

Bluegrass Banjo
for the
Complete Ignoramus!

by
Wayne Erbsen



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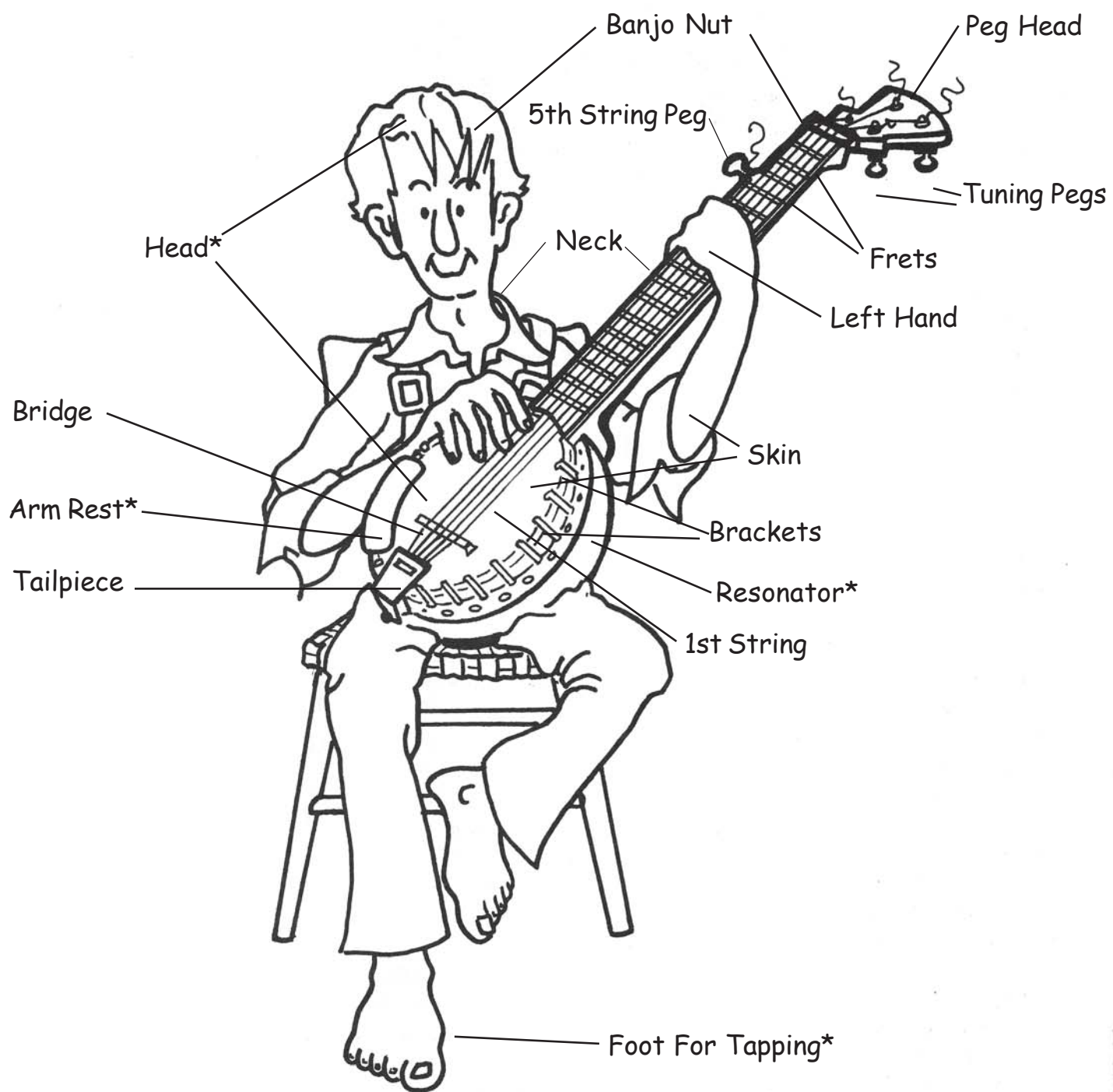
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Parts of a Banjo(ist)



Legend: * = optional

How to Use This Book

As you'll see when you thumb through this book, there's a certain amount of "fluffy" material at the beginning, such as how to pick out a banjo, what picks to use, how to hold the banjo, etc. Then the fluff stops and the guts take over. The real heart and soul of the book are the painfully simple tunes written out in banjo tablature. The tunes are laid bare and naked for you to look at and play. There's no fancy stuff cluttering up the basic starkness of the melodies.

That's the way it should be.

