# EBBC Banjo Reference & Playing Information

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These articles are intended for anyone interested in banjos, banjo owners and banjo players.

The purpose of these articles is to introduce the mechanics of the banjo and share my 60 plus years of banjo playing experiences with others. Some mechanical issues are very critical and I highly suggest that before making adjustments to a banjo to please use this reference and also confer with someone experienced for advice.

Enjoy EBBC and playing your banjo,

Larry Risner

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# 01. Choosing a Banjo

Banjos come in various models and sizes for various uses and personal preferences. Before purchasing a banjo a few decisions should to be made that include the type of music to play, the banjo tone and the banjo size.

**Banjo Ukulele** – A small ukulele sized 4 string banjo usually played and a tuned as a ukulele. Due to it's small size it is very high-pitched. It is also known as a "Banjo Uke".

**Tenor banjo** – A short neck length 4 string banjo that was commonly played in early 1900's orchestras and in homes. Because of its tuning it has a strong rhythm "punch" sound for rhythm and melody picking. . Many Dixieland and trad jazz bands prefer the tenor banjo because of its punch and uplifting tonal quality. The tenor has an uplifting sound that cuts through nicely. Tenor, plectrum or guitar tuning can be used with the corresponding strings. Some banjoists prefer this model because of its shorter neck and its easier to transport.

**Plectrum banjo** – A full neck length that is the same as the guitar. This 4 or 6 string banjo can be tuned and played as a guitar (Chicago tuning) or use plectrum banjo tuning. The plectrum banjo much like a guitar and has a variety of tones that depends on where on the neck it is played but it does lack the crispness of a tenor banjo. This banjo is also preferred by trad jazz bands because of its mellower tones and is very nice for blues. The baritone ukulele can also be guitar or plectrum tuned.

**Bluegrass banjo -** Same as the plectrum with an added 5th string. This banjo is usually picked using multiple individual "finger picks". It can use plectrum or bluegrass "D" tuning. or can be played the same as the 4-string plectrum by simply removing the 5th string. The main difference between a plectrum banjo is the 5-string banjo neck is wider than the 4-string plectrum neck to accommodate the additional 5th string. A 5-string bridge and tailpiece used.

Note:

The banjo club has banjos available to borrow with a returnable deposit and option to purchase. Beginners might consider this club service before investing in an expensive instrument.
Most beginners start with inexpensive instruments and upgrade to more expensive banjos as their skills improve.

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# 02. Selecting a Pick

This article is focused on the “flat pick” used by 4-string banjoists not the “finger picks” used by 5-string bluegrass banjo players. Selecting the “right” pick for yourself can be a daunting experience of trial and error. Picks come in a wide variety of materials, thickness and shape and finding the right one for your use can be very frustrating. It happens that asking others for advice isn't always helpful. Everyone has their own opinion on the best one to use but it's really an individual personal preference. Over the years I have used a variety of picks and have settled on one style and 2 different thicknesses that work well for me - thin for soft playing and thick for loud playing.

Up into the early 1960's the pick of choice by professional banjo players was made of real tortoise shell. Besides being somewhat expensive they were subject to breakage and were discontinued when synthetic material picks became available. Unlike plastic picks nylon and teflon picks can last for years of playing. I bought a triangular teflon pick in the mid 1960's and used it for over 40 years. It was slightly worn but over time it developed a curve which made it difficult to tremolo. So I then started the trial and error process selecting a new pick of choice for me. I didn't even consider using plastic picks because they easily break and it always happens at the wrong place and time.

The most common style of flat pick shape used these days is a “pointed oval” used by both guitar and banjo players. At I first thought that a stiff rigid pick would be best because the tortoise shell picks were also very stiff as was the teflon pick I had used. I found that to tremolo with the stiff pick I had to loosen my grip on the pick because when holding it tight it was not easy to strum up and down or tremolo (the sweeping of the pick continuously and smoothly up and down across all of the strings is called a tremolo). I then tried a thin flexible pick and found that it was difficult to selectively pick notes with any volume no matter how hard I held the pick but it did glide nicely across the strings for tremolos. My final choice became both 2 picks, a medium pick that I found was good for both picking and playing load and a softer pick for playing softer when needed. Once you find the pick of your choice be sure to buy a few spares in case of loss. Also, you should always have a spare pick stored somewhere on the instrument so if you drop your pick while playing and you can quickly grab the spare pick to continue playing. Pick holders are available for holding a spare pick on the instrument.

