

# BEGINNING 5-STRING BANJO

Everything You Need to Get Started!

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*Online Video Lessons*

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**RICK MCKEON**

# *Welcome!*

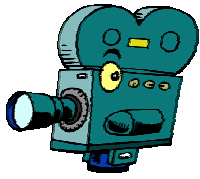


Hi, I'm Rick McKeon, and I would like to welcome you to this fun and easy introduction to banjo playing!

This book (together with the online video lessons) will give you everything you need to get started playing the 5-string banjo. You will learn about:

1. Tuning the Banjo.
2. Right and left hand techniques.
3. Reading tablature.
4. Playing with solid timing.
5. Embellishments that add life to your playing.
6. A little bit of music theory.
7. How to jam with other musicians.
8. The underlying principles of what makes for great music.
9. Ten excellent beginning level banjo songs. These songs sound amazing, but they are pretty easy to play.

Included in this program are 21 online video lessons.



*In the video lessons I give detailed explanations of each topic and teach each song phrase-by-phrase. During each lesson there is plenty of "play along" time, so get your banjo out and play along with me! All of the video lessons can be found at:  
<https://www.rickmckeeon.com/beginningbanjo.html>*

I don't like rules because I think music should be more about enjoyment than following a bunch of rules. But I do have three important principles to keep in mind.

1. **Have fun:** Don't make work out of your practicing and playing. We have enough stress in our lives. Make music your passion, not hard work.
2. **Solid rhythm:** This is the heart of music. You can hit wrong notes now and then, and it's no big deal. But if your timing is not rock solid, your music will never sound good. Play all exercises and songs slow at first with solid timing. Insist on solid timing from the very beginning. Speed will come automatically.
3. **Play with confidence:** If you are afraid of disturbing the neighbors (or scaring the cat), take the resonator off the back of your banjo and stuff a towel inside or get a mute. Don't get in the habit of being a timid player. There are times to play quietly, but even then I want you to play with strength and confidence.



*"When you see this little guy, you know he is offering some tips to make your life easier or just making a silly comment to lighten things up."*

I would love to hear your questions and comments. Send me an email at [rmckeon5@gmail.com](mailto:rmckeon5@gmail.com). I respond to all emails personally.

We have an exciting musical adventure waiting for us, so let's get started!

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# Chapter 1. The Basics

## 1.1 Tuning the Banjo (Video Lesson #1)

In Video Lesson #1 we get our banjos in tune using standard G tuning (gDGBD). Match each of your strings to what you hear on the video. When tuning, keep the following in mind:

1. Make sure you are adjusting **the right tuning peg**. I have made the mistake of turning the peg and wondering, “Why isn’t the pitch changing?” Until all of a sudden – SNAP! The string breaks because I was cranking on the wrong peg! If in doubt about which peg goes with which string, just take a finger and trace the string down to the peg itself.
2. Strike the string **before** you turn the peg. This way you can hear if the pitch is going up or down.
3. Turn the pegs fairly **slowly**. You can change the pitch quite a bit with just a small turn. This is especially true for the 5th string.
4. After you have adjusted all of the strings, strum across all of them slowly. This will be a G chord. You should be able to hear if something is out.
5. Check the 2nd string, 3rd fret against the open 1st string. Make sure they sound exactly the same.
6. An electronic tuner is worth the investment.



Figure 1.1 shows which tuning pegs adjust which strings.

