

# The Theory of Bluegrass: Modal Minor Messup - By Matt Snook

Some time ago, I was watching the band *Donner Mountain* rip through a lickety-split version of *Lonesome Fiddle Blues* as only a group of teenagers can. It was up-tempo, driving, and a definite show stopper - the way bluegrass is supposed to be! Frankie Nagle did a fine job of turning this fiddle tune into a bona-fide banjo showpiece, but what caught my eye as well as my ear was her use of a particular fingering position on the fretboard. Instead of retuning to D minor, or even playing in a standard minor chord position, she had barred at the seventh fret and was using her middle finger to raise the second string up to G. "Well, that's a different approach," I thought. She was playing what we banjo players call the "modal" tuning, with the open 3<sup>rd</sup> raised to the 4<sup>th</sup> note in the scale.

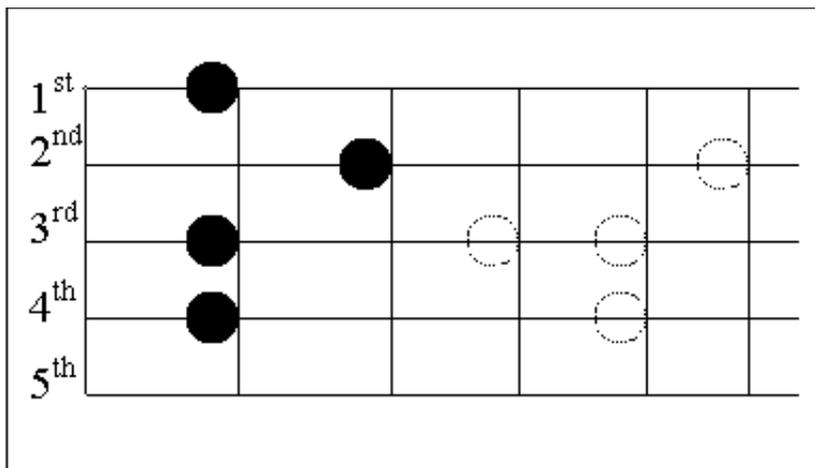


Figure 1: Frankie Nagle's base position. The black dots indicate a barred seventh fret with the 2nd string fretted on the 8th. The open dots indicate the locations of the other melody notes.

I was intrigued, because minor keys are often assumed to be difficult to manage on a banjo. Many players retune so that they don't have that pesky major 3<sup>rd</sup> on an open string where a mistake blares out for all to hear. Well, Frankie's playing position doesn't offer the open minor 3<sup>rd</sup> like retuning would, but it does remove the open major 3<sup>rd</sup>, and it offers a useful position for playing minor key melodies. Here is one way to use Frankie's idea on *Lonesome Fiddle Blues*.

## Lonesome Fiddle Blues - Part A

by Vassar Clements

Not long after that, I was rewriting my own version of David Grisman's *Opus 57 in Gm*. I had worked out a nice break but had used an open minor tuning with the B string tuned down to Bb. It worked well in providing a smooth melodic line, but absolutely messed me up for any kind of improvisation. Because of the retuning, I couldn't break away from my well rehearsed and now rather tired sounding solo. It was very frustrating, and banjo is supposed to be *fun*. In order to regain my improvisation skills, I worked out a way to play it without retuning, and guess what! I ended up using the same base position Frankie had used with Dm on her tune, only for Gm it is 'barred' at the nut and I used my index finger to fret the 2<sup>nd</sup> string at the 1<sup>st</sup> fret.

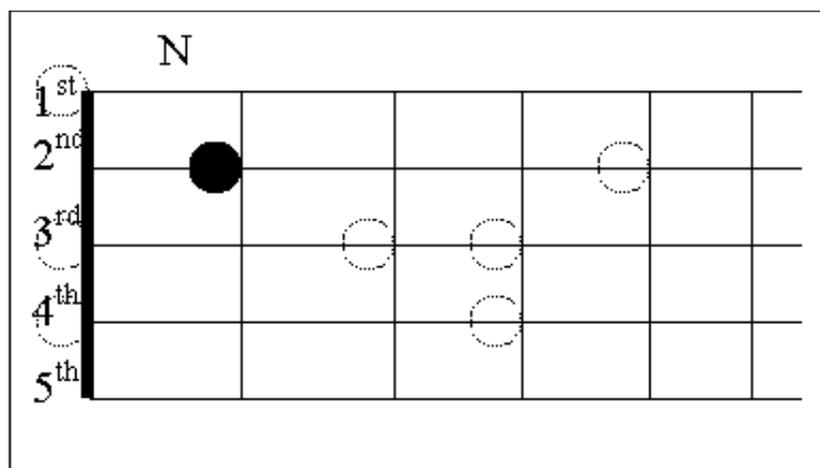


Figure 2: The modal fingering position located at the nut. The black dot indicates permanent fretting of the 2nd string at the first fret. The open dots indicate the same melodic locations as in the Dm position.

With this fingering position, the tune lays out easily with a combination of melodic and Scrogg's style rolls. Here is one way to do part A of *Opus 57*:

## Opus 57 - Part A

Gmod

6

by David Grisman

After that I started looking at ways to use this handy fingering position for other tunes in minor keys. Here is one example, part A of *Jerusalem Ridge*. Simply capo at the 2<sup>nd</sup> fret and use the Gm fingering position. Since you haven't retuned, the sections of the tune played over major chords are no longer a frustrating mystery! It is very handy, lends itself to improvisation, and I'll bet you can find think of several other ways to use it before lunch break is over. Go ahead and try it, you'll thank me later.

## Jerusalem Ridge - Part A

Gmod

Shift here, then back to the Gmod...

6

Baker/Monroe...

Happy picking, and next time I'll get back to some theory of bluegrass that the non-banjo folks can appreciate as well.

**Links to the full tab in PDF format of these pieces can be found below**

- [Lonesome Fiddle Blues](#)
- [Jerusalem Ridge](#)
- [Opus 57](#)