The thickness of picks is measured in millimeters and I found the thicker Dunlop Maxi-Grip 0.73mm and the thinner 0.63mm picks best for me. These are inexpensive nylon picks that come in packs of 12 for very little cost. These picks are available in other thicknesses but thinner or thicker didn't work for me as I previously described.

Picks are easy to drop while playing especially if it is loosely held so some picks will have slight ridges, bumps or holes to help you grip them. The Dunlop Maxi-Grip picks have little bumps to help you hold them.

If you need to experiment in finding the right pick for you buy a few with various thicknesses to try and when you have determined which thickness is the best for you buy a few more. Picks are available at music stores and online at Sweetwater.com or on ebay.com.

Selecting a pick is an individual preference and you really have to experiment until you find the right one(s) for you.

# 03. Selecting Strings

Selecting strings for an instrument is a trial and error effort with personal preferences. Many factors effect the tonal sound quality of an instrument. An inexpensive instrument can sound good or bad just as an expensive instrument can sound good or bad. An instrument can also sound good to one person and not so good to another. Picking out a set of strings is a final step in seeking the sound you prefer.

Ukuleles and guitars usually have wooden bodies with fixed-in-place bridges that are not adjustable so the strings are the only variables. Banjoeles and banjos on the other hand have movable bridges and plastic or calfskin heads that effect adjusting the tuning and sound quality. It's most important to make sure the bridge is properly positioned on the head and the head is correctly tightened before tuning and experimenting with string selection.

I play a 4-string plectrum banjo and I preferred using Gibson SBG-571 string sets with wound 3rd & 4th strings. It's almost impossible to find these string sets today so I have settled on the GHS PF-180 M 5-string sets that have a mellower sound than the "lighter" string sets. These sets are readily available and I can always find them on the internet for around $4/set. Plectrum sets are not common so I use these and trash the unused 5th string. You have to make sure the string end that connects to the tail piece is the correct type. They can be either looped, ferruled or plain and only the correct type will work on an instrument. Another concern might be the string length but if you buy the correct string set for the instrument that should not be a problem. The factory string sets have pre-selected gauges so when they are all properly tuned the string tensions are closely matched.

You should also change the complete set of strings should one break or if they haven't been changed for some time. I change mine routinely every six months because they do lose tonal quality over time and risk breakage.

Strings can be changed quickly and easily if you simply wrap the end 3 times around the tuning nut then pass the end through the hole in the nut and pull it tight. Tune the string to make sure it doesn't slip then cut off the loose end leaving about 1-2 inches sticking out. If you are changing all the strings change one string at a time until all are changed so the bridge will remain in place. Note that the strings are always counted from the bottom up when holding the instrument in playing position. The 1st string is the highest tone, the lowest tone is the 4th string. The short G string on a 5-string banjo is the 5th string.

**Baritone Ukulele:** (4-string set) strings 1,2 &3 are nylon the 4th is wound bronze.
Use guitar [d-g-b-e] or plectrum banjo [c-g-b-d] tuning.

**Banjolele:** (4-string ukulele set) Same as tenor ukulele..
Use ukulele [g-c-e-a] tuning.

**Tenor Banjo:** (4-string tenor set)
Use tenor banjo tuning [g-c-d-a] or Irish tenor tuning [g-d-a-e]. Can also use guitar or plectrum tuning using corresponding strings.

**Plectrum Banjo:** (4 & 5 string banjo set)
Blue Grass Banjo [g-d-g-b-d], Double C [g-c-g-c-d] or C tuning [g-c-g-b-d].
Guitar tuning (also called Chicago tuning) [d-g-b-e].
Plectrum tuning [c-g-b-d].
*4-string plectrum sets are hard to find but you can always use the first 4 strings of a 5-string set and discard the unneeded 5th string (the first 4-strings are the same as 4-string plectrum sets).*

**Tenor ukulele:** Use Aquila strings and tune them often when new because they will stretch.
4-string [g-c-e-a] some ukulele players use an octave lower wound bronze g-string.
6-string [g-c-c-e-a-a] the c-c & a-a pairs are an octave apart ( low c & high c, low a & high a).

