

Jamming Prep for Novice Bluegrass Fiddlers by Pete Wernick

I am being taught to play fiddle as a lead instrument and I don't understand about chords on the fiddle.

This is typical, if that's any comfort. We teach a lot of fiddlers the basics of backup.

Fiddlers who customarily play from music notation may not have any notion of the chords of a song. But in jamming, **the chords are all-important**, defining which notes are the most acceptable when improvising backup or lead.

So this is a big change in “how do I know what to play?”

From:

**reading* notes from a page or screen and *obeying*, and perhaps remembering the notes TO*

*following a chord progression and *deciding* what to play.*

That's a major change of focus! Playing with no notation or anything written to follow is a serious challenge for a “paper-trained” musician, and can be a constant and demoralizing struggle – at first.** It's multi-tasking: You have to decide what to do (chop, long-bow, saw in rhythm, do fills) while simultaneously always remembering to follow the chord progression and (if possible when soloing) the melody. It's all new, quite a *dis-comfort zone*! Soon enough you will start “hearing” chord changes, never a concern until now.

In a jam, the guide all musicians can follow is the **chording hand of a trustworthy guitar player**. Once the guitar's G, C, D, and A are recognizable, the job gets easier. Most bluegrass songs don't use many chords, and the chords repeat in mostly-simple patterns. Sometimes the verse and chorus use the same melody (and thus the same chords), entirely or partially.

Making mental notes about the chord progression when you first hear the song and watch the chord changes on guitar will help you remember the patterns as they start repeating. Best first step: Just drone the root note of each chord as you watch the changes.

One welcome aspect of playing bluegrass fiddle: It's the one instrument in the band that's not expected to be heard all the time. If no other instrument is playing off-beat rhythm chops, a fiddler can do that, and no need to know the chords! A fiddler can bide their time and chop or just play quietly, doing some fills and following the chords. Their presence is not always expected. But just adding simple “fiddle sound” as accompaniment behind a vocal or another instrument's solo is often a tasteful and welcome contribution.

I thought arpeggios were just chords broken up into single notes the fiddle can play, and a way to beat into the brain just which notes are acceptable choices when everyone else is playing a certain chord.

That's exactly right (chord = two or more notes that harmonize together). If you play an arpeggio of the “three component notes of a chord”, then any one of the three notes can be used. If you play two at the same time, that can be called “a chord”, but a fiddle playing any one is enough to be passable playing backup in a jam. The notes in a chord are: the

** These challenges can be stressful and upsetting. Someone quite competent doing memorized fiddle tunes, or playing classical music, may be brought to their knees by having to play backup and improvise solos on the fly over chord changes. Fiddle is already hard (no frets, and bowing is not simple). Learning a fully new approach to playing has to be daunting. We sympathize!

FIRST, THIRD, and FIFTH note of the scale the chord is based on. Example: The 1st, 3rd, and 5th notes of the C scale make a C chord. Those notes are: C, E, G.

To follow chords in bluegrass, you mainly need to know what notes are “acceptable” choices behind each of the song’s chords. The choices change as the chords change. The diagrams below, from page 45 of the JAM Songbook, show the locations of the main notes in the main chords. In our Slow Jam video, we start out with several two-chord songs. They use G and D chords. For those two chords, the acceptable notes are:

- (for G:) G, B, D
- (for D:) D, F#, A

So, for instance, as the song changes from a G chord, to a D chord, on the fiddle you could note a G and then an A. Or... a G and then a D. Or a D and then a D!

Once you can find any note that works with each chord, the technical end is pretty simple, but you do have to keep the “acceptable” choices in mind as you follow the chord changes. Make sure to stay “legal”.

This gets much easier the more you do it, to where you can almost stop thinking about it, while still doing it correctly. That’s why I strongly recommend our Slow Jam video. The chord changes are shown clearly on screen, and as the songs play, you get to practice by just following along. The video has 17 standards, all played slowly, and use only G, C, D, and A. Play along enough with that video, and you’ll be able to fit right in, and set your sights on more than just the basics of “being legal”.

Bluegrass Fiddle Backup (know your CHORD TONES)

You can hold a note like no one else can! Once you’re bowing through the chord changes playing the root, try using the other chord tones (the 3 and 5) as shown in the diagrams below.

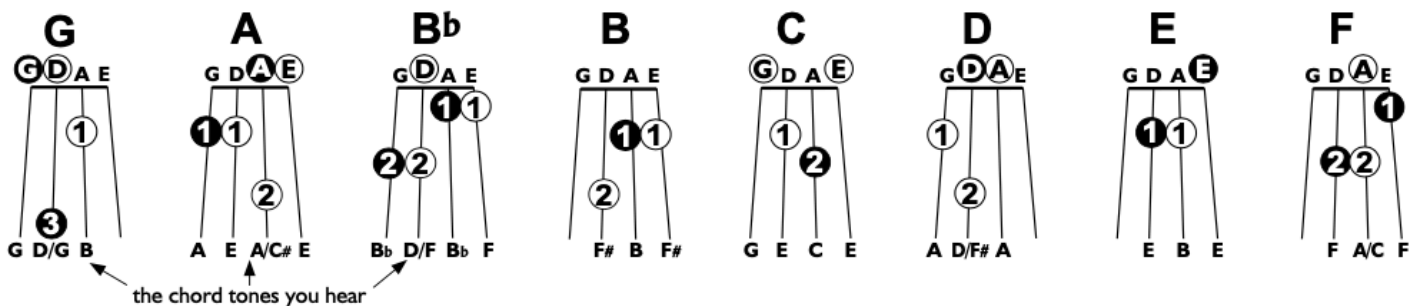
Old time fiddle backup?
Typically, old-time fiddlers just keep playing the melody.

At all times, a fiddler chooses what sort of backup to play:

- “chopping rhythm” playing a quick touch across strings on the offbeat (halfway between beats)
- playing long-bows on single or pairs of chord tones, either steadily or in a rhythm
- playing fills – finding “holes” (such as the space between verse/chorus) to insert short melodic phrases – they can be standard licks or ones you make up yourself.
- “laying out” — always an option for a fiddle. Then when it comes in again it’s a welcome change.

Fiddle Chord Tones

Circled notes are CHORD TONES. Dark circle = the root 1= index, 2 = middle, 3 = ring



Are there suggested ways to improve learning chords?

Pick two chords that are commonly played in the same song, and practice switching between them. At first, once you’ve made the note choices, play those strings individually to make sure they sound clear and correct. Then change the chord and do the same. Go back and forth, and in time, more quickly. With practice, this will become easy!