

Getting That “Banjo Sound”

Just playing chords and plucking melodies is really not enough to get that “banjo sound” that draws most people to the instrument in the first place. Luckily, learning the necessary techniques can be boiled down to *two basic tasks*. These along with Lesson One of the Get Started course are the first steps toward banjo mastery.

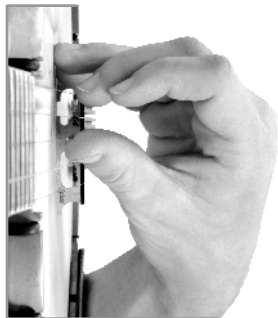
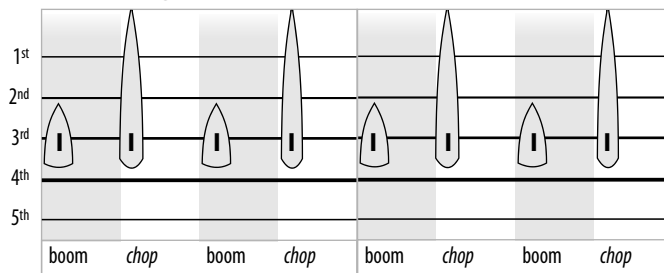
Refer to the relevant online videos (marked with a ► symbol) at <http://toneway.com/resources/videos/banjo-2011>

Task One: Accompaniment Basics

First, try the **Index Finger Strum** to accompany yourself singing Shady Grove, as you did in Lesson One. As you recall, you alternate between using your index finger to strike down on one or two of the thicker strings and then using the same finger to brush down on the smaller strings (► #1). This time however, really aim your index finger for the 3rd string. Also, hold your hand in the claw-like position shown (right), with half-curved fingers, thumb separated. Make sure your accompaniment lines up rhythmically with the words, as shown in the chart below.

There is another basic way to accompany Shady Grove, using the thumb and a finger or two. You can use either thumb and finger picks or just your bare hands at this point.

Index Finger Strum (► #1) (I = Index finger)



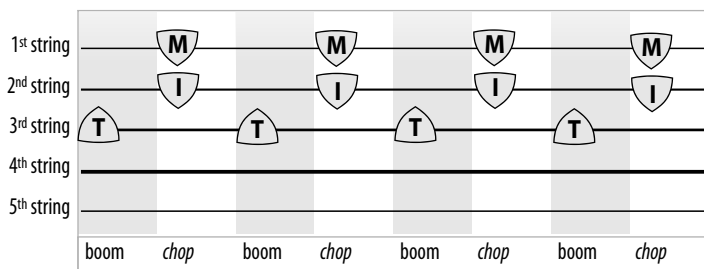
When finger-picking, anchor your pinky and (optionally) your ring finger to the head of the banjo, as shown in the picture (left). This will steady your hand and improve your accuracy immensely.

For the **Thumb & Pluck** accompaniment, (► #2), you pick the middle string with the thumb on the 'boom', and pick the last two strings with your index and middle fingers on the 'chop'. (Chart, bottom left)

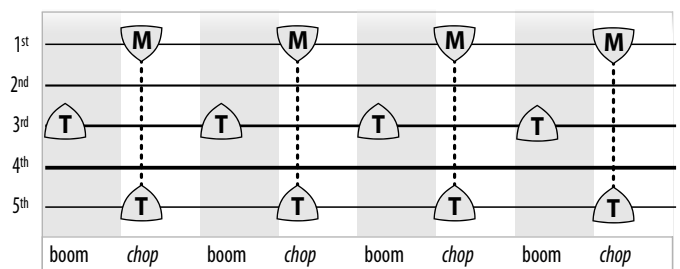
For the **Thumb & Pinch** accompaniment, (► #3), you instead 'pinch' the 1st and 5th strings with thumb and middle finger on the 'chop'. (Chart, bottom right)

Continue doing these three accompaniments until you can pull them off fairly smoothly while singing Shady Grove. Then we'll move on to some more interesting accompaniment styles, which move you another step closer to that classic banjo sound.

