Old-Time Harmonies

Thinking about chord selection for Backup Guitar
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In **old-time music**, especially in **modal** or **drone-heavy** contexts (fiddle tunes, banjo tunes, dulcimer-influenced textures), the **9th** and **6th** tones appear **a lot** in harmony, but **without making the chords functionally dominant or minor** in a jazz or classical sense.

Why This Happens:

1. **Open tunings and drones** (like in clawhammer banjo, dulcimer, or cross-tuned fiddles) naturally lead to:
* **Ambiguous chords** without a 3rd.
* Color tones like the **2nd (9th)** or **6th (13th)** sounding as **melodic or harmonic extensions**, not as signs of jazz-style "sophistication."

2. No Voice Leading Expectations:
In old-time, there's rarely an expectation that a **9** leads anywhere (e.g., to the root or down to the 7th), or that a **6** resolves to a 5 - these tones are **color**, not function.

3. Modal Sounds:
* Dorian mode (minor + 6) and Mixolydian (major + flat 7) are common.
* That makes the **6th** and **9th** sound like **normal, natural extensions** of the scale rather than ornamented or "jazzy."

4. Instrumental Influence:
* The banjo's tuning and drone strings often **force** you into voicings where the **2nd or 6th sneaks in**, especially when the 3rd is missing.
* Fiddlers often play **double stops** or harmonized lines that include the **6th** or **2nd** above or below the melody.

Implications for Backup Guitar

If you're arranging or improvising backup:

You don't have or need to spell out full chords - especially not full jazz/dominant chords.
Using **5ths + 9ths** (or 6ths), leaving out the 3rd, or even using **two-note harmonies** (like C-D, or G-E) can give the backup a beautiful **open, modal** feel.

This is part of what separates old-time backup from bluegrass rhythm guitar, which leans more on **full, closed-position chords with 3rds clearly stated.**

In old-time backup, we often hear **color tones like the 9th or 6th** used not as part of dominant or minor chords in the jazz or classic sense, but as **open harmonies** that come from **banjo tunings, fiddle drones, or modal melodies.**
These harmonies add richness without forcing a chord to behave "functionally."
As a backup guitarist, you don't always have to define a chord's identity fully - sometimes it's better to **suggest a harmony** and let the collective sound of the group bring it to life.

Don't Chase the Melody - Let the Harmony Emerge

When you play backup guitar in old-time music, it's tempting to try to "follow" the melody: to change chords whenever the tune plays a new note, to fit every passing tone into a clear chord shape, or to correct what sounds like a "wrong note" by swapping to a new harmony.

But old-time music doesn't work like that.
This isn't jazz, and it isn't bluegrass. It's not about finding the right

chord for every moment - it's about holding a **solid groove** while letting the harmonic picture **emerge from the whole group.**

Color Tones Aren't Chords

In old-time music, you'll often hear tones that don't "fit" cleanly into the basic chords:

* A **B note** ringing out in a tune that's still sitting on a G chord.
* A **6th** or **9th** sounding clearly in the fiddle, while the guitar stays put.
* An **F natural** in a G tune - not as a sign of modulation, but just as **part of the tune.**

These aren't invitations to change chords. They're just **color tones.** They add flavor, tension, or movement - but they don't demand a reaction.
The backup guitar isn't responsible for naming every note.

Hold the Groove, Not the Harmony

Many guitarists come to old-time music from other styles where you "play the chords." In those styles, the guitar is the main carrier of harmony, and the rest of the group locks into that.

But in old-time, the guitar's role is different. It doesn't define the harmony - it **supports the rhythm,** grounds the bass, and **opens space** for the melody instruments to lead. It's more like a **drum with pitch** than a keyboard with rhythm.

You might play:

* Just the **root bass note and a percussive 'chuck'**(Boom-Chuck)
* Power chords or 5th chords (G-D, C-G) that leave out the 3rd
* Simple drone-like voicings that leave space instead of filling it

The result? **The harmony is not imposed by the guitar** - it **emerges** from the interplay between what you're playing and what the fiddle and banjo are doing.

Teach Your Ears to Hear Less

If you're used to hearing every note as part of a chord, you'll need to retrain your ears a bit. Try to hear:

* The **pulse** before the harmony
* The **color** of a note instead of its function
* How your note sounds **together with** the others, not on its own

A Rule of Thumb

* If the melody plays something unexpected, don't react - listen.
* If the backup sounds shaky, **strengthen your rhythm,** not your chords.

Old-time harmony is often **deliberately ambiguous.** Let it be that way. The best backup playing doesn't "explain" the music. It **trusts** it - and holds the beat.

When It **Sounds** Like a New Chord... But Isn't

1. The F Natural in a G Tune

You're backing a tune in G major, and suddenly the fiddle hits an **F natural.** A guitarist from a different background might think:

* "Aha! It's an F chord - we've modulated to the flat VII!"

* But in old-time, that F natural is often just **a bluesy color** - part of the old modal scale.
* You don't need to change anything.
* Just keep playing your **G chord** or G bass and let it pass through.

✓ G stays in place. The fiddle just leans into a modal sound.

2. The B Note Over a C Chord

You're playing a C chord (C-G bass), and the banjo or fiddle hits a **B note.**
Is that a Cmaj7 or C9 chord?

Not really - it's just a **passing tone,** or a melodic choice.
Don't stretch to add the 7th or 9th.
Keep your **C bass and groove steady** - the melody can handle the dissonance.

