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MIKE SEEGER

SOUTHERN BANJO SOUNDS



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HDCD

AN ANTHOLOGY OF STYLE AND TECHNIQUE

A survey of traditional Southern banjo techniques, styles, instrumentals and songs played solo on a variety of 23 mostly vintage banjos. Styles range from 19th-century African-American Mississippi style to a song played in the style evolved in the 1940s by North Carolinian Earl Scruggs. Recorded and annotated by Mike Seeger.

1. **SOON IN THE MORNING BABE** 1:21
2. **JOSH THOMAS'S ROUSTABOUT** 2:39
3. **JIM CRACK CORN** 2:14
4. **DARLING CORA** 3:49
5. **DEVIL'S DREAM** 1:51
6. **LITTLE BIRDIE** 3:21
7. **AROUND THE WORLD** 2:21
8. **WHOOPIN' UP CATTLE** 3:00
9. **FLOP EARED MULE** 1:46
10. **LOST GANDER** 2:19
11. **THE SAILOR AND THE SOLDIER** 1:57
12. **AMERICAN SPANISH FANDANGO** 2:10
13. **GOT NO SILVER NOR GOLD BLUES** 2:21
14. **WE'RE UP AGAINST IT NOW** 2:30
15. **THAT'S WHAT THE OLD BACHELOR'S MADE OUT OF** 2:36
16. **THE LAST OF CALLAHAN** 1:47
17. **LADY GAY** 3:42
18. **DOWN SOUTH BLUES** 2:47
19. **LAST NIGHT WHEN MY WILLIE COME HOME** 3:22
20. **WABASH BLUES** 2:00
21. **BRIGHT SUNNY SOUTH** 2:54
22. **ROLL ON JOHN** 3:10
23. **NEEDLECASE** 1:30
24. **COME MY LITTLE PINK** 2:42
25. **BATTLE IN THE HORSESHOE** 1:24
- AND...
26. **I'M HEAD OVER HEELS IN LOVE** 2:23



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(Lester Flatt, Peer International Corp. | BMI)

ABOUT THIS COLLECTION

by Mike Seeger

This recording is about the variety of banjo sounds in the rural South prior to 1950—the traditional Southern right- and left-hand techniques it takes to make them, the different kinds of banjos that can be used, and the songs and instrumentals played by traditional Southern banjo players.

In Southern rural music, having a personal style is very important, and there are quite a few banjo-picking techniques on which styles are built. There are families of right-hand techniques. The frailing, framing, beating, knocking, or clawhammer family of techniques, generally considered to be of African origin, is one of the earliest and most widely used. (Since styles are personal, so are traditional names for them, a possible reason that there are so many different terms for clawhammer-type playing.) Styles abound in the clawhammer family, ranging from Lucious Smith's totally unique "Soon in the Morning" and Hobart Smith's "Wabash Blues," to my Scroggs-tinged "Head over Heels." There are combined clawhammer and finger-picking techniques, which have a clawhammer-like galloping rhythm but use different motions to obtain them, such as on "Little Birdie" and

"Around the World." There are various other picking techniques, some of which may also have roots in Africa, such as on "Lost Gander." And there is the whole variety of two- and three-finger styles developed primarily by rural and urban Anglo- and other European-Americans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In addition to these basic families of styles and techniques, there are unique, personal ways of playing created as far as we know by a single person, such as that of Dock Boggs on "Lady Gay" and Earl Scruggs's style, to which I adapt an old song, "Little Pink." The same traditional right-hand technique can be "styled" to sound entirely different by different players according to their temperament, sense of rhythm, use of physical strength, thickness of fingernail, other physical characteristics, and so forth.

Most of these are solo banjo styles. Much if not most old-time banjo music was made by a person entertaining himself or herself, family, or a few friends. Solo banjoists are free to create techniques, tunings, rhythms, and ways of accompanying their own vocal music, much of which wouldn't fit into ensemble playing.

My criteria for including a style or technique in this collection are that it have some sound or finger pattern that differentiates it from the others and that it can be used to play

more than a song or two. I use the term "technique" for the more mechanical characteristics of style. Differences between techniques may sometimes be very subtle, since I play each in my own style.

This record also surveys some types of banjo tunes and songs. It covers the improvisational melodic drum-tune of Lucious Smith, the accompaniment and riffs-between-verses of "Josh Thomas's Roustabout," and the phrase-long patterns of "Wabash Blues," along with the examples of tunes and songs that possess a more predictable, and I would suggest a more European, melodic line.