# 04. Tuning The Banjo

Tuning a musical instrument is really easy if the instrument has only one variable however banjos have a number of variables all of which directly effect the tuning.

The variables that effect tuning the banjo include:

The mechanical security of the banjo's components.
The tightness of the banjo head.
The placement of the bridge on the head.

**Steps:**

1. Verify the mechanical security of the instrument if you aren't sure ask for help. First verify that the tension rod inside the neck (if equipped) is not loose. If it isn't or you aren't sure how to adjust it ask an experienced person to check it for you. Then check that the head is properly tightened (see the note regarding banjo heads) and if there are rods inside the banjo tub make sure that they are not loose. Test that the string tightening pegs are not loose and feel secure. If they are loose sometimes you can use a screwdriver to tighten them or they may need replacing. If you aren't sure about any of these “banjo mechanics” you need to talk to someone that can help - one simple mistake can be catastrophic especially with the neck tension rob.

2. Make sure the head is properly mounted and evenly tightened. If you lightly tap the head about an inch from the edge all the way around it should sound the same and feel tight. If not make sure that all the bracket nuts are evenly tightened.

3. Correct placement of the bridge is critical and if it is off even just little bit it as you play up the neck it be out of tune. The easiest way to place the bridge is to tune the first string using a tuner then press the string down at the twelfth fret and it should be the same note but one octave higher. If it's pitch is higher move the bridge a little toward the tail piece and repeat tuning, testing and moving until the pitch is exactly one octave higher. If the pitch is lower use the same procedure moving the bridge toward the neck. Once the 1st string bridge setting is correct repeat the process on the 4th string swinging the end of the bridge under this string one way or the other being careful not to move the other end of the bridge.

The method that I use to set the bridge utilizes the harmonics (chimes) of the strings. It's not easy to describe in print so if you wish to use this method you should talk to someone that uses it. It involves listening for the second harmonic of a string or the “chime” at the “one octave” (12th) fret location up the neck.

Once the three steps above have been taken the instrument should only require occasional minor tuning using a clip-on tuner and a slight tweaking of the tuning pegs. If you are having problems with tuning your instrument you should ask an experienced player for help.

When playing in a band tuning can be more involved and requires tuning to a note that the entire band has tuned to (usually a “Bb”) and more than likely is a bit off key if a piano is not in tune. In this case ask the pianist to play the note of your 1st string then tune the 2nd string using the first string as the reference and continue tuning the remaining strings, third, forth, etc.. until all are in tune with the first.

# 05. Banjo Heads Explained

The head of a banjo is the major component of the banjo that defines the tone. The second tone defining device is the bridge but the head must always be first properly mounted and tightened. The objective of this article is to provide the basic mechanical details of the banjo head. Before the introduction of mylar (plastic) banjo heads they were made of calf skin that was sensitive to humidity changes, wear and needed replacing often due to breakage. The mounting of a calf skin head is a skill not covered in this article. Modern mylar heads are easy to replace and do not have the problems of calf skin heads. They rarely if ever need attention or replacing unless damaged or worn by fingers on the surface.

**Banjo heads dimensions**:

The most obvious dimension is the diameter as measured across the top of the head. The most common size is 11 inch but there are other sizes so a measurement is needed. A replacement head must be the exact diameter of the original head and it should fit nicely on the top rim – not too tight or loose.

The other critical dimension is the "crown height" as measured from the edge of the top surface edge to the bottom of the tension ring around the head. There are three crown height sizes for banjo heads; low (3/8"), medium (7/16") and high (1/2"). The correct crown height size head must be used to properly fit the neck and tension ring so be very careful with this measurement.

When ordering a banjo head you must specify the exact head diameter and the exact crown height - if either of these two measurements are inaccurate the head will not fit.

Banjo heads are available in various styles depending on a player's preference of appearance and tone.

1) Top Frosted – white with rough frosted top surface.
2) Bottom frosted – white with a smooth top surface for quiet strumming [most popular style].
3) Prism – shinny prism-look with bright sound.
4) Clear – viewable interior of the banjo body and resonator with bright sound.
5) Black – glossy black with mellow sound.
6) Fiberskyn – looks like calfskin, thick with a very rough surface and plunky sound.
7) Renaissance – smooth surface with bee's wax color and brighter than fiberskyn.
8) Kevlar – white thick head with orange-peel like surface.