Thumb & Pluck (► #2) (T=Thumb, M=Middle, I=Index)



Thumb & Pinch (► #3) (T=Thumb, M=Middle)



Styles of Accompaniment

You have two classic banjo accompaniment and melody picking styles to choose from. The first is a two-finger style which we'll cover first, below. The other is the old-time clawhammer style which begins on page 4. We recommend trying both styles. In the long run you'll probably end up playing both styles depending on the situation

Task One: Two-Finger Picking Accompaniment

You can accompany your singing by picking strings with your thumb and middle finger. Let's start with just the thumb's part. The thumb alternates between picking one of the inside strings on the *boom*, and the fifth string on the *chop*. (► #4)

Try this as you *speak* the words to Shady Grove using an open G chord. Speaking, rather than singing, helps you focus on what the fingers need to do at the moment and takes the pressure off. Make sure the words and picking line up correctly as shown (above right).

Now mix in the middle finger, which plays a 'drone' note (always the 1st string) in-between every thumb note (below, right). You will now be playing twice as many notes in the same amount of song. The words will always fall on the thumb notes, never on the middle-finger notes. (► #5) Start slow, allowing the words will come out very slowly, and gradually build up speed. Remember to anchor your ring and pinky fingers on the skin of the banjo head!

Foundation (repeated)

1st string
2nd string
3rd string
4th string
5th string

boom chop boom chop boom chop boom chop

"Sha- dy Grove, my little love..."

Basic Roll (repeated)

1st string
2nd string
3rd string
4th string
5th string

boom chop boom chop boom chop boom chop

"Sha- dy Grove, my little love..."

Loosening Up the Thumb

Now let's try letting the thumb pick a few other strings on the 'boom' downbeat. You'll keep the same steady roll going smoothly—i.e., the T-M-T-M sequence remains the same. Initially, just talk or hum through Shady Grove while doing this. The chart shows particular strings for the thumb to pick on the 'boom' which loosely follow the melody. However, feel free to pick the 2nd, 3rd, or 4th strings on the 'boom' as you please. The essential here is to keep the T-M-T-M sequence and rhythm solid. (► #6)

Thumb picking strings 2, 3 or 4 on the 'boom'

1st string
2nd string
3rd string
4th string
5th string

boom chop boom chop boom chop boom chop boom chop boom chop boom chop boom chop boom chop boom chop

"Sha- dy Grove, my little love... Sha- dy Grove, my dar- ling..."

Task Two: Two-Finger Melody Picking

First, just pick the melody of Shady Grove using the ToneWay Notation below along with the **Picking Pattern** (in the book) as needed. This is the same as you did already in Lesson One. Be sure to use only your thumb, no fingers. Then, pick the melody again, and when there is a pause or "space" in the melody—shown with dots (•) below—play the fifth string with your thumb. (▶ #7)

3
 Sha 1 1 • 1 6 5 • 5 5 6 1 3 • 3 • 3 1 1 • 1 6 5 • 5 5 5 6 1 • 1 •
 dy Grove, my little love, Shady Grove my darlin', Sha dy Grove, my little love, Goin' back to Harlan.

Next, follow the ToneWay Notation on the chart below. You will now use your middle finger to pick the 1st string between each tone your thumb picks. This is similar to what you did before in Loosening Up the Thumb, but now your thumb is right on the melody and using the 5th string as a drone note only when the preceding note lasts longer than the usual "half a beat". This not only fills the space, but adds that unique 'banjo sound' to the melody. (▶ #8)

T **M** **Note:** White picks are 'drone' notes (not melody) played on the outside (1st and 5th) strings.

T	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
3	1	1	1	6	5	5	5	6	1	3	3	3	3	3	3
			T			T					T		T		T
boom	chop	boom	chop	boom	chop	boom	chop	boom	chop	boom	chop	boom	chop	boom	chop
"Sha- dy Grove,				my little love...				"Sha- dy Grove, my dar				lin...			

