

Blue Grass Guitar 101

by Bradley Laird



THIS IS NOT THE COMPLETE BLUE GRASS GUITAR 101 eBook. THIS IS A FREE EXCERPT WITH THE SECTION ABOUT HARMONY SINGING. ENJOY!

**10 POPULAR
BLUE GRASS TUNES
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BASICS OF HARMONY SINGING

Bluegrass Harmony

This teaches the basics of bluegrass style harmonizing. You can use this information to sort out singing duets (lead and tenor) and trio (lead, tenor, baritone) harmonies. Some songs are easier to work out the harmonies than others. I am going to use one of the most simple melodies in this book as our example so that you can understand the principles which create the magic of harmony singing.

In bluegrass there are generally three singing parts. If you are singing the melody you are called the LEAD singer and we say you are singing LEAD. So, lead is nothing but the melody of the song. If you sing a song by yourself then you are the lead singer.

If you add a second vocal part (creating a “duet”) you will generally add a part just above the lead melody. This is called the TENOR part. In a moment I will explain how you find the tenor part above the lead singer’s melody.

The third vocal part in bluegrass is found just below the melody or lead and it is called the BARI-TONE part.

Chords Are The Essence of Harmony

As you know from observing a guitar player they are often playing chords. But, what exactly is a chord? A chord is when 3 different notes are played or sung at the same time. To keep this as simple as possible I want you to notice that throughout this book I have written the chords above the music. Here is an example:

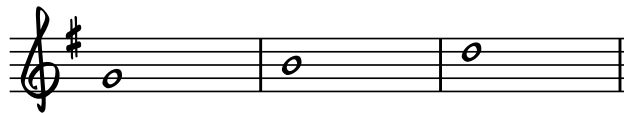
TRADITIONAL

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains a melody line with lyrics underneath. Above the staff, chords are written: G, C, G, D, G, D, G. The lyrics are: BOIL 'EM CAB - BAGE DOWN BOYS, BAKE 'EM HOE - CARES BROWN, THE ON - LY SONG THAT I CAN SING IS BOIL 'EM CAB - BAGE DOWN. The bottom staff is also a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains a melody line with lyrics underneath. Above the staff, chords are written: G, C, G, D, G. The lyrics are: ON - LY SONG THAT I CAN SING IS BOIL 'EM CAB - BAGE DOWN.

As you can see the first measure is marked G. That means the band plays a G major chord. When singing you would also sing notes of the G chord during that measure. In the second measure you can see that the chord changes to a C chord. Then back to G and then it goes to D.

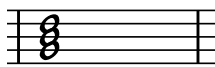
In the song Boil Them Cabbage Down the melody (written above) is always on a note found in the current chord. For example, in measure one the melody sings a B note over a G chord. This works because a B note is one of the 3 notes of a G chord. So what are the three notes of a G chord?

The G major chord consists of 3 notes. Here they are:



Measure 1 shows a G note, measure 2 is a B note and measure 3 is a D note. If your guitar player is playing a G chord, and then strums all six strings of the guitar, every one of those six strings will be playing one of those 3 notes!

Let's pretend for a moment that the melody of the song is a B note as shown in measure 2 above. And let's assume that the chord progression calls for a G chord at that time. In order to create a three-part bluegrass style harmony the three singers would sing these notes together:



That is a G chord. The lead part is in the middle singing the B note. The tenor takes the closest chord note above the lead and sings a D note and the baritone sings the closest chord note below the lead and sings a G note.

You, and two other people, should try singing that G chord. Each person sings one of the three notes. If someone in your group reads music or plays the piano they could help you by playing the three notes one at a time for you to match with your voice.

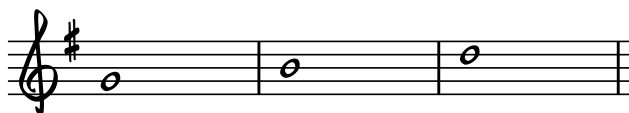
If you do this you may discover that it makes sense to have the person with the highest voice sing the tenor part and the person with the lowest voice sing the baritone. Of course melodies move up and down and it is important that each person is able to sing all of the required notes for their part. That is called the "range" of the part. If we look at the melody of Boil Them Cabbage Down again we can see that the lead singer's highest note is a C and their lowest note is a G.

TRADITIONAL

That is a pretty narrow range of notes and should be pretty easy for almost anyone to sing. In fact the melody only uses 4 notes: G, A, B and C. (I told you I chose an easy example.) If a person can sing those four notes they can sing the lead in the key of G.

