

The Don Reno Banjo **Workshop**



By Jason Skinner

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By Jason Skinner © 2006

Hello and welcome to my Don Reno Workshop. Don is the most unappreciated banjo (and guitar) player from the first generation pickers, even though his style was much more complex than his contemporaries. His contributions to the world of bluegrass are tremendous. It is my hope that with help from all of you that Don Reno will finally get the credit he deserves in the music world.

For the past 15 years Don Reno has been my inspiration and mentor. What's amazing is that after all of these years listening to Reno day in and day out, I still hear something new that I didn't catch before. Whether it is a certain roll, a lick, back-up, or just little nuances, the listener is constantly treated to something new. In this workshop we will examine some of Don's licks, back-up, theory, and arrangements. We will dissect some of his best licks and techniques to explain how it is done. I did not want to tab out whole songs because I want to teach you the tools to help you figure them out on your own. Developing a good ear is very important and learning completely from tab can hinder your ability to learn by ear. I am not the best Reno style picker in the world but, hopefully what little bit I do know can help others enjoy Don Reno's wonderful style. I hope it will bring you as much joy as it has to me over the years.

Understanding Don Reno

Before we get into learning anything on the banjo itself we need to understand a few things about Don Reno. Don was a very soulful musician, much like a blues musician or jazz musician. I always say he is the Django Reinhardt of bluegrass banjo. Now with this being said, understand that it is not necessarily the notes he plays as much as it is the "feeling" he puts into the notes. You can teach anyone notes but you can not teach the "feeling". It has to come from within yourself. A good example of this is Don's version of "My Old Kentucky Home". I have never heard so much "feeling" put into a song. I think it is one of Don's greatest recordings. It is nearly impossible to reproduce. Don's style is almost a freeform style that is very spontaneous. To play true Reno style you have to play how you feel, not exactly what's learned from a tab. One of the many things that makes his style so special is that it can be used as a means to express your feelings, where in other styles it is a little more mechanical and repetitious. If you want to try and get as close as you can to Don's "feel" you have to immerse yourself in his music and of course - practice, practice, practice. Listen to him all the time and eventually these things will begin to seep into your subconscious. With practice, before you know it will come out on your banjo neck. This applies to any musician's style that you are trying to emulate. You have to try and learn that musician's way of thinking. But use Don's style as a vehicle for the creation of your own style and licks. Learning his way of thinking will help you do new things you never thought of. Remember you can never beat a person at his own style but you can learn enough from them to start your own. The key thing to remember is "the feel". It isn't what you play, it is how you play it and it doesn't need to be difficult to be good. If it doesn't have "Soul" then it's just notes.

Some ways of putting “feeling” into the song are choosing how hard to hit a note, how you hit the note, where to hit the note, and the distance your right hand is away from the bridge. Right hand position plays huge part of putting “feeling” into a song. Don moved his right hand away from and to the bridge a lot to get different sounds. Usually on slow songs Don would move more towards the neck, away from the bridge. But he would also get close to the bridge for a more bright and powerful tone on faster tunes. Sometimes he would do both techniques in the same song. Back up is usually played with the right hand closer to the neck. It all depends on the mood and sound that he wanted. It is up to you to decide where to use these techniques to get your own “feeling” across to the listener.

Another important thing is, don’t be afraid of making mistakes. Spontaneity is “key” in Reno style. Don hardly ever did the same thing twice exactly the same way. Play for the moment. Don would try something new whenever it came to him instead of practicing it 3000 times before a show. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn’t. But when you pull off something new it is one of the greatest feelings in the world. I am not saying to just go off trying to improvise all the time; you have to have some structure to the song. You have to know your banjo neck very well to improvise. It takes years of hard practice before you can gain the knowledge to help you pull off the inspirations in your head. Remember to relax and have fun, that’s what Don did!

Now, on to a more technical aspect of Don’s banjo picking. It is no secret that Don was one of the best and very first guitar pickers in bluegrass. His guitar style played a very important part in his banjo style. As with Eddie Adcock, Don used his knowledge of the guitar to develop his unique banjo work. Don always considered himself a guitar picker more than a banjo picker. I think he was the best at both! But, if you are an accomplished guitar picker then it will be a big asset to you in learning Reno style banjo. If you don’t play the guitar, you should learn a little. That way you can be able to show people the chords to the tunes and you can also follow a guitar players chords when they are doing a song that you don’t know.

A lot of the chord positions, licks, back up, and breaks Don did were taken directly off the guitar. Is there anything wrong with that? Of course not. It is important to listen and learn from all types of music and instruments. Don and Adcock both took things from other instruments and applied them to the banjo. Steel Guitar Rag and Remington Ride immediately come to mind. Don knew something good when he heard it no matter where it was coming from. I learned “Tijuana Taxi” off of a Herb Alpert And Tijuana Brass album. It is a great tune! So don’t be afraid to explore other music, you’ll never know what you might find! Of course nothing useful can be learned from Rap!!

Most of Don’s famous licks and breaks are based out of chord positions or partial chord positions. So when you are trying to figure out his stuff remember that it probably isn’t that far from the chord you’re playing in. Reno used partial “two string” chord positions a lot to work out breaks or to walk from one chord to another. “Talk of The Town is a perfect example. Know your neck and learn how to get from one chord to another.

The Capo Myth

I have heard so many times that Don Reno never used a capo. Well “never” is a pretty strong word. Some people get pretty defensive when I tell them that Don did use a capo.

Yes I said it, Don Reno did use a capo....well sort of. Here's the truth about Don and the capo. Reno used the capo many times on his recordings but, only on records. I don't know of any instance that he used a capo outside of the studio with Red Smiley or Bill Harrell. The only time that Don was known to use a capo on stage was with the Bill Monroe back in the 40's because Bill asked him to. In fact Don Reno stopped using the capo completely in the late 60's.

