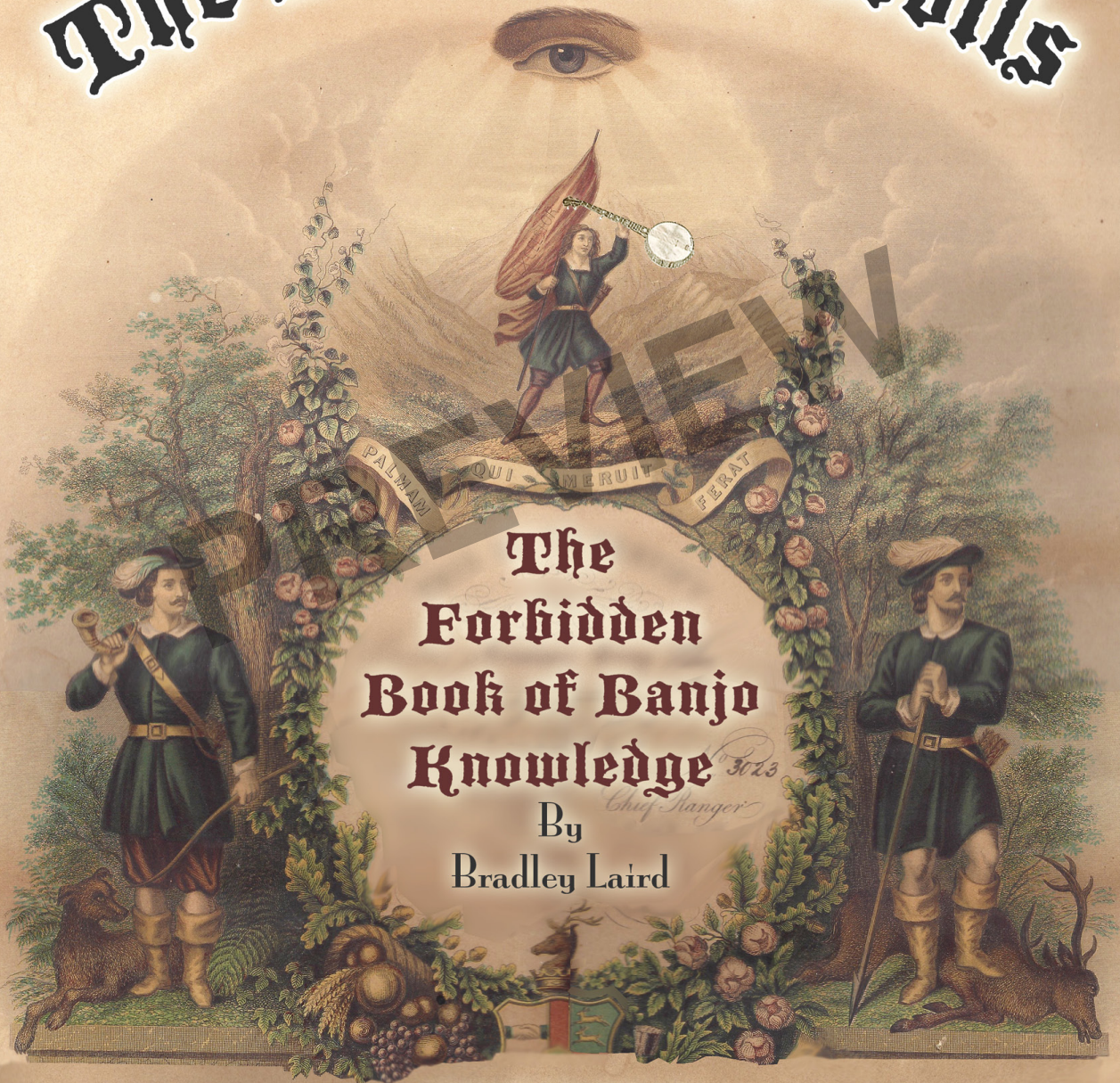


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The Flint Hill Scrolls



The
Forbidden
Book of Banjo
Knowledge *1873*
By *Chief Ranger*
Bradley Laird

FIRST EDITION

The Flint Hill Scrolls

The Forbidden Book of Banjo Knowledge



Dedicated to Jackson

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The Flint Hill Scrolls

The Forbidden Book of Banjo Knowledge

This book is not like most other 5-string banjo books. First, let me tell you what this book is not. It is not a book of famous banjo tunes. It is not a lick encyclopedia. It is not a chord dictionary. If you skim through it looking for pre-arranged songs to play, things someone else figured out and wrote down, you might be a little disappointed. There are plenty of other good banjo books which do those things. You may have a stack of them already. This book will help you understand them more.