Song types include the 19th-century African-American banjo song "Roustabout," a variety of Anglo-American traditional songs including the ancient ballad "Lady Gay," some early 20th-century blues, some old-time country, and an early bluegrass composition.

This record is also about some types of banjos used down through the years and the different elements of sound they contribute to a player's style. The instruments on this collection include a gourd banjo, an early minstrel, and a few odd ones like the Dobson top-tension, as well as the simple wood-rim and spun-rim banjos played by most Southern traditional players in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. I play three different models of the

Gibson Mastertone banjo, the type that is used by most contemporary three-finger-style banjo pickers. A few of these instruments are by contemporary makers.

This collection includes both obscure and familiar repertoires. In all the selections, I strive for traditional sound, and on many, I try for fidelity to the original source; but I will always sound like myself, whether I want to or not. I usually try to bring something new to each and am generally clear about that in the notes for each piece. I've learned all of these songs and tunes from traditional Southern musicians or their recordings, most of them soloists, as I am here. I don't read music.

I would have liked to include other styles. Some of these are: the Round Peak style played by Fred Cockerham, Tommy Jarrell, and Kyle Creed, which, with its many variations and recent developments, has become the dominant old-time style played by hundreds of younger players across the country; Snuffy Jenkins's three-finger style; Omer Forster's rippling Tennessee style; Will Keys's style, also from Tennessee; Uncle John Patterson's picking; Uncle Dave Macon's exuberant Tennessee "rapping" style; Dink Roberts's North Carolina style; DeFord Bailey's left-handed style; and so on. There's a world of ensemble styles that is only touched on in this collection.

I hope that this will make interesting listening for a casual listener and give banjo pickers a sample of traditional techniques on which they can build their own personal style. A series of video teaching tapes that include every piece is in production and will be available through Homespun Tapes starting in 1999.

A Brief History of the Banjo in America

The banjo first came to America with African slaves in the 17th century and was played almost exclusively by them until the early 19th century. During its early history here, it had a number of names of African origin, the most popular of which were variations on the word "banjer." Early banjos were strictly homemade and varied greatly in construction, size, and number of strings. From the few written accounts and artists' renderings remaining from this period, we can infer that they were usually gourd instruments with two or more long strings, a short drone string, and no frets. We have little idea of the playing style or repertoire prior to the late 19th century, and can only speculate backwards in time based on the oldest forms that survived into the early 20th century here and in Africa.

Playing style in that early period is generally considered to have been the "stroke," or "clawhammer" style of beating downward on

the strings, although I personally believe there was a great variety of playing methods. As banjo playing became popular among Anglo and other European-Americans in the early 1800s, the instrument soon evolved into the wood-hoop-with-brackets type that was the forerunner of present-day instruments.

In the mid-1800s minstrel shows presented mainly White players who mimicked their idea of African music, especially banjo picking. Gradually the instrument and its playing styles changed during the mid- to late 1800s. Construction of most banjos became the domain of manufacturing companies, who used a lot of metal to get a more stable design and a clearer, louder tone. Ornate parlor banjos were also produced at this time. Frets were added, changing the banjo from a rhythmic melody-and-drone instrument to one that could play chords and European composed music. In the late 1800s, steel strings became widely available, replacing the less dependable gut or silk strings previously used.

From the mid-1800s until the early 1900s, nearly all banjos were the five-string variety, with a short fifth string. Then a few manufacturers began attaching other types of necks to the banjo: guitar, mandolin, tenor, plectrum, and eventually ukulele. In the mid 1920s the Mastertone Gibson banjo, the favorite of Earl

Scruggs and his followers, was introduced. The banjo was in a decline from about 1925 to 1945 until Earl Scruggs, Pete Seeger, and interest in traditional jazz and Southern old-time music triggered its present revival. Today, there are players of virtually any kind of music on the five-string banjo. It's possible to purchase a banjo of almost any design one wishes, from a gourd instrument to one appropriate for bluegrass or jazz.

