

67 LICKS for Bluegrass Guitar

BY ALEX GRAF



**Ideas and Licks
in G, C, D and E Shapes**

GREETINGS

I'm Alex Graf.

This is a book of licks I wrote for bluegrass guitar.

These are phrases and ideas I commonly play.

Some of these licks are my own and some are “borrowed” from some of my favorite guitarists and musicians.

Licks are a double edged sword.

I hope you use these in a musical way.

Alex Graf

PS. If you learn one of these licks, record a video of yourself playing it, share it to instagram and tag me, I'll repost it!



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HOW DO I IMPROVISE?

I think there are many ways to learn how to improvise. Many different roads and ways to practice. Better said, there is no one way to learn how to improvise.

Important topics include scales, chords, fretboard mapping, phrasing, theory, melody, reinterpretation, tension, release, alterations and on and on...

Yet, with a genre like bluegrass that has such a strong shared language with a canon of repertoire, **licks can be very valuable**. They can help us learn how to say things and when to say them.

Learning to speak the language is crucial with such a specific dialect.

Ultimately this is a shared language. You need vocabulary.

The licks in this book are a jump start into the language of bluegrass and my own personal language. My personal language draws of course from bluegrass but equally so from bebop. It is equal parts Tony Rice, Clarence White, Doc Watson as well as Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker and John Coltrane (at least I strive for this).

So, don't get down on learning licks. It's one big part of learning how to freely improvise.

My hope is that these licks will get you a long way!

*Note: These licks are **not** organized by progressive difficulty. I encourage you to bounce around.



INTRODUCTION

WHY ARE THESE LICKS OUT OF A “SHAPE”

If you are a bit unfamiliar with the genre, you might be asking yourself this question.

The truth is that these licks and ideas do not have to be in any shape in particular. You can and should transpose these ideas across the fretboard, in closed position, different shapes. This will truly give you full command over them.

With that in mind, the real truth is that bluegrass guitar is dependent on the capo. The capo is a tool. Some people trash talk a capo. It makes no sense to do that in bluegrass. The capo allows guitar player to fulfill their role in the band. We need access to open strings to be able to play the guitar in a bluegrass way.

Not only is this true for rhythm guitar but it also pertains to lead playing and improvising (taking a “break” in bluegrass-speak). Unlike the jazz world, open strings are your friend. They allow for more powerful lines. They allow us to sustain notes. They are important.

So, we find ourselves playing a lot out of G, C and D shapes. To a lesser extent E shape. Sometimes an A shape and rarely F shape.

So, yes, these licks are out of a shape, anchored to an open position.

One more note, there a lot more G licks than other shapes. That’s just how this book is! You’ll probably be playing out of G but that doesn't mean you should neglect other shapes.

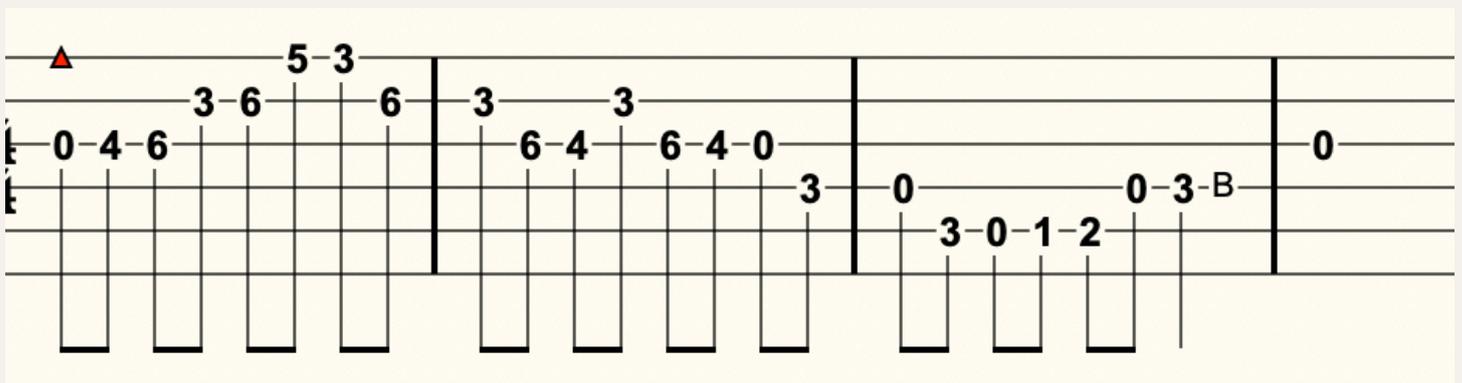
That is all.

