



[Current Issue](#) | [Home](#) | [Back Issues](#) | [Other Mel Bay Sites](#) | [Purchase Mandolin Products](#)
[Jazz Mandology](#) | [Latin Mandolin](#) | [What's In Your Case?](#) | [Staten Island Hornpipe](#)
[Building A Traditional Tune Repertoire](#) | [Celtic Mandolin](#) | [Sequences-Part 2](#)
[Interview with Kyle Alt](#) | [Tunes for Mandola](#) | [Introductions or Kickoffs](#)

Jazz Mandology

Plays Well With Others...

by Ted Eschliman



Question: What is the role of the mandolin player in the traditional jazz ensemble?

Answer: Going out to get pizzas for the rest of the band during rehearsal...

The Role of the Mandolin in Jazz

Let's get serious for a second. Face it, we are decades behind our horn brethren in establishing just what it is mandolinists contribute to a jazz group. (How many times has someone asked you if "jazz mandolin" was an oxymoron?) Fret not (bad pun...), this doesn't have to be a bad thing! This gives the current generation of players a wide-open field to define this role.

Though we don't hold a deeply rooted tradition in jazz, it's a wide-open frontier, partner. With a little forethought and sensitivity to others in the ensemble, we can blaze these new trails together. Understanding the basic ingredients to music composition (in essence improvisation) can give us some fresh and creative ways to contribute. Let's go create a tradition!

Melody, Rhythm, Harmony

ANY instrument has a responsibility to contribute at one time or another one of these duties or musical elements. You won't see a sax player "comping" chords; you won't see a drummer kicking the head off with a theme-setting melody. Yet these instruments have already carved their own important niche in jazz, working around these limitations. Let's take a look at just what it is that our eight-stringed wonder is capable of offering in this environment.

Melody

This is a no-brainer in that we certainly are capable of playing the melody, barring any acoustic obstacles. Unplugged, we won't be able to cut through a blistering big-band trumpet section, but for this discussion, let's assume we are talking a smaller, "string band" environment. One thing to be aware of, in your approach to melody and phrasing, you want to think like a wind instrument. This means sustain, connecting your notes, "breathing" them like a clarinet. This can be a challenge, but with some attention to technique, keeping your fingers close to the fingerboard, bleeding one note into the next, it can be done. As an example, the simple melody of the last four measures of the Gershwin standard, "I've Got Rhythm:"



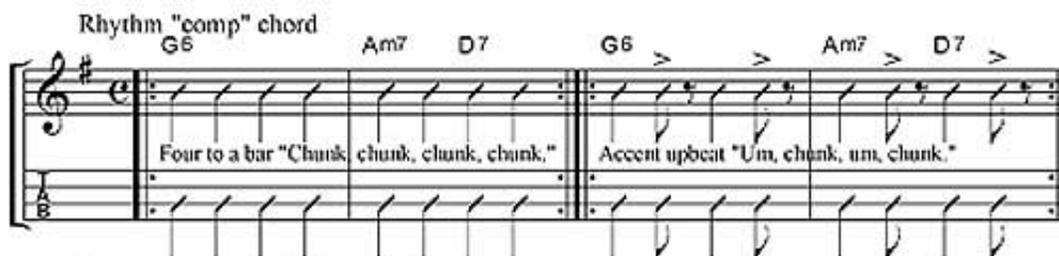
The image shows a musical score for the melody of "I've Got Rhythm" in G major. It consists of a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody is written in 4/4 time. Above the staff, the chords are indicated: G, G13, CMaj7, F9, Am7/D, and G6. Below the staff, the fretting is indicated with numbers: 7, 2, 5, 7, 3, 7, 2, 2, 7, 2, 7, 5.

Listen to the above: <http://www.tannah.net/ted/MBMp3/RhythmwMel.mp3>

Rhythm

If you've come from the Bluegrass world, you are no stranger to the "chop" chord, the "back beat" function of the mandolin. In essence, in a typical string band, this is the equivalent of the jazz band hi-hat cymbal. Straightforward, unsophisticated, its role is to "pierce" as band timekeeper. In jazz, you have this in a much more complex function, ranging from a simple Four-to-a-Bar Gypsy "chunk" or a more sophisticated syncopated Latin "Clave" rhythm.

Let's look at a couple variations of a straight comping style, one the Four-to-a-Bar Gypsy "Chunk, Chunk," or a more sophisticated version, "Um, CHUNK," in which the back beat is accented:



The image shows a musical score for rhythm variations in G major. It consists of a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The time signature is 4/4. Above the staff, the chords are indicated: G6, Am7, D7, G6, Am7, and D7. Below the staff, the rhythm is indicated with notes and accents. The first variation is labeled "Four to a bar 'Chunk, chunk, chunk, chunk.'" and the second variation is labeled "Accent upbeat 'Um, chunk, um, chunk.'".