There are a few reasons that Don did not use a capo in a live situation. Number one - they are a pain to use. You always have to retune. Another reason was that Don was the MC for their shows. He was too busy to fool with the capo and talk at the same time. But the main reason is that when you put a capo on, it limits your ability to use the whole neck of your banjo. As you know Don was all over the neck. He may have wanted to hit lower notes that weren't available to him once the capo is on. Plus when you get used to playing without one and you put a capo on, it throws you completely off! As for later years with Bill Harrell, I think he stopped using one in the studio because he had become known for not using one. It became part of the Don Reno style. Some of the tunes Don recorded using a capo were the original “Charlotte Breakdown”, “Bringing In That Georgia Mail”, “Love Please Come Home”, “Dixie Breakdown”, “San Antonio Rose”, and many others. So when someone tells you Don Reno never used a capo you just tell them “Yes he did but only in the studio!”



Here are two rare pics of Don with a capo. The first is Don posing with Tut Taylor in 1949. The second pic is from the 1965 Fincastle Bluegrass Festival.

The Capo-To use or not to use

That is the question. Well honestly that depends on what sound you want. If you are trying to be like Reno then you wouldn't be wrong for using a capo or not using one. But, here's my opinion on it. Don did abandon the capo in the late 60's even on records. Though he did many great breaks without the capo, he also did some breaks that didn't quite "fit" the song he was playing. Now in fairness these were usually "live" situations and not in the studio. An example of this is Don Reno's version of "Pike County Breakdown" in the key of A without a capo. It wasn't so much that his break was bad, it was the sound that was produced from using closed chord positions. He did a fantastic job at picking it in closed positions. But, some songs like "Pike County Breakdown" and "Doing My Time" have a certain sound using open strings that are characteristic of the song itself. So the question should not be "Can it be done?" but, "Can it be done and sound good." I hardly ever use a capo myself. But, I will decide whether or not to use one by determining what I think will sound best for the song, not just to show off that I can play without the capo. Remember your job as a band member is to compliment the other members of the band and the singers with your playing, not to show off. But, don't use the capo as a "crutch" either. Some players get too dependent on their capo. Any tune in "D" shouldn't really need a capo. Also playing a tune like Rawhide in the key of C should not require a capo either. It is all a matter of choosing what's best for that particular song. You have to make that decision for yourself but you need learn to play without a capo first before you can make that choice.

Just for kicks here is a picture of Don with D-Tuners on his banjo.



Set-up and picks

If you want to pick like Reno then you probably want your banjo to sound like Don's too. Who wouldn't? Well, that will be impossible because a lot of the sound comes from the person, not the instrument. But, you can do some things to help you get closer. We will be referring to the sound of his Gibson not the brash Stelling sound in his later years. Don's banjo wasn't "thuddy" like a lot of banjos. His banjo was bright and clear. So keep the tension tight on the banjo head. Another thing that helps achieve Don's tone is to thin the banjo bridge. Most new banjo bridges are way too thick. Don would always thin down his bridges to get a brighter better tone. Don always used light gauge strings along with a close string action. Don didn't pick as hard as some and very rarely broke strings. Reno's picks are important too. He used custom stainless steel finger picks most of his career. Though in the early 50's he probably used regular National finger picks. Also Don used a metal thumb pick in a lot of those old recordings. But, he usually used a clear plastic "Dobro" thumb pick through most of his career. The thumb pick is very important in achieving Don's tone. Reno would sand the blade of the thumb pick (on the top side) thinner. Not too thin but just enough to get the tone he wanted. This produces a certain tone with the brush technique and single string picking. You can play around with these combinations to get the sound that is right for you.



As you can see in this picture of Don his bridge is really worked down. There is about 1/8" or less of maple under the ebony topping. This combined with thinning the bridge width really opens the tone and volume of the banjo. How much to thin and how much to remove under the ebony depends on the banjo, the bridge, and your personal preference.

Getting Started – Earl versus Don

Ok we will assume that you already play the banjo “Scruggs” style so take a deep breath and get ready for what I am about to say...”Forget everything you have learned.”. Nah, I am just kidding but you will have to “re-learn” some things to get that Reno sound. Sometimes it is actually harder to unlearn something than it is to start from scratch. Don used different rolls than Scruggs, therefore his licks were different. For instance listen to the sound bite for the difference in this classic lick in Scruggs style and Reno style.

Earl’s version

Earl 1

T I M T M I T M T

- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don’s version

Don 1

T T I M T I M T

- Click the speaker to play the clip

This particular lick is the result of Don not using the “forward backward roll” that is a fixture in Scruggs style. It is a subtle difference the way Don does it but it is a crucial part of Reno’s sound.

A match made in heaven!!



A key aspect on Don's playing was that he led with his 1st finger (pointer finger) a lot, where Scruggs would usually lead with his thumb. Don would hit more melody notes with his 1st finger than Scruggs would have. This is especially evident in the "Foggy Mt. Breakdown Roll" as some call it. Don would use his 1st finger to hit the hammer-on notes instead of the thumb and rolls it different as well. Also Don does another variation of this lick that only works when the chord change goes to "D" chord. You leave the 1st open and come up to the 7th fret on the third string to do the hammer-on while fretting the 2nd string on the 7th fret. This is pure genius! Only Don could have re-worked one of the most used licks in the banjo world. He used this quite a bit in later years. Listen to later versions of Charlotte Breakdown. Check out these Reno variations of the "Foggy Mt. Breakdown" lick.