“I don’t want anybody to steal any of my licks” -Tony Rice



I. GLICKS

LICK 1: THE WORKMAN



Let's start off with one of my favorite sounds, courtesy of Jake Workman. Jake uses this kind of idea a lot. The characteristic part of this lick is that C# on the A string, (second note of the lick, 4th fret). That sharp 4 sound is not typically within G major. When it is used in a minor context, it's usually a passing tone in a minor pentatonic/blues scale, linking the 4th with the 5th. In the setting that Jake uses it, it gives a very unique flavor. The way I hear this lick borrows from more of a jazz situation. I hear this as "lydian dominant," a mixolydian scale with a sharp fourth.

For those initiated, to achieve this lydian dominant sound in your playing- lydian dominant is the fourth mode of melodic minor. If we are playing in G and want G lydian dominant, we can just think of D melodic minor. Modal thinking is very powerful if you can utilize the symmetry of the fretboard. If this kind of talk makes you want to stop learning, fear not, we're moving on.

Songs you might hear this sound would be:

Down in the Dirt - Jake Workman

Garfield's Blackberry Blossom - Traditional

Barnyard Playboy - Adam Steffey

Rock Squirrel in a Twisted Juniper - Alex Graf



LICK 2: #4 TRIADS

Building off of that #4 sound, let's extend the metaphor. In this lick, I'm playing off of some triads that exist within the melodic minor family. You can actually do this with any family of "diatonic" chords. Triads in your improvising are powerful, especially because of the *rhythmic* flavor that they can give your lines. Just like playing a banjo roll in your crosspicking, it's a syncopation hack.

LICK 3: PAT MARTINO-GRASS

Pat Martino was an innovative jazz guitarist. I got to see him once in New York. His 16th notes swung harder than any other guitar player that I've heard. He had a unique outlook on life and music. At age 35 he had a brain aneurysm and almost died. He was left without any memory of playing guitar. He had to re-learn everything. Pat saw the guitar in a very geometrical way. The line above is a classic Martino-ism. Listen to any one of his solos and you are likely to hear some derivation of this line.



LICK 4: ROCK-SQUIRREL

As I mentioned above, in my tune, “Rock Squirrel in a Twisted Juniper,” uses that #4 sound. This lick is a verbatim quote from the beginning of this tune. It can be useful in many G contexts, especially those that have a b7 sound.

LICK 5: M7B5 (MINOR 7TH FLAT 5)

Sticking along this idea of the #4 (lydian) with a b7 (dominant). I love this minor 7 flat 5 shape. It is probably my favorite arpeggio. I learned it in high school and did not really realize it's true power until much later. In the above context, this arpeggio starts on the B note on the 2nd fret of the A string. In the above context, we are not actually thinking of it as a m7b5 arpeggio. Because we're starting on the B and in the key of G, we are starting on the 3rd degree of G. So again, we're not starting this arpeggio on the root note. That gives it a hipper flavor, a little bit less dry.



G LICKS

LICK 6: ARPEGGIATE

Here's a cool pattern, kind of out of the patten world of Lenny Breau. This zone is a common Tony Rice spot and it's almost like one of his classic licks. It takes advantage of the nearby b7 (that F on 10th fret of the g string, second note in the lick).

LICK 7: COLTRANE V TO I LICK

Here's an idea I ripped right from John Coltrane. You can hear him play this line on "Giant Steps" at least two separate times and it's a lick that is very common in his vocabulary. I think it works well for bluegrass. You could use it over a I chord in G or over a V chord (D) going to a I (G).



LICK 8: CHROMATIC DESCENDING

The cool thing about this lick is the descending whole steps, going down chromatically. I really like this relationship and the shape at the beginning lays out well for the hand. Also, don't forget that big slide from F to G at the end. It's one of my favorite abbreviated but powerful G runs.

