



Beginning Irish Tenor Banjo: Hitting the High B Note

by Michael Keyes

In Old Time music there is a tune called Quince Dillon's High D in which the fiddler has to get out of first position and slide up to the high D note. The name of the tune is enough to grab the attention of any Old time fiddler because that person is warned that they will have to do something out of the ordinary.

Like their Old Time compatriots, Irish fiddlers play most of their tunes out of first position. This occurs because most Irish tunes don't go past the high B note which is also the practical upper limit of the whistle and most lilter's voices. Unfortunately, the same is not true for banjo players.

If you have been reading this series on Beginning the Irish Tenor Banjo, you will recall that I advocate the guitar or finger assignment technique of playing. While I consider the mandolin style just as valid, I think that a beginner has a better chance of playing the music with the four-fingered style due to the scale length of the banjo. All of this analysis goes out the window when it comes to hitting the High B note.

The leprechauns who wrote most traditional Irish music had a strong tendency to use High B. I can hear the groans of every beginning banjo player when the note is indicated and can imagine all the shenanigans that occur trying to hit it at any decent speed. But the High B note is commonly the most dramatic note in the tune and it would be a shame to flub it.

The mandolin style players will often say: "Aha, proof that we were right after all" because they do have a partial answer built into their system. To me the mandolin system is too much like work, but they do have a point. So how do you hit that note? "Let me count the ways..." I am going to introduce an old tune and a new tune to help you understand the various techniques and I hope that it helps you play the tunes a little more comfortably.

First a little theory. With the fiddle and mandolin, you can play scales all the way up the neck by merely moving your hand (as a whole) to the correct position. The scale is short enough that you can play four notes on one string with your first finger on the root and then move to the next higher string (which is tuned a fifth higher) placing your first finger on the same fret and complete the scale by playing the same pattern with your four fingers. This is called a closed scale. If you try this with an instrument with 15" or more scale, you have to have very long fingers to make it work. It cannot be done that way on a tenor banjo by normal human beings.

As a result, if you want to play a closed scale, you will have to move your hand down the neck to hit the fourth note and then bring it back up for the second four notes in order for the first finger to be placed on the correct fret. Most of the time we are playing in an open position (meaning we use an open note as part of the scale) and we can avoid this problem. The only note that we normally play that makes us move our hand is the High B.

With the four finger technique the highest note we can hit with the pinky is the high A note. With the mandolin style the high A note is hit with the ring finger and the High B can be reached with the pinky. This fact alone seems to be a powerful reason to use the mandolin technique, but as you will see, sometimes this will not work.

There are three ways (probably more) to hit the High B note: Use the mandolin style, Slide the pinky from the A to the B note, or Do a Positional Change. If you are being really picky, the mandolin style and the positional change may be the same thing, but for the sake of this article, we will treat them differently. The purpose of these techniques is to make sure that when you hit the High B note, it rings out as clearly as the other notes.

The Silver Spear

♩ = 155

The image displays six staves of musical notation for the piece 'The Silver Spear'. The notation is written in a mandolin style, featuring a treble clef and a 3/4 time signature. The first staff begins with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The music consists of a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some triplets. The notation is arranged in a single system of six staves, with the first and last staves ending with double bar lines and repeat dots.

Rhythm: Reel

Notes: Arranged By Michael J. Keyes, MD

Using Mandolin Style

In the mandolin style, the pinky is only used to hit the seventh fret. In practice, the only time the pinky is used in this system is when the High B note is played. I will illustrate this method (which is the most common way to hit High B in both styles) using the second part of the reel Silver Spear. You don't have to play the triplets I play, just make sure that the tune "lilts" You will also note that I throw in variations that correspond to the various techniques. The mandolin style gives you a more distinct articulation of the notes, but sometimes it is harder to use if you are going from the High B to the high A note. This can be an important factor when you are trying to play the tune at speed or with good tone.

The Silver Spear Mandolin Style

Download the Movie:

[SilverSpearMando.mov](#)

Positional Change

There are actually two types of positional change, the quick jump to the High B note and the anchored positional change in which you put your first finger on an anchor fret (the position name comes from how many frets about your normal starting fret it is) and proceed to play several notes in this position. The quick change is usually used on the E string only with the first finger playing the F note, the pinky the A note, the first finger going back to the F note and then the pinky jumping up the the High B. When you make that quick jump, guide it with your eyes, it is a lot easier than guessing where the seventh fret is. Here is the notation and a video that shows the quick jump.