Next, let's figure out the tenor part and the baritone part.

As I said at the beginning of this explanation, a G chord consists of 3 notes. G, B and D.



However, there are more than one G, B or D notes available. If you walk up to a piano and play middle C you can count up or down 12 keys and find another C, and another and another. Those notes are called octaves. The distance from one C to the next higher or lower C is an octave. This octave principle is true for any note. Count all the keys on a piano (88) and divide by 12 and you'll see that there are over 7 octaves present on the instrument. Luckily, the human singing range is just a couple of octaves so don't worry about trying to sing those super-high or super low notes!

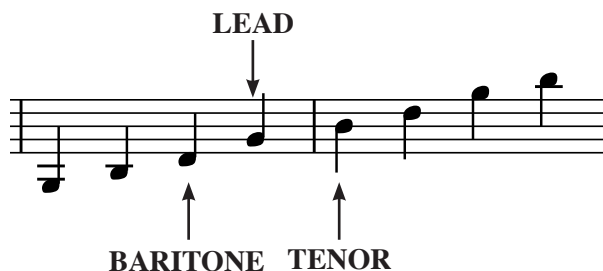
Here are more G chord notes:



Again ask your piano playing friend to play these notes for you. The notes in order in measure 1 are G, B, D, G. You can see we've already gone up an octave in measure 1. Measure 2 continues with B, D, G and a high B note. All of those notes are G chord notes since they are all G, B or D.

The reason I am showing you a range of possible G chord notes is because the lead or melody part will not always stay on a B note. Here is the important thing to remember. When on a G chord, find the lead singer's note and the tenor will be the next chord note above it and the baritone will be the chord note below it.

What if the lead singer sings this G note during a G chord? What are the tenor and baritone notes?



Answer: If the lead is singing G during a G chord the tenor sings the B above and the baritone sings the D below.

That style of singing is the typical way in which notes are stacked when singing bluegrass trios. This is called "close harmony" because the harmony parts are always singing the nearest possible chord note to the lead part. If the tenor singer should skip over his or her note and sing the 2nd note above the lead it creates a problem for the baritone singer! If the tenor singer "shoots too high" and sings a D note they have "stepped on" the baritone's proper note! That would force the baritone singer to jump over the lead singer to sing the missing B note or to go lower down to a B note.

That brings up another general rule. All three parts sing DIFFERENT notes. If you are singing the same note as the lead singer you are singing “unison” which is not harmony. Or, if you are singing an octave of someone else’s note you are not creating harmony. Everybody has their own note and it takes two notes to create harmony and a minimum of three notes to build a chord.

So far we have only talked about what note each part takes during the G chord. What happens when the chord changes to C or D? The same rules apply but you use C chord notes to select from. Or D chord notes. Sometimes, when you are trying to figure out each persons part, it is helpful for the banjo or guitar player to play the notes of the current chord.

It is difficult to explain this without going into some discussion about music theory. If you would like to learn more about these things I would suggest that you explore some of my other resources which are listed in the Additional Resources section. On the next page I will show you the 3 vocal parts for Boil Them Cabbage Down and discuss them a little bit.

Typical Bluegrass Song Arrangements

One thing which I have not mentioned in this book is how to “arrange” songs. If you listen to some recorded bluegrass or live performances you will soon figure it out. A good arrangement can make an average song sound great. A lousy arrangement can wreck an otherwise great song. Here are some typical ways to arrange bluegrass songs:

- **The Kick-off** - The intro or kick-off sets the pace and the mood of the song. Often one of the lead instrumentalists will play once through the verse as a kick-off but you could do other things.

- **The Verse** - The lead singer typically sings a verse of the song. One lead instrument may play some back-up fills or several players may take turns playing back-up licks to make the lead singer sound even better. Back-up fill players try not to play over each other, but in alternation.

- **The Chorus** - The singers all come together to sing in harmony for the chorus. Generally the lead is in the middle, the tenor above and the baritone below but it could be a duet. The backing instruments generally “cool it” a bit during the chorus limiting their back-up licks and fills to the spaces between phrases. All effort should be to highlight the harmony singing and make the words easy to understand and vocal blend sound good.

- **Instrumental Break** - An instrument plays a solo break with everyone supporting them with rhythm and chords. Sometimes, breaks are split with one instrument taking the first half and another taking the second.

