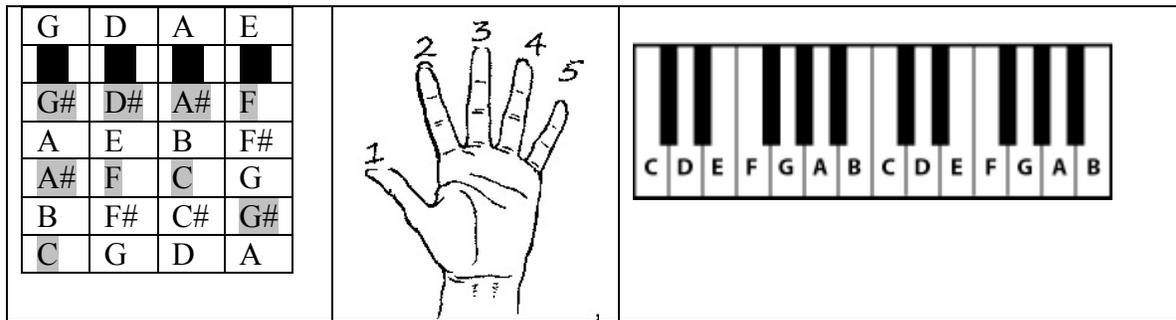


Key of D Notes (handout for Desert Bluegrass) matt McConeghy 2/2012

'D' tunes: Soldier's Joy, Liberty, Angelina Baker, Arkansas Traveler, Fisher's Hornpipe, Forked Deer, Fly Around Pretty Miss, Green Willis, Golden Slippers, Johnny Don't Get Drunk, Julianne Johnson, Over the Waterfall, Lover's Waltz, Midnight on the Water, Pig Ankle Rag, Road to Boston, Spotted Pony, Valley Forge, West Fork Girls, etc

A large fraction of all the tunes that are played at Bluegrass, Old Time and Celtic sessions are played in the key of D (that is, D major). D uses the notes D, E, F#, G, A, B, C#. The notes C and F are sharps.*



Here are the note locations for fiddle or mandolin. This is the easiest key for fiddlers, I think because all four open strings can be used, the finger patterns on the D and A strings are the same, the G string tends not to be used much, and the E string pattern is made easier when you play the F# instead of the F natural.

For the large majority of tunes in Bluegrass, C&W, Old Time, and Celtic music, the *main chords we play* are the “1 – 4 – 5” chords, and you often hear players call out those numbers during a tune. That is easy to understand if you can count to five and you know that the notes are named C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C. Count from your thumb D-E-F-G-A. So the 1 chord is D, the 4 chord is G and the 5 chord is A. It is also helpful to know that the *notes in a major chord* are the 1 – 3 – 5 notes. So, the notes in a D chord are D – F – A, except, we are playing in D so the F has to be F#. So a D chord has the notes D – F# – A.

What is this good for? In jam sessions we often are playing along with some song we've never heard before. How do we even know what key it is in? We only have to hear a few notes to recognize the key. 1) If the tune starts on D and especially, if *the melody ends on a D note*, then we are almost certain that it is in the key of D. And, if it is in D, then 2) we almost always will hear the D, F# and A as repeated, emphasized notes in the tune. In D tunes the three notes of the D chord are likely to be repeated over and over so in a simple version of Soldier's Joy I count 64 notes. 48 of the notes are D, F# or A. 3) If you hear a G note, then you might think you were in the key of G, but the key of G uses C instead of C#. So if you hear the three notes of the D chord and then a C# it is a good bet you are playing in the key of D. (Later on we'll briefly point out some exceptions!)*

I think it is a good idea for fiddlers to learn a little bit of guitar. You don't need to become a hot flat-picker, but if you learn the positions of the main guitar chords, then you can recognize them when you are playing a new tune and by watching the guitarist change from D to G to A, etc. you can sometimes catch on to the tune pretty quickly. Also, while you are watching, you can be playing. If the guitar guy is playing a D chord, then the fiddler can play D, F# or A notes and it will work out OK.

A chord needs three notes, but on fiddle we can only play two notes at the same time, so we play partial chords or 'double stops'. Since the notes in a D chord are D F# A we can play a partial D chord by playing D F# or F# A or D A. How many places can we do that on the fiddle? We have an A note on the G string, we have D and F# on the D string, we have A and D on the A string, and we have F# and A on the E string. So any combination of those makes a partial D chord. Life is made a bit easier since these combinations of notes also occur in other chords. That is, a B minor chord is B D F#, so you could play the F# on your D string and the D on your A string with either D major or B minor. Needless to say, unless you are amazingly smart, you are not going to be figuring all of this out on the fly while a fast tune is happening!

* For a more detailed explanation of why there are two sharps, exactly what is a key, and the modifications of keys that are called 'modes' (as in 'modal' tunes) see the handout for week four 'June Apples' or see <http://mmcconeghy.com/RIMUSIC/modesalamode.htm>