

Closed Fingerings

A review on the benefits of closed finger patterns (FFcP)

By Ted Eschliman



Some Reader Feedback

"Hi, Ted.

I've been playing mandolin for a couple of years and have tried repeatedly to understand your FFcP system. Just don't get it. Could you please point me to an explanation that might help? Thanks.

Rick"

Rick we always appreciate questions and yours points out something we take for granted, that everyone understands this foundational approach to closed fingerings, the **FFcP** system.

Closed Minded... It's good in this case.

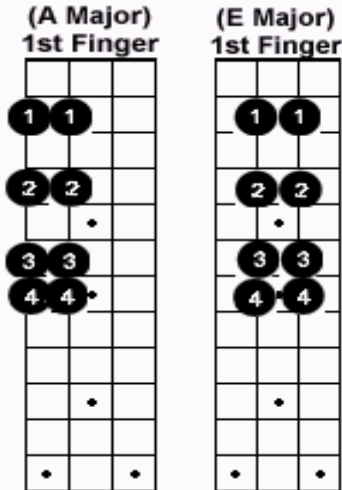
We've made many references to the concept of closed fingerings in previous articles. For many of you this will be old hat, but if you're new to the mandolin, or just plain skeptical of using your pinky or forsaking your dependence on open strings, let's take some time to talk about why closed fingerings are good. A healthy share of the exercises in Mel Bay's "**Getting Into Jazz Mandolin**" use this strategy intensely, and there are compelling arguments why.

Closed vs. Open

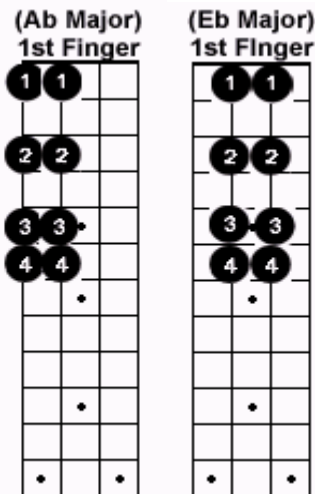
Just to be clear, let's review what we mean by "**closed fingers**." When you first picked up the mandolin, you probably learned where a **G** is. Next was identifying the frets and note names from **1st** to **5th** or **6th**, but always marking your place on the fretboard aurally and physically with the **open G** as your reference. You learned your other strings, **D**, **A**, and **E** in this same way, always falling back on the open string as a base or "Ground Zero." Chances are, you played Folk/Bluegrass tunes that gravitated toward keys based on the lower open strings, **G**, **D**, and **A**, and you found it affirming.

Taking an interest in jazz, you discovered many, if not most songs were written in unfamiliar "horn" keys, **Eb**, **Bb**, maybe even **Ab** and **Db**. This probably freaked you out, making you think many of the notes of the scales were based on strange notes you didn't even know existed on the fretboard. So much for the comfort of open strings...

Close it up

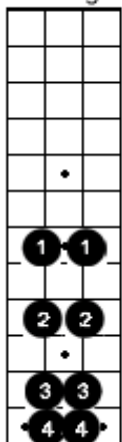


When we step back and take the familiar **A scale**, and instead of using the open **D**, substitute a **7th fret D** on the **4th string**, and the octave **A** replaced by the **7th fret A** on the **3rd string**, the result is we sacrifice open strings. Everything sounds the same, maybe a little awkward on the pinky at first, but "closing" the scale in this way gives you some incredible opportunities and potential for transposability. We discover that we can move everything up a string, starting on the **E** on the **2nd fret** of the **D string** and we have a whole new scale, without having to change the note relationships.



Note, you can take this fingering another string and do a **B scale** with the 1st finger as the base, as well. Where we really start to have fun though, is when we move them up and down strings. For example, you can move that **A pattern** down a fret and you've got an **Ab pattern**, move the **E pattern** similarly and you've got immediate access to the **Eb scale**.

(A Major)
1st Finger



Move it up!

You can see how cool this concept is, moving this one octave scale pattern virtually anywhere on the fretboard. Start it on the **13th fret**, the **4th**, the **9th**, whatever. You have a new way of looking at how you feel and hear the fretboard. Note you can also lose the rigid dependence on thinking what note names are.

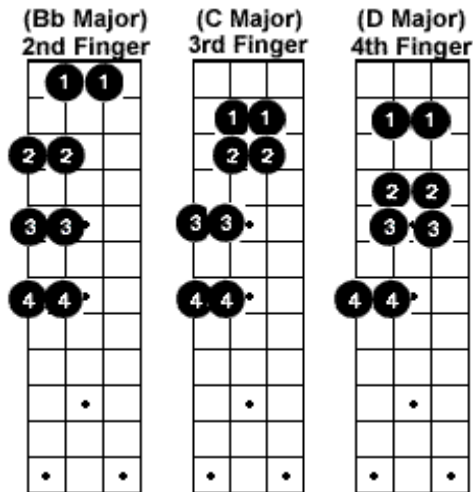
It's all relative

Your concept of playing can be in **scale degrees**, rather than **note names**. The relationship of the **7th to the 1st**, the **5th to the 1st**, the **4th to the 3rd**, these are all going to be much more valuable than knowing if the **10th fret** on the **G string** is an **F** or an **F#**. You will be thinking in terms of relationships or positions in the scale. This reference moves up and down the frets no matter where you are!

Where this approach really shines is in your improvisation. When you whistle a tune, do you waste any intellectual energy thinking "am I playing an **F** or **F#**?" Unless you have Perfect Pitch, probably not. The goal here in playing is the same! It's almost like you are "singing" the frets.

More fingers

The next step in developing this further is to take this **Four Finger closed Position** strategy and start the pattern with the other fingers. This gives you quadruple the fingering potential, and exponentially better mastery of the fretboard. This system is outlined in the "**Getting Into Jazz Mandolin**" book, as well as the **JazzMando.com** website. We even have some more advanced lessons on this, when you are ready to move it up the fingerboard, or apply yourself to **Pentatonic** and **Dorian/Minor** scales.



Check out the exercises: http://jazzmando.com/ffcp_studies.shtml

Many of the introductory exercises are free samples, directly taken from the "**Getting Into Jazz Mandolin**" book. They will be a taste to a whole new world of fretboard real estate.

Open yourself up to being more "closed minded!"

Open it up

We are not asking that you completely abandon open strings for the rest of your playing career! The entire system is a means to an end, developing more opportunity in other areas of the fretboard. It demands a strong, flexible pinky, and you won't develop this until removing complete dependence on the open strings. Eventually, once this skill is developed, you'll want to go back and **ADD** the open strings again. The natural resonance of these sounds is crucial to the aesthetic beauty of a fretted string instrument. Open strings are also great for certain melodic tricks, but plan on coming back to them **AFTER** you've worked up some of these skills.



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