The Silver Spear (Variant of Second Part)

Arranged by Michael J. Keyes, MD



Rhythm: reel

The Silver Spear Variation with Jump

Download the Movie:

[SilverSpearSecondQuick.mov](#)

Slide

This is a little different that the slide you may be used to. For one thing, it is a lot quicker and for another you don't hit the note in the middle of the slide (unless you are looking for a specific effect) but just as your pinky reaches the seventh fret. In this example, there is a slide down back to the A note which does have that "slide" effect. Again, guide the whole process with your eyes. The quick slide is a lot easier to perform at times than the jump or the mandolin technique especially from the A note to the High B note. There will be tunes in which it is not comfortable or practical to go from the guitar style to the mandolin style back to the guitar style. In these cases the slide is a good tool but it does not have to be restricted to only those conditions. I tend to use it a lot as a variant.

The Silver Spear Slide Variation

Download the Movie:

[SilverSpearSecondSlide2.mov](#)

Musical Priest

I haven't gotten into the anchored positional change yet and Silver Spear is not a good tune to illustrate it. Instead, I am going to introduce a three part reel that is tough (as in "If you make me play that SOB one more time at that speed I will kill you" tough) for banjo players because it introduces the High B from several awkward positions. Fiddlers and whistle players easily play the High B in Musical Priest but banjo (and bouzouki) players have to suffer a little when they play this tune.

The Musical Priest

Arranged by Michael J. Keyes, MD



First Part

The first part is relatively easy. Not a High B in sight. You should get this part down quickly, but it is only playing with you for the time being. (Did I mention that some banjo players consider this tune to be the living personification of Evil?)

The Musical Priest

Download the Movie:

[MusicalPriestFirstPart.mov](#)

Second Part

Now it gets interesting. The tune is just a little harder (with a backwards triplet thrown in, but you can do it) when suddenly it reaches a D B A F# bar. This piece of work is a killer if you try to play the D note with your pinky and then jump to the B note with your pinky and then slide down (or use your ring finger) to the A and play the F# note right after it with your first finger. It is very hard to do in first position. A lot of banjoists would just flub the note and let the session hide the mistake. Here is where the mandolin stylist has an advantage. He would slide the ring finger from the C# note to the D and then play the High B with the pinky according to the style book. And he would be right. After that four note bar then just slip back to the first position. Here is the second part of Musical Priest using a positional change. Watch what I do on the A string right before the High B note. This kind of positional change is fairly common in Irish traditional music. I will show you the slide method for you to have a reference to the difficulty of trying to play the second part in any other manner.

The Musical Priest Second Part Slide

Download the Movie:

[MusicalPriestSecondSlide.mov](#)

The Musical Priest Second Part Positional Change

Download the Movie:

[MusicalPriestSecondPartPos.mov](#)

Third Part

But the third part of this reel is why banjo players go to the bar when the session starts to play it. In the first bar you go from a written B triplet on the A string to a High B A F# High B that is just a killer. And you have to do it again later on. No wonder banjo players hate this tune. It can be very hard to hit all the notes in time with good tone and stay on the beat. When you try this don't forget to guide with your eyes. There are three variations shown, Slide (really a Jump/Slide), Jump (with a backwards Mandolin style), and Anchored Positional. The latter takes advantage of the shorter distance between frets higher up the neck to play the right notes. Try all the technical variations I show and see which one suits you best.

The Musical Priest Third Part Slide

Download the Movie:

[MusicalPriestThirdPartSlide.mov](#)

The Musical Priest Third Part Jump

Download the Movie:

[MusicalPriestThirdPartQuick.mov](#)

The Musical Priest Third Part Anchored Positional

Download the Movie:

[MusicalPriestThirdPositional.mov](#)

References

This lesson is so visual, that you have to get some videos such as the Gerry O'Connor video or CD-ROM (available from <http://elderly.com/search/elderly?terms=gerry+O%27connor&x=0&y=0>) in order to see how he reaches the High B. Tab is of no help (not that there is that much banjo tab to begin with.)

Finding the High B notes is easy if you get the music. Go to Thesession.org (<http://www.thesession.org>) and click on "Tunes" and you will have access to more tunes that you can stand. The trick is to figure out which method you want to use to hit that High B and if you want to vary how you do it.

If you have questions, email me at mikeyes@charter.net

About the Author

Mike Keyes, a native of Franklin, Tennessee, has played tenor banjo since 1957 and over the years has learned to play five string banjo, mandolin, and guitar. He earned his way through college and medical school playing in bluegrass and dixieland bands and currently plays in the Irish band "Good Luck." He is an expert in sports performance and has written and book and over 200 articles on the subject.

His interest in Irish music started a number of years ago when effort to learn more about his musical roots led him to the discovery of session playing. Since then he has been to Ireland to learn more about the music and has taken classes and interviewed such banjo greats as John Carty, Charlie Piggot, and Gerry O'Connor.

His medical practice is in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin where he practices Psychiatry. You can email him at mikeyes@charter.net if you wish to discuss some aspect of the Irish tenor banjo.