Earl's version- Click the paperclip to play sound clip

Earl 2

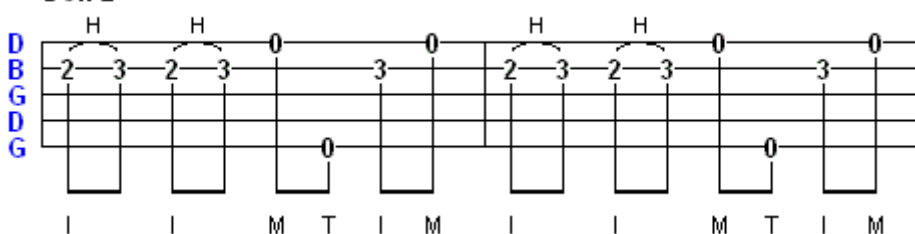
D
B
G
D
G

I M T M T I M T I M T M T I M T


- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don's versions

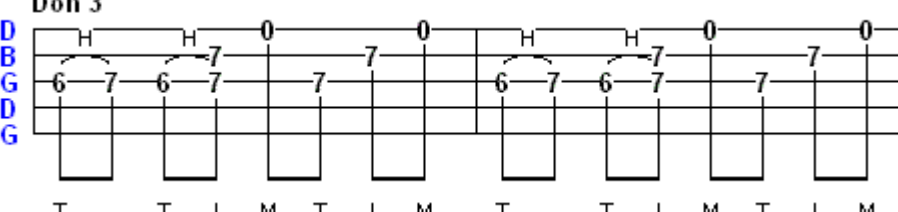
Don 2




The notation for Don 2 shows a four-string banjo (D, B, G, G) with fret numbers 2, 3, 2, 3, 0, 3, 0, 2, 3, 2, 3, 0, 3, 0. Above the staff, 'H' is written above the first two pairs of notes (2-3 and 2-3), and 'H' is written above the next two pairs (2-3 and 2-3). Below the staff, the timing is indicated by vertical lines: I, I, M, T, I, M, I, I, M, T, I, M.

 - Click the speaker to play the clip

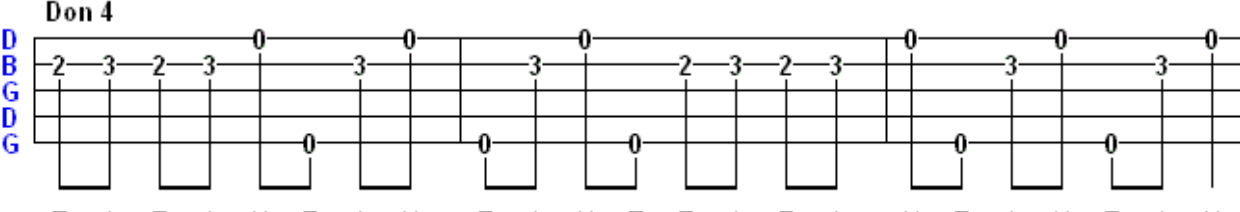
Don 3




The notation for Don 3 shows a four-string banjo (D, B, G, G) with fret numbers 6, 7, 6, 7, 0, 7, 0, 6, 7, 6, 7, 0, 7, 0. Above the staff, 'H' is written above the first two pairs of notes (6-7 and 6-7), and 'H' is written above the next two pairs (6-7 and 6-7). Below the staff, the timing is indicated by vertical lines: T, T, I, M, T, I, M, T, T, I, M, T, I, M.

 - Click the speaker to play the clip

Don 4



The notation for Don 4 shows a four-string banjo (D, B, G, G) with fret numbers 2, 3, 2, 3, 0, 3, 0, 3, 0, 2, 3, 2, 3, 0, 3, 0, 3, 0. Below the staff, the timing is indicated by vertical lines: T, I, T, I, M, T, I, M, T, I, M, T, T, I, T, I, M, T, I, M, T, I, M.

 - Click the speaker to play the clip

Don used a forward roll more than any other roll. He would sometimes keep the forward roll going non-stop and force the melody in by “flirting” with the timing using the left hand. Usually he led the melody with his first finger as described above when doing this continuous roll. It is very tough to do. "Cumberland Gap", "John Hardy", and "Goodbye Liza Jane" are both good examples of this. Also he would use his famous “double roll” like on “Double Banjo Blues” in which he actually triples the amount of forward rolls that would normally fit into the timing. But Don would also use what ever roll he had to, to get the sound that he wanted. Sometimes his rolls would be erratic and very hard to figure out. I am still trying to figure out a lot of it! Again Don played for the moment and many of the tunes he recorded he never played them as good or the exact same way. “Banjo Riff” comes to mind here. But, some songs he played better after he recorded them the first time as with “Clear Skies”.

Another important roll is the "Dixie Breakdown" Roll. This roll is very difficult to some. I put the banjo down for a few years and when I got back into picking again, I quickly realized I couldn't do this roll anymore. This is one of the main rolls in Reno style. It is not only used in "Dixie Breakdown" but Don uses this roll where Earl would normally use the "alternating thumb roll". The "alternating thumb roll" is used by Scruggs a lot and is essential in his versions of "Rueben", "Cripple Creek", and "Doing My Time". Don's version of this roll can be used in these tunes as well. Listen to the difference.

Earl's version

Earl 3

T I T M T I T M T I T M T I T M



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don's version

Don 5

t i m i t i m i t i m i t i m i



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Another lick that stands out is a tag lick or "fill" lick that Don uses a lot. Most people don't pick up on this lick but, it is essential to Reno's sound. If you have studied Earl's instruction book you probably have learned Scruggs version of this lick. It is usually done at the end of a solo or break. But Don also used it a lot in his tunes as well.

Earl's version-

Earl 4

t i t i m i t i t



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don's version-

Don 6

Musical notation for Don's version 6. The notation is on a five-line staff. The strings are labeled on the left: D (top), B, G, D, G (bottom). The notes are: D (open), B (open), G (open), D (open), G (open). The fret numbers are: 0, 0, 0, 0, 0. The rhythm is: I, T, I, M, T, I, M, T.



- Click the speaker to play the clip

One final tag lick we'll discuss is one every banjo player uses. Scruggs' version is most commonly used but you can spice things up with Don's version. Don did this one several different ways. Sometimes he would hit the first string on the second fret and sometimes he would pull off on the second fret. But then sometimes he would pull off from the third to the second fret to the open string. Later on during the Bill Harrell years Don started doing another variation. Check them all out below.