Although there was always some variety in styles and tunings, I believe that there was a great surge of inventiveness from about 1850 into the early 1900s as White rural Southerners took up the instrument through contact with both minstrel-style White musicians and Black banjo players. New techniques and tunings evolved as the banjo met and mixed with previously unaccompanied Anglo-American songs and fiddle tunes. The banjo also brought composed minstrel songs with it, and out of the mixture of these elements came the repertoire that we generally call old-time Southern music. Its richness is seen by the great variety of banjo music from this era, which included blues-related pieces such as "Darling Corey"; comedic, sometimes pithy banjo songs like "Boil 'em Cabbage Down"; English songs or ballads like "Lady Gay"; and newly made American songs or

narratives such as "Timbrook and Molly." Equally important were banjo tunes, some being instrumentals for listening, some for dancing, and some for ensemble playing, especially with the fiddle. Arpeggiated two-finger-and-thumb styles, historic forerunners of Earl Scruggs's style, appeared in the late 19th century.

The banjo fit in perfectly to the Southerners' love of homemade music—whether it was a person wanting to make music for himself or herself, amuse family or friends, play for house dances, busk during public gatherings or, more rarely, perform at schoolhouses or other community gathering places.

Africans were certainly the first to play fiddle-and-banjo music in America, perhaps as early as the 17th century. With the appearance of inexpensive guitars and development towards an urban, dollar economy in the early 20th century, the fiddle, banjo, and guitar became the popular, dominant string band combination that we now call old-time string band music. In the 1940s, bluegrass music built on the firm foundation of that old-time string band music.

While early string band music was played by both African- and Anglo-American Southerners, by the 1940s Black musicians were moving away from banjo and string band

music. Now participation by Black musicians in any form of contemporary country-style music except blues is very rare.

Old-time Banjo Styles

The banjo has invited experimentation and evolution—in the making of the instrument and in the playing of it—from the time when each handmade gourd-and-skin instrument was inherently very different from another to the era of experiment in design and manufacture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Perhaps as a relative newcomer to western European technological innovation, the banjo quickly experienced an evolutionary process that the fiddle and guitar had already undergone. In any case, a greater variety of construction designs was developed for the banjo than for stringed instruments from western Europe.

Except for a few banjo manuals circulated in the mid-19th century, there was little formalized teaching of the banjo, and practically none in the rural South. Something about the banjo—perhaps its ancient, infernal fifth string—demanded ingenuity and individuality. Certainly its brash, rhythmic qualities, its adaptability to existing Anglo-American song and dance traditions, and the relatively easy access to information on how it's made and played contributed to its popularity. As the

banjo was introduced into and mixed with Anglo-American mountain music, playing techniques, styles, and tunings proliferated. Banjo playing became a fad in the North, but in the South this robust expression of African-American tradition became a vital part of Anglo-American music.

I've heard many more styles than we have room for on this CD—more than I play myself, for sure—and the diversity of techniques is mind-boggling. I've heard people combine styles and do things that really challenge the imagination. A dean at the University of the South, who learned to play clawhammer from a Black Virginian, sounded the fifth string with an upward thumb motion, the reverse of usual technique. Another player, from East Kentucky, double-thumbed the fifth string in both up and down directions with his thumb. Will Keys occasionally picks the fifth string with his first finger and the first string with his thumb to achieve his unique, rolling sound. Ola Belle Reed and Matokie Slaughter pick the melody notes (upward) on the first two strings and clawhammer the melody notes (downward) on the third and fourth strings. And so on. Often when I've asked, "How did you learn that?" the answer can be, "I don't know, I just figured it out myself."

Certainly this stylistic individuality is an

attraction of the banjo. So many country players tell us proudly of their first banjo home-made from materials found close by. Many are also proud that they figured out how to play by themselves, and have their own unique style. The instrument seems to invite you to play to suit yourself. Some techniques suit certain people, songs, or tunes better than others, and each one gives a different effect.

Only a few of the traditional players I've known use more than one right-hand technique. Ralph Stanley is one. Backstage with the Stanley Brothers years ago, I asked Ralph how he played his classic version of "Little Birdie." Without a moment's hesitation he started playing it at top speed. As I watched his right hand, he played it four times through, each time with a different right-hand technique. Though each repetition had the same melody and overall sound, each technique had subtle differences, especially in rhythm and power. Ralph Stanley's ability to play in at least six different styles or techniques, including three-finger, is unique in my experience.

