

Translating Breaks to Different Keys

Rich Stillman

Banjo Camp North, Spring 2013

In a way, you're already partway to knowing how to do this. When you sing a song, you sing *relative pitches* - start on a different note, you have no problem duplicating the melody. In this way you can hear the same melody in any key. Now you have to learn to do the same thing on the banjo.

Interesting facts that help you

Scales overlap. Top half of C scale is bottom half of G scale. Top half of G scale is bottom half of D scale. Also, the same chords pop up everywhere. The G chord is important in the key of C as well as G, the D chord in the keys of D and G. See the chart below. This means many phrases and licks work in more than one key, so you already know much of what you need to play breaks in C and D.

C and D are two frets apart - learn to play in one key, and many (although not all) of the same techniques will work for the other key.

Many chords and licks are played completely or almost completely on fretted strings. These can be moved to other keys just by changing positions, much like singing from a different starting note moves you to another key.

Start with the chords. Chord translations:

Scale degree	Key of G	Key of C	Key of D
I	G	C	D
IV	C	F	G
V	D	G	A
II minor	Am	Dm	Em
VI minor	Em	Am	Bm
III major	B	E	F#
VI major	E	A	B

Ear training is step one. Learn to hear the common changes.

Learning to hear these chords, and the relationships between them, is very important. Fortunately, the same patterns repeat all over the place, both within one key and within the same intervals. The V-I transition sounds the same in any key, and can be played using the same movement in any key.

Learn how the chords relate to each other on the fingerboard. Most chord pairs can be played with minimal hand movement - one or two frets at most.

Learn to hear, and then play, the same song in different keys. A melody is just a series of intervals - play the same series starting on any note and you'll be playing the same melody, just in a different key. Impractical but educational.

How to transpose practically? Use the chords to find the notes. Check handout 1 to see how this is done.

Figure out the first note of the tune in G, then figure out that note in the key you want. The chord translation chart will probably help.

Hold the chord position while playing the melody. It will make the melody notes easier to find and cause your roll or fill notes to be in the right key.

Finally, learn clichés - licks that are common in G have counterparts in C and D. Look at handout 2 for some of those.