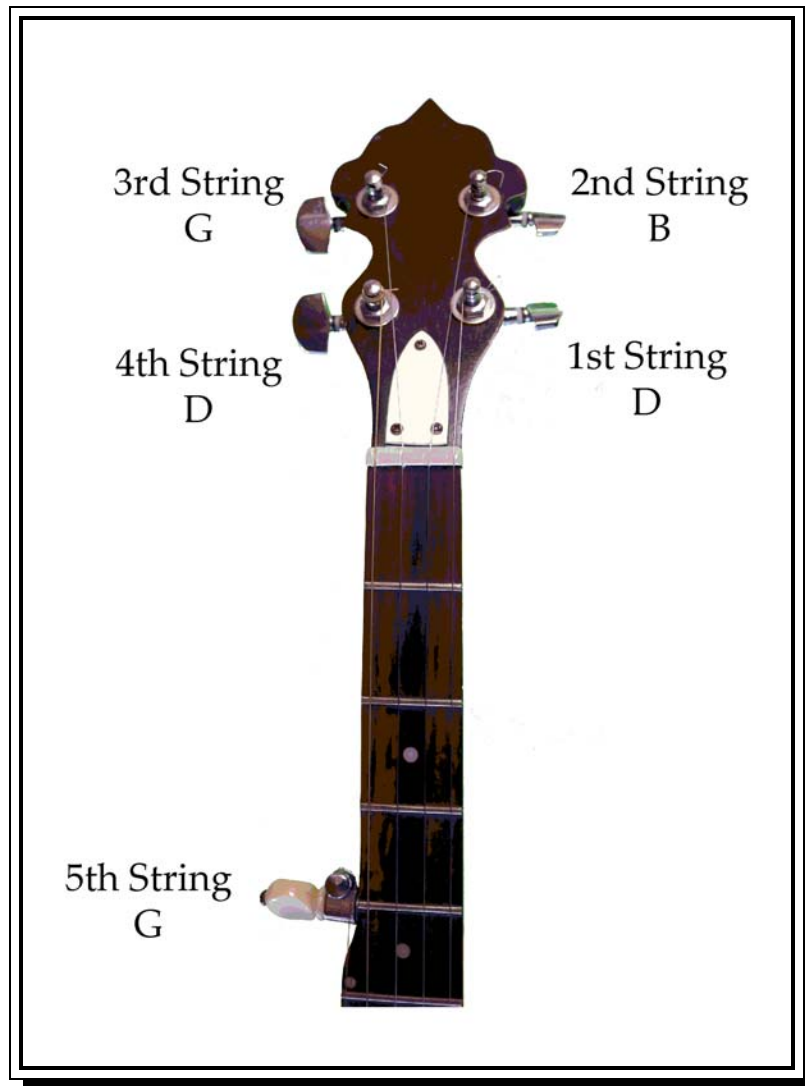


Figure 1.1 Tuning Pegs and String Names



*"I always think of making a circle in the clockwise direction around the head and the pegs go 4, 3, 2, 1."*

As shown in Figure 1.2, you can tune the banjo by matching the pitch from one string to the next:



Figure 1.2 Relative Tuning

4th String, 5th fret = 3rd String open  
3rd String, 4th fret = 2nd String open  
2nd String, 3rd fret = 1st String open  
1st String, 5th fret = 5th String open

In standard G tuning the names of the open strings (from 5th string to 1st string) are g, D, G, B, D.

## 1.2 How to Read the Tablature



*"Tablature and standard music notation have several things in common like time signature, bar lines, repeats, and measure numbers. But they are very different systems. Frankly, tab is a lot easier to learn than standard music notation."*

I want to encourage you as much as possible to “play by ear” so you can focus on your playing and the sound you are creating, but tablature is a wonderful learning tool. It helps you visualize what's happening on the fingerboard, and if you haven't worked on a song in some time you might ask yourself, "How does that go again?" To refresh your memory, all you need to do is dig out the tab. Also, having an arrangement written down is a convenient way to share it with others. So, tab has its place.

I have written out all of the exercises and songs in tablature for your reference. Use the tab to help you learn the song and then put it away.

Figure 1.3 shows the first four measures of tab for the song "Cripple Creek." We'll use it as an example to help us understand how the tablature system works.

The image displays two musical staves for guitar. The top staff is in G major, indicated by a 'G' above the staff. It shows fret numbers 2, 5, 5, 0, 0 across five measures. A barre is shown at the 5th fret, with an arrow pointing to it from the left. The bottom staff is in C major, indicated by a 'C' above the staff. It shows fret numbers 1, 2, 0, 0 across five measures. A barre is shown at the 2nd fret, with an arrow pointing to it from the left. Both staves include rhythmic notation and a 4/4 time signature.

Figure 1.3 Cripple Creek: First Four Measures

The first thing you will notice is the time signature. Cripple Creek is in 4/4 time. The top number of the time signature tells us how many beats per measure and the bottom number tells us what kind of note gets one beat. So, there are four beats per measure and the quarter note gets one beat.