Picking the complete Shady Grove

Once you've got the first part above down, go ahead and play the rest of the song using the ToneWay Notation above as needed. (▶ #9)

Picking the Next Song, Handsome Molly

Next try all this out on Handsome Molly. The first challenge is something that all stringed instruments face: changing chords. Use whichever accompaniment style you like best, and sing Handsome Molly with the chord changes as shown in Lesson Three. Then, using just your thumb again, pick the melody following the ToneWay Notation below.

5 5 5 6 1 • 1 • 5 5 6 1 2 • • 2 2 2 2 3 • 2 2 3 2 1 6 1 • •
 Sailing 'round the ocean, Sailing 'round the sea, Think of Handsome Mol-ly wher^ever she may be.

Two Finger Melody Picking with Chord Changes

It is time to apply all the picking techniques and chord changing skill we have to *Handsome Molly*. The first half is drawn out on the next page with the ToneWay Notation, the chord change and the drone notes to help you get going. When ready, pick the rest of the song. Try playing it by ear a few times. Then, if you need to, follow the ToneWay Notation again.

Again, the T-M-T-M pattern is constant, only the thumb's note changes. When the 5 chord comes around, hold down the chord (in this case, the D chord) as much as possible until it changes again. There are two places toward the end of the song where the melody hits a 3 tone while you are holding down the 5 chord. In this situation, momentarily lift your finger off the 2nd string to play the 3 tone on the now-open 2nd string. (▶ #10)

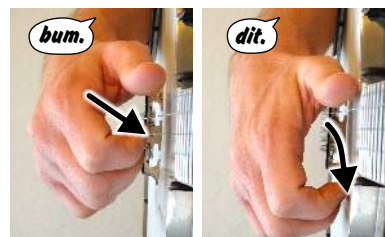
Note: The open 5th string is not part of the 5 chord, so it may sound a little "off". That's OK, it's part of the charm of the banjo. You can, however, experiment with substituting another string (like the 2nd string) for the 5th string during the 5 chord.

M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	
5	5	5	6	1		1		5	5	6	1	2		T		T	
boom	chop	boom	chop	boom	chop	boom	chop	boom	chop	boom	chop	boom	chop	boom	chop	boom	chop
"Sai- lin round the o -				cean...				Sai- lin round the sea...									

Change to the 5 chord here

Task One: Clawhammer Accompaniment

The clawhammer strum is a 'shuffling' rhythm that fills the space between the 'chop' beat and the following 'boom' beat. This rhythm is also known as "bum ditty". Why? Go ahead and say: "bum ditty bum ditty bum ditty bum ditty..." That's the rhythm of the clawhammer strum!



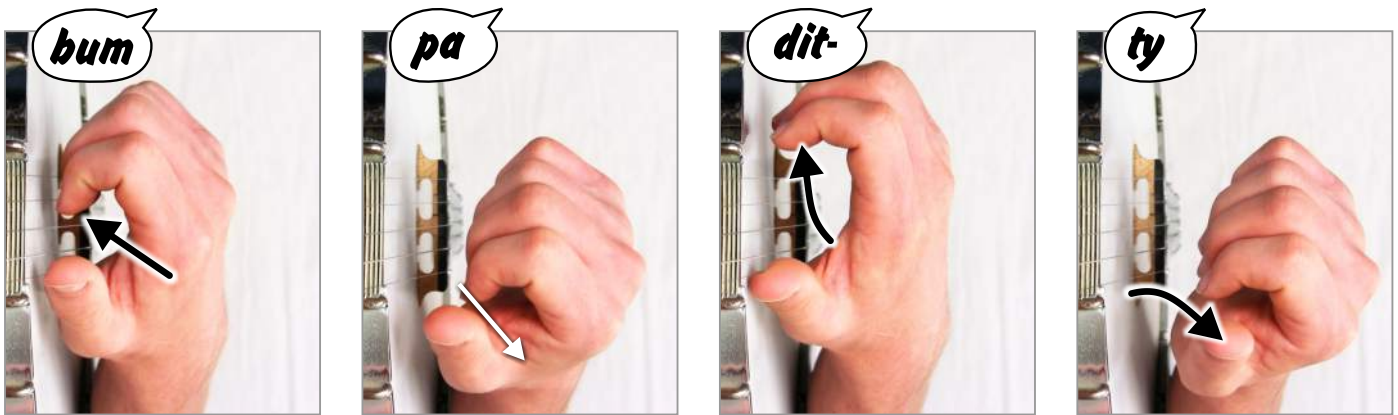
First, review the **Index Finger Strum** on page 1. Remember, you form a partial claw by loosely curling your fingers partway into a fist (photo left). Line the fingers up, almost touching nail to nail. Strum away, but this time, say "bum dit" in place of "boom chop". "Bum dit bum dit bum dit bum dit..." (▶ #11)