Earl's version

Earl 5

Musical notation for Earl's version 5. The notation is on a five-line staff. The strings are labeled on the left: D (top), B, G, D, G (bottom). The notes are: D (open), B (open), G (open), D (open), G (open). The fret numbers are: 0, 0, 3, 2, 0. The rhythm is: T, M, I, T, T.



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don's version

Don 7

Musical notation for Don's version 7. The notation is on a five-line staff. The strings are labeled on the left: D (top), B, G, D, G (bottom). The notes are: D (open), B (open), G (open), D (open), G (open). The fret numbers are: 2, 0, 3, 2, 0. The rhythm is: T, M, M, T, T.



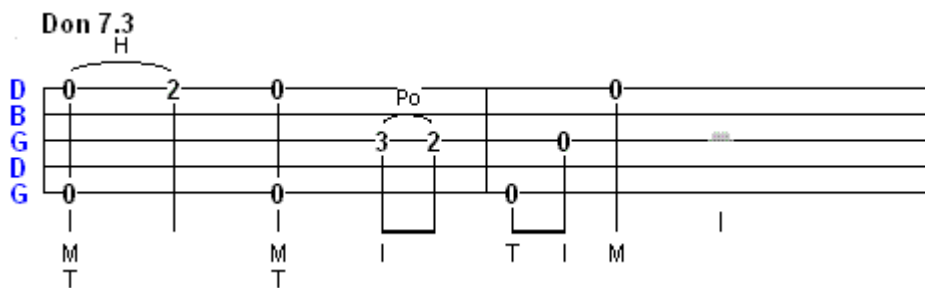
- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don 7.2

Musical notation for Don's version 7.2. The notation is on a five-line staff. The strings are labeled on the left: D (top), B, G, D, G (bottom). The notes are: D (open), B (open), G (open), D (open), G (open). The fret numbers are: 3, 2, 0, 0, 3, 2, 0, 0. The rhythm is: T, M, T, T. There are pull-off markings (PoPo) above the notes. A note indicates: Pull-offs are downward.



- Click the speaker to play the clip



Note: The 3-2 pull-off (or push-off) above is upward



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Here's what some of these licks sound like together



- Click the speaker to play the clip

This should give you something to get started rolling like Don. Remember you can combine these licks together. Listen to Don's records for the endless combinations.



Don practicing- taken around 1962-1964

Single String Picking

When most people think of Reno style they immediately think “single string” picking. Single string playing is a very important part of the Reno style but is only a small part of it. Actually Don didn’t begin recording a lot of single string stuff until the very late fifties or early sixties. If you have the Reno and Smiley Box-set you’ll see what I mean. There wasn’t any single string picking on it that I can remember and it was some of his best stuff ever.

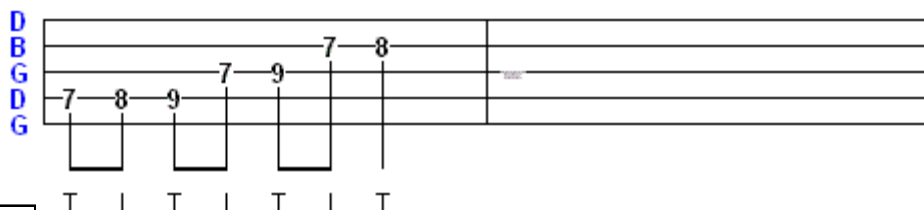
Single string picking is using your thumb and first finger to pick notes out as you would when flat picking a guitar. Again Don adapted it from his guitar playing. Single string is difficult but it can bring a welcome break to the constant rolling in Scruggs style picking. It is always done T-I-T-I-T-I. “T” being thumb and “I” being the index also called the first finger. It is a simulation of the up and down strokes of the flat pick on the guitar. Contrary to popular belief Don did not pick up with his thumb pick.

Reno tried to develop patterns that where in “closed” positions. This means that the licks or patterns avoided open strings so that he could play them at any place on the neck. This is one of the secrets to playing without a capo. Reno’s single string “bag of licks” are endless so we’ll only cover a few of his most popular licks.

The “D” Position Lick

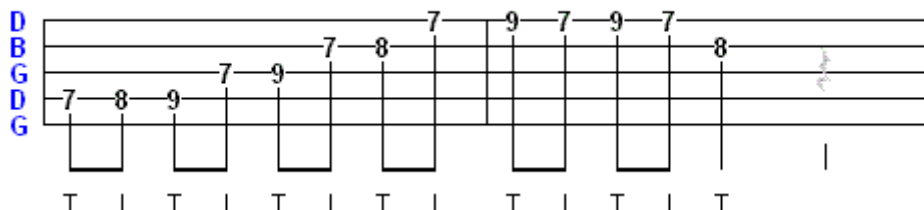
This is a very versatile lick built out of the “D” position. It can be moved to any position on the neck. Here are a few different variations. Listen to Follow The Leader, Everglades, I Ain’t Gonna Walk Your Dog No More, and the later version of Limehouse Blues on Rural Rhythm label for these versions. Don did these licks and other versions of it in many other tunes as well.

Don 9



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don 10



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don 11

Diagram for Don 11 showing a guitar lick on a four-string fretboard (D, B, G, D). The fretboard is divided into two measures. The first measure contains the following fret numbers: 7, 8, 9, 7, 9, 7, 8, 7. The second measure contains: 9, 7, 9, 10, 9. The fret numbers are written above the strings. The strings are labeled D, B, G, D on the left. Below the fretboard, there are vertical lines indicating the timing of the notes, with 'T' marks at the beginning of each note.



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don 12

Diagram for Don 12 showing a guitar lick on a four-string fretboard (D, B, G, D). The fretboard is divided into two measures. The first measure contains the following fret numbers: 7, 8, 9, 7, 9, 7, 8, 7. The second measure contains: 9, 7, 9, 10, 9. The fret numbers are written above the strings. The strings are labeled D, B, G, D on the left. Below the fretboard, there are vertical lines indicating the timing of the notes, with 'T' marks at the beginning of each note.