✓ Your solid C backup gives the melody room to "float."

3. A Note That "Wants" an Am, But You Stay on C

In a tune in C, the melody hits an **A note** and maybe even an E.
It might "sound like" an Am chord - but if the bass is still on C, and the tune resolves back to G or F, it's not functional harmony.

Hold your **C backup** and let the A be a **color** or **melodic low point.**
The guitar doesn't need to interpret every color note as a full chord.

✓ Bass notes define the feel - not the melody notes alone.

The Main Point:

Let the **fiddle or banjo carry the melody's tensions.**
You don't need to resolve them.
You just need to hold the floor.

Old-Time Harmonies examples

When It **Sounds** Like a New Chord... But Isn't

(for backup guitar players learning to leave harmonic space)

1. F NATURAL IN A G TUNE

Tune in G major. Fiddle plays this:

```
e |----------------|
B |--1--0----------|   ← F natural!
G |--------2--0----|
D |----------------|
```

Many guitarists want to switch from G to F chord. But don't.
The F note is part of an old-time **modal flavor** - not a modulation.

You play:
* G bass, G chord, or G5 shape.
* Keep the **Boom-Chuck groove** steady.
L* et the F note **pass over** your G backup.
It's modal, not functional.

2. B NOTE OVER A C CHORD

You're playing C (bass: C-G). Banjo hits:

```
e |----------------|
B |--0-------------|   ← B note
G |------0--2--0---|
D |----------------|
```

Someone might hear this as a Cmaj7 or C9. But it's not.
It's a melodic ornament - not a harmonic shift.

You play:
→ Solid C root-bass with percussive chuck.
→ No need to add a B or shift the chord.
The tension belongs to the melody instrument.

3. A MINOR FEEL, BUT YOU STAY ON C

Melody goes:

```
e |----------------|
B |--1-------------|   ← C
G |--0-------------|   ← G
D |--2-------------|   ← E
A |--0-------------|   ← A
```

This **looks like** an Am chord. But the tune **stays grounded in C.**
It might feel minor, but the backup doesn't follow it down.

You play:
→ C chord, C bass.
→ Let the A and E float as part of the melodic color.

The backup holds the frame - the tune adds the shadow.

Remember

* Your job isn't to match every note - it's to **hold the groove.**
* The harmony comes from how your steady bass and rhythm blend with the melody notes.
* Let the fiddle or banjo add the tension - your backup just keeps walking.

Literature on Old-Time Backup Harmony

References and sources (both scholarly and practical) that support the observations about 9ths and 6ths in old-time music, particularly the use of open harmonies, modal inflections, and non-functional chord tones. Since old-time music is primarily an **aural tradition,** much of this knowledge is based on **analysis of playing practices** rather than formal theoretical documentation. Still, here are some places to dig in:

1. Jeff Todd Titon - "Old-Time Kentucky Fiddle Tunes"

* Titon transcribes and analyzes dozens of tunes, many in **modal or ambiguous tonalities,** showing how **melodies imply harmonies** that include 6ths and 9ths - without functional harmony.
* He emphasizes the **Dorian and Mixolydian** modes, both of which naturally include **6ths and 9ths.**
* His commentary often notes that the **guitar backup** doesn't always "fit" the melody in a classical sense, and that's part of the aesthetic.

Titon, Jeff Todd. "Old-Time Kentucky Fiddle Tunes". University Press of

Kentucky, 2001.

2. Bertrand Harris Bronson - "The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads"

While not strictly old-time, Bronson's modal analysis of folk melodies shows the prevalence of **6th and 9th intervals** in melodies without functional harmony. This supports the idea that traditional music often includes these tones **without suggesting jazz-style chords.**

3. Mark Nelson - "Learn to Play Clawhammer Banjo" (and similar banjo manuals)

* Banjo books often include chords or drones that contain **2nds (9ths)** and **6ths.**
* These are used because of the tuning and melodic logic, **not because the banjoist is building a C9 chord.**

4. Dena Epstein - "Sinful Tunes and Spirituals"

Her work traces rhythmic and harmonic elements from African-American traditions into American folk styles. Implies a continuity of **color tones and rhythmic playing** that emphasize **sound and feel** over theoretical completeness.

5. Listening-Based Sources (highly recommended)

You can also hear the use of 6ths and 9ths in old-time music by listening to:

* **Tommy Jarrell & Fred Cockerham** (fiddle-banjo duets with modal sounds)
* **The Freight Hoppers, The Bucking Mules,** or **The New Lost City Ramblers** - where backup guitar often favors power chords, incomplete voicings, or modal drones
* The banjo playing of **Adam Hurt** or **Clifton Hicks** who use tunings that naturally bring out those non-functional tones

6. Fiddle Tunes and Modal Harmony - Informal Theory

Some theory resources discuss these topics informally:

* **American Harmony** and **Modal Harmony in Fiddle Tunes** (blog posts and handouts by musicians like Andrew Kuntz or Ken Perlman)
* Perlman especially talks about "melodic guitar backup" using modal chords that imply 6ths and 9ths without spelling full jazz harmonies

Summary:

There's not one theory book that lays out the "rules" of old-time harmony, but a combination of:

* Ethnographic sources (like Titon),
* Melodic collections,
* Instructional materials, and
* Careful listening

...all point toward a **non-functional, modal, color-rich** harmonic language.