(More verses, choruses, and instrumental breaks are played. Usually ending this phase with a chorus)

- **The Ending** - The song is ended by singing the chorus, or with just the last line or phrase of the chorus repeated, or by a instrumental break or a part of one. Everyone ends together. That is key! Practice your kick-offs and endings and get them tight!

Here is the LEAD vocal part. This is same melody we have seen earlier.

BOIL 'EM CAB - BAGE DOWN BOYS, BAKE 'EM HOE - CAKES BROWN, THE
ON - LY SONG THAT I CAN SING IS BOIL 'EM CAB - BAGE DOWN

Here is the TENOR vocal part. Notice that the tenor is singing the next higher chord note. Notice how the note remains the same when going from G to D in measure 4. Sometimes, due to the placement of the melody note, and the current chord, a note does not move up or down! Don't always assume that if the chord changes then you must change to a new note. Sometimes you do, sometimes you don't.

BOIL 'EM CAB - BAGE DOWN BOYS, BAKE 'EM HOE - CAKES BROWN, THE
ON - LY SONG THAT I CAN SING IS BOIL 'EM CAB - BAGE DOWN

And here is the BARITONE vocal part. The baritone is always supplying the missing third note of the current chord. Notice how the baritone sings the same note for the first three measures! Pretty easy, don't you think? Then, on the D chord in measure 4, the note drops slightly to a F#. Then it is back to G for 2 more measures and finally down to F# and a low D at the end.

BOIL 'EM CAB - BAGE DOWN BOYS, BAKE 'EM HOE - CAKES BROWN, THE
ON - LY SONG THAT I CAN SING IS BOIL 'EM CAB - BAGE DOWN

If you sing that baritone part alone it sounds pretty strange, but put the three together and you have amazingly good sounding chords if everyone sings the correct notes and sings them in tune.

More Complex Melodies

I have explained the basic ideas behind three-part bluegrass style harmony singing. I selected a song in which the lead singer is always singing a chord note. Be aware that not every song is that simple. Sometimes the melody begins a phrase on a chord note, drifts around to some other scale notes, and then lands back on a chord note. Look at the melody of Little Maggie and I'll show you what I mean.

The image shows a musical staff in G major (one sharp) with a 4/4 time signature. The melody is written on a single treble clef staff. Above the staff, two chords are indicated: a G major chord over the first measure and an F major chord over the second measure through the end of the phrase. The notes are: a whole note G for "Ov'r", followed by a quarter note G for "YON", a quarter note B for "- DER", a quarter note A for "STANDS", a quarter note G for "LIT", a quarter note F for "- TLE", a quarter note G for "MAG", a quarter note F for "- GIE", and finally a quarter note G for "WITH A". The word "MAG-GIE" is underlined. A double bar line is placed at the end of the G chord section.

On the words “Ov’r yonder stands little” the lead singer is singing only chord notes. But, look at the notes on the word “Maggie.” The chord is a F and the singer starts on an F chord note (an A) but then drops to a G note briefly which is NOT an F chord note. Then the singer lands back on an F note which is once again an F chord note.

Without going into some pretty involved music theory just notice that most phrases start and end on chord notes. So, get those notes stacked up correctly first. Then figure out how to handle those moving, in between notes. Sometimes a harmonizing part will move similarly to follow the movement of the lead part and sometimes it sounds better just to stay on your original note and just let the lead singer do his or her thing.

Listen to other bands and how they handle harmonies and experiment until you find parts which you think sound good. There are a lot of possible ways to harmonize which sound good and this basic primer it just designed to get you started with a very simple tune.

It is important that you figure most of this out on your own. If I wrote out harmony parts for every song you would never learn to figure them out on your own. Learn this easy one first. Make it sound great and then begin to try other songs and figure them out yourself. I am not being lazy. I just want you to learn the skill and you need to do that with experimentation over time.

How to Create Duets

What if you only have two singers? Duets are very common in bluegrass and they are pretty easy to create. You simply omit the baritone part. A standard bluegrass duet consists of the lead part with a tenor part above. You figure out the tenor part the same way you did when constructing a trio.

There is one added freedom which comes with eliminating the baritone part. Remember how I warned you about the tenor singer “shooting too high” and skipping over the next available chord note to one even higher? That created a problem for the baritone singer, but with no baritone singer there is no problem. I am not saying the tenor singer should do this often, but if it happens that the tenor singer just wants to go really high, and you think it sounds good, then it is okay to do it. If you plan on including a baritone singer at some point it is best to stick with the normal “close harmony” of selecting the nearest chord note above the lead part.

Are There Other Ways to Stack Harmonies in Bluegrass?