LICK 9: CRITTER'S IDEA

I stole this idea from Chris (Critter) Eldridge. He plays an idea similar to this on the Mighty Poplar record, on Blackjack Davey. It's got this half-step ascending motion, a counterpoint to the previous lick. Just another reminder that patterns are very recognizable for a listener.

LICK 10: TONY'S HALF-STEP

This is a play on a classic Tony Rice lick. I think he plays the first part of this one on "Your Love is Like a Flower," the Bluegrass Album Band version. Tony Rice licks are great. Also, they're overplayed. So I made a little musician joke out of this one. In the first bar, you play the lick in the right spot. In the second, I displaced the lick up a half step. This adds a little bit of comic relief to an overplayed lick. Although it's a bit of a joke, please know that displacing pentatonics up or down a half step is a time-tested idea, an easy way to create tension. You should use this concept in your own playing. It's easy to forget but humor is crucial to music.



LICK 11: STEFFY'S IDEA

I took this idea from one of my favorite modern mandolin players, Adam Steffey. This whole thing can still go over a G chord. The great part about it is that it outlines/implies chords and leads a listener's ear through harmonies that don't necessarily have to be present in the tune. In the first bar of the lick, it basically outlines a D Minor 7th chord. This lick works very well over a G that is more of a dominant 7th chord than a major chord. This is also the reason why the D minor 7th works. It's a very mixolydian sound. Whenever you are playing a tune that has a flat 7 chord (meaning an F in the key of G), you can superimpose this minor (dorian to be exact) V chord sound.

LICK 12: GET UP!

The idea behind this lick is that you can connect disparate parts of the neck with slides. This is a powerful idea. A lot of times we get stuck in “boxes.” How do we break out? One great way is a slide. You've got to map out the slides that work. Not all are created equally. This lick can transfer you from playing out of the third fret zone and into the fifth fret zone. Fretboard mapping is a very powerful idea.

My method of mapping overlays all of the CAGED shapes (major triad pattern across the neck), major scale all across the neck, and major pentatonics all across the neck. If you can do this task you will have focused on “major” more than 99% of guitarists out there. Major is the most important tonality and it is rarely studied for the correct amount of time on the fretboard! If you're interested in mapping your fretboard, my course, [Fretboard Mapping 101](#) is included in my [Acoustic Club](#).



LICK 13: JAKE'S #4 THROUGH THE OCTAVE

Building on this idea of the #4, here's a mega-lick that uses two octaves to expand on the distinct flavor it creates. You'll need to do a big stretch to make that G to the B on the high E string. If you can't make that stretch naturally, try slanting your fretting hand. This should help extend your pinky to that 7th fret,

LICK 14: DIMINISHED PATTERN

I like to use the diminished sound in my playing a lot. It's an easy way to create tension. Also diminished chords/patterns are symmetrical across the fretboard so you basically get 4x the amount of bang for the effort. Here's a lick that explores that idea, taking a motif and continually shifting up a minor third (three frets up, aka a whole step and a half step.)

LICK 15: UP AND DOWN THE NECK

Okay, I'll give it to you straight up, this is one of the most difficult licks in this book. However, it shows you two key ideas in flatpicking guitar, some topics we've already started to go over. To get up the neck, to switch positions, you'll need to incorporate some slides into your playing, The first bar of this lick illustrates this well. Second, to get back down the neck, open strings are your friend. In the fifth bar of this lick I use an open string as my opportunity to get all the way down from the 9th fret. Also, worth noting, there is a classic Tony Rice b7 idea in this lick, on the fourth bar, though this is not how he typically fingered the lick.



LICK 18: THE BILLY

Tablature for Lick 18: The Billy. The diagram shows a 4/4 time signature and the strings E, B, G, D, A, E. The notes are: 1-0, 3-1, 0, 3, 2-0, 2-0, 0-3, 2-0, 2-0, 0, 2-0, 3-0, 1-2, 0.

This is perhaps the most iconic Billy Strings lick. He plays it a lot and I don't blame him. It's simple and effective. You can use this as much as you want and get away with it.

LICK 19: THE TONY

Tablature for Lick 19: The Tony. The diagram shows a 4/4 time signature and the strings E, B, G, D, A, E. The notes are: 0-2, 3-0, 0, 3, 0, 3, 0, 3, 2-0, 2-0, 0, 3, 0, 2, 4, 3, 3, 5, 4, 2, 0, 2, 0, 0, 3, 5.