Tunings

The banjo was originally a fretless, rhythmic, melody-and-drone-string instrument. Although there is very little documentation of early,

especially Black, banjo tunings, I believe there were relatively few, especially for the three- or four-string varieties. It is my belief that the majority of the 50 or so traditional banjo tunings were developed during the time when both White and Black people were playing the banjo, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, in order to adapt the instrument to Anglo-American songs and tunes previously sung *a capella* or played on fiddle or lap dulcimer. Then in turn new songs and fiddle tunes were created from banjo ideas. Especially in the mountain areas, where music and individual style were so important, solo banjo players seemed to like sustaining, sometimes dissonant, drone strings and irregular phrasing.*

In old-time music, a capo was rarely used; a player often had to tune the banjo to a key he or she could sing in, one which also suited the song harmonically. No doubt some tunings were created this way.

In summary, I believe most banjo tunings were devised in the mountain areas between about 1850 and 1930 by players wishing to have something of their own yet remain connected to an older tradition. Each tuning conveys a special sound and feeling with drones, fingerings, and harmonic effects that cannot be achieved any other way.

Types of Banjos Used in Old-time Music

Basically, players have used what has been available. Through the early 1800s, banjoists played homemade instruments, whose construction ranged from primitive gourd-and-stick to the early wooden-hoop banjos made by a few experienced, mostly urban craftsmen. From the mid-1850s to about the 1920s the majority of banjos were factory-made, with a thin wood rim. At first most were fretless, but by about the 1880s, frets and sheet-metal-clad wood rims, often called full-spun metal rims, were common. Since the banjo was most popular amongst rural Southerners from about 1870 to the 1920s, most old-time banjo music was played on these factory-made instruments. Gradually in the early 1900s the more expensive banjo rims came to have heavy metal tone-rings under the head and thicker wooden rims. Developed in the 1920s, resonator banjos are favored by bluegrass players and some contemporary old-time players as well. Some home-making of banjos continues to this day.

Personally, I like certain kinds of banjos for certain songs. A gourd banjo can sound perfect for an archaic song such as "Roustabout," and a Gibson Mastertone, the type used in bluegrass, can sound perfect for the sustain required by the harmonics on "Lost Gander." The banjo I use most of the time is one of

about ten of its design made in about 1977 by Richard Newman, a studio furniture maker, musician, and dance teacher in Rochester, New York. It has a hollow, laminated 11-inch diameter, 3/4-inch thick rim with a tube-type bracket ring and a very thin brass tone ring—a design based on an early-20th-century instrument manufactured by V. Kraske. I like it because it possesses a mellow balance of plunk and clarity, adapts well to a variety of styles, is good to sing with, and is very well made.

In general, though, I think that old-time music sounds best on the lighter wood-rim banjos (including the metal-clad type), with little if any tone ring, no resonator, and a skin head.

THE SONGS

Songs are arranged so as to roughly follow the development of banjos and playing techniques in America, starting with a couple of African-American styles and progressing through a variety of clawhammer and clawhammer-like techniques, some two-finger picking, a few one-person styles, guitar-based styles, and more modern styles using metal and plastic finger picks with heavy resonator banjos.

Format of song notes: title, tuning, fingers used and their motion, source for the style, source for the song, comments on style, banjo used with comments. Unless noted otherwise, all banjos have skin, not plastic, heads. I use picks only when noted. In right-hand technique, "two-finger" means thumb and finger, "three-finger" means two fingers and thumb.

1. SOON IN THE MORNING BABE

gDGBD (pitched five half-steps lower, in D)

This is a distinctive, one-of-a-kind "frailing and picking" style I learned from Lucious Smith, an African-American man from Sardis, Mississippi, when he was in his late 80s. I play the third, fourth, and occasionally the fifth string with my thumb, and first, second, and third strings with my first finger in alternating up and down motions. Basically this is an improvisa-

tional arrangement, constantly gaining speed, of about a half dozen drum-like patterns.

