# Balkan Music

by Seth Austen

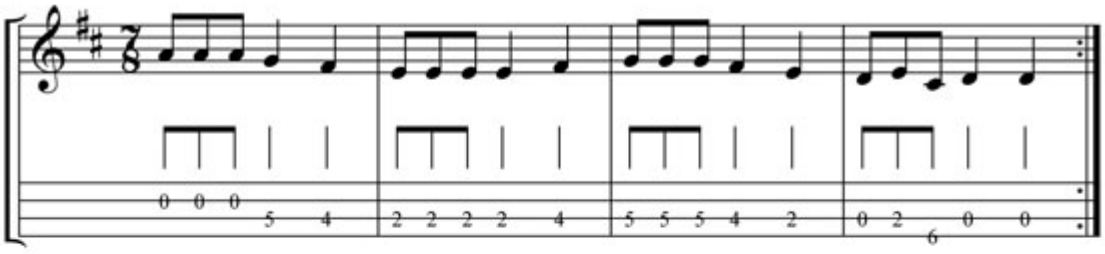
Welcome to this issue of **Mandolin Sessions®**. This month we'll take a break from klezmer and try a related style of Eastern European folk music. Balkan music is often characterized by its driving rhythms; odd meters such as 5/8, 7/8, 11/16 and others are frequently encountered. We'll start with a tune in 7/8, this rhythm can also be found in many other styles of music including Greek, Romanian and Turkish.

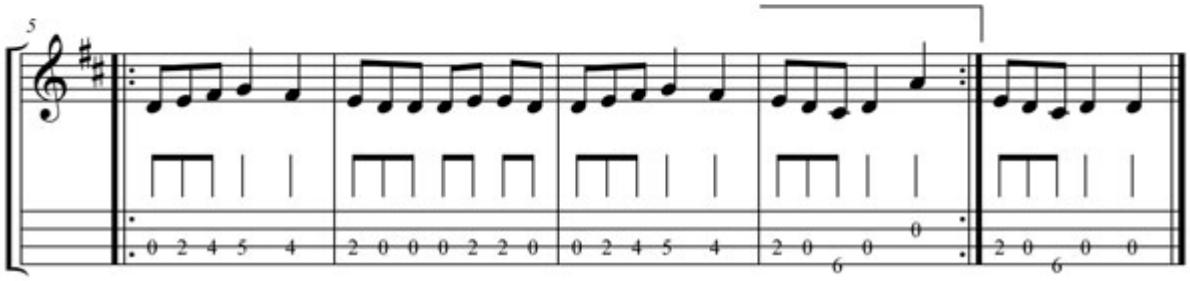
When first encountering 7/8, people can get confused trying to figure out how to count the beats. It doesn't work to simply count 1,2,3,4,5,6,7. For one thing the word seven has two syllables, so if you count numbers you inadvertently end up with eight beats. That would put us back in 4/4, which although familiar territory, isn't what we want. Almost any rhythm can be broken down to smaller groups of twos and threes, we can break down 7/8 into two groups of two eighth notes and one group of three eighth notes. The most commonly used groupings in 7/8 or 7/16 are 3+2+2 or 2+2+3.

We'll be playing a tune in 3+2+2. Try counting ONE-two-three, ONE-two, ONE-two, emphasizing the ones. Try clapping your hands or tapping your feet every time you say one, and you'll start to get the feel for this rhythm. Some people prefer to use syllables instead of counting numbers. Many years ago a jazz guitarist suggested saying Ta-ki for two beats and Ga-me-la for three. Using this method our rhythm would be Ga-me-la, Ta-ki, Ta-ki. My good friends in the Pennsylvania based ensemble Simple Gifts teach these rhythms using familiar words such as fruits or vegetables, so this rhythm could be realized as Straw-ber-ry, ap-ple ap-ple or perhaps Po-ta-toe, cab-bage, cab-bage. I highly recommend listening to this kind of music as much as possible, and learning the folk dances that go with these tunes is also a great way to internalize these rhythms. After a while, playing in 7/8 becomes as natural as 4/4.

Once you can count the rhythm, the next step is figuring how to pick this rhythm on mandolin, I find that using DOWN-up-down, DOWN-up, DOWN-up works well, since you always have a down pick for a down beat. This will help you express the rhythm properly.

