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Bluegrass in spring



# Brown County Breakdown

Emory takes you through a challenging instrumental in E

By Emory Lester



*Emory Lester is an icon in the Canadian bluegrass scene. Although he is a Virginia native, Emory now calls Ontario home. His mandolin playing is revered worldwide.*

**D**own in the woods of central Indiana, in an area known as “Brown County,” is a little town called “Bean Blossom”—a small place that is legendary the world over for being the home of the “Bean Blossom Bluegrass Park,” and for its founder, the Father of Bluegrass, Bill Monroe. A small park, rich in history and music, is still going as strong as ever, even after Monroe’s passing in 1996. I’ve played on that stage and in that park many times in my career, and it never fails that one of the signature songs of that place, the noted Bluegrass Boys fiddle tune, “Brown County Breakdown,” is always heard multiple times while being in that park, on and off the stage.

A great instrumental piece in the (some say “dreaded”) key of E, it is a challenging tune, with its fiddle “double stops,” and three segment parts. Renditions of this tune have evolved through many years and many musicians and styles, and here I present a version of this tune that I recorded with my partner Mark Johnson, on a project called Acoustic Vision.

Instead of the “Monroe style” approach, I employed various modern techniques to try and

present the melody in a more harmonious and complete way, in my judgement. I made use of “hand position shifts,” playing higher melody notes up the neck, cross-picking through some passages, and added some little strategically-placed “slide” notes to embellish and give the tune a little bit of the fiddle “flair.”

Playing a complex bluegrass instrumental in the key of E on the mandolin, you will most likely notice that your noting hand will feel a bit stretched out, as there are quite a few 6th fret notes to reach out for, but we do have that friendly open 1st string (E) to use to help us move the noting hand from position to position. In “Brown County Breakdown,” I made use of this technique at the end of the first line, as you will note the letters at the bottom of the staves (for noting hand guidance—to suggest which finger to play the note with, “I” index, “M” middle, “R” ring, and “L” little).

Check this version out; maybe you can embellish your current version with some of these ideas, or just incorporate this as your version. Monroe would probably say “that ain’t no part of nuthin’,” but I’d like to think that “this IS part of somethin’!”

(Key of E)

# BROWN COUNTY BREAKDOWN

(Trad.) - version taken from  
'Mark Johnson & Emory Lester - Acoustic Vision'



Sheet music for mandolin in the key of E, titled "Brown County Breakdown". The music is presented in six systems, each with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The notation includes rhythmic patterns (downstrokes and upstrokes) and fret numbers (0, 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11). The music is divided into sections labeled M-SL, I, L, and R-SL. Chord diagrams for E, A, and B are provided. A circled 'G#m' indicates a barre on the 7th fret.

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