Foundation		(repeated)	
1st			
2nd			
3rd			
4th			
5th			
boom	chop	boom	chop
"Sha- dy Grove..."			
Bum - pa Dit - ty Bum - pa Dit - ty			

Got that? Next, without changing what you're doing with your hand, add in the 'between-words' "-pa" and "-ty" so that you now say "bum- pa dit- ty" repeatedly. Let's break it down: (1) Say "bum" as you strike a string with your index fingernail. (2) Say "pa" and **do nothing**. (3) Say "dit" as you brush the strings. (4) Say "ty" ("tee") and **do nothing**. All that "say __ and do nothing" stuff is important, because it paves the way for what comes next.

Again, watch and playing along with the videos! Continue on when you can keep this rhythm and speech ("bumpa ditty bumpa ditty bumpa ditty...") going steady for a few minutes.

Next we're going to incorporate the thumb for the 'shuffle'. The thumb comes to rest on the fifth string at the end of each brush ("dit"). Your thumb's job is to pluck the string right after the "dit" (on "ty"), just before the next "bum" index-finger strike. The photos on the next page break it down...



(1) **“bum”**: Your index fingernail hits a string—or two or three if you’re really goin’ at it.

(2) **“-pa”**: Your hand retracts, preparing to brush the strings. No sound is made.

(3) **“dit-”**: Your “claw” loosens a bit as your index fingernail brushes over a few of the bottom strings. Your thumb comes to rest on the fifth string. Use arm and finger motion in lieu of wrist rotation.

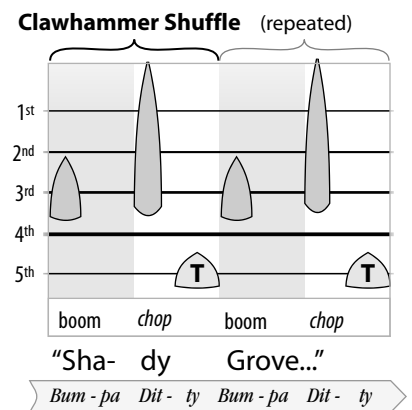
(4) **“-ty”**: Your hand retracts again. Your thumb “catches” the fifth string and plucks it on the way up. The fingers are now ready to come down for another... (1) **“bum”**: You get the idea.

We recommend saying “bumpa ditty” (including the “pa” where the banjo isn’t played) to help you maintain the timing of it all. Again, you’ll end up with **“bum-pa dit-ty, bum-pa dit-ty, bum-pa dit-ty...”**

Do this roll **very slowly** at first to sense the rhythm. (► #12) Then, slowly build up your speed but maintain the ‘bumpa ditty’ rhythm! (► #13) In particular, be sure not to insert an additional pause between the “-ty” 5th-string note and the next “bum”.

Next, just talk the words of Shady Grove with your strum, which allows you to focus on what the hand needs to do. Make sure the index finger’s strike and brush line up correctly with the words as shown. The words will always fall on the index strike or brush, never on the thumb note. Start slow, allowing the words will come out very slowly, and gradually build up speed.

This shuffle movement will take a while to coordinate. Indeed, expect it to take at least a few months to execute smoothly.



Task Two, Clawhammer Melody Picking

Initially just pick the melody of Shady Grove as you did in Lesson One, using your index finger, striking the string with the top edge of the fingernail (see photo, page 1). Use the ToneWay Notation on page 3 and the banjo **Picking Pattern** for the key of G.