If a quarter note gets one beat, how about the other notes? Here's how the other notes relate to the quarter note:

1. **Eighth notes** happen twice as fast, so in 4/4 time they will get 1/2 beat. That means that we will have two eighth notes per beat.
2. **Sixteenth notes** happen twice as fast as eighth notes, so we would have four of them per beat.
3. **Half notes** last twice as long as quarter notes, so they take up two beats.
4. **Whole notes** last twice as long as half notes, so they would take up four beats. This means that in 4/4 time a whole note would take up the entire measure!
5. For each note value there is a corresponding **rest** where we don't play anything.

In tablature quarter notes have a stem with no flag. Eighth notes have one flag, and sixteenth notes have two flags. To make reading the tab as easy as possible we group notes by the beat whenever we can. So usually you will see two eighth notes with their flags beamed together as in the 3rd and 4th measures.

The horizontal lines aren't staff lines like you find in standard music notation. They represent the strings. The 1st string is on top and the 5th string is on the bottom. Remember, the 5th string is the short one with the tuning peg at the 5th fret. The vertical lines (bar lines) divide the tab into measures. OK so far?

The numbers on the lines represent the frets - not your left hand fretting finger. Sometimes you will see numbers like 16 or 17. Nobody has 17 fingers on their left hand! I have put the count below the tab. Let's look at each measure:

1. **The First measure** has three quarter-note rests and then a pinch of the 1st and 5th strings. When the first measure of a song has some rests and you don't actually play all four beats, it is a partial measure. We call it a "pickup" measure. In terms of measure numbering, the pickup doesn't get a number. In that case we start numbering with the second measure being called measure one. When you see more than one note above each other that means play them at the same time. That's called a "pinch." Also, notice that after we pinch on beat four, we slide the 1st string note from the 2nd fret to the 5th fret. The [S] below the arrow means "slide." In tab you will also see [P] for pull-off, and [H] for hammer-on. In Video Lesson #8 you will learn how to play these various types of embellishments.
2. **The Second Measure** starts with the note we slid from beat four of the previous measure. Because it's a slide note you don't strike the string again. It's important to keep pressure on the string as you slide so the note continues to ring out. For beats 2, 3, and 4 we have a pinch and two quarter notes.
3. The third measure has four eighth notes and then two quarter notes.
4. The fourth measure starts with a sixteenth note slide into an eighth note (notice the double flags on the sixteenth notes). Then there are three beats of eighth notes.

There is a beginning repeat sign at the start of the second measure and an ending repeat sign at the end of the fourth measure. When you reach the ending repeat sign you go back to the beginning one. The actual song Cripple Creek doesn't have a repeat sign in the fourth measure, but I put one there just to illustrate how repeat signs work.

In this tablature I have all of the stems pointing up to make room for the count below the tab. I also have the stems pointing up in songs with lyrics. Putting the lyrics below the tab (at least one verse) helps us to keep track of where we're at in the song. Also, I typically highlight the melody notes with a blue background.

## 1.3 Fretting for a Clean Sound (Video Lesson #2)

At first fretting notes and making changes quickly might seem impossible, but believe me, with some practice you will start to wonder why you ever thought it was so difficult.

Here are a few tips to help you get a good, clean sound:

1. Get up on the tips of your fingers so they are coming almost straight down on the fingerboard. This will help to keep you from muting adjacent strings.
2. Keep the nails on your left hand short so they don't interfere with the fretting.
3. Make the chord and strum the strings very slowly - one at a time - and listen to the tone. Adjust your finger positions to achieve a clean sound with no muting and no buzzing.
4. Get up as close to the frets as possible but not over the fret. If you can't get right behind the fret that's OK but get as close as you can.
5. Only use as much pressure as you need to get a good sound. Too little pressure makes a buzz. Too much pressure tires your hand and can actually bend the string off pitch.
6. Once you are able to produce a good tone with all four strings, remember the feel in your left hand.
7. Here's a good exercise: Make a chord; take your hand off the fretboard just a little (no more than 1/4 inch), then make the chord again. Repeat this several times.
8. Another good exercise is to make a D7 chord and then make a C chord. Go Back and forth several times, always insisting on a clean tone. Just strum or pinch the chord or pick a simple pattern. And finally, go back and forth between D7 and C using a metronome. Start really slow at first and then gradually bring up the speed. You may need to start very slowly, but make sure that you play the chord exactly on the beat. This is not easy but it will improve your playing immensely.

