

In this month's column, we'll continue to look at how we can adapt blues and boogie woogie piano music to the banjo by checking out another Professor Longhair song. Penned by Earl King, "Big Chief" was originally recorded in 1964 and has been a staple of the New Orleans repertoire ever since. As we saw with the previous lesson on "Tipitina," there are some key licks and phrases that translate surprisingly well to the nuances of three finger banjo.

The song has a basic 12-bar blues format in the key of Eb, but it features a distinct V-augmented arpeggio that occurs every other measure. This voicing is achieved by simply raising the fifth degree of the chord one half step (so raising the F to F# in a Bb chord in this case), and is a nifty way to pass from the V chord to I chord in any context where you're looking to inject a little tension and harmonic variety. This arpeggio kicks off the tune and is repeated throughout the form, and is played with a quick forward roll triplet across the fourth, third, and second strings, and then bringing the thumb up to the fifth string for two eighth notes, and then playing a backwards roll across the same chord shape, this time on the fifth, second and third strings. There is a fair amount of using the same picking finger for consecutive eighth notes (particularly with the thumb), but this style is generally not played at quite the blistering tempos of bluegrass, so you should be able to execute it smoothly in the 90-100bpm range where you'll often hear this song performed.

The other primary pattern in this song is first seen in measure two, and is also based around a triplet passage, as is so much of the music in this style. I've found the best way to play this one is with a pull off. After the double stop that begins the measure, get up the neck quickly and finger an Eb chord with the root on the 13<sup>h</sup> fret of the first string. Then play a backwards roll across the first, second, and third strings, while pulling off from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> fret on that first string. The key here is to make that pull off sound as smooth as the picked notes, so practice that on its own at a slow tempo and focus on that articulation. Also note the implied movement to the IV chord after that first pull-off triplet as the G (3<sup>rd</sup> string/12<sup>th</sup> fret) is raised a half step to a G#. This exact pattern is moved to the the IV chord (measure 6) and V chord (measure 10). Generally this is played against a descending pentatonic line in the left hand of the piano that makes for a wonderful interlocking rhythmic counterpoint.

The final neat lick from this arrangement is the ascending octave passage that occurs in measure 11 going from the V chord to the I chord. This common piano technique translates well to the tuning of the banjo with the first and fourth strings being octaves of one another, which can be easily played with the thumb and middle finger on your picking hand. As with all music in the New Orleans blues and jazz style, there is a ton of variation and improvisation, and this is just one take on it that I came up with based on Professor Longhair. Feel free to use this as a starting point and come up with your own interpretation.

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