

Thinking Good Tone Part 2

Using the picking hand to *start* Good Tone.

By Ted Eschliman



What we think...

In our last visit we went pretty broad, looking into various aspects of tone creation, particularly common errors in execution, but also some deep thoughts on the philosophical side. We were privileged with the contributions of some of the great mandolinists of today. If you haven't taken time to read this, it would be a great idea to do so now: **Thinking Good Tone Part 1**

<http://www.mandolinsessions.com/apr07/Eschliman.html>

We looked at five areas, including 1.) Maximizing the sweet spots with the fretting hand, 2.) Right Hand/Left Hand coordination, 3.) Connecting notes together, 4.) Maintaining phrase intensity, and 5.) Healthy pick strokes. It was a quick survey, and one we hoped got you started really focusing in on aspects of your own tone creation. As we mentioned, tone is a vital characteristic of playing and not often a priority for many players. We can't stress enough that if you are serious about good tone, you need to devote time to it.

Strike one

We want to go a little deeper into the 5th issue of healthy picking here. We can refer to the similarities in certain sports in understanding the profound significance of a good strike. Think for a moment about a soccer or polo player caressing a ball from one end of the field toward the goal. The opportunity is there to move faster, slow down, twist or turn, and perpetually manipulate, but in contrast, these benefits are not endowed to a golfer, tennis or baseball player. One strike is all they get, unable to continuously manipulate once the ball leaves the racket or bat. "Smack," and it's gone, dependent on aim and power behind the thrust. If contact is good, vigor sufficient, and follow-through smooth, it's all the difference in the world, but again, no second chance after the strike.

Wind instrumentalists have privileges similar to the soccer star, plenty of opportunity to manipulate with breath rather than foot. A violinist can also draw sound out with the bow through a phrase, but a vibraphonist or plectrum player gets one stab at starting good tone with the mallet or pick. No matter how secure the fretting fingers squeeze the mandolin or how long they sustain, if that initial smack isn't robust, consistent, and confident, it's all downhill from there. **Jamie Masefield** pointed this out in the previous article when he mentioned the left hand is often blamed for the sins of the right. **Emory Lester** demanded

hearing all ten notes when ten notes are played, not eight. **Don Stiernberg** registered he expected to hear the notes all played consistently, pick angle steady and pushed all the way through the string.

We're going to credit **Evan Marshall** for a good share of the following exercise. He offers an amazing workshop that explores and explains what good picking is all about and this material is very similar to what we want to explore. As he mentioned in the previous article, the similarities between traditions in **Monroe Style** and **Gypsy Jazz** picking are striking (pun intended!). It's about using the **Rest Stroke** on the down stroke. When you downstroke on a **G string**, you end the pick stroke on the **D**. It "parks" there, either for a subsequent upstroke or another downstroke. No wandering, nor going any farther, so as to set up for what's coming next. This is best understood at a slow tempo, and since we want to explore it across all four courses, we'll do a two-octave scale.

Note, we introduced "Third Position playing" recently <http://www.mandolinsessions.com/feb07/Eschliman.html>, and we're going to use this exercise to continue to develop tone proficiency and tactile familiarity within this area. We'll start with your **2nd** finger on the **5th** fret and stay in this position for two octaves. As you play the following measures, think first about a clean attack and where your pick will stop. Of course on your E string, you can't rest it on the next string, but use the conceptual string-to-string distance for physical reference.

We strongly urge the use of a metronome. If you don't have one handy, stand next to a clock and watch the second hand after you have this memorized; two quarter notes will equal one tick of the hand (60 beats per minute). Think "tone, tone, tone," and make each note ring loudly and last entirely through to the next. Snap each at equal volume, and play perfectly or go back and re-do. We can't overstate the importance of slowing things down until these downstrokes can be done with the utmost in tone quality.

♩=120 Third position two octave scale, all down strokes:
Slowly, with intent

The musical notation consists of two systems of five-line staves. The first system covers the first octave, and the second system covers the second octave. The notes are quarter notes, and the tempo is marked as 120 beats per minute. The first system starts on the G string (5th fret) and ends on the G string (17th fret). The second system starts on the G string (17th fret) and ends on the G string (29th fret). The notation includes fingerings (1-4) and rests (3, 5, 7, 8) for each note. The fretting hand is shown in a simple position, with the pick resting on the string for each note.

Harder than you'd think!

We don't often listen to our playing this introspectively. We're more worried about the notes than the *tone* of the notes. If you imagined you were recording the preceding exercise in a Hollywood studio for some professional movie soundtrack, would *your* playing be good enough? For most of us not likely, and this can take months to perfect to that level (if not years) even with this simple exercise, but this has to be the objective. (And it has to be subconscious.) Notice we are keeping the fretting hand very simple, as our attention needs to focus on the pick.

Going Up...

We can't stress enough how imperative it is that the preceding measures become instinctive for you before moving on. When you get comfortable with this, it's time to add the upstroke. You will double the strokes, but try to maintain the same level of sustain and of *perfect* pick execution; clean, consistent, and continue

Alternating strokes, short/long quarter:

continue up
2nd octave,
& descend...

Mixing it up

Again, string crossings are an ensnaring trap for diluted intensity, and we don't want that. Be sure you kept your notes long while crossing strings, no discernable drop in tone. (*It ain't easy, is it?!*) Just to test you, we'll alternate quarter notes at the beginning of every two measures in this version:

Alternating strokes, long quarter short:

continue up
2nd octave,
& descend...

And there we begin

The preceding is a glorious opportunity to get your pick started right each and every day. We have a PDF of the entire exercise here called "Sweeping for Tone":

Link to complete exercise:

<http://jazzmando.com/Sweep.pdf>

The time you spend cleaning up your picking and developing an aural sensitivity in this exercise will reward you greatly in every other aspect of your playing. Like we said earlier, you can't go anywhere with good tone on a mandolin if you don't start the sound properly.

A few pointers in getting the most out of "Sweeping for Tone"

Grip the pick with just enough strength to keep control. Don't tense up any harder, and try to keep fingers and wrist relaxed.

Don't lift the Left (fretting) Hand too far off the fingerboard between notes. These must be "at the ready" for the next notes. (*Don't let them go out for coffee, meantime...*)

Make as much sound as you can with the pick. Strive for volume without sacrificing clear, bell-like tone. Throw the tone to the other end of the room.

Aim for articulation "evenness." Each and every attack must be at the same healthy dynamic level.

Don't rush! Play as slowly as you need to get the maximum richness out of the string.

This version uses the 2nd FFcP fingering. Try a full, two-octave version of this starting in the keys of **Bb** and **B** using the 1st FFcP fingering. See <http://www.jazzmando.com/ffcp.shtml>

Keep the string crossings clean. This will take some concentration, especially moving from 4th finger to 1st, but keep the notes connected, blending into each subsequent attack with intent

and fluidity.

Don't move on to the next section until you can play it perfectly. Allow yourself no clams, fracks, half-fretted notes, gaps, or anything less than beautiful tone.

As we already recommended, use this as a warm-up routine everyday! The pick starts the note; you can't get anywhere with good tone until this is working properly. What you do to prepare your picking hand will determine the quality of your tone the entire duration of your playing time. It is this critical!

The time you spend cleaning up your picking and developing an aural sensitivity in this exercise will reward you greatly in every other aspect of your playing.



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