## 1.4 Practice Routine Suggestions

When you first start out playing the banjo everything is new and exciting, but practicing just one little thing over and over again can get boring. I like to introduce a lot of variety in the practice session - even for beginners.

At first you will be working on just fretting for a clean sound and the basic rolls, but it won't be long before you can introduce a lot of other things into your practice routine. Here are a few ideas that will allow you to mix it up a bit and keep things interesting:

1. Warm up. Practice the basic rolls with a metronome. Keep track of the tempo you are comfortable with and try to bump up the speed gradually. BUT always keep it solid. Insist on solid timing from the very beginning!
2. Work on new songs.
3. Review familiar songs and try to work out variations.
4. Work on specific problem areas – quick chord changes, tough licks and smooth transitions from one phrase to another. Loop them up and focus on that one little area over and over again.
5. Jam along with backing tracks.
6. Take a familiar melody and try to work up a banjo arrangement. Start with just the melody notes, and then add in some roll patterns, licks and runs.
7. Record yourself and then sit back and listen. You will spot the areas that need more work.
8. Listen to some of your favorite songs and try to work out the melody, licks, and eventually the whole arrangement.
9. Write tabs for the songs you like. This will give you an in depth look at the timing involved – quarter notes, eighth notes, notes that are held over bar lines, etc.
10. Just noodle around. There's nothing wrong with spending some time just noodling around. You will become more familiar with the fret board and you might discover some great licks!



# Chapter 2. Basic Roll Patterns

## 2.1 Basic Roll Patterns (Video Lessons #3 - 6)

There are a lot of different roll patterns. Figure 2.1 shows the four patterns we will learn.

1. The Alternating Thumb Roll
2. Alternating Thumb - Pinch
3. The Forward Roll
4. The Forward - Reverse Roll

Rarely will a song be based entirely on a single roll pattern. Usually they are used in combination together with bringing out the melody and adding embellishments. Does that sound like a lot? Well, it is, but we'll take it a little at a time.

Practice these rolls very slowly at first. Make sure your timing is rock solid before picking up the tempo. Using a metronome and constantly hearing the beat starts to develop an "internal clock" where you feel the pulse of the song inside of you.



*"I said this in the Preface, but it is worth repeating here. Always insist on solid timing. So many people learn a bunch of licks and even entire songs, but their playing doesn't sound like real music because their timing is off."*

Another major aspect of good timing is to not hesitate when changing chords. That will interrupt the rhythm of the song. Use the exercises from Video Lesson #2 to work on smooth chord transitions.

**Alternating Thumb Roll**

**Alternating Thumb - Pinch**

**Forward Roll**

**Forward-Reverse Roll**

Figure 2.1 illustrates four basic guitar roll patterns. Each pattern is shown on a four-string staff (D, B, G, D) with a sequence of fingerings (T, I, M) and accents (&) below it. The first two patterns are in 4/4 time, and the last two are in 3/4 time.

Figure 2.1 Basic Roll Patterns

## 2.2 Licks and Runs (Video Lesson #7)

Figure 2.2 shows some typical licks and runs. You can incorporate these into your songs, but the main purpose for presenting them here is for developing right and left hand technique. Here we are learning some skills and developing your "chops." Rolls, licks, and runs are not music, but they will turn into music almost automatically. You can't produce exciting music without the skills. So, first come the skills, and then comes the music! In Video Lesson #7 we go through each of these licks in detail.

**Bass Run and Pinches**

A guitar diagram showing a bass run and pinches. The run consists of notes 0, 2, and 4 on the first string. A vertical bar separates this from the pinches, which are pairs of notes (0, 2) and (0, 4) on the first and second strings. The diagram includes a 4/4 time signature and a pick direction symbol.

T T T T TM T TM

**Bass Run and Turnaround**

A guitar diagram showing a bass run and turnaround. The run consists of notes 0, 2, and 4 on the first string. The turnaround consists of notes 0, 2, and 4 on the second string. The diagram includes a 3/4 time signature and a pick direction symbol.

T T T T T T T

A guitar diagram showing a variation of the bass run and turnaround. The run consists of notes 0, 3, 2, 1 on the first string and 0, 4, 3, 2 on the second string. The turnaround consists of notes 0, 2, 4 on the second string. The diagram includes a 5/4 time signature and pick direction symbols.