What I've given you are the essential melody notes to play the tune. Nothing more, nothing less. I call this the "skeleton" of the tune. No clothes, no nothin'. Then, in a separate closet, I give you simple rolls or clothes to "dress" the skeleton. (Heaven forbid you'd let a naked skeleton run around!)

The beauty of this method is that it's simple. It teaches you the basic melody for each song and then shows you how to add appropriate rolls to fill out the melody here and there. By approaching it in this way, you will quickly learn to improvise. You'll easily understand how to make up your own arrangements of the songs.

Along with each song will be instructions for adding rolls to dress the melody. The easiest way to play it will be called "Ice Cold Licks." From there, things gradually progress in difficulty to "Cool Licks," "Warm Licks," "Hot Licks," "Red Hot Licks," and even "White Hot Licks."

If you are a true ignoramus, I strongly advise you to go through the entire book just playing the ice cold and cool licks. When you can play all the songs with the simple rolls, then **GRADUALLY** turn up the heat. There's no use overwhelming yourself with the hot licks until you're ready for them. By and by, you'll really be cookin'!



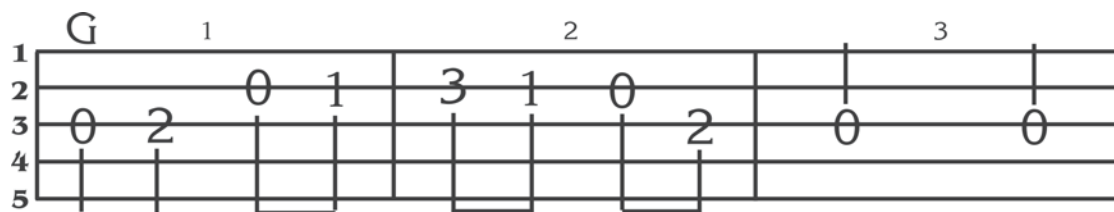
William Kirkpatrick, ca. 1920





How to Read Banjo Tablature

Instead of standard musical notation, banjo players use a system called "tablature" to write out the music. It's how they communicate with their own kind. Trust me, it's really quite easy to read.

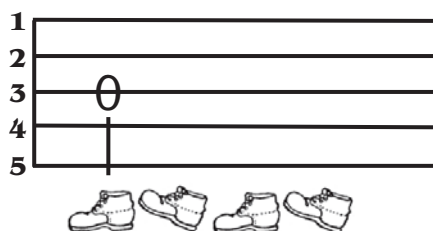


In the example above, you'll see five horizontal lines. These are your five strings of the banjo, which are numbered on the left side. The numbers on the lines or strings represent the frets that you play on that string. For example, an "0" on the middle line would mean you play the 3rd string "open" or unfretted. A "2" on the middle line would mean you press down or "fret" the 3rd string at the second fret. This activity is called "fretting." Remember to use the tips of fingers and to play about half-way between the metal frets. Above each measure is a tiny number. These numbers just identify the measure, so you and I will know what measure we're referring to as we talk amongst ourselves as we wander through the book. The number in the phonograph tells you what track on the CD to listen to.

If you play the notes in the example above, you discover you're playing part of a G scale that goes up and back down again. To get the timing right, you can use your foot as a metronome. Where the notes are tied together, like the "0" and the "2" at the very beginning of the line, your foot would go "down up, down up," as in the following illustration. As your foot hits the floor, you would play the 3rd string open or unfretted. The next time your foot hits the floor you would play the 3rd string at the second fret.



On the notes that are all by themselves with a single stem, as in the following example, each of those notes would get a "down up, down up" with your foot.





Playing Rolls

The thing that sets bluegrass banjo playing apart from any other type of music is the way that the banjo uses rolls to play the melody. A roll is nothing more than a series or pattern of notes. The rolls become your tools, like a hammer or a saw. In this book we're going to learn to play the melody using a toolbox full of seven basic rolls: the pinch, the two-finger roll, the pegleg sailor roll, the alternating thumb roll, the forward roll, the reverse roll and the "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" roll.

What's unique about this book is that I'm not going to present the tunes with the rolls already incorporated into the song. Instead, you'll get just the bare-bones skeleton of the tune. With my help, you'll learn how to dress the skeleton with this roll or that one. The beauty of this method is that you can dress the skeleton whichever way YOU want to. It means YOU DON'T HAVE TO PLAY IT THE SAME WAY TWICE. Excuse me for yelling, but this is important, and I was afraid you might not hear it. Once you get into the swing of the book, you'll start to realize how much sense this method makes. If you don't, send it back, and I'll return your money.