This is one of the most iconic Tony Rice licks out there. We all play it. You probably should try it at least once. The ending is my own doing.

LICK 20: NORMAN'S ASCENT

Tablature for Lick 20: Norman's Ascent. The diagram shows a 4/4 time signature and the strings E, B, G, D, A, E. The notes are: 3, 0-1, 2-3, 0-1, 2-3, 3, 0-1, 2-3, 0-1, 2-3, 3, 0-1, 2-3, 0-1, 2-3, 0, 3, 0, 3, 0, 3, 2-0, 2-0, 0.

Here's an almost-chromatic lick that comes straight out of the book of Doc Watson and Norman Blake. It's easy to memorize because of the symmetry- move chromatically up to the third fret on each string and end it with a pentatonic to a g run.

LICK 21: NORMAN'S DESCENT

Tablature for Lick 21: Norman's Descent. The diagram shows a 4/4 time signature and the strings E, B, G, D, A, E. The notes are: 3-2-1-0, 3-2-1-0, 3-2-1-0, 3-2-1-0, 3, 0, 1-2, 0, 1-0, 3, 0-1, 2, 0-2-0, 0.

This is pretty much the inverse of the previous lick. Very much a part of Norman Blake's vocabulary. Billy plays this a lot too!



LICK 22: CHROMATIC MAJOR TRIADS UP

This lick uses major triads that move up chromatically to get back to home base, our G major triad. Major triads in the wrong place are a great tool of creating a kind of “safe” dissonance—major sounds positive and happy to our ears but when it’s objectively “wrong,” as in the case above where we are playing almost random major triads, it’s kind of like a more acceptable form of dissonance with a big payoff on the resolution. You can also use this technique descending chromatically. Again, as I’ve already mentioned, note the use of that open note (known as an escape note) to get back to open position.

LICK 23: CHROMATIC MAJOR TRIADS DOWN

Like I mentioned above, you can use this technique to create downward motion. This is a really common sound in 90's era country telecaster players. I'm thinking of Brent Mason or even his contemporary, Mike Tuck. It's a super useful technique and is not limited to just this kind of triad on the top three strings.

LICK 24: GET UP (SIMPLIFIED)

Here is a modified version of Lick 15. It's a bit easier on the hands. Slide up, escape note (open string) to get back down. It's turning into a formula at this point, no?



LICK 25: CASCADING MINOR PENTATONICS

This is one of my favorite minor pentatonic ideas down in open position. We are using minor pentatonic for this lick but you can also achieve this kind of sound with a major pentatonic. It employs pull-offs to create a cascading upwards effect. I don't always remember to use this idea in my playing but when I do it always feels like a fresh take on a well worn flavor (minor pentatonic).

LICK 26: GOING UP F/D MINOR

So we're starting this G lick on F, making it instantly that dominant 7th (b7) sound. I'm kind of dancing around both a D minor and F major sound here, my way of emphasizing the mixolydian sound over G. Use this on a tune like Big Mon (Key of A) or Wheel Hoss!



LICK 27: MINOR IV BACK TO I

Okay this is one of my favorite non-bluegrass ideas to play in a bluegrass setting. The concept behind this lick is a little turnaround. The lick outlines a minor iv chord (in this case Cmin) resolving back to a I chord. Now obviously this is not your typical IV chord. Usually the IV in a major key is a major chord, however you can create a lot of tension by minoring the IV (lower case roman numerals indicates minor in this setting, thus, iv). In this case, the scale I'm using over that iv chord in the first two bars is the Melodic Minor. You can think of a melodic minor scale as almost a cross between a major and a minor scale. Likewise you can think of it as a major scale with a minor third instead of a major. Spelled out in C the note names are C, D, Eb, F, G, A, B. It's commonly called the Jazz Minor and it is an incredibly useful scale and sound.

LICK 28: NO MAN'S LAND

Here's an arpeggio-based lick that I like to use as a way to navigate that mid-fretboard space that doesn't get used all too much traditionally in flatpicking guitar. This lick features some really big interval jumps which stand out to a listener in a genre like bluegrass where we are typically playing very linear lines. Again, the recurring theme here; use open strings to get out of sticky, upper fretboard situations and back down to home base to play open chords.