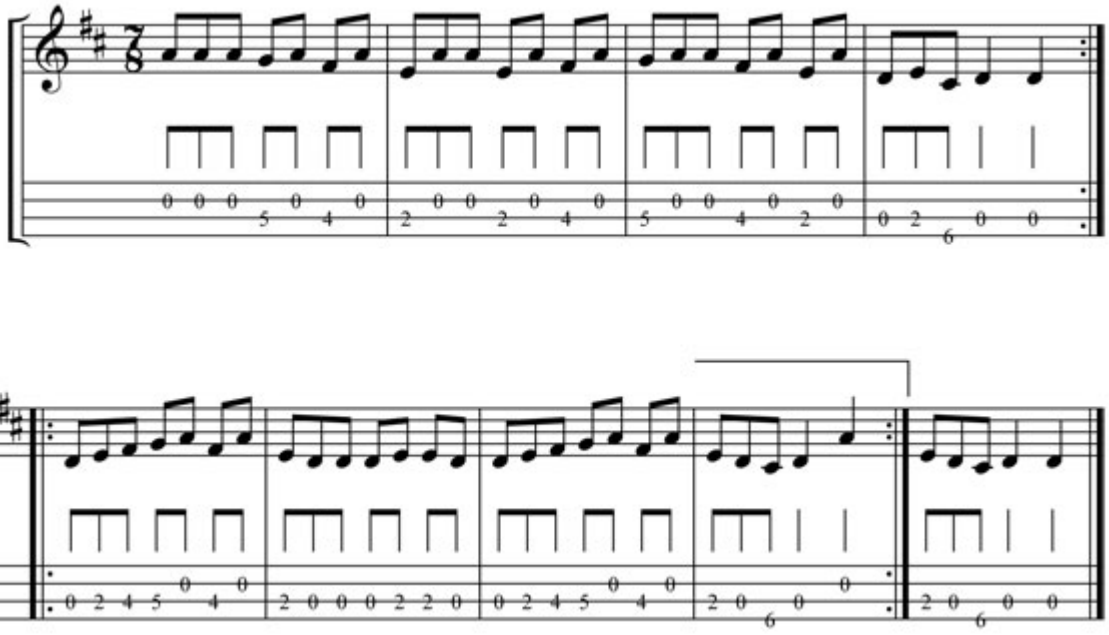
We're going to play an untitled Balkan tune that I learned almost 25 years ago. In all the time I've played this melody, I have yet to find the title. Take it slow to begin with, and be very careful to play the right combinations of down and up picks. Quarter notes are all played with down picks.



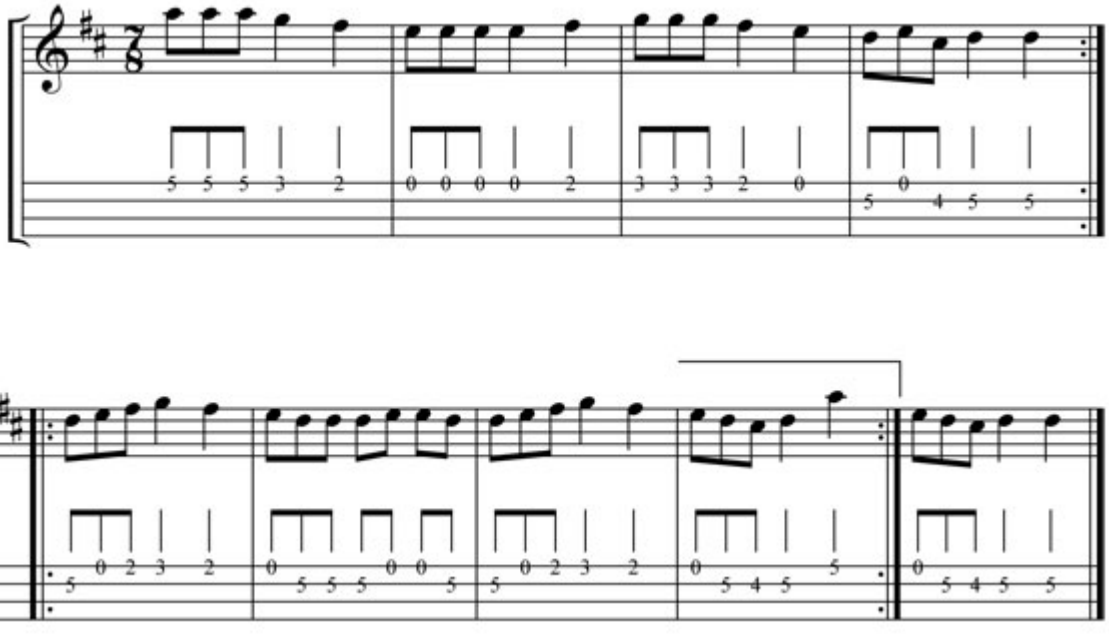


Once you get comfortable with the tune, here are a couple of variations to try. The first variation fills in extra eighth notes, which creates a wonderful drone accompaniment to the melody. The second variation takes the melody up an octave higher.

## Variation 1



## Variation 2



Enjoy!

Seth Austen