Your First Roll: the Pinch

I call this first roll "the pinch." It will soon become your best friend because 1) it's easy, 2) it's versatile, and 3) you can plug it in just about anywhere.

The pinch is nothing more than plucking the 1st and 5th strings together at the same time. Use your middle finger on the 1st string and your thumb on the 5th string. Here's the way it works: you'll play a melody note on the 2nd, 3rd, or 4th string with your thumb and then the pinch. Let's try it. Play the 2nd string followed by the pinch, then the 3rd followed by a pinch, and finally the 4th string followed by the pinch. In tablature, it looks like this:

tick TOCK tick TOCK tick TOCK

In this example, the melody is represented by a "tick" on the 2nd, 3rd and 4th strings. Each each melody note gets a DOWN with your foot and each pinch gets an UP with your foot. Practice hitting the 2nd, 3rd and 4th strings in any order with your thumb while you quickly follow each note with a pinch. The rhythm should sound like one TWO, one TWO or tick TOCK, tick TOCK.



Bile 'Em Cabbage Down

“**B**ile 'Em Cabbage Down” is a minstrel tune from the 1850s that is a great tune to start with. For those of you who don't speak “Southern,” the word “bile” in the title means “boil.” The verses float from song to song and can be found in such songs as “Shady Grove,” “Whoa Mule,” and “Lynchburg Town,” among others. The “hoe cakes” mentioned in the song were a favorite in the antebellum South. Slaves often cooked corn meal hoe cakes on their hoes over an open fire. Confederate soldiers reportedly roasted them on bayonets.

You'll notice chords above each of the lines of the tablature. When you're first starting off, you can ignore those chords. After you get to where you can play the tune using the warm licks, you can add the chords (see page 62).

Chorus

G 1	C 2	G 3	D7 4
1			
2	1	0	
3			2
4			
5			
Bile 'em cabbage down, boys turn the hoe cakes brown, the			
G 5	C 6	G 7	D7
1			
2	1	0	
3			2
4			
5			
Only song that I can sing is bile'em cabbage down.			

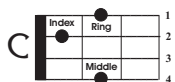
Went up on the mountain,
Give my horn a blow.
Thought I heard my true love say,
Yonder stands my beau. (Chorus)

Went to see my gal last night,
I done it kind a-sneakin'.
Kissed her mouth and hit her nose,
And the doggone thing was leakin'. (Chorus)

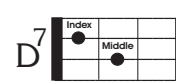
Jaybird died with the whooping cough,
Sparrow died with the colic.
Along come the frog with a fiddle on his back,
Inquirin' his way to the frolic. (Chorus)

Took my gal to the blacksmith shop,
To have her mouth made small.
She turned around a time or two,
And swallowed the shop and all. (Chorus)





Cold, Warm & Hot Licks



The bare-bones skeleton of "Bile 'Em Cabbage Down" on page 14 is as simple as bluegrass banjo gets! With practice and time, you'll gain experience and confidence and will gradually be able to play the same melody with a variety of rolls. In effect, you'll be dressing the skeleton with clothes of your choosing. What follows are some of the clothes you can use to dress your melody. As you go down the page, the rolls will get progressively harder. Don't be in a big hurry to play it as fancy as you can. **LESS IS MORE.** Be sure you can play the cold licks before progressing to the warm and hot licks. In fact, if you're a true ignoramus, it would be wise to play all or most of the songs in the book using the cold licks. Then go through the book playing the warm licks, and finally, the hot licks. But since this is your workbook and nobody's looking over your shoulder (yet!), you can progress at your own speed.

ICE COLD LICKS: First, play just the chorus melody of "Bile 'Em Cabbage Down" with your right thumb. Notice that all the melody notes are either on the 2nd or the 3rd strings. Make sure to use the index finger of your left hand to play the first fret notes, and your middle finger to play the second fret notes. For now, ignore the chords.



COOL LICKS: When you can play the melody of "Bile 'Em Cabbage Down" blindfolded, standing on one leg, while chewing gum and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, you're ready to add the pinch. After each of the melody notes simply play the 1st and 5th strings together with your middle finger and thumb.



WARM LICKS: Add the C chord where indicated. (See page 62.)

EVEN WARMER LICKS: Instead of playing the pinch, play the two-finger roll. (2 1 5 1 or 3 1 5 1. See page 58.) With your thumb playing the melody, try alternating the pinch with the two-finger roll. For variety, play the pegleg sailor roll instead of the two-finger roll (page 58).