LICK 29: MINOR PULL OFFS

On this lick we take a minor triad (with a pull off), and repeat the pattern up the neck. The last position of the shape starting on the 8th fret of the b string is a C minor. This points to the same chord substitution/alteration that we made a few licks ago. Its a iv back to a I. This lick is best used at the end of a phrase.

LICK 30: PLAY LIKE TIM

Tim Stafford. If you don't know his guitar playing, you should. Early member in Alison Krauss and Union Station, founding member of Blue Highway, all around great person. His rhythm guitar playing is super tasteful and his guitar breaks are always illuminating. This lick above I ripped off Tim on a solo he takes on on a Blue Highway tune, maybe "What Will Become of Me." It's pretty simple but has a bit of an unusual pattern, those first three notes with the open string is a bit of a curveball. It's a good lesson to learn from, sometimes it's not about playing something super technically challenging but instead approaching something easy with a beginner's mind in order to play it in a novel way!



LICK 31: SIXTHS FOREVER

This lick takes advantage of a fun interval to play on the guitar; sixths. Think the intro to “Soul Man,” or even Van Morrison’s Brown eyed Girl. Sixths are great especially as a turnaround. The above lick should go over a D chord (V Chord) over the first two bars and a I chord (G chord).

LICK 32: TONY’S OPEN STRING

Here’s another V to I lick in G. This one plays off of another classic Tony Rice lick. I think Tony probably got this one from Clarence White. Clarence might have gotten this from Doc Watson. So goes the “borrowing” of musical language! The cool part about this lick is that it uses an open string (high E) over the D chord. Usually that open E is more a staple of C shape licks, so it’s pretty awesome to find a way to use it in this context.



LICK 33: OUT-PATTERN RESOLUTION

Sometimes people ask me about “playing outside.” I don’t really do it *too much* in the bluegrass context, but it can be a great way of creating some unique tensions. Playing outside is just playing something that is not “right” or “correct” or “in the key.” It pushes the boundary of social acceptance and some audiences will react negatively to it. When we are improvising all we have are choices and expectations. We *get* to make a choice about what we play and what we don’t. These choices will have an impact on the expectations of the listener. If you’re playing an outside lick the important part is your *awareness* of this dynamic. This “outside lick” above uses a pattern. Patterns can be really useful when playing outside because it gives a listener something to grab on to. Though it might not make harmonic sense, we can give the listener a rhythmic idea that is repeated which helps them “understand” what’s going on and feel less alienated! This can be a soft landing into the world of outside playing.

LICK 34: DIMINISHED PATTERN

This is a lick that goes from the V chord (D) to the I chord (G) in G major. The five chord is a huge opportunity to create tension. Why? Because typically after a V chord you get the resolution power of the I chord. Therefore you can get away with a lot more over the V as long as you are resolving back to the one. Over the five chord on this lick we use a cool diminished pattern, kind of like a Coltrane/Jerry Bergonzi 1, 2, 3, 5 pattern.



LICK 35: ALEX'S WAY

Here's a lick that is truly mine. I definitely didn't steal or borrow this from anyone. That's my story and I'm sticking to it. No only kidding. I don't think it's really possible to make such a claim. We're always borrowing, always influenced by others and that's the beauty of music. I can't tell you exactly where this one came from but certainly from something I've heard out there in the musical world. Again, we're starting on the V chord and resolving to the I. Simple, right?

