

BEGINNER'S CORNER

Forward Motion

Eddie Collins

Let's jump right to the topic of this month's lesson—the Forward roll. The word forward is used to describe the motion of the right hand as it plays the following three fingers consecutively: Thumb, Index and Middle. The first time most of us encountered this roll was when we attempted to play the basic version of *Cripple Creek* in Earl Scruggs's book (Example 1). While holding a C chord, your right hand played T I M T—the first three notes formed a Forward roll.

A standard measure in 4/4 time bluegrass banjo music is made up of eight eighth notes. A Forward roll can occur on any three consecutive eighth note stems. *Example 2* shows how a measure can begin with a Forward roll. Many of us think of a roll pattern as being something that fills up a complete measure. An interesting thing happens when you try to fill a measure by repeating the Forward roll pattern. If you repeat the roll three times in a row, you will sound as though you are playing a measure of triplets in 3/4 (*Example 3*). Nine notes is one too many for a measure of eight 8th notes. The idea is to have one group of two notes somewhere in the measure and two Forward rolls (two groups of

three). The two-note group could come at the beginning, middle or end of the measure. For the purposes of this discussion, we'll put the two notes at the beginning followed by two groups of three as in *Example 4*.

Leading with the Thumb: Notice in *Example 4* it is suggested that you strike the first note of the pattern with your Index finger, even though you are playing the 2nd string. Since it is beat 1 of the measure and most important melody notes are on beat 1, the Thumb can strike the string firmer so as to bring out the melody. If you look ahead to the accompanying tune, *This Land Is Your Land*, you will see that the roll in the first full measure has you striking the strings in the exact same order as in *Example 4*. The measure at the end of the first line (under the D chord) also strikes the strings in this exact same order, even though the melody notes are now on string 3 (see *Example 5*). To me, this is another important reason to begin the roll in *Example 4* with the Thumb—the pattern stays the same no matter where it begins. Having said that, there is a school of players, headed by Ralph Stanley, that prefer to lead the pattern in *Example 4* with their Index finger. To some, it is just easier to

play and it keeps their notes flowing better. The trade off is your melody notes may not jump out as much.

Syncopation: The nature of the pattern in *Example 3*—placing patterns of three into a feel of 2 or 4 beats per measure—creates what is referred to as syncopation. Syncopation is where accented (melody) notes are pushed to unaccented beats—often the "&" of the beat. If you were to play the melody to *This Land* as it is sung, you would end up with a somewhat square pattern as in *Example 6*. In this example the words "your" and "land" end up on the 1st and 5th eighth notes in the measure, whereas the word "land" ends up on the 4th eighth note when using the Forward roll pattern in the arrangement of the song that accompanies this article.

Extending the roll: Sometimes, when completing the pattern in *Example 4*, you will find yourself wanting to automatically strike the Thumb again on the 5th string. This is the beauty of the Forward roll—once you get it going, it is hard to stop. Notice that in *This Land* this is exactly what happens. The Thumb plays the 5th string at the beginning of the second full measure. This note merely serves as a fluid fill-in note before the melody picks up again. Next month, we'll continue to explore the Forward roll and see how easy it is to keep the pattern going "beyond the measure line."

Here are a few tips to help you perform the song: Begin on beat 2. Most of the phrases also begin on beat 2 until near the end. The melody notes are highlighted, so strike each a little harder to bring the

This Land Is Your Land

Key of G
Tuning: g DGBD