

Old Joe Clark *key of A, capo 2*

Fiddle tunes are an important part of the bluegrass and old-time repertoire. As you might guess, they primarily feature the fiddle but the other instruments of the band have been encroaching on their exclusive territory for years.

Fiddle tunes are generally old melodies that over time evolved into instrumental fiddle solos. “Old Joe Clark” is one, and it was originally a vocal song which, by the way, has some pretty hilarious lyrics.

“Old Joe Clark” is almost always performed in the key of A, the key that fiddlers like. Guitarists and banjo players usually play out of the key of G and capo at fret 2.

“Old Joe Clark” has an unusual chord in the second part. If you’re playing out of the key of G capoed at fret 2, it’s in F. If you’re playing without a capo in the key of A, it’s a G chord. Either way it’s unexpected and gives the tune a bluesy or modal sound.

An F chord relative to the key of G and a G chord relative to the key of A can be referred to as a “flat seven” (bVII) chord. Why a “flat” seven? Because the seven chord in the key of G would normally be an F \sharp , and the seven chord in the key of A would normally be a G \sharp . If we “flat” the F \sharp , it becomes an F or F natural. If we “flat” the G \sharp , it becomes a G or G natural. The “Scale, Chord, and Transposition Chart” on page 9 will give you more information on chord numbers and keys. It can also be used to help you transpose songs from one key to another.

After the second open solo of the regular speed track you’ll get the chance to practice backing up another bass solo, just like on “Going Down this Road Feeling Bad.” Listen to how differently the band backs up this solo. Instead of percussive chops on the first beat of each measure, we keep the rhythm going but get quieter to focus attention on the bass solo. Cindy Browne is a wonderful bass player, and “Old Joe Clark,” especially with that odd chord, offers interesting possibilities to any soloist. Cindy comes up with a fine and melodic solo.

The introduction, played on the regular speed track by the mandolin and on the slow track by the guitar, is a special kind of kickoff for fiddle tunes. The lead instrument is simply playing two notes of the I chord, G or A, depending on whether you’re capoed or not, with a rhythm that communicates the beginning tempo of the tune to the rest of the band. The mandolin is playing the first and second strings, the E and the A, open and unfretted. The guitar, on the slow version, is playing the third and fourth strings, the G and the D, open but capoed at fret 2. In this case the lead instrument plays eight beats. But instead of saying “eight beats,” the fiddler might say “eight potatoes.” Get it? Beats/beets? Potatoes? The fiddler is being funny.

The guitar solo is packed with quarter notes. More advanced solos could use eighth notes. In fact, you could turn this solo into an eighth note solo simply by substituting in two eighth notes for every quarter note. You’ll probably want to continue to play the strums as quarter notes.

The flatted seven chord is in measure thirteen. If you have difficulty with the barred F as written in the solo, try the two alternate measures shown on the next page.

Alternates for measure 13, capo 2

Track locations

Slow speed CD track 8:

1. Guitar intro/kickoff (:00)
2. Guitar solo 1 (:09)
3. Open solo 1 (1:00)

Regular speed CD track 9:

1. Mandolin intro/kickoff (:00)
2. Guitar solo 1 (:08)
3. Open solo 1 (:51)
4. Banjo solo (1:34)
5. Open solo 2 (2:16)
6. Bass solo (2:59)
7. Open solo 3 (3:42)



Photo by Dix Bruce

Mid-1800s Martin parlor guitar neck and body joint