This book is different. This book is a journey of discovery. It is an experimental lab. It's a schoolhouse. It's a workshop. Instead of laying out note after note in tablature, it attempts to *enlarge your understanding of how music functions* and improve your ability to navigate the banjo fingerboard. This book strives to increase your general musical understanding by employing some oft-neglected musical thought experiments, but mostly it provides a perspective for understanding *why we play the notes we play*.

This book is about understanding concepts, a few facts about music, notes, chords and scales, and then it turns you loose, like a kid playing in a sandbox, free to explore, test ideas, and make music on your banjo in a way you may have never considered before. All of the great pioneering musicians, banjo players included, began with some information, discovered more ideas, and devised what they played on their own. There was no tab to memorize back then.

However, there are is a fair amount of banjo tab in this book. Treat the tab in this book as my means of demonstrating certain things since I cannot sit in front of you to show you these things. Do not treat the tab like an obligation. You do not have to learn to play the tabs in this book, though you might want to. You just have to fiddle with them enough to understand them. That should not be too hard. Think “play” not “work” while you toy with the ideas in these pages.

A Brief Note About Tunings

The bulk of this book will be oriented towards “Standard G Tuning” since that is by far the most common 5-string banjo tuning in use today. So, tune your banjo to GDGBD tuning before you dive in. There are, as you probably know, many other tunings which are possible on the banjo and I encourage you to explore them too. They will make more sense after you read and understand this book.

How This Book Is Organized

First, as you progress through this book it may appear to jump around a bit. We may be looking at one topic when I suddenly turn the corner and make a short side trip to another seemingly unrelated topic. Just follow along and it will make sense.

Secondly, there is a lot of material in this book and some readers, depending on their prior skills and knowledge, may get overwhelmed at times. Read slowly. If something doesn't make sense, re-read it a few times. When you finish a paragraph ask yourself "Do I really understand what he just said?" If you answer "no," just back up and read it again a couple of times. It may help to go through the whole book, without worrying if you completely understand everything, just to get some familiarity with the contents, and then start over back at the beginning and go through it again with the intent of picking up the finer details.

Confession

I, Bradley Laird, being of reasonably sound mind and body, before any and all persons, do hereby confess that I am not the originator of many of the contents of the book you are now reading. The volume before you is an edited translation, prepared by myself, of the original which I discovered under a porch of a small abandoned cabin in western North Carolina in the year 1978 of the common era. I discovered the scrolls accidentally when one of the rotted boards of the porch gave way beneath my foot as I was attempting to peer through the keyhole of the front door. My left boot heel landed squarely on the lid of a metal lard can in the soil beneath the porch. After recovering the can and examining its contents, subsequent metal detecting under the porch turned up a buffalo nickel, several .22 spent cartridges, numerous Cheerwine bottle caps and a National fingerpick which, unfortunately, had been stepped on and was flattened beyond salvation.

In the can was the original text, inscribed on a series of nine thin circular calf-skin hides which were rolled together and carefully wrapped in a yellowed copy of the *Nashville Banner*. These were placed together, by some unknown person, in a cloth sack bearing the name "Martha White" and sealed in the lard can. Rolled between Scroll 3 and Scroll 4 was found a small scrap of blue paper bearing some kind of chemical formula with the symbols Cu, Sn, Ag, etc., some odd numerical figures and a small cartoonish pictograph depicting a cross-eyed man wearing a Western hat.

The script on the vellum was tiny, severely faded and could only be read with considerable eye strain. The obscure language and diagrams were eventually, after five years of studious work, translated into modern text (with modern names and references) and compiled in the form you now possess. The original manuscript bore no title and did not include the full name of the author so that person is still unknown to me. However, at the end of Scroll 9 was written (in pencil) the notation "S.J. Fecit" and also the words "et modica pars totius" in small, barely legible letters.