T TI TI TI TI T T T

**Turnaround Variation**

A guitar diagram showing a turnaround variation. The run consists of notes 0, 2, 1 on the first string and 1/3, 2/4, 3, 2 on the second string. The turnaround consists of notes 0, 2, 4 on the second string. The diagram includes a 7/4 time signature and pick direction symbols.

TI M TI M TI M TI M T M T TM

Figure 2.2 Licks and Runs

## Chapter 5. Songs

In this chapter we are going to learn ten beginning level songs. I choose these tunes because they are lots of fun to play and they sound great, but they are pretty easy arrangements. I hope you enjoy them!



*These arrangements are pretty easy and they are a great place to start, but I want you to realize that folk music is not written in stone. The "folk process" involves songs evolving and changing over time. You can be part of that process. There are no "banjo police" who will come to your house and confiscate your banjo. Once you have learned these basic arrangements the real fun begins! Then it's time to experiment and mess around with various licks and your own ideas. Keep in mind that "If it sounds like music, it is music!"*

**5.1 Cripple Creek** (Video Lesson #10) is an old time folk song. We don't know exactly when it was composed, and there is some discussion about which Cripple Creek it refers to. In any case, it is one of the best-known bluegrass standards. At first listening, our arrangement may seem kind of complex but it is a lot easier to play than it sounds. It is a good practice in solid timing, slides, partial chords, bass walks, and pinches. This arrangement includes some nice banjo breaks, some licks up the neck, and a "shave and a haircut" ending.

**5.2 Do Lord** (Video Lesson #11) is often considered as an old time spiritual, but is often credited to Julia Ward Howe (1819-1910). This is an easy arrangement, but it includes a couple of interesting licks, a base run, and a mix of roll patterns. I have highlighted the melody notes and placed the words below the tab just to help us keep track of where we're at in the song. In the video lesson I encourage you to try different G licks and fills. Mix it up and have some fun trying out some of your own variations.

**5.3 Amazing Grace** (Video Lesson #12) is one of the most well known and most loved of all gospel songs! Written by John Newton in 1779. He was a slave trader, but completely changed his life after he discovered God's amazing grace. The song is based on a traditional Irish melody. After his conversion, he was ordained by the Church of England in 1764, and began writing hymns.

**5.4 Froggy Went A-Courtin'** (Video Lesson #13) is an old Scottish folk song first published in 1548. Our arrangement starts with a 3 1/2 beat pickup measure. It is a pretty simple arrangement, but it has some interesting eighth note and sixteenth note slides together with some fun licks, pull-offs and pinches. Also, we are reaching over to the 3rd string with our index finger to play some of the melody notes.

**5.5 Hard Times Come Again No More** (Video Lesson #14) is a moving Stephen Foster tune first published in 1854. In this arrangement we are playing the melody using double stops, and I have included a drone sound on the 4th string. This arrangement is not technically difficult, but it is important to try and convey the melancholy feeling of hard times.

**5.6 Shall We Gather at the River** (Video Lesson #15) Written in 1864 by Robert Lowry (1826-1899), this is a traditional Christian hymn. In this arrangement I tried to bring out the melody as much as possible and highlighted the melody notes in the tab. To add some interesting sounds I included some nice double slides and double bass walks. Also, in this lesson I give you some backup patterns to accompany the singing.

**5.7 Two Dollar Bill** (Video Lesson #16) Have you experienced hard times? This traditional song is about a guy who lost everything (probably in a poker game) except a two dollar bill. So, he's on his long journey home. For this lesson we have two arrangements. One I call the "basic version" and the other arrangement includes a few embellishments.

5.8 **Bury Me Beneath the Willow** (Video Lesson #17) is a traditional folk song that was probably based on a 19th century parlor song, but its exact source is unknown. It was first archived in 1906 by an English professor at the University of Missouri. The Carter Family wasn't the first to record it, but they were the ones who popularized it. For this arrangement I tried to bring out as many melody notes as possible and tried to incorporate a variety of roll patterns to make this simple arrangement interesting.

5.9 **Crawdad Song** (Video Lesson #18) is a southern folk song that was first published in a collection of songs in 1917 by Cecil Sharp. The melody for Crawdad Song is also used in several other folk songs. In this lesson I teach a solo banjo arrangement and two different backup arrangements that you can use behind the vocal.

