice based on the trade-offs as you see them. Best of luck! Pete

Pete, Thanks for you information. I replaced the bridge and greatly increased the volume. The notes seem to be much clearer also. The string height raised 1/16.

By the way, my wife said "Thanks a lot." —Ed

Visit Pete and ask a question at www.DrBanjo.com. Space still available in all three January Banjo Camps, Basic/Intermediate/Advanced.