Fearing a curse, I replaced the manuscript and the other artifacts, exactly as I found them, in their original location, in May of '83. Several color snapshots of the cache are still retained by me.

Self-Test #1

1. Complete the chromatic scale by filling in the missing notes:

A A# ___ C C# ___ D# E ___ F# G ___

2. If we add a “#” symbol to a natural note, have we raised the pitch or lowered the pitch?

3. If we begin on any note and move lower by one half-step, how many frets lower is the new note?

4. Is the distance from D to E a half-step or a whole step? _____

5. What is the term for the interval from any note to the same note 12 frets higher called? (For example: a G played open compared to the G at the 12th fret.)

6. What is the correct lowest note to start a chromatic scale?

a. an A note

b. a C note

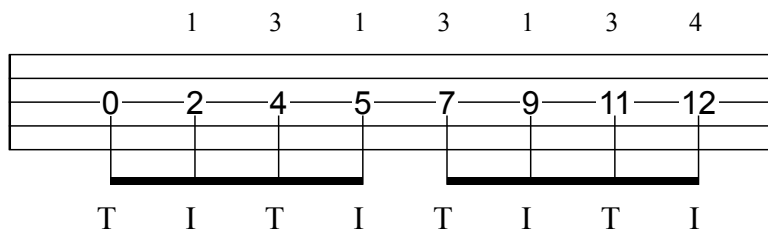
c. an A 440 note

d. any old note you feel like

ANSWERS FOR EACH SELF-TEST ARE IN THE BACK OF THE BOOK

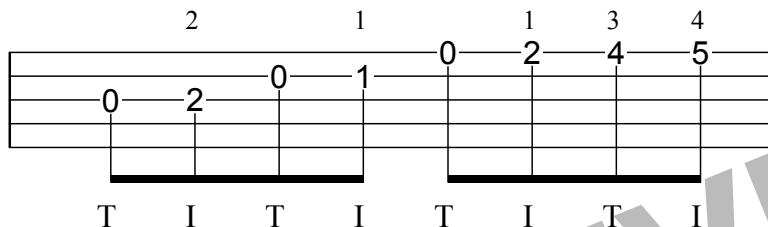
Here are three examples of the same G major scale on the banjo. The first, primarily for theoretical demonstration, begins on the open 3rd string and goes up, using 2-2-1-2-2-2-1, all on a single string.

G Major Scale on a Single String



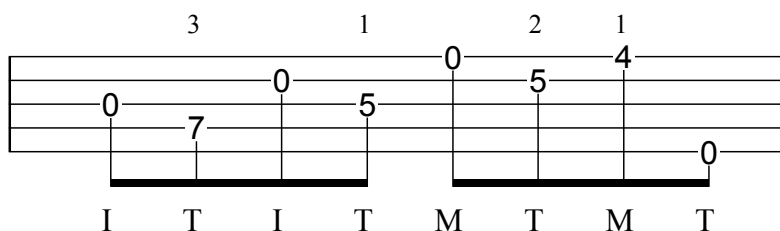
This next version of the exact same musical pitches is shown in the “Reno Style”:

G Major Scale on Multiple Strings



And lastly, here are the same notes played in the “Melodic” or “Keith” style:

G Major Scale "Melodic Style"



After you try playing them a bit, be sure that you can name each note of the scale. Just begin at a known note, like an open string, and count up the frets to the note you are playing using the chromatic scale. For example, the next to last note in the melodic example is a 4th fret on the 1st string. What is its name? Well, the open 1st string is tuned to a D note. If you count up to the 4th fret (D, D#, E, F, F#) you find that the 4th fret on that string is an F#.

Of course, you would rarely engage in that thinking nonsense when performing, but while isolated in your practice shed, it is a very useful activity.

Practical Use of The Three Major Shapes

If your mind is numb from that mental traverse through the three major chord shapes, perhaps it would help to pick up your banjo and examine some examples of these shapes used in a typical Scruggsian way.