Listen to the above: <http://www.tannah.net/ted/MBMp3/Comp1.mp3>

Listen to the above: <http://www.tannah.net/ted/MBMp3/Comp2.mp3>

How you mute with your left hand, how you accent with your right gives you a wide range of opportunity to contribute richly to the band's rhythm. Closing (muting) the right hand or letting it ring gives you control over the percussiveness of the chord.

You can do more sophisticated syncopated Funk or Latin patterns as well. The caveat here, you don't want to rhythmically conflict! You want to support. Never forsake complexity for collaboration.

Harmony: Melodic (linear)

Parallel the melody. This is something you can introduce to support the melody, a harmonizing phrase that mimics the melody, only a 6th or 3rd away. Throw in a few signature tremolos in a slow ballad, and you add a touch which no other instrument (but a mandolin!) can. Don't do this all the time; pepper it occasionally. Let's do this with the last two measures of our early example of the end of "I've Got Rhythm:"

The image shows a musical score for a mandolin. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody is written in a 4/4 time signature. The notes are: G4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), B4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter). Above the staff are chord symbols: G, G13, CMaj7, F9, Am7/D, and G6. Below the staff is a second staff labeled 'Harmony: Parallel one third up'. The notes are: B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), D5 (quarter), E5 (quarter), F5 (quarter), E5 (quarter), D5 (quarter), C5 (quarter). Below the harmony staff are fret numbers: 7, 2, 5, 7, 7-3, 5-5, 3-5, 3, 2.

Listen to the above: <http://www.tannah.net/ted/MBMp3/RhythmwHar.mp3>

Another "linear" support to the melody would be counter melody. Melodies ebb and flow, peak and plunge. You can complement the melody by picking up the "motion" of the melody by echoing it or varying it in a "call and response."

In exploring the way you support the other members of the band in reinforcing its harmonic pattern, exploit the strengths of the mandolin but circumvent its weakness. Remember, you don't have bow or breathe, so natural string decay is always your foe. Fight it constantly with finger control, accurate right hand/left hand coordination!

Harmony: Chords (horizontal)

As a soprano register instrument, be aware of which instrument is voicing the bass. (It may not always be the bass instrument.) Unless you are playing alone, you are at the mercy of the lowest note heard, which establishes the bass note of the chord, but this can be liberating at the same time. You only have 4 courses of string, meaning a special challenge the characteristic extended chords of jazz. For example, the six notes of a Bb13(b9) (Bb, D, F, Ab, Cb, G) call for an understanding of chord "economy" but at least with the bass voiced elsewhere, you only have to worry about the upper voices of the chord. The liberating part of this: you get to voice the "cool" notes, the color of the chord extension.

Be careful with these extended voices; listen to the other "color" comping instruments. Your extensions must not clash. If you add a 9 to the chord, the guitar can't be conflicting with a #9. Err on the sparse side. Chord economics is another topic worthy of a whole other discussion; let's tackle it here in a future article.

"Hybrid" Support

Crosspicking, something we can actually learn from a banjo player (go figure...) is another accompaniment technique that introduces the element of rhythm. While this isn't something that can "swing," it's still a nice background technique for the straight 8th note feel in Pop Rock. You'll probably use this more in a pop style ballad, never in a hard swinging groove.



Listen to the above: <http://www.tannah.net/ted/MBMp3/CrossPick.mp3>

Repetitive Riff is a melodic motif that's stated as a rhythmic contribution, but contains a melodic seed is another way to lend continuity to the ensemble. State something simple, but repeat it often (assuming it fits in the chord structure) and you add an element that is unique to the band, and something another player may pick up on and embellish later. Remember, your audience wants both familiar, and an artistic detour.



Be indispensable...

The key to what you do in the ensemble: Do that which no one else is doing, You can complement by adding variety, you can support by reinforcing. Either way, if your contributions are totally irreplaceable, your position in the band is inimitable. Guarantee your own "employment!"

Strive to be unique, but take advantage of the liberty you have, not being pigeonholed by convention or stereo type.



Thanks for checking in with Jazz Mandology again, and if this is your first visit, be sure to click on the above "[Back Issues](#)" button. There's lots more information here, just as close as your mouse.

Thanks for all the questions and comments. Keep me posted with your thoughts at ted@jazzmando.com, and check out my website, www.jazzmando.com. Also, there is a heap of information in the back issues button. If you're new around here be sure to go back and click 'em up, too!

To purchase Mel Bay products::

- * Check your [local music store](#)
- * Call 1-800-8-MEL-BAY (800-863-5229) or
- * [Online retailers](#)

For a catalog: call 1-800-8-MEL-BAY (800-863-5229)
or e-mail email@melbay.com



Copyright © 2002 Mel Bay Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.