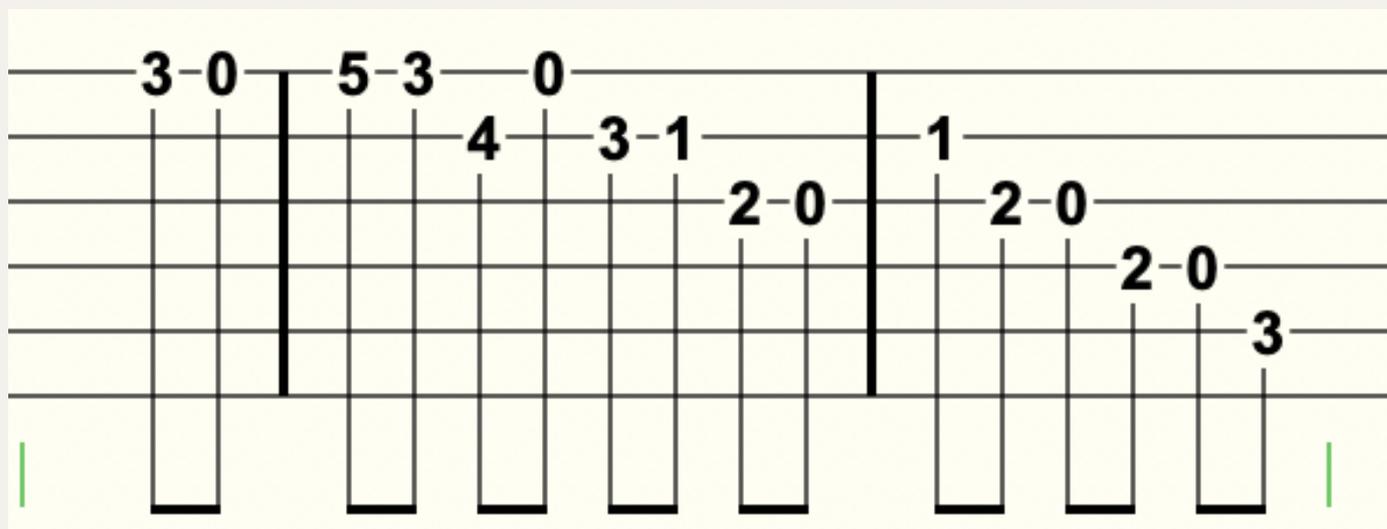
LICK 36: LENNY-BREAU GRASS

Here's another one of those repetitive patterns that can lend tension. This one I took from the great Lenny Breau's playing. Again, this could go over a V chord back to a I in the key of G.



II. C LICKS

LICK 1: THE CLASSIC



This is one of the most classic C Licks you could play in a bluegrass tune. It's straight out of the book of Doc Watson. Doc pretty much single-handedly defines the cannon of C Shape licks for bluegrass guitar. You should be listening to Doc Watson if you aren't already. This lick begins with a couple pick-up notes but you can modify the timing to make it work for whatever you're playing. Please note the open E string and the half-step tension that is created when that string rings out against the Eb on the 4th fret of the B string!



CLICKS

LICK 2: CLASSIC C UP THE NECK

Here's an extension of the first C lick. We'll use the open E string to transverse the neck, to get back down to our C shape.

LICK 3: BLACK MOUNTAIN PATTERN

This is a descending pattern that I pulled right from Doc Watson's version of the fiddle tune, Black Mountain Rag. It's basically a turnaround to get you back to a I chord. Notice some of the cross-picking at the end of the line. Cross-picking is very powerful technique for your lead playing in bluegrass. It basically is a sustain pedal for you guitar! The cross-picking above is not actually very melodic but more of a way to get back into strumming. Cross-picking is not only very useful in lead playing but also in rhythm guitar.

LICK 4: CHARLIE PARKER GRASS

Here's a lick that is an ode to my bebop hero, Charlie Parker. This is almost a bit of a quote from his classic tune, "Donna Lee" (though Miles Davis claimed to have written the tune which is based on the chord changes of Back Home Again in Indiana). The line tries to emulate the Charlie Parker bebop ornamentations while still staying in the bluegrass/Doc sound.



LICK 5: SLIPPERY C

Here's a slippery way to get up the neck out of a C shape. This lick employs a slide up the C major pentatonic and then uses a descending pattern to get back to C shape. At the end of this lick I've got one of my favorite chromatic endings, kind of unconventional but super effective.

LICK 6: MORE BEBOP GRASS

Here's a bluegrass-bebop lick that implies a quick V to I (G7 to C) motion. Please note that the portion of the lick starting on the third bar is that same m7b5 shape that I showed you in the G lick portion. Here it's used to outline the V chord (G) starting from the third of that G7, B!

LICK 7: PENTATONIC PATTERN

Here's a lick that uses the C major pentatonic pattern up and the back down. Major pentatonics are super useful for guitar and bluegrass. If you can figure out all five major pentatonic patterns across the neck, link those to all of the CAGED shapes and then link 5 positions of the major scale on top of that--- you'll have a mapped fretboard! That's how I like to look at things. Anyway, take a bite sized piece with this lick that traverses all of the c major pentatonic notes out of an A caged shape. If that doesn't make sense, don't worry, just play!