The four-finger, four-string shapes we just examined have many uses. They are used, in bits and pieces in hot lead solos, and are more commonly used to good effect when playing chords and backup. First, let's look at an example of some medium tempo backup type playing using only the "Eff" shape:

Typical Backup Using the "Eff Shape" - Nine Pound Hammer

The image shows two staves of musical notation for the piece "Nine Pound Hammer". Each staff consists of a five-line banjo fretboard with fret numbers (5, 3, 4, 5) and fingering letters (T, M, I, T, M) written below. The first staff is divided into two measures: the first measure is for a G chord and the second for a C chord. The second staff is divided into three measures: the first for a G chord, the second for a D chord, and the third for a G chord. The notation includes specific fret numbers and fingering letters for each note, with some notes connected by horizontal lines to indicate slides or sustained notes.

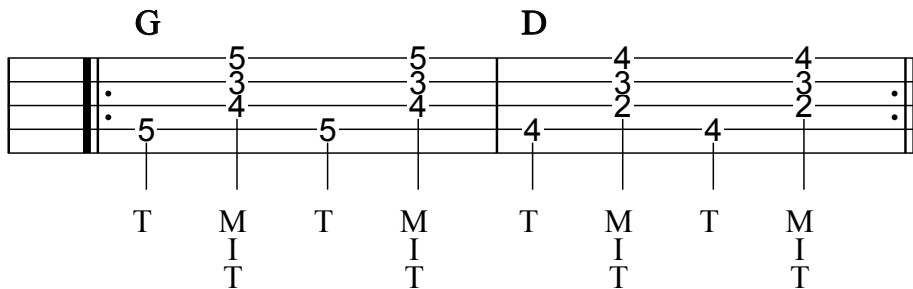
Mess around with this for a bit and you'll quickly discover that those long leaps up and down the fretboard are a bit challenging, at least in terms of aim and accuracy. Here are few tips to help your aim:

1. Know where you are going BEFORE you go there. Be thinking and looking ahead. While playing G be thinking of the upcoming C. That is important.
2. Right before you make the big leap up to C, while G is still happening, drill your eye-balls into one specific spot--the 10th fret of the 4th string. Focus your eyes like a laser beam on that aiming point BEFORE you make the leap. Then, when the time comes, move your ring finger there by sliding up the string maintaining finger contact with the string. Don't push it down so you are fretting all the notes from 5 to 10. Just relax the down-force and glide that finger up to the target spot. Use the string as a guide like a railroad track. Do the same thing between G and that D at the 12th fret.

Changing Horses Midstream

Playing with only one of the three big major chord shapes involves a lot of long leaps, and they are worth learning to do, but sometimes it is easier to switch to another nearby shape. First, let's talk about switching from "Eff" to "Dee":

Switching from "Eff" shape to "Dee" Shape Exercise



Play this exercise very slowly for a while. After you tried it a few times, let me tell you the secrets for efficiently making this transitional move:

1. You are using your ring and pinkie to play the 4th and 1st strings on both chords. That is important. Many beginners completely let go of the first chord and then must locate all four fingers back on the strings to make the second one. That is a mistake.
2. Expanding on #1 when you reach the end of measure 1, relax your down force so that the strings rise off of the frets, but not so much that your fingers leave the strings. Think of the strings like a spring. You compress the spring to play the chord and then the spring decompresses and pushes your fingers up and off of the frets. But, don't leave the string... yet.
3. Next allow the index and middle fingers to rise slightly above the 2nd and 3rd strings. Just barely hovering above their strings. (You are still in the G shape.)
4. Now, with the ring and pinkie gliding on the top of the outside two strings (4th and 1st) you slip down to the 4th fret. The index and middle fingers are offering no frictional resistance since they are slightly above their strings.
5. The tricky part: Halfway to the 4th fret target, the index and middle fingers, slightly aloft, swap strings!
6. Your ring and pinkie land at the 4th fret and then the index and middle fingers drop down to their NEW positions. You make them swap in mid-air but keep the ring and pinkie gliding on their strings like a train car on a track.

Soloing Using These Shapes

The chord shapes we have been discussing (the Barre, Eff and Dee) are useful when playing lead breaks too! Most of the time you don't even need to play all four fingers of the chord.

Here is an example, again as a break for the tune Little Maggie, using nothing but three finger and two finger remnants of the larger chord forms.