Yes, there are. What we have discussed is the typical way to stack up (arrange) bluegrass vocal parts. Lead in the middle, baritone below and tenor above. This is the most common arranging system. However, it is possible to sing all of those same notes correctly using a couple of other common bluegrass trio arranging stacks. Here they are with the parts shown stacked from highest on top to lowest on the bottom:

STANDARD TRIO	HIGH LEAD	HIGH BARITONE
Tenor	Lead	High Baritone
Lead	Baritone	Tenor
Baritone	Low Tenor	Lead

Sometimes with female singers, or males with very high vocal ranges, it is better to place the lead part on top. If you have a powerful lead singer who likes to sing high it is sometimes hard to find someone who can sing tenor above that person. The solution is called High Lead. The baritone part is the same as before. That is, the baritone sings the closest chord note below the lead part. The low tenor is simply the normal tenor part sung one octave lower. This puts the tenor on the bottom of the stack. In this case the person with the lowest pitched voice should sing Low Tenor.

Sometimes, if you have a lead singer with a low pitched voice, it might be better to put the lead vocal on the bottom of the stack. This is called High Baritone. The lead singer is on the bottom and the tenor part is just above in the normal way. The baritone is above the tenor singing the usual baritone part up one octave. In this case the person with the highest pitched voice should sing the top note, the high baritone part.

Remember, when stacking in these optional ways, tenor doesn't always mean the highest singer and baritone doesn't always mean a low pitched singer. In the standard trio it is true that the tenor sings the high part and the baritone sings the low part.

I think it is important to ALWAYS put your lead singer in their best possible range. Sometimes it means that the song needs to be played in another key. And then, secondly, stack the other vocal parts so that every singer is singing in his or her natural range. Forcing someone to hit notes which are not easily reached by their "pipes" is a recipe for disaster and lousy pitch. Training and practice can increase the range of most singer's voices but demanding that someone hit a note which is obviously too low or too high for them to sing clearly and easily is going to create lousy music, bad attitudes and cringing audiences. Perhaps moving the key up or down a bit will allow everyone to sound good.

In short, be sure the lead singer is happy with the key. Then, try the standard trio system. If everyone is singing well and within their natural range you will be off to a good start. If someone is straining, try moving the key up or down a little or try one of the other stacking systems.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Each person in the group, whether banjo, guitar, mandolin, fiddle or bass, will either come to the table already knowing how to play or they will need some other basic instruction to learn how to hold the instrument, how to tune, basic techniques, scales, chords, etc. Here is a list of other learning materials sorted by instrument:

Banjo:

Banjo Instruction Course - I wrote this complete course for the beginner bluegrass banjo player. It covers everything from tuning to rolls, chords, slides, hammer-ons, pull-offs, tunes, chords and backup. It is a PDF ebook with MP3 tracks. It is available here: www.bradleylaird.com/dojo

The Flint Hill Scrolls - This is a follow-up book for banjo players who have already learned the basics. It is a fun exploration of basic music theory, chord and scale formation, and other topics. You can read more about it and download a copy here: www.bradleylaird.com/dojo

Mandolin:

Mandolin Instruction Course - I wrote this complete course for the beginning mandolin player. It covers everything from tuning to playing chords, lead solos and backup. It is a PDF ebook with MP3 tracks. It is available here: www.bradleylaird.com/mandou-site

Mandolin Master Class - This is a follow-up book for mandolin players who have already learned the basics. This book and tracks covers music theory, chord and scale formation, improvisation, practice techniques and other topics. You can read more about it and download a copy here: www.bradleylaird.com/mandou-site

Mandolin Training Camp - This book is a full of exercises and ideas to get your fingers to do what you tell them to do! Read about it here: www.bradleylaird.com/mandou-site

Video Mandolin Lessons - I have created a huge series of video mandolin lessons, many which are completely free, which you can find here: www.bradleylaird.com/playthemandolin/videos.html

Guitar:

Free Bluegrass Guitar Lessons - I put together a website with basic lessons in playing bluegrass style guitar. This is good for complete beginners or musicians who have played other styles but don't know how bluegrass works. The site also has guitar tabs and chord charts. They are here: www.bradleylaird.com/guitar

Other Information:

Capos, Playing in Other Keys, Jam Session Cheat Sheets - You can find this free information here: www.bradleylaird.com/survival

Clawhammer Banjo, Dulcimer, etc. - I am constantly adding new lessons and materials for other instruments which you can find at my main site here: www.bradleylaird.com