- Click the speaker to play the clip

The “F’ position lick

Another lick used a lot by Don. Of course it is played out of the “F” position and can also be played any where on the neck. Check out later Reno versions of Follow The Leader and many others for these classic licks.

Don 13

Diagram for Don 13 showing a guitar lick on a four-string fretboard (D, B, G, D). The fretboard is divided into two measures. The first measure contains the following fret numbers: 3, 5, 3, 5, 3, 5, 3, 4. The second measure contains: 5. The fret numbers are written above the strings. The strings are labeled D, B, G, D on the left. Below the fretboard, there are vertical lines indicating the timing of the notes, with 'T' marks at the beginning of each note.



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don 14

Diagram for Don 14 showing a guitar lick on a four-string fretboard (D, B, G, D). The fretboard is divided into two measures. The first measure contains the following fret numbers: 3, 5, 3, 5, 3, 5, 3, 4. The second measure contains: 5, 3, 4, 3, 5, 3, 4. The fret numbers are written above the strings. The strings are labeled D, B, G, D on the left. Below the fretboard, there are vertical lines indicating the timing of the notes, with 'T' marks at the beginning of each note.



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don 15

- Click the speaker to play the clip

Classic Single String Licks

Here are some classic Reno licks that he used throughout his playing. These can be heard on just about any Don Reno album. Some are simple but some are not as easy as you think.

Don 16

- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don 17

- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don 18

- Click the speaker to play the clip

DBGD



Don 20



Here's picture of Buck Ryan, Ronnie Reno, Don Reno, Bill Harrell, and George Shuffler taken about 1968.

The Thumb Brushing Technique

To me this is the most defining characteristic of Reno Style. "I Know You're Married" was the first bluegrass tune I remember catching my ear. I didn't even know it was a banjo. I thought "What is that? Is this bluegrass? That sound's awesome!" It is done by slightly muting the banjo by putting the side of your hand on the bridge while you brush down on the strings with the thumb. It is usually done in conjunction with "double stops" with left hand. "Double Stops" are two strings fretted and strummed together at same time. A technique mandolin and guitar players both use. The "double stops" are not always fretted with two separate fingers. Sometimes when doing a brush style lick or break you will fret two strings by barring your finger across them. Don used this especially when starting it out of a barred position as compared starting out in an "F" or "D" position. And it is not always brushed with just the thumb. To get the really fast up and down licks like the ending of Don's break on "Love Please Come Home" you have to brush down with the thumb then come back up with the first finger. Also the amount of pressure you put on the bridge can determine the sound that you want.

For example "I Ain't Gonna Walk Your Dog No More" by Don Reno. He really put pressure on the bridge to get an almost electric guitar sound out of the banjo. Genius at work! It sounds simple but it can be tough for some to get the hang of it. Remember as mentioned before when figuring this stuff out most of Don's licks are played out of a chord position. So the notes you are looking for will probably be in or around a particular chord position. We'll go over some of his best brush licks.

The Chuck Berry Lick

Ok here it is rock and roll on the banjo! This was used in a lot of Reno's instrumentals and great breaks. Don uses variations of this in "Love Please Come Home", "Bringing In That Georgia", and "Another Day" among others. This is also the basis for "I Know You're Married." Remember you need brush down with the thumb then come up with the first finger on some of these tunes.

Don 21

T T T T T T T T T



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don 22

T T T T T T T T



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don 23
Sl



- Click the speaker to play the clip

The Tumble Lick

This lick is really hard to explain. It can be transferred to any where on the neck but we'll use the "D" chord as an example. It begins out of barred "D" position at the 7th fret. You don't bar all the strings but it is based on that position. Then it "tumbles down to a "D7" position at the first and second frets. It is done by using a combination of pull off's, double stops, and brushing down with the thumb and up with the 1st finger.

Don 24
Po



- Click the speaker to play the clip



Some pretty fair musicians....

"I Know You're Married"

This kick off is probably one of his most famous. It sounds very "rock and roll-ish" and it's one of my favorites. We will dissect it into separate parts. Again, this is where learning your neck and knowing how to go in and out of a chord comes in handy. The licks used to create this break can be applied to many tunes in any key, but especially the key of "D". Don had a certain knack for playing in the key of "D". It seems he could always count on "D" to come up with a great tune. I almost like playing in "D" more than the key of "G" myself. Once you get the hang of it, you'll love it.

I Know You're Married- Part 1

We'll be going from the regular lower "D" position to the higher "F" position "D" chord. As mentioned before, it is mainly all inside the chord position itself. Timing and phrasing is the key.

Don 25

12-12 13-10 12-10 [10] 11-11 10-11 11-11 10-12 10-11 11-10 11-11 10-12 10-11 11-10 11-11 10-12



- Click the speaker to play the clip

The last part is walk down from the bar position "D" to the lower "D" position we started with. The first position is based out of the "D" bar position but a 7th is added. This the same walk down position used in Reno's Ride just moved up to the "G" barred position at the 12th fret.

Don 26

7-7-6-5-4 4-4 3-3 3-3 2-2 2-2 2-2 2-2



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Getting To Know Your Neck

Ok, so we've touched on a small amount of Don's most famous techniques. Now we need to make it all work. To do that you'll have to know your banjo neck. In this section we'll discuss walk ups and walk downs from one chord position to another. We'll use the thumb brushing technique, rolls, and single string to do it. As with most Reno licks and patterns the walk ups and walk downs are all based out of chord positions which are usually within the scale of the key you're playing. Some of it will be full chord positions and some will be partial two string chords positions. Let's get to walking!