5.10 **House of the Rising Sun** (Video Lesson #19) has its roots all the way back in the Renaissance period. In its current form it seems to date back to the last decade of the 19th century. This arrangement is a little bit different from the other nine songs we have looked at. It is in 3/4 time and in the key of Gm. The minor tuning (g, D, G, Bb, D) helps to give it a mournful bluesy sound. In this tune we use some pretty tense harmonies and introduce a triplet roll.

# 5.1 Cripple Creek (Video Lesson #10)

**G** **PART 1 (BANJO BREAK)** **C** **G**

**D7** **G**

**C** **G**

**D7** **G**

PART 2 (VERSE)

9

Goin' up Cripple Creek. Goin' on a run.

11

D7 G

Goin' up Cripple Creek to, Have a little fun.

13

Goin' up Cripple Creek. Goin' in a whirl.

15

D7 G

Goin' up Cripple Creek to, See my girl.



VARIATION UP THE NECK

17

17 17 17 17 17 17

15 15 17 15 17

0 0 0 0

G  
15

19

9 9 9 0 0 0 0 0

11 11 0 0 0 0 0

0 0 0 0 2 0 0

D7 G

G  
9

ENDING

21

9 7 0 0 16 7 17

11 9 8 0

0 0 0

G  
9

G  
8

## 5.2 Do Lord (Video Lesson #11)

6

4  
4

Do Lord, oh, do Lord, oh,

3

do remem - ber me.

5

C

Do Lord, oh, do Lord, oh,

7

G

do remem - ber me.

9

G

Do Lord, oh, do Lord, oh,

11

do                    remem -                    ber                    me.                    Look                    a -

13

D7

way                    be -                    yond                    the

G

1.

15

blue.

G

2.

17

blue.

11

two dol - lar bill. I'm

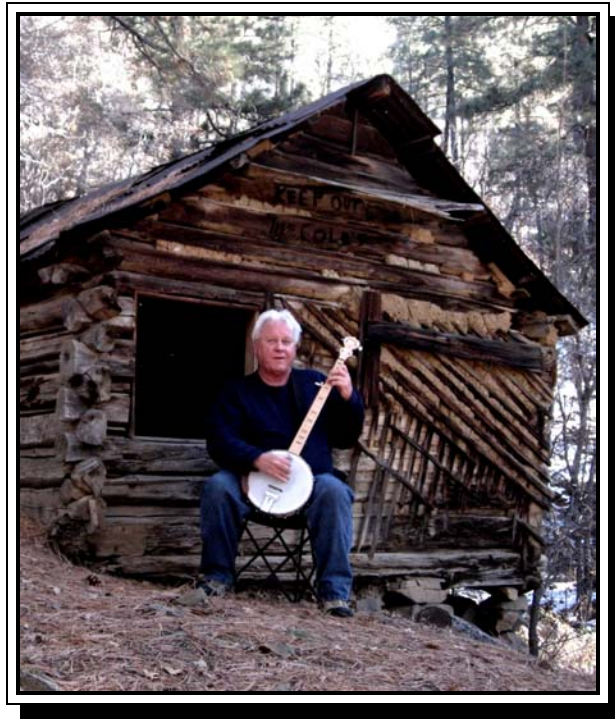
13

on my long jour - ney

15

home.

## *Meet The Author*

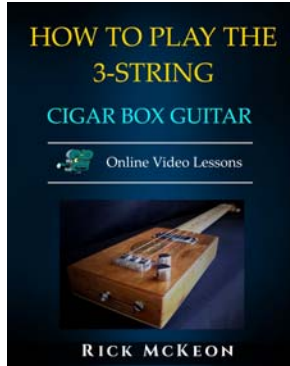


Rick has studied with many of the world's greatest players in workshops and summer music camps. Also, he has studied music theory, composition, and performance in college classes and in private lessons. Rick has taught hundreds of guitar and banjo students over the past several decades in both classroom settings and as private students. He has been active in the music community for many years playing at folk festivals, coffee houses, blues bars, and (his special love) at rest homes in service to the elderly.

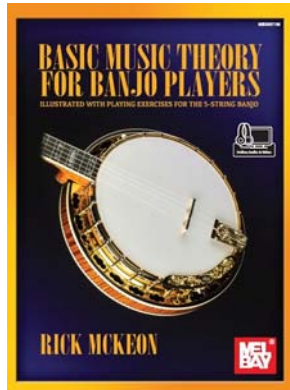
Since retiring Rick has been pursuing his passion for writing, playing music and teaching. He has written several best selling books about music, science and nature. Some of his other interests include hiking, treasure hunting, recreational mathematics, photography and experimenting with microcontrollers.