CLICKS

LICK 8: JULIAN'S SUPERIMPOSITION

I stole this lick from Julian Lage. Julian plays this lick on the Chris Eldridge + Julian Lage version of the fiddle tune, Whiskey Before Breakfast. Essentially this lick is a tension creator. It uses a half step motion to create this tension by displacing the c major triad up a half step to C#. The technical analysis of this harmonic device is basically a tritone substitution. A tritone substitution is a device that is used over seventh chords to create new tensions and harmonies. So basically in this case instead of playing the V chord here (key of C V chord is G7), we are playing a major chord a tritone away from that V chord. A tritone away from G is C#! There you go. Again, if this doesn't make sense, just play it and note how it makes you feel. That's all that matters at the end of the day.

LICK 9: ALTERED FIVE

This lick uses an "altered" V chord sound. Typically when we're talking about an "altered" sound it actually refers to a specific sound- the altered scale, which is the seventh mode of melodic minor. This is a quick and accessible way to use some jazz tensions over a V chord in the bluegrass context.



CLICKS

LICK 10: MELODIC MINOR THE IV

We've already talked about this concept- changing the IV chord into a minor chord and using it as a quick turnaround back to a I. In this scenario, we can quickly play some melodic minor stuff in order to create some cool tensions. This lick stays up the neck!

LICK 11: MAJOR/MINOR

This lick plays with the bluesy place between major and minor pentatonic. You probably do this type of thing a lot already out of a G shape in the Key of G. If you can imagine a capo on fret 5, then some of these phrases will probably become a lot more familiar in your hand!

LICK 12: MINOR 7 FLAT 5 PENTATONIC

A pentatonic is just a 5 note scale. Although we commonly use both major and minor pentatonic, you can create many other five note scales, technically pentatonics. I stole this particular idea from guitarist and teacher, Tim Miller. In the above lick, I've created a pentatonic from notes in that m7b5 chord/arpeggio plus some diminished notes.



LICK 13: TURNAROUND

This is one of my most favorite “turnaround” licks in C. It gives you simple access to some really cool tensions, namely a rootless D9th chord on the first cross-picked section in bar 3, followed up with a rootless G 13 b9! This gives the turnaround almost a ragtime feel with this downward voice leading. It’s super useful for endings of tunes, especially those out of a C shape with more of a western swing feel like East Tennessee Blues or Beaumont Rag.

LICK 14: INTERVAL BREAUX

Lenny Breau has already been mentioned in this book. This is a big interval pattern that is a nod to Lenny’s rare moments of single note line improvising. You’ll need to stretch for this one. Your hand will adjust with time on the stretch!



III. D LICKS

LICK 1: TONY'S WAY

A guitar tablature diagram for Lick 1: Tony's Way. It consists of two staves. The top staff shows fret numbers and techniques: 5-2, 2-Sl, 5, 3-4, 4-0-3, 2-0, 0, 0-2, 3, 0-1-2, 1, 1-0, Sl, 3, 4-0, 0, Sl, 0. The bottom staff shows fret positions with vertical lines and arrows indicating bends or slides.

This is a must-have piece of Tony Rice D shape language. Listen to “Blue Railroad Train” or “Why You Been Gone So Long” to get a taste of his D shape language. The more you listen, the more you will hear his vocabulary. This is a direct quote and will be recognized as a nod to TR by other guitar players at the jam.

LICK 2: PEDAL STEEL

A guitar tablature diagram for Lick 2: Pedal Steel. It consists of two staves. The top staff shows fret numbers and techniques: Sl, 2, 4, 2, Sl, 3-4, 4, 4, 3, 2-0, 2-0, 3, 0, 2, 0, 0, 0, 0, 2-0, 0, Sl, 0. The bottom staff shows fret positions with vertical lines and arrows indicating bends or slides. A 'Po' (pedal) marking is present above the 2-0 fret.

Here's a lick that I think I got from Albert Lee in a completely different context. It's almost like a classic country pedal steel lick.



D LICKS

LICK 3: TONY'S OPEN STRING

I've talked about this open string trick already in this book back in the G lick section where we moved from D back to G. In that case the D was the V chord but in this one it is the I so there's no need for resolution. The open string creates a super cool effect. Again, taken directly from the source!

