

Cripple Creek

Traditional

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G (A) C (D) G (A)

D7 (E7) G (A)

1. D7 (E7) G (A) 2. D7 (E7) G (A) C (D) G (A)

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C (D) G (A) D7 (E7) G (A)

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Like just about everyone else who plays bluegrass banjo, this is one of the first tunes I learned, out of "Earl Scruggs and the Five String Banjo, " sometimes just called "the book." Those first slides of Cripple Creek were an epiphany for me, as they were for a whole generation of banjo players. Earl's Cripple Creek is still perfect in its simplicity, and it cannot be improved upon. I still play it, and I'm still working at trying to get it to sound like Earl.

Still, I've come to realize over the years that Cripple Creek has not run dry, and it's perfectly all right to play more than one version if you want to. I've always wanted to work up an arrangement which changes the location of the eighth notes in the A part, and places them on the C chord, where they are generally found in frailing renditions. I've added a couple of harmony notes- a B flat resolves to the second string B natural, as the C chord (now actually a C7) resolves to G.

You'll note that the up the neck version continues the exploration of the dulcimer roll. One unusual feature is the delayed hammer in the second measure of the B part: while the initial note is struck on the second note of the four note pattern (syncopated double thumb), the hammer takes place on the 4 count, two notes later, when one expects to hear the middle finger. Instead, the middle finger shows up as the first note of the next measure.

A few thoughts about Earl's Cripple Creek, and about slides in general. The simple slide on the third string, from the second to the third (or fourth) fret, in the standard convention of time symbols, would indicate that the slide is rapidly executed as a 32nd note wedged in between the two 16th notes of the right hand alternate thumb pattern. That would be one way to play the slide, and I use that kind of rapid slide in a lot of places, such as in the second string slide from the first to the third fret in the cadence of Old Joe Clark. But I don't believe that's what Earl is actually doing in the low part of Cripple Creek. Instead, I think he hesitates, and only executes the slide at the time he picks the second string with the index finger, or just before. That gives a loping gate to the low part, which is often missed by his imitators.

When executing a slide, the pressure on the string can also be varied. If the string is firmly held against the fingerboard for the entire length of the slide, it will be heard with clarity from its starting to its ending note. This is generally how you would execute a rapid slide. Another possibility, however, is to gradually reduce the pressure, eventually lifting the sliding finger off the fingerboard, muting the note and introducing ambiguity as to just where the slide actually terminates. On slides with longer timing this works well, and is accomplished almost subconsciously. This is why, I suspect, Earl's Cripple Creek slide is transcribed sometimes ending on the third fret, and sometimes on the fourth. I think he was heading for the fourth, but allowed the note to gradually mute out at the third fret.

If you were to ask any bluegrass banjo picker what it is about Earl's playing that is most distinctive, the answer you would get would probably be his right hand timing, and I guess I would say that, too. But the subtle dynamics of Earl's slides (and his hammers and pull-offs), whether instinctive or deliberate, has to be another feature of his playing still unmatched. Just listen to his Cripple Creek.