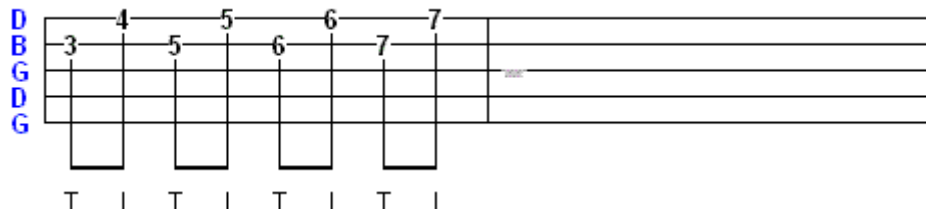
Walking around the neck

This little walk is very simple but is very important. We'll do this out of the key of "D". There are a lot of variations that can be done. I'll show you how to do it with the brush technique and the using the thumb and first finger to walk it up. The same notes can be used in reverse to walk down. Don used these licks to great extent. The second break on "I Wouldn't Change You If I Could" and the end of his break on "Pretending" come to mind. As with most of Reno's licks they can be transferred any where.

Two finger version

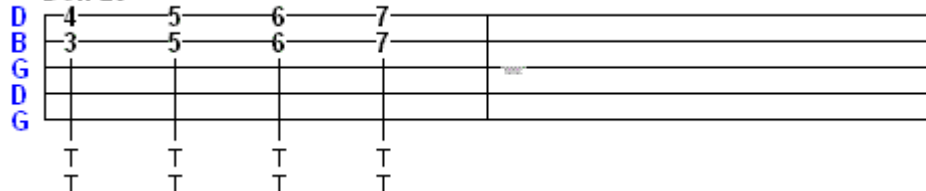
I

Don 27



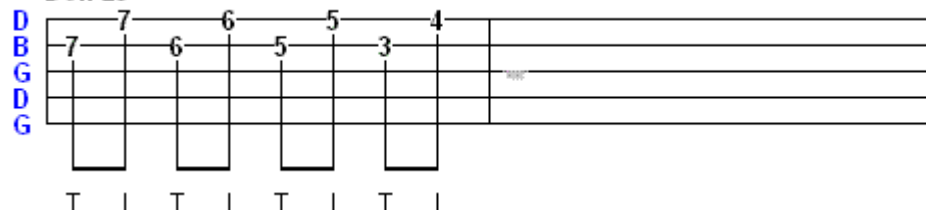
- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don 28



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don 29



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Thumb brush version - A special note here. Instead of starting at the “D” chord position the brush version is usually started at the barred position. The notes on the 2nd and 3rd strings at the barred “D” position are the same as the notes on the 1st and 2nd strings in the normal “D” chord position. Remember the “double stops” are played by barring your finger across two strings. They are not noted using one finger on each string. This is also part of the “tumble” lick we discussed earlier. Basically he was tumbling through the scale of the chord by using walk down positions. I still don’t see how Don thought of it! You can also add another kick to these licks throwing open notes between the double stops and don’t forget to brush down with your thumb and back up with you first finger to get the faster notes. Check out the last sound bite for the “Pretending” lick that uses these extra notes.

Don 30



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don 31



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don 32



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Alright we'll stick with working in "D" for now. This time we'll be walking up and down from "D" to "D" but on different strings. We'll use the 2nd and 4th strings to do the walking this time. Sometimes the notes are "pinched" (played at the same time) with the thumb and first finger. But it can be rolled or use two fingers to walk it like the previous "D" licks. Don would sometimes add the open 1st string in these positions using it as a drone string. This is very characteristic of Don's style. Don used this technique beautifully in "Cary Me Back To Old Virginia", "Blue Christmas", and "Banjo Signal". However, using the open 1st string as a drone doesn't work in every key. Usually it is reserved for the keys of D, G, and sometimes C.

Don 33

T | T | T | T |



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don 34

T | T | T | T |



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don 35

M | M | M | M |

T | T | T | T |



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don 36

M | M | M | M |

T | T | T | T |



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don 37

[illegible]

- Click the speaker to play the clip

Ok let's move on to another key. We'll work out of the key of "G" this time. Let's walk up from the "F" position "G" to the "D" position "G" chord. Then we'll walk back down again. We'll be on the 1st and 3rd string this time. Again transpose this to any key.

Don38

[illegible]

- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don 39

The first system of musical notation for 'The Rose Tree' is shown. It consists of a four-staff system. The top staff is a soprano line with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The notes are G4, A4, Bb4, and A4. The second staff is an alto line with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The notes are E4, F4, G4, and F4. The third staff is a tenor line with a bass clef and a key signature of one flat. The notes are C3, D3, E3, and D3. The fourth staff is a bass line with a bass clef and a key signature of one flat. The notes are G2, F2, E2, and D2. The lyrics 'The Rose Tree' are written below the staves. The first measure contains the lyrics 'The Rose Tree' and the second measure contains the lyrics 'The Rose Tree'.



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don 40

5 7 8 9

4 5 6 7

M T M T M T M T



- Click the speaker to play the clip

The same thing can be done on the 2nd and 4th strings from the “G” chord starting at the 9th fret using the “D” chord position. The same techniques we used in the key “D” apply to the key of “G” using those same positions.