Mr. Smith was banjoist with Sid Hemphill's band and was recorded by Alan Lomax several times in the 1940s and 1950s. Folklorist/musician David Evans played me a tape he had made of Smith's banjo picking in about 1971. I loved the earthy old sound of it but could never catch on to how he was doing it. I phoned Smith in 1976 and asked him if he would give me lessons, for a fee of course, and he agreed. I drove to Mississippi and we had two lovely sessions, during which he played this piece and a few others in the same style many times from slow to very fast. He also played in the usual clawhammer style and a thumb-lead style. I watched him carefully but still couldn't get it. At the end of our session, he said jokingly of my learning his style, "I tell you, [you] ain't going to learn it—you goin' to try." And later, "[But] if you play it, I'll move up further. I ain't going to let you catch me (laughs).... That's what makes good musicians." I asked him if it was difficult to learn this way of playing, and he said, "I tried and tried and tried and sometimes stopped trying," and that describes my learning of it, too. After trying off and on for years, about 20 years later I listened to my tape of him saying that, and it gave me heart to "try and try" also. Although I may not be using his exact

technique, I think the sound is pretty close.

Mr. Smith learned this style from Sid Hemphill and others and said it came from Alabama in the late 1800s with middle-aged African-American men. He called the style "cross-noting," and tuned his de-fretted spun-rim banjo very low, a G tuning down to D. Sometimes he sang the title with a few other words while playing.

I use a circa 1996 Bob Thornburg gourd banjo (gut-strung and fretless, of course) that doesn't sound nearly as funky as Smith's.

2. JOSH THOMAS'S ROUSTABOUT

gCGA#D (pitched one and a half tones lower, in E)

Clawhammer is probably the most widely used right-hand technique in old-time Southern music. It consists of an index-finger strike downward on one of the first four strings, usually a melody note, followed by an index-finger strike downward on one or more strings, most often the higher pitched strings, followed by thumbing of the fifth string. Some players use their second finger for the first and/or second strike. There is some motion of the hand and forearm and nearly always some soundings of the strings with fingers of the left hand known as "pull-offs" and "hammer-ons."

This piece is an unusual and archaic-sound-

ing form of clawhammer in which the third and fifth strings are the primary drones and the first is a secondary drone.

This is an African-Virginian style I've heard only from one remarkable player, Josh Thomas of Hollins, Virginia, near Roanoke. I'm indebted to Cliff Endres, who shared three hours of recordings he made of Thomas in 1970, when Thomas was about 80. This piece is a 19th-century African-American banjo song becoming the blues.

I play an accurate copy of a circa 1850 Ashborn minstrel banjo built for me by Clarke Prouty in about 1990. It's fretless and gut-strung.

3. JIM CRACK CORN *gCGBD*

(pitched three half steps lower, in the key of A)

This is a slow, irregular-accent clawhammer, possibly related to minstrel style. I occasionally use a rhythmic and harmonic embellishment called "double-noting" or "drop-thumb," the thumbing of the second, third, or fourth string. This sounds similar to the style of Thaddeus C. Willingham, although I believe he was playing a two-finger up-pick-down-stroke technique. This is a 19th-century minstrel song that I learned as a vocal solo from a 1937 John Lomax field recording of Uncle Eck Dunford at Galax, Virginia. On the recording, Dunford stated that it was a "noted banjo tune," and that gave me the idea about 20 years ago to play it this way.

A "shitepoke" is, amongst other things, a green heron.

I use a Farland wood-rim banjo with gut strings designed by a performer of classic banjo music, A. A. Farland, around 1900. The neck and rim were apparently made by the well-known New York makers Rettberg and Lange. The main feature of this instrument is that the skin rests directly on the 3/4-inch thick, 11 9/16-inch diameter, laminated maple-wood rim. It's one of my favorite banjos. Farland marketed this banjo to players of written banjo music.

4. **DARLING CORA** eCGCC

(pitched a half step low, in B)

This is a clawhammer style: index finger plays melody note, and index, middle, and ring finger brush all strings on the off-beat. At an eastern Kentucky senior citizens' lunchtime program with Roscoe Holcomb, we met C. B. "Lummy" Thornsberry, an old-time banjo picker who played this style and used this tuning on this song. (He called Roscoe's style "bluegrass.") Thornsberry was a big man with big, strong, working-man's hands. When he played, he let the first three fingers of his right hand hit the strings of the banjo and briefly stop on them, producing a short, percussive, damping sound. Ralph Stanley plays clawhammer in this style a

lot these days because of its power, he says. This is a strong, fairly basic-sounding, percussive style, especially when played a little slower than I play here. My percussive sound is not as strong as Thornsberry's—I have softer nails and a smaller hand, and I'm a different person.

The text here is mostly from a 1927 Victor recording by Kentuckian B. F. Shelton.