Soloing Ideas Using the Shapes - Little Maggie

The image shows two staves of guitar notation for a solo in Little Maggie. The first staff contains measures 1 through 4, and the second staff contains measures 5 through 8. Above each measure, the parent chord shape is indicated: G, Dee, Dee, F, Dee, Dee in the first staff; G, Dee, D, Eff, G, Eff, Eff in the second staff. The notation includes fret numbers on the strings and rhythmic patterns (T, I, M, T, M, I, T, M) below the notes. A large 'PREVIEW' watermark is overlaid on the image.

You can use whatever fingers you choose in order to play the solo above, but keep in mind the parent chord form they are derived from. I have written the chord form names above each section where they are used.

The ring finger is not used at all in this solo. Just let it touch the 4th string as a guide or keep it above the strings. Your choice.

Watch out for that quarter note at the start of the 7th measure and also the final note. Take it slowly and you will soon be able to play this. If you practiced this solo for 15 minutes a day, for a year, you will be able to play it better than me!

Slow down, get the notes right, strive for accuracy, clarity, tone and precision and faster speeds will come without effort.

The Dark & Mysterious Minor Chord

Building a Minor Chord

A minor triad (chord) is a snap to create once you have found the notes of the major triad. Simply flat the 3rd note of the scale by moving it down one fret.

To convert a C major triad (chord) to a C minor triad:

1	3	5	1	b3	5
C	E	G	C	E \flat	G

Minor chords are extremely common and important. In order to communicate the two polarities of human emotion -- the yin and yang if you will, the day or night, the giddy or glum, the hopeful or hopeless, the cheerful or despondent -- you need to be able to play using their emotional musical counterparts: major and minor.

What chord am I?

Let's back up and look at the 7 notes of a G major scale:

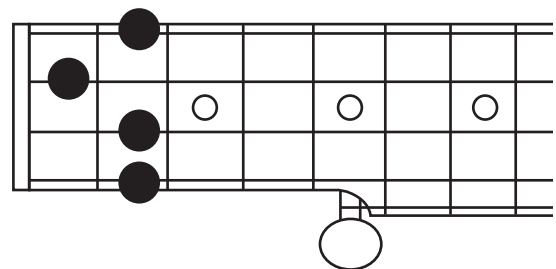
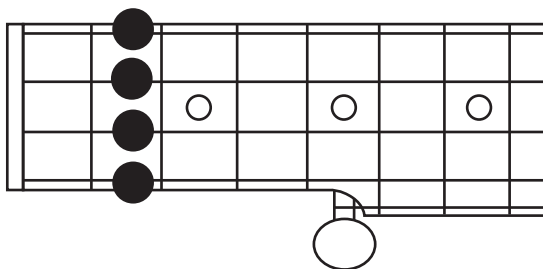
G A B C D E F#

And, we learned that notes 1, 3 and 5 form the G major chord:

	1	3	5	1	b3	5	
Major	G	B	D	Minor	G	B \flat	D

To make this chord minor we simply lowered the B note by 1 fret. In theory terms you have flatted the 3rd degree of the major triad.

What does this look like on your banjo? Let's compare two chord forms:



The chord on the left is an A major. You already learned that. The one on the right is an A minor chord. See the one note that moved lower by 1 fret. That half-step movement towards the nut lowers that particular note from C# to C. C# is the 3rd of the A major scale and the A major chord. C is the "flatted 3rd". It's really that simple. One tiny change turns happy into sad. (Just as one unkind word can make someone sad.)

Two and Three String Derivatives

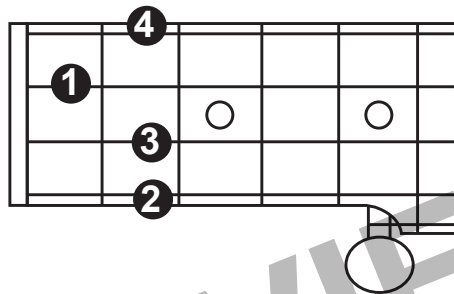
Here is the first A minor chord lick. It's using an A minor shape played with fingers 2, 1 and 3 of the left hand:

Am

T I M T M I T M T I M T M I T M

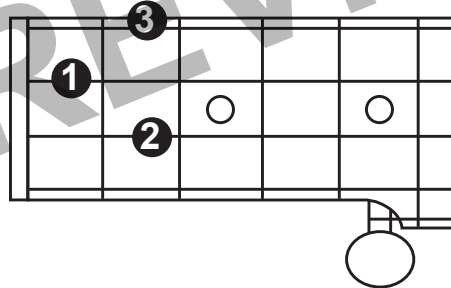
Clearly it does not make sense to try to hold this entire four-finger A minor chord during this lick:

Full A Minor



This three-finger derivative will do the job much easier:

Derived A Minor



Daddy Bill

The important thing to realize is that the origin of that 3 string lick is the full, 4-string chord.