Removing and mounting heads:

No tricks here except taking care to loosen or tighten the head evenly to avoid distortion. Before removing the head remove all hardware and parts that will interfere with removing the tension ring and head. Then using an imaginary "clock" pattern loosen a hook (12 o'clock) 2 turns then directly across (6 o'clock) loosen that nut 2 turns. Then loosen at (3 o'clock), (9 o'clock), (1 o'clock) and so on. Idea is to loosen brackets as evenly as possible. You can develop your own method just be careful to keep it gradual and even. To install a head use the same pattern procedure to tighten the head once you have set the head and tension ring in place and have all of the nuts started finger tight. Be careful to tighten the head only to the point where you can press on it around the edge and it indents slightly and feels taut. It should "ring" a bit if you lightly tap it and it resonants at "G or G#" using a tuner.

Ask for assistance by a club member that is familiar with mounting banjo heads.

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Includes excerpts from an article by Carolina Bridges (April 2017 Deering Banjo)

# 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 anyr 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.

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# 07. Selecting a Bridge

Selecting a bridge is the last step in setting up a banjo for playing. The banjo head and neck must be correctly mounted and adjusted before selecting a bridge.

Bridges are available in various shapes, heights and materials. Once the neck is properly mounted select a bridge that raises the strings approximately 1/4" above the fret closest to the head.

Some bridges are made of all maple or maple with an ebony top. One commonly used model is made by Grover and has an ebony top. There two basic models are available having either two legs or two legs with an additional center leg. The bridge characteristic that has the most influence on tone is the mass of the bridge. A thin bridge will produce a brighter sound than a heavy thick bridge but it may very hard to distinguish the difference. Bridge height may also have an affect the tone but the proper bridge is predetermined by the string height and there isn't much of a choice without making major neck adjustments. In my experience of using many various bridge styles from inexpensive to very expensive bridges I finally settled on a bridge that has the proper height, has a center leg and is perfectly flat when mounted and under pressure from the strings. I disregarded the bridge design or the materials – it's all in the sound.

Because banjo bridges are not fixed in place as they are on guitars and ukuleles they must be precisely located on the head. See "*Page 04 Tuning The Banjo - paragraph #3*" for bridge placement instructions.

With the bridge in place and the strings tensioned by tuning the bridge should be flat on top and the banjo head should have just a slight indent from the string pressure on the brige. Once the bridge is in place I suggest making small dot marks on the head at both ends of the bridge so you will know where it goes should it be moved. Some bridges with 3 legs have a longer center leg to keep the top flat.

# 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 | … |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|

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 “-”.

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# 09. Playing Rhythm

There is a great difference between playing a guitar as compared to playing a banjo. Guitars by nature do not deal well with hard playing and therefore they aren't played hard even by beginners. Banjos on the other hand is of a drum (percussion) style construction and most players have a natural tendency to play the banjo way too hard because it seems like the thing to do. Unfortunately playing a banjo hard takes away from its somewhat limited tonal qualities. There is a natural tendency to play a banjo hard, especially if one is playing along with other banjo players. The problem is that as more banjos are added to a group the louder they are collectively and it then becomes a lot of noise. Banjos are by nature loud and it takes a little time to learn how to play it softly. My suggestion for beginners is to first learn to play chords holding the pick loosely or use a soft pick either of which will result in softer playing. It's much easier to start learning the banjo playing softly then play it harder when needed. When playing rhythm in a group, try to be aware of how loud you and the others are playing. If you can't hear the lead melody or the vocalist then the banjo players are playing too loud. A guide for this is for the rhythm players to play as if a vocalist is singing each and every song. The melody of a song must always be dominate to be heard and the rhythm is the support foundation for the melody - the rhythm should never overpower the melody.

**Some rules for rhythm banjo playing:**

- Play in support of the entire group, not yourself.
- Play every song as if a vocalist is singing the melody and must be heard.
- Keep in mind that the banjo is louder to those in front of you.
- If others are playing loud don't play loud also.
- If you can't hear the melody, the rhythm is way too loud.