HOT LICKS: After you've mastered this tune with all the above rolls, you may be ready to try using the forward roll (page 59). Start off each forward roll with your index finger. Notice that on measure four the melody moves to the 3rd string, so your roll would be 3 1 5 3 1 5 3 1. Remember, the last note is optional. Line two starts off like line one until measure seven, where we have something new. The melody moves from the 2nd string to the 3rd string. When using the forward roll in a situation like this, you'll of course start out with your index finger playing the 2nd string. You'll play 2 1 5. Now, since the melody moves to the 3rd string, you'll fret the 3rd string at the second fret and play 3 1 5 3 1. So the entire roll would be 2 1 5 3 1 5 3 1. Measure eight is a good place to use pinches after each of the melody notes.



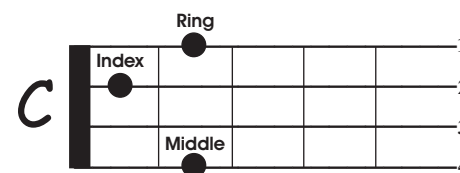
After you're comfortable playing this tune using your index finger to lead off the forward roll, you can try it using your thumb. Remember, you'll use the thumb only on the first of the eight note roll. On the fourth note, you'll continue to use your index finger.

Banjo Chords

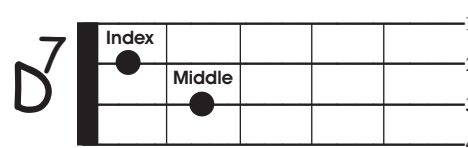
Unlike the guitar, most chords on a banjo are painfully easy. You'll find that the average bluegrass song uses only three chords: G, C and D7. Since your banjo is tuned to a G chord you don't even have to put the fingers of your left hand on the strings to play the G. What could be easier?



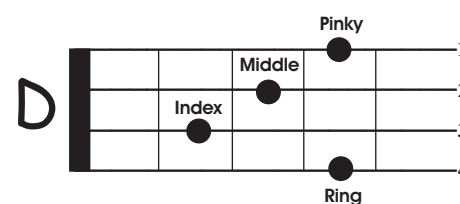
For the C, put your left index finger on the 2nd string at the first fret, your middle finger on the 4th string at the second fret and your ring finger at the 1st string at the second fret. It is essential that you place your fingers down on the strings at the same time. Note: It's rare that you'll be playing the 4th string while on the C chord, so a two-finger C chord will work 98% of the time. Be sure to use your ring finger on the 1st string, so when you do need to play the 4th string while on a C you'll have your middle available to pounce on that string.



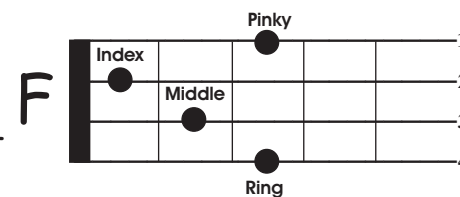
To play a D7, put your left index finger on the 2nd string at the first fret and your middle finger on the 3rd string at the second fret. Just like I said on the C chord above, it is very important that you place BOTH of your fingers down on the strings at the same time. Trust me. This will make a big difference in the time it takes you to make a chord.



I usually play a D7 instead of a D, but there will be times when a D chord will be useful. You can make the D chord several ways. The easiest way is just to play a two-finger D, using your index and middle fingers. For spice, you can add the pinky. On rare occasions you'll need the ring finger on the 4th string.



Although you won't need F very often, on songs like "Little Maggie," it is essential. It's fingered similar to a D7, except with more fingers. Sometimes on the F you won't be playing the 4th string, so when that happens, you can leave it off.



Note to ignoramuses: If you are a certified ignoramus and you're just playing the ice cold and the cool licks, you can ignore the chords that are written above each song in the book. When you advance to the warmer licks, you can begin to add the chords if you like, but most of the songs will sound fine if you continue to ignore the chords. Add the chords only if you think it makes a song sound better.



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Whew!

You've worked yourself through the book, and now you deserve a firm handshake, a pat on the head and a hardy congratulations. But before you faint of heatstroke basking in the glory of your many accomplishments, allow me to let a little air out of your balloon. You ain't done, not by any means. If you started out as a total ignoramus and you've gotten this far, you've learned a lot, no doubt. But now it's time to go back over the road you just traveled, this time mixing up your rolls, substituting one for another. You also need to get to the point where you aren't relying on this dumb book. The way to do that is to play the bare-bones skeleton of the tunes enough so you can play the basic tune without looking at the tablature. Then start adding the simplest rolls (starting with the pinch) and keep switching around your rolls until you get to the point where you play a tune differently each time you pick it. When you can do that, you've done something! Good luck, and let me hear from you with your successes and failures (if any!)



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