Don 41

D
B
G
D
G

T I T I T I T I



- Click the speaker to play the clip

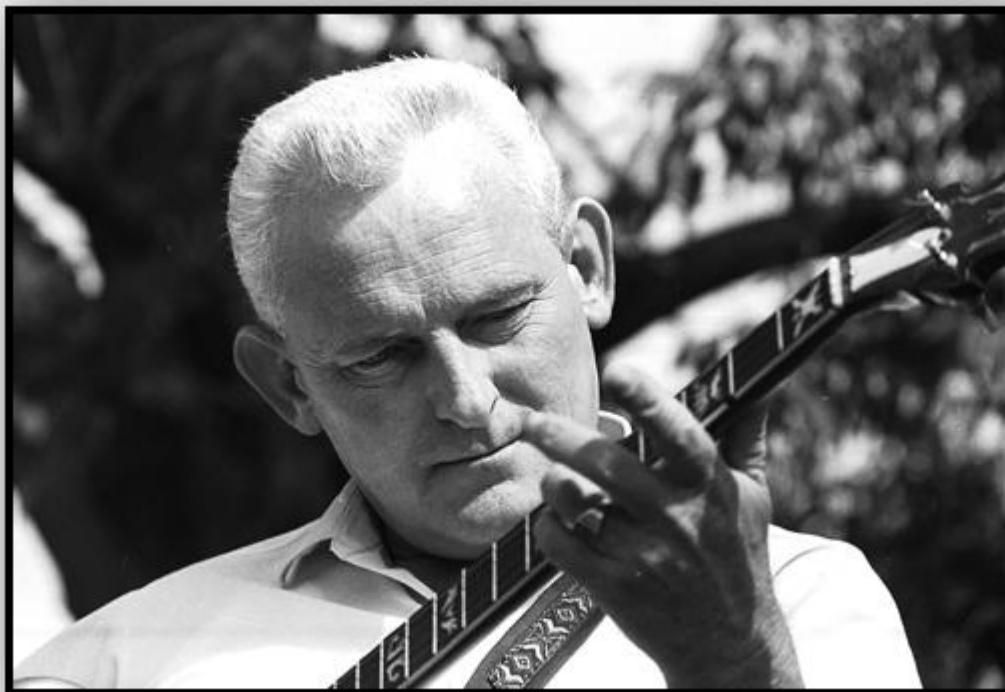
Don 42

D
B
G
D
G

T I T I T I T I



- Click the speaker to play the clip



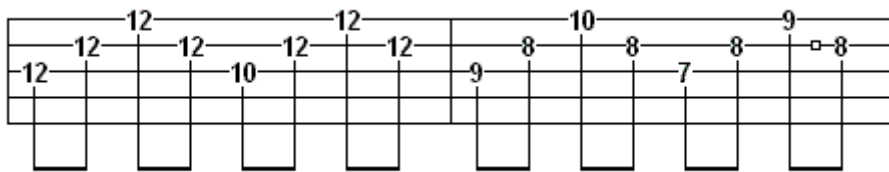
Don Reno- A genius at work!

"Dixie Breakdown"

This walk down will be full chords instead of partial ones. The chord positions are very simple; it's the roll that's tough. Basically Don is walking from a barred position to a "D" chord position. We'll be using this to walk to go through the G, C, and D chord changes of the song. Reno used these rolls and positions a lot. "Banjo Special" is based on these positions and is one of Don's toughest tunes.

Don 43

D
B
G
D
G



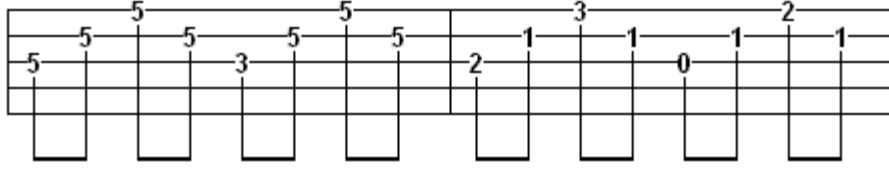
T | M | T | M | T | M | T | M |



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don 44

D
B
G
D
G



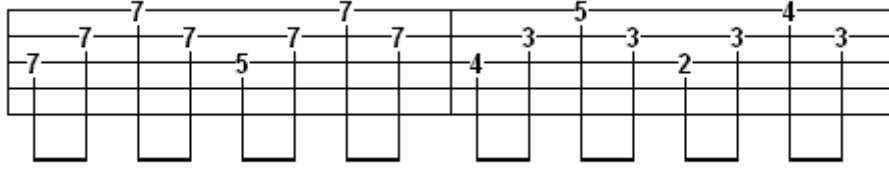
T | M | T | M | T | M | T | M |



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Don 45

D
B
G
D
G



T | M | T | M | T | M | T | M |



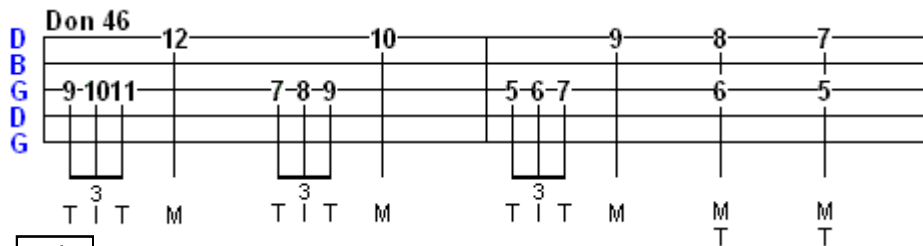
- Click the speaker to play the clip



Ronnie and Don about 1968

Descending "D" lick

This lick is probably one of Don's most "infamous" licks. He used this on almost all of his recordings from the 60's until his death. It is one of my favorites. Basically it is comprised of some of the same type two string walk downs we have discussed. We'll be moving from the "F" position D chord to the "D7th" chord out of the barred position. As usual you can transfer it anywhere. Well moving from one position to the other Don threw in a little single string for a unique sound. Again I believe this originally was a guitar lick because I have many electric guitar players use it. Or maybe they got it from Don! We'll never know!



- Click the speaker to play the clip

Here is an example of the above lick played at various positions on the neck, followed by a tag lick and ending. Listen carefully to the recording and see if you can work out the various positions. Find the start note of each phrase



- Click the speaker to play the clip



Learning the tunes- Hints and tips

Now that you have learned some basic Reno licks and theory, you're ready to tackle those great tunes. Here I will discuss some hints and tips on some of Don's most famous tunes. This should give you a better insight into Don's style and his way of thinking on these tunes. Hopefully it will help you to figure out your favorite Reno arrangements and to create your own.

"Follow The Leader"

This is one of Don's most popular tunes. Its a little bit Bluegrass Breakdown, Foggy Mt. Breakdown and part Cincinnati Rag. It has it all, single string, unique rolls, and unique chord positions. It can also contain the brush technique if desired. Don't limit yourself by copying the original version note for note. This tune is perfect for experimenting with different licks and techniques. This is exactly what Don did to compose this tune. He was just "messing around" putting things together and came up with "Follow The Leader". As for the original recording you'll notice that it is about 1 fret higher in tuning than standard 440. His later version from the 70's is in standard tuning. The original was much faster than his later version as well. I have many live versions of Don doing this tune and he never did it as fast as the original recording. I have feeling that the original was "sped up" after recording it. This may have been done to give it more "punch". This would account for the higher pitch as well. I may be wrong because Reno could have done it as fast as he wanted to. So, don't feel too bad if you can't get it up to speed with the original. You can always play along with the later version.

