

Creative Backup Made Easy

by Eddie Collins

For most students of the 5-string, just memorizing a solo to a song is task enough that they seldom work on the back-up parts necessary to complete a decent arrangement of a song. In a basic jam session, banjo players typically just vamp chords with a “boom-chick” rhythm pattern. In most instruction books, if they bother to present the back-up at all, it is presented in such a way that you feel as though you have another solo to memorize.

The following is my approach to quick and easy back-up parts that sound interesting:

1) Know the background chords. Most fiddle tunes have repeated 8-measure segments, whereas many vocal tunes are 16-measure progressions. “Salty Dog” has an 8-measure progression that is the same for the verse and chorus: G - E - A - A - D - D - G - G. For added color, we’ll substitute a D7 for the second measure of D.

2) Establish a right-hand rhythm pattern. The pattern used in the “Salty Dog” examples that follow is played by striking the 4th string, pinching strings 1 and 2 and then playing T M T I on strings 5, 1, 3 and 2. To allow for smooth chord changes, play the last note of the pattern as an open string by lifting the chord early, or simply omit the note. When staying on the same chord more than one measure, such as the A chord in “Salty Dog,” keep the 4-note roll pattern going.

3) Find the chords in different positions on the neck. In the following example, I play the back-up to the verse with down-the-neck chord forms followed by up-the-neck forms for the chorus. The right-hand pattern stays the same, thus allowing the focus to be on changing the chords smoothly.

4) Add interesting fill licks. Fill licks occur in between vocal phrases. In “Salty Dog,” there is room to fill during the final two measures of G in both the verse and the chorus. Since the back-up during the verse is played down-the-neck, the fill lick is built using the same right-hand pattern. The up-the-neck fill lick is the familiar “In The Mood” forward roll played while holding a partial G chord at the 15th fret.

The following back-up parts come from my just-released book, *Basics of Bluegrass Banjo ... and a Whole Lot More!* What I tried to do different than other instruction methods was develop the concept of playing complete songs with intros, all the back-up parts, down- and up-the neck solos, and unique endings. You can find more information about this book and other instructional materials I have at my website: <http://www.eddiecollins.biz>

Salty Dog: Back Up to Verse

G Tuning: g DGBD

G E A D D⁷

G

Salty Dog: Back Up to Chorus.

G E A D D⁷

G

Happy picking to All ... Eddie Collins



About Eddie Collins

Eddie Collins resides in Austin, TX, where he teaches music and performs with some of the finest musicians in Central Texas. Eddie is nationally recognized as an instructor of 5-string banjo and acoustic guitar. He contributes articles to many publications and conducts music workshops throughout the U.S.

Collins was the founder of 5-String Quarterly and has authored instruction books for both banjo and guitar. His career was highlighted as the cover story in the May 2002 issue of Banjo NewsLetter. Previously, his performing career was documented on the syndicated TV show, Texas Music Cafe. As a recording artist, Rise & Shine represents Eddie's fourth work--two with his band, the High Stakes Rollers and another solo project of honky tonk country music, Guitar Slingers & Texas Music.