

06. The Banjo Neck

The banjo neck is by far the most critical component of a banjo. It must be straight, not twisted, have no cracks and be mounted at the correct elevated angle in relation to the bridge for proper string height over the frets. All frets be identical in height on the neck and the frets can be replaced by a professional luthier if they are excessively worn or damaged.

In this article I will describe the techniques and mechanics of properly fitting a banjo neck however I must caution that this should be done by either an expert or someone with this experience. Maladjustment or improper mounting can not only damage the neck but can also damage the banjo tub. The playability of the banjo is directly effected by the neck.

When considering a banjo purchase the first thing to visually inspect is the neck. If the neck has any visible defects it may not be usable or repairable. The neck is the most critical and expensive single component of a banjo and to replace a neck could cost upwards of \$500. There may less expensive necks available on ebay for some banjo models.

The end of the neck at the head should be at the same height of the head. If it is higher or lower it could be very hard to play even if the angle of the neck is correct. The top of the neck must also be flat in respect to the head. When looking across the head toward the neck the fret closest to the head should be level with the head surface. While checking the level of the closest fret look down the top of the neck to the far end and verify that the neck does not have a twist – it should be perfectly flat the entire length of the fret board.

The neck must be fitted so that the end with the tuning pegs is at a slight down angle in respect to the surface of the head. This allows for a bridge that will raise the strings at the head end so the strings do not touch any frets when depressed. If they touch or are too close to any frets they may cause buzzing. The strings should be less than 1/4" over the fret closest to the head with a bridge in place. There are many factors to properly mounting and adjusting the banjo neck. I can't stress it enough that someone experienced with adjusting and mounting a banjo neck should be asked for help. Altering even one setting can throw off another setting, creating compound problems and possibly damaging the neck.

Some banjo necks have a tension rod inside the length of the neck. The purpose of the rod is to have a thin neck that will remain rigid with the tension of the strings. There is an adjustment nut on end of the rod at the peg head but this adjustment should only be attempted by someone with experience or the neck could be permanently damaged.

Newer banjo necks may have a carbon composite bar that has no adjustment inside the neck instead of an adjustable rod. Some banjos will have thicker necks if they don't have a tension rod. The advantage of the thinner necks is ease of playability but it is easy to get accustomed to a thicker neck.

Before attempting any adjustments make sure that all hardware on the banjo is secure and that all bolts and nuts that hold the neck to the banjo pot are tight.

If you aren't sure about any adjustments be sure to ask for assistance from an experienced banjoist or a professional banjo luthier.