# 10. Playing in a Band

Music sheets that are used by small bands usually consist of a single treble clef melody line with the chord signatures above it and the lyrics below it. This form is commonly called a fake sheet and when in book form are called fake books. Because the full orchestration for the various instruments is not written it's up to the band members to “improvise” the supporting rhythm, harmony and bass for the melody. To achieve an ideal performance of a song its important that the band members utilize the playing guidelines as described below.

***Basic playing rules for bands:***

1. ***Bass*** *– The bass player provides the tempo for the entire band and the band members must follow the “beat” of the bass. The bass maintains a steady and solid tempo for everyone in the band to follow including the vocalist(s). The bass player, when reading fake book sheets observes any written bass breaks and plays through the melody rests unless it's otherwise noted on the arrangement. It is important for the bass player to maintain a steady and continuous tempo because the entire band will follow the bass.*
2. ***Vocals*** *- Vocalists should follow the established tempo throughout the song with the band. There may be an occasion when a vocalist may incidentally slip the timing. Should that happen the entire band including the bass should hold the tempo and the vocalist should return with the set tempo at the correct place rejoining the band.*
3. ***Lead player*** *– The lead player plays the melody line in place of a vocalist and follows the vocalist rules. The lead player should play harmony or rhythm while the vocalist is singing or while another lead player is playing the melody.*

**Rhythm:**

The rhythm is the most important component when playing a song. The rhythm tempo is set with either a countdown or a brief introduction and once it has been set it must be followed by the band members. All band players including those playing either the harmony or the melody should follow the established rhythm. Rhythm players play through the melody breaks and rests unless otherwise instructed or it is noted on the music sheet. Having a strong solid rhythm is essential.

**Harmony:**

Harmony is playing to support and re-enforce the melody without duplicating the melody. Harmony playing should not be the main focus of the tune for the listeners, the melody should should be the focus. Harmony playing is acquired by developing an ear for various chord and note patterns that add “color” and support the melody. Harmony can also be picked notes rather than chords as long as it adds to the tune. Harmony is sometimes referred to as the “second part”.

**Melody:**

Melody is the voice (lyrics) of the song be it vocal or played by an instrument. Rarely is it proper to have more than one player playing the melody at the same time. However, this can sound really nice if it's done by two different instruments as a duet or a vocalist and an instrument harmonizing together just like two vocalists singing together.

***Note:***

*By following these basic rules when using fake book sheets the music will sound “arranged” to the listeners rather than “jammed”.*

# 11. Playing Chord Melody (Lead)

When I first heard Earl Collins play his banjo I was astonished as to how he could play the melody and his own accompaniment on the banjo at the same time and it sounded so great. I had thought when listening to recordings with banjos in various bands it is a rhythm instrument and that's all it could do. Well, to make a long story short once Earl told me how to play chord melody I was hooked. This article provides some playing tips, basic chord melody methods and is based solely on my own experiences over many years of playing the banjo. I advise asking a chord melody player that uses the same tuning as you use for playing tips.

Chord melody is the style of playing the melody note of the song on the first string, which is the highest pitched string and playing the "rhythm" chord on the rest of the strings at the same time. To learn this it's very helpful to have a plan and I kinda developed one that worked for me. Playing chord melody (lead) is fairly easy and helps to develope an ear to play harmony using the same chords because you will learn the various chord positions all up and down the neck. There's three advantages in learning to play chord melody. You learn the chord positions for rhythm, harmony and melody.

You will need:

a) A chord chart reference book.
b) Some sheet music of very simple songs.
c) Patience and lots of practice time.

Incidentally, once I learned to play chord melody practicing became so cool and fun!

I play plectrum tuning but if you are playing tenor or guitar tuning you can use the related chord charts for those tunings. Note that because of the crispness of the tenor banjo most tenor players develop single string picking techniques for playing melody and play chords when playing rhythm.

As silly as it may seem I decided to start with "Bicycle Built For Two" because it has just a few different chords and the melody kinda jumps out even when strummed "erratically". Learning the notes on the first string and then finding the accompanying chord with it is a slow process at first and therefore erratic but there is satisfaction of hearing the melody notes with the chords.

Learning a song in the key of "C" or "G" with just a few chord changes is best for a start. The idea is to locate the melody note on the first string and form the chord on the other strings. A simple song could have just three chords C – F7 – G7. You will probably need a chord book to look up chord fingering that can accompany the melody note. I also recommend playing softly and use chords that let you keep your little finger on the 1st string as much as possible.