Next, using the chart on the following page, strike the melody tones with the index finger on the ‘boom’ or ‘chop’. Strum down with the index finger when there is no melody note on that beat—don’t pluck the 5th string with your thumb at first. And don’t worry if you miss striking the precise melody tone. Any tone you strike will sound harmonious, after all! Avoid striking the 5th string; it is reserved for the thumb to pluck the 5th string between the ‘chop’ and the following ‘boom’. (► #14)

3	1	1	1	1	6	5	5	5	5	6	1	3	3	3	
boom	chop	boom	chop	boom	chop	boom	chop	boom	chop	boom	chop	boom	chop	boom	chop
"Sha- dy Grove, my little love..."						"Sha- dy Grove, my dar lin..."									

Once you've got the first part of the song down, play the complete Shady Grove using the ToneWay Notation as needed (see bottom, page 3). The dot (•) placed after a tone shows the space where you need to strum. When you're ready, insert the 5th string thumb pluck. This not only fills the space, but adds that unique 'banjo sound' to the melody. (▶ #15)

Clawhammer Melody Picking with Chord Changes

Use just the index finger strike and strum accompaniment initially and practice changing the chord for Handsome Molly. (▶ #16) The chart (below) shows where the chord changes in Handsome Molly. Now try picking the melody. Note again how the index finger follows the melody either on a 'boom' or 'chop'. As your aim improves, more of your index finger's strikes will land on melody tones.

Once you've got the first part (below) down, play the complete Handsome Molly using the ToneWay Notation as needed (see page 3, ▶ #17). The dot (•) placed after a tone shows the space where you need to strum. When you feel ready, insert the 5th string thumb pluck . See note on page 4 about playing a 3 tone during a 5 chord.

Note: The open 5th string is not part of the 5 chord, so it may sound a little "off". That's OK, it's part of the charm of the banjo. You can, however, experiment with substituting another string (like the 2nd string) for the 5th string during the 5 chord.

↙ Change to the 5 chord here

5	5	5	6	1	1	1	5	5	6	1	2	1	1
boom	chop	boom	chop	boom	chop	boom	chop	boom	chop	boom	chop	boom	chop
"Sai- lin round the o- cean..."						Sai- lin round the sea..."							

What's Next? (both styles)

Believe it or not, you have learned the essential core of banjo playing. You need to develop this core into two intuitive skills: knowing the Picking Pattern, and sensing the spaces in a melody that will benefit from 'filler' (a roll or shuffle). You can begin training this skill now by applying the techniques you've learned to more songs. The ToneWay Notation on the following pages will help you do this. For clawhammer playing, you can try both the keys of G and C/D. For two-finger picking, play everything in the key of G for now—I know, this goes against our "learn to play in every key" approach, but playing in C or D is a bit of a can of worms, which we'll open later.

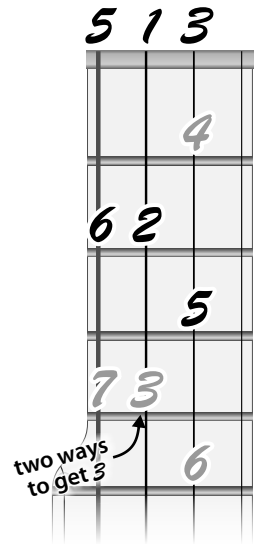
We'll wait on introducing the "fancy" techniques, such as slides and hammer-ons. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of consolidating these essentials before seeking what are essentially bells and whistles. The more solid your grounding is in the essentials, the more fluent your banjo playing future will be.

My Home's Across the Blue Ridge Mountains

Remember, the dots show you beats to use your 'filler' technique on. There are a few places where there is an "empty boom" beat (with no melody tone) followed directly by a melody tone. Repeat the last melody tone in that "empty boom" to fill it.

If you're playing clawhammer, you know everything you need to know to play this song.

For two-finger banjo, we run up across a limitation: we can't play melody tones on the first string because it's being used as a drone string! Actually, we can, but it messes up the roll pattern. So instead, we're going to play the higher parts of the melody on the *second* string. The Picking Pattern at right will show you what to do. Use it along with the ToneWay Notation below.



