

08. Banjo Part Rhythm Sheets

Most of the music available for use by banjo players are in books called fake books written for piano and vocalists. The music sheets in these books have only a melody line, lyrics and chord notation without a hint of a band arrangement. Because there is little if any accompaniment instruction for the rhythm and bass instruments they usually play a straight beat rhythm from the beginning to the end supporting the melody unless other wise noted.

My first introduction to rhythm sheets written for banjo parts was in the mid 1960's when making a recording with a trad jazz band playing “strict” early Bix Beiderbecke arrangements for a published LP record. I quickly discovered that with some bands each instrument has a written part so the horns and reeds playing together are actually playing chords. The banjo and bass parts were also written so the entire band was playing the arrangements according to the music composer's written directions. Up until this experience I was under the impression that small bands jammed by ear and the members were free to do whatever they thought sounded best based on experience.

The challenge for me became learning to read and follow the directions on the banjo charts some of which are very complicated and are sometimes referred to as “road maps” because they jump around between multiple pages. I highly suggest that before playing with a band that uses written arrangements you should obtain copies of their charts well before the performance so you can familiarize yourself with the songs, the mapping and also have some time to practice your part. You might even listen to the songs on “youtube.com” if you're not familiar with them.

Banjo charts are written in a variety of forms the two most common styles are shown below:

Dream A Little Dream Of Me - Key G (4/4)

(First 5 chorus measures)

Each “/” is a stroke (beat) – 4 per measure in this illustration.

Stroke style:

G /// Eb7 / D7 / G /// E7 /// Am /// ...

Box style:

G	Eb7 / D7	G	E7	Am	...
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Each large box is a measure of four beats in this example and can be divided into 2, 3 or 4 sections dependent upon the chord changes within the measure.

1,2,3,4	1,2 / 3,4	1	2	1,2	1	2
		3,4	3	4	3	4

There are many other styles used and notice that there is no reference made to the melody. The tempo is usually maintained by the bass and is one stroke per beat.

Note:

Repeated measures are sometimes shown as “%” and rests are usually shown as “-”.