In your mind you should be able to “see” the original “Barre” major shape which is where this Am lick really began. That “Barre” major was converted to a “Barre” minor by dropping the 2nd string by one fret and then, finally it was pared down to a 3-string derivative.

You might look at that A minor and say “Hey, that is just a C major chord with one note added!” and you would be correct. But, look to the chord progression -- the chord happening at the time -- to use as a basis for your analysis. Chords do share notes, for example, 2 notes of the A minor chord are also 2 notes of the C major chord. When you notice things like that you know you are beginning to understand music.

The Blues in Bluegrass

The next subject I want to dive into is the topic of the blues, blues songs, blues chord progressions and, of course, the blues scale. Back in the section on “Dominant 7th Chords” I briefly mentioned the blues. I’d like to explore it more fully here.

For newcomers to the banjo and bluegrass it might seem odd that I am suggesting the influence of blues to the formation of bluegrass. However, if you look into the history of bluegrass music’s progenitor, Bill Monroe, you will find that he was influenced by a blues musician by the name of Arnold Shultz. Monroe was, of course, influenced by many other styles of music including Scotch and Irish traditional immigrant music, “holiness” singing and others.

I suggest, if you really want to understand bluegrass banjo, that you rummage around the history of the music and do some reading and listening to early bluegrass and proto-bluegrass recordings. (I do not mean that you must revere it as a religion, only that you should at least partially understand it.) Your ancestral roots are a huge component of who you are and the ancestral roots of today’s banjo picking and bluegrass are just as relevant.

For simple confirmation of the presence of blues musical influence just pause and reflect of the titles of these “bluegrass standards”: “Lonesome Road Blues”, “Florida Blues”, “Blue Railroad Train”, “Nashville Blues”, “Evening Prayer Blues”, “Columbus Stockade Blues” or “Worried Man Blues”. And remember that hundreds of tunes and songs are brimming with “the blues” but do not necessarily have the word “blues” in their title.

The blues are not the sole property of any particular culture and folks around the world have expressed this emotion through music. The forlorn hollow cry of a Native American flute, the twanging wail of the Mississippi “diddly bow”, the strident bowing of a Norwegian fiddle can express the sorrows and pain of the human heart. Your banjo is capable of such expression too despite what you may have learned from “Hee Haw”.

Musically, to my Western ears, the blues lives in a “no-man’s land” between major and minor. The blues is not one or the other. It is neither happiness or sadness. It’s both. All at once. It is the merging of the two. To me the blues is a state of emotion where there lives both hope and despondency. It is not all or nothing. It is not complete annihilation or total victory over life’s unending challenges. It’s that middle ground we all exist in and that is why it is universally resonant with all cultures. Let’s look at how blues are expressed, simply and using our banjo, in terms of our Western music methodology:

Answers to Self-Tests

Self-Test #1

1. B, D, F, G#
2. raised
3. one
4. a whole step
5. an octave
6. d, any old note you feel like



*The small scrap
of blue paper.*

Self-Test #2

1. D, 2-2-1-2-2-2-1
2. F, G, A, Bb, C, D, E, F
3. E, F#, G#, A, B, C#, D#, E
4. F-A-C
5. an inversion

Self-Test #3

1. 1, 3, 5
2. 3rd
3. C major
4. G# major (or Ab Major)
5. the same note an octave higher
6. C major
7. G major
8. G minor

Self-Test #4

1. 1-3-5-7
2. minor 7th chord
3. dominant 7th chord
4. a C note
5. F, A, C, Eb
6. Bmin7, Bm7, B-7

Self-Test #5

1. an E note
2. a suspended 4th chord
3. an augmented 5th chord
4. Gsus4
5. A, C, Eb, Gb (Bonus: Adim, Cdim, Ebdim, Gbdim)
6. False

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