A way to practice "melody chords" is to start with the "C" chord beginning with the 1st string open and find a configuration of a "C" chord for the rest of the strings. Then move up the neck a fret at a time and find a "C" chord for each move. You will only find three "C" tonic chords but you can play some sort of "C" based chord at each fret. Once you have this worked out you can apply the same fingering at different positions to play in other keys. If you have questions or need help you can ask a lead player.

# 12. Song Introductions

There are three elements to a typical song introduction:

- To establishe the rhythm (tempo) for a song.
- It might include a small bit of the song melody leading in to the song.
- It should have a downbeat note or chord run (pick up) for others to start playing.

The best song introduction is to play the last 4 or 8 bars of a song. This provides the accompanying players with all three of the key song introduction elements. Playing this type of introduction requires that the player be familiar with both the melody and the tempo for the song.

Another easy intro style is a 4 bar minor vamp – playing a minor chord 4 beats per bar.

A difficult introduction for a group is by a vocalist. This type of introduction should be avoided unless the group is well seasoned and is familiar with the song. Starting to play at the exact instant can be difficult and if not timed correctly it may confuse the group. This can result in a staggered start as the group members join in.

If there is no designated player or vocalist for an introduction then a count can be used. Typically, this is a verbal count or audible tapping of a known sequence. Most commonly the sequence is a two measure count of 1 - 2 ,1,2,3,4 the 4th is the pickup. A single measure count of 1,2,3,4 works also but sometimes the group needs the longer two full measures to get the temp set.

If the introduction player is not going to play the lead then he/she should drop back to playing rhythm or harmony. This is a basic method and one will develop an ear for this with the experience of playing with groups. There are no fixed rules and the variety of playing techniques by the group members can add “color” to the song as long as the rhythm is steady and strong.

Played introductions should be loud enough to be clearly heard by the audience and the group. A major concern associated with playing a banjo is to not beat on it. Very hard banjo playing results in both a loss of tonal quality and has a tendency for the other banjo members to play harder and the performance then becomes noisy.

Keep in mind that the sound from a banjo is directed out from the front of the instrument and the player is above and behind it so it may not sound as loud to the player as it is to the listener located in the front. It's always a good idea to ask others around you how you sound and then compensate accordingly. Sometimes the answer may surprise you so it is most important to ask the listeners how it sounds to them.

# 13. Changing Keys

A typical "C" chord pattern is "C-F-G7-C" (basic boogie-woogie, blues and be-bop). Add a few more chords for "C-C7-F-Fm-A7-D7-G7-C" and it becomes a more complete set of chords for many songs in the key of "C". This works for the key of "C" but what about songs in other keys? It so happens that the frets on the finger board of stringed instruments are precisely spaced to the musical scale. This can be seen on the charts that show the notes of the strings at the frets on the neck. As an example, if you play a chord then slide it up (up is towards the bridge) or down (away from the bridge) one fret it goes up or down in pitch according to the musical scale.

If you play a "C" chord then move it up one fret it becomes a "Db" chord. Move it up one more fret and it becomes a "D" chord, up one more fret it's a "Eb" chord. If you play the chords of the progression in the key of "C" three frets up the neck the “C” chord progression is now an "Eb" progression. Play that same chord fingering up two more frets and it is now an "F" progression. So you started in the key of “C” moved up the scale to “Eb” then to “F”.

An example of this is playing "When The Saints Come Marching In" in "F" then in "G" and finally in "C". By playing the same chord fingering played for the key of "F" up two frets it becomes the key of "G" then up 5 more frets for the key of “C”. Stringed instrument players (banjo, guitar and ukulele) most often play songs in the keys of “Bb, C, Eb, F & G" because the chords and melody notes mostly fall within the "range" of the neck. If you are playing in a band that includes non-stringed instruments you should be prepared to play songs in the keys of “Ab, D & Db" also. However, knowing that of the key "Ab" is simply moving one fret up from the key of "G" and that "Db" is one fret up from the key of "C" makes it pretty easy. With practice, playing the various chord progressions that you are familiar with at different locations on the neck isn't all that hard. Changing keys when playing chord melody works the same way up and down the neck but is it more difficult because of the neck markers that are used for position references – a lot of practice is the answer.