For more information visit his website at <https://www.rickmckeon.com>

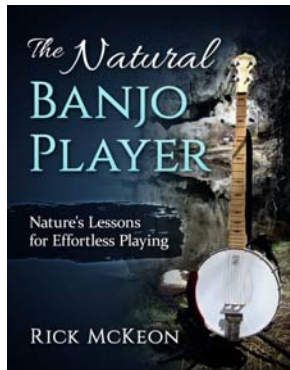
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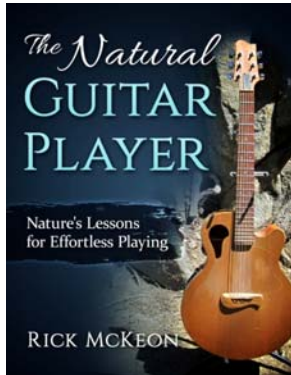
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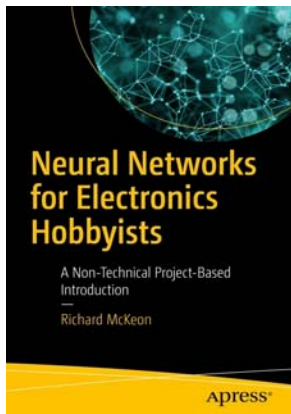


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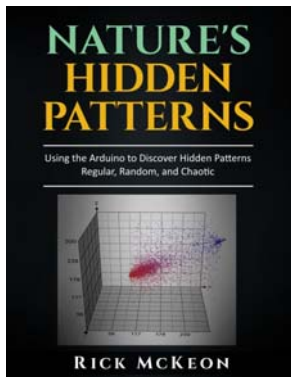
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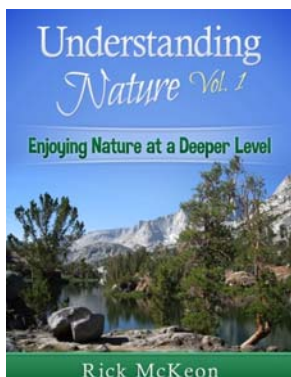
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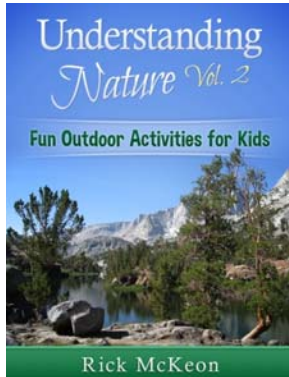
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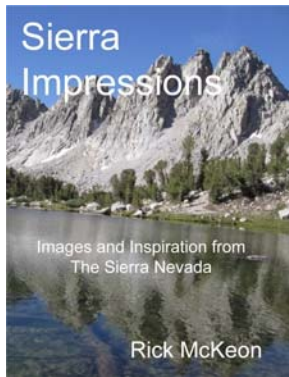
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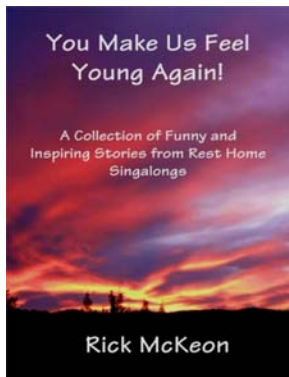
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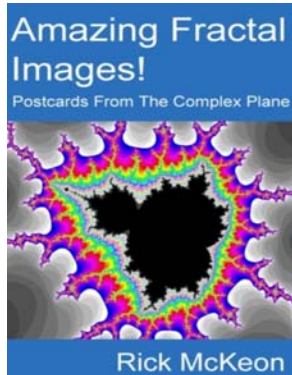
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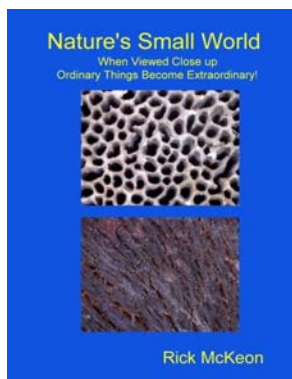
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