•="empty" beats (one per "boom" or "chop") for filler techniques

3 3.. 2 3 2 1 6 5... tains 1.. 5..
 My home's a-cross the blue ridge moun

1 2.. 2 3 2 1 2 3... tains
 My home's a-cross the blue ridge moun

3 3.. 2 3 2 1 6 5... tains 1..
 My home's a-cross the blue ridge moun

7 1 2 2 2 2 3 2 1 6 1...
 And I never expect to see you a-ny more

Worried Man Blues

Banjo playing doesn't always adhere to the melody. Melody notes are often dropped. In fact, you almost *always* omit notes that fall in-between "boom" and "chop". If you want to drop out other notes of the melody (for example, transitional tones like 7 or every other 2 tone in the last line of My Home's Across the Blue Ridge Mountains), feel free. Do what sounds best to you.

Tones that fall between "boom" and "chop" (and are only *half* a beat long) have been written with smaller gray numbers. *Don't play these tones.* Instead, you'll usually end up playing drone notes (1st string for two-finger, 5th string for clawhammer) through these tones.

5 5.. 5 6 1.. 2 3.. 3 2 1..
 It takes a worried man to sing a worried song,
 ignore these

1 6.. 6 7 1.. 6 1.. 1 6 5..
 It takes a worried man to sing a worried song,

5 5.. 5 6 1.. 2 3.. 3 2 1
 It takes a worried man to sing a worried song,

1 7 1 2.. 2 2 3 2 1 6 1...
 I'm worried now, but I won't be wor-ried long.

Hot Corn Cold Corn

Here's a great example of a song where you *should* omit some melody tones. All those repeated tones in a row can sound...repetative. So try omitting one here and there (droning through the beat) to mix things up. Where? We've marked some "expendable" tones with a dot. But which one(s) you omit is a matter of taste, so experiment!

3 1 1 *i* 1 *i* 1
Hot corn, cold corn, bring along a 6 6 5
demi-john

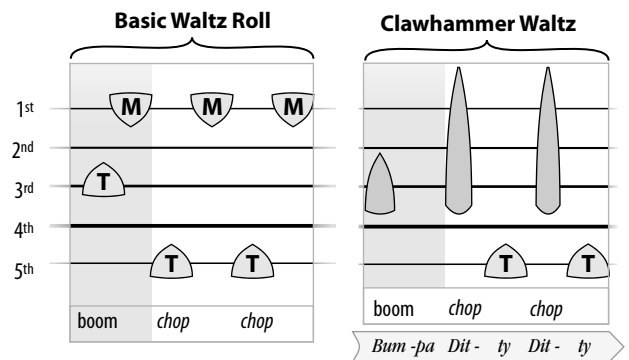
2 2 2 *i* 2 2 7 7 6 6 5
Hot corn, cold corn, bring a long a demi-john

repeat first line here 1 1 1 1 6 6 5
bring along a demi-john

2 2 *i* 2 2 2 *i* 2 2 2 2 7 7 6 5 3.
Fare thee well Uncle Bill, I'll see you in the morning, Yes, 1... Sir!

Down in the Valley

Waltz time! Recall that waltzes have a "boom chop chop" rhythm. The charts at right illustrate how this translates into your roll. As you can see, you're simply playing the "chop" part twice. "Bumpa ditty ditty bumpa ditty ditty..." (for clawhammer).



5 1 2 3.. 1.. 3 2 1 2.....
Down in the val- ley, valley so low

5 7 2 5.. 2.. 3 1 2 1.....
Hang your head o- ver, hear the wind blow

Long Journey Home

The only unusual part of this song are all the "empty beats" that land on "boom"s instead of "chop"s. This gives it a nice syncopated quality, and doesn't make it any harder to play if you don't get caught up on it.

5 5. 6 1 1 1 2 3 3. 2 1... 3 3. 2 1. 1. 6 1. 6 5...
Lost all my money but a two dol lar bill Two dol lar bill, boys, two dol lar bill

5 5. 6 1 1 1 2 3 3. 2 1. 1 2 3. 1. 2. 3 2 1... ..
Lost all my money but a two dol lar bill And I'm on my long journey home