LICK 4: DOMINANT PATTERN

Here's a lick that is super-angular and sharp. It relies on a dominant 7th arpeggio and a pattern. It won't really work over a super major-ey sounding tune, although you could force it with good effect.

LICK 5: BEBOP MILEAGE

I like to recycle ideas into a new context. The above phrase was already used in a G context. You can get mileage out of all of these licks by transposing them into different keys but also by resolving in the right place, regardless of the beginning. That's not exactly what is going on above but I still want you to think about that idea. Above I'm almost outlining a ii-V-I in the key of D, E minor, A, back to D. The ii-V-I is one of the most important pieces of the circle of fifths and jazz language. We use the abbreviated version of this (like we do with a lot of jazz harmony in bluegrass).



D LICKS

LICK 6: AUGMENTED I

Okay, here's another example of reusing licks. This shape and idea has been used multiple times already in other contexts in this book. While in some cases the shape in the lick is used to create a V chord tension, this version applies tension to the I chord, the D.

LICK 7: COLTRANE LICK V TO I

Here is an example of how to transpose! If you go all the way back to lick 7, you'll find a V to I Coltrane lick in the key of G. Here is that same lick transposed to the key of D. In reality, if you think of every tune in just one major or minor tonal center then you have no limits to your language.



LICK 4: PENTATONIC SLIDE

Here's a way to get up the neck in E. We'll slide up using major pentatonics. There's almost a little quick V to I implication based on the note choice. This will work well over just a I chord.

LICK 5: DEFINITELY NOT BEBOP

Here's an angular, Thelonious Monk inspired beginning with a Charlie Parker ornamented ending.

LICK 6: STUCK IN A LOOP

This lick is a doozy. It embellishes and extends an idea- using major and minor pentatonic. This kind of lick is meant to show you how you can use chromaticism to extend ideas using rhythm. Someone who I think is an incredible modern example of this kind of rhythmic extension is mandolin player, Harry Clark. He commonly can extend really simple ideas using this kind of poetic/word play kind of device. I almost think of the above lick like a rhyme or poem or even like a rapper using simple permutations in word play to create deeper meaning with something that is based off of simple small units.



LICK 7: ISN'T THAT MINOR?

I didn't say that these E licks would all be major. E minor (natural) has all of the same notes in G major. Okay, so what? I relate this E minor arpeggio to it's relative major G and it helps guide me. This is an under utilized minor arpeggio for many in bluegrass. I use it all the time. Try using this kind of thing over the B part of Blackberry Blossom. Or over the A part of Stony Point!

LICK 8: MINOR 7 FLAT 5 AGAIN

Okay, here's another re-use of that m7b5 shape that I'm so crazy about. In this context that 7th fret note on the A string (second note of the lick) is the root note, E. So we are analyzing this shape from that note. So in that vein, our arpeggio turns into a minor 6 arpeggio! We can get so much mileage from this one arpeggio. That's the beauty of the guitar fretboard, if you can map it out and see the patterns your vocabulary will basically triple instantly.

LICK 9: CHROMATIC TONY

Here's a Tony Rice idea that I've just added a bunch of chromatic notes to. Blasphemy? Yes.



LICK 10: THIS IS BEBOP

This last lick is literally just a classic bebop ii-V-I lick. It might be considered trite in the jazz world but that is totally fair game for a hip line in bluegrass.

*Please note:
Audio examples for all
licks in this book are
available within
Alex's Acoustic Club.*



CONCLUSION

WOW, THAT WAS A LOT

I hope you found this book to be helpful and illuminate some of my favorite improvising topics.

If you're ready to really improve your improvising you will benefit immensely from all the methods I teach on Alex's Acoustic Club.

Also, for all audio examples of these licks join the Acoustic Club. They're all there.

[Click here to check out the Club!](#)

The Acoustic Club features all of my workshops, Fretboard Mapping 101, Advanced Rhythm Guitar, Chord Substitutions for Bluegrass, Workshop on Tone + Speed, lots of lessons on fiddle tunes, rhythm guitar and access to my advice whenever you need it!

Please feel free to send this book to your friends and enemies.

"I want everybody to steal my licks" -Alex Graf