"Green Mt. Hop"

Ah here's a real Reno classic. This is actually Don's reworking of Black Mt. Rag. Don also recorded this song by himself. Meaning he played all the instruments. That alone is a major accomplishment. The song is in "D" tuning. The original has the 5th string tuned to "A". His later versions he tuned is 5th string down to "F#". To me, tuning the 5th string down takes a little bit of the "edge" or "bite" out of the song. You decide which you like best. Of course the main question is "How is he doing that crazy part?" It is done by doing a triple pull off on the first string. That's right I said TRIPLE pull off!! It's tough and will take some practice to get it right. You pull off from the 4th to the 3rd to the 2nd to an open 1st string. Don also uses a triple pull off in later versions of Charlotte Breakdown.

"Dixie Breakdown" / "Banjo Special"

I grouped these tunes together because the main structures of the two tunes are built on the "Dixie Breakdown" roll that we discussed earlier in the workshop. Dixie Breakdown is kind of a stepping stone the "finger buster" Banjo Special. The original Dixie Breakdown was done in "A" with a capo in the second fret of course. Capo you say? Yes, he used the capo. Dixie Breakdown is very straight forward. The bridge progresses through G, C, G, and D. But Banjo Special is a little more difficult to say the least. The bridge progresses through E, A, D using the same chord shapes and the same roll as Dixie Breakdown. That's where the similarities stop. It is amazing that Don could play so many different versions non-stop without messing up. Yet even more amazing is the fact that Don still did not exhaust his bag of tricks because he could have easily done a single string break or all brush technique break. Also noticeable is the great drive that Don put into the original recording. It is one of his best recordings period. The possibilities are endless with both of these tunes for improvising.

"Crazy Finger Blues"

This is one that has been overlooked by most pickers. I think in part because people can't figure out what Don is doing. It basically it's another "Boogie" tune in the tradition of Tennessee Stomp, Double Banjo Blues, and Banjo Riff. This time it is in the key of "E". Most people think Don is tuned in "D" tuning for this tune. They are both wrong and right. Let me explain. If you play in "D" tuning often, you'll notice the same type rolls and licks in Crazy Finger Blues but it's in the key of "E". How is this done? You can tune a banjo to open "E" instead of open "D". Open "E" is just a matter of tuning your banjo strings two frets higher up from open "D". So instead of using F#, D, F#, A, D, you tune it to G#, E, G#, B, E. This is a great tuning to try new things in the key of "E". But, the trick to playing Crazy Finger Blues is that the 1st is not tuned to "E". It is tuned to C#. So to play Crazy Finger Blues you tune to G#, E, G#, B, C#. This is what gives the tune such an unusual sound. Now the question is, how does he do that "crazy riff" part? It is actually a lot easier than it sounds. The tuning is the trick to the sound. The riff is done by pulling off from the 3rd fret to an open string starting on the 1st string, then the 2nd string, then the 3rd, and the 4th. All pull off's are made from the third fret. Open strings are hit after each pull off. It is hard to explain but hopefully with a keen ear you can get the right flow to it. You can also start the first pull off on the 2nd string at the 5th fret instead of on the 1st string at the 3rd fret. Experiment with it and you'll have "crazy fingers" in no time!

Tunes Done With The Capo

There are a lot of non-instrumental songs that Don did with the use of the capo. But we'll focus on the instrumentals. As discussed earlier Don abandoned the capo completely in the late sixties.

"Charlotte Breakdown"

This is actually a straight forward tune for a Reno composition. The chord structure is very simple, G, C, G, and D. It is a lot like Shucking The Corn. But what makes this simple tune different is that on the original version Don put the capo on at the 7th fret to play in the key of "D". This was very unusual even for a diehard capo user. It gave the tune a very different sound from his later versions in the key of "G". His later "G" versions had many more tricks and Reno-vations but, the capoed version is great in its simplicity. It's almost like a totally different tune. Try them both.

"Dixie Breakdown"

As mentioned before the original version of Dixie Breakdown was done in "A" with the use of a capo. This may have been done because of the twin fiddle work. It would have been easier to play twin fiddles in the key of "A". Also it adds to the "old breakdown" feel to the tune. His later versions were in "G" with much more advanced Reno work.

"Down On The Farm"

This is of course Whoa Mule Whoa. Don would often change the names of tunes. This is actually simple compared to wild versions that Raymond Fairchild has made popular. But if you listen to Don's version you can hear where Raymond got the idea for his "slipping and sliding" licks. In one break Don does very similar type licks. Don plays this out of the "C" position with the capo on the second fret. This was probably done because Don did a lot of tunes in the key of "A" with capo on the Wanted album which this song appears.

"San Antonio Rose"

Another great tune also played in the "C" position with the capo on the 2nd fret. This was also on the Wanted album.

"Five By Eight"

This is one of my favorite Reno tunes. It is played in the key of "A" with the capo in the 2nd fret of course. Again the reason for the capo is probably to complement the eight string fiddle work by the great Benny Martin. A lot of the walking up and down the neck on the bridge are variations of the positions discussed earlier in the workshop.



Reno and Smiley the greatest duo in bluegrass music!!

Well that's it for now. I hope this workshop will help you understand a little more about Reno style picking. Hopefully it will give you an extra edge on learning all those great tunes Don recorded. These exercises should give some basic understanding of your neck as well. Play around with as many keys as possible. You will be playing without a capo before you know it! Thanks for purchasing the workshop and happy picking!

Sincerely,

Jason Skinner



***the*
Skinner
Family Band**