I play a circa 1985 Forbes banjo with a plastic head. It has a thin, moderate-depth, 13-inch wood rim and is one of the most sought-after banjos amongst contemporary old-time players. David Forbes made a few dozen of these banjos and is now a maker of fine violin bows.

5. **DEVIL'S DREAM** fCFCD

This is a two-finger, up-pick, up-and-down-stroke style. I learned this piece from George Landers, a neighbor of my friend Peter Gott in Madison County, North Carolina. Peter encouraged Landers to revive his banjo picking when the latter was nearly 80, and he was an unusually facile and distinctive player and singer. You can hear some of his recordings on my compilation *Close To Home* (Smithsonian Folkways 40097) and on *High Atmosphere*, a compilation by John Cohen (Rounder 0028).

I've encountered this technique mostly in western North Carolina, where it was played in a basic form by Bascom Lamar Lunsford and is

still played by Doc Watson and others. It's related to the style played on "Bright Sunny South" (track 21). Landers's version of the style, with its pinches, drags (not on this piece), and back-and-forth strokes, is the most elaborate version of this technique I've encountered.

I've used an inexpensive, mail-order-type, early-20th-century spun-rim banjo with a patented add-on tone ring and several carved bone decorations. Like the double-drone-string banjo on track 8, it was found in Missouri. The spun-rim or metal-clad wooden-rim banjo was probably the most popular type of banjo amongst Southern banjo pickers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

6. **LITTLE BIRDIE** eCGAC *(pitched a whole tone lower, in B flat)*

This is a two-finger style: index finger up-pick and down-stroke. I've seen a great number of mountain players use this style, especially on this song. A few who use the style are Roscoe Holcomb, Wade Mainer (on a few songs), Dee Hicks, Ralph Stanley (occasionally), Clyde Troxell, Arthur Smith, and Paul Brown. It is a variation of the style used on "Around the World" (track 7)—its down-stroke is sometimes not as strong, and it may therefore sound smoother and perhaps be less capable of high speed. Really, it's hard to tell the difference

between the two; individual players will find ways to make the styles sound different from one another.

I learned this tuning and got the idea for the second part from a 1971 visit with Robert Osborne, father of Bob and Sonny Osborne, the well-known bluegrass musicians. Mr. Osborne played in this style as well. He was a fine old-time musician who was originally from near Hyden, Kentucky, and settled in Ohio.

The banjo is a top-tension design with wood screws through a wooden stretcher band into a wooden hoop built into a resonator. "Henry C. Dobson's Patent July 16, 1867" is stamped into the side of the heel of the neck. The banjo was restored by Ed Cherniss of Fresno, California, in 1974. It was probably fretless originally but had new-looking frets when I bought it. Judging from the number of these instruments I've seen, a fair number must have been produced, though I've not seen any played by traditional players.

7. **AROUND THE WORLD** gDGBD

This is a three-finger style played index up-pick, second finger down-stroke. My source is a Dick Burnett recording from 1929 first released on *Ramblin' Reckless Hobo: The Songs of Dick Burnett and Leonard Rutherford* (Rounder 1004). This was a popular style

around the South, played by Ralph Stanley ("Little Birdie," on Rich-R-Tone), Pete Seeger, and Elizabeth Cotten, just to name a few. It has a rhythm similar to clawhammer, though less percussive, and can be played smoothly at great speed. Sometimes it's difficult to distinguish from the technique I use for "Little Birdie" (track 6), and Burnett may be using either on his recording.

I use a 10-inch spun-rim circa 1900 Weymann banjo with gut strings, which looks similar to photos of Burnett's. I doubt that he used gut strings, but I was striving for less sustain, as on the original lo-fi Gennett recording.

8. **WHOOPIN' UP CATTLE**

(Ti-Yiddle-Um Yeah) *dcADGA* (approximately)
Accompaniment: two-finger thumb-lead style on the first four verses, three-finger thumb-lead style on the remainder. Melody-playing: clawhammer style on first two breaks, three-finger style on final break.

Although multi-drone banjos are known in the Old World, this is the only banjo I've ever seen this side of the Atlantic with two drone strings. The tuning pegs for the drone strings are at approximately where the fifth and eighth frets would be. It has a large, 12-inch laminated wood rim, a fretless rosewood neck, and violin-type pegs, and a date penciled inside: "1870."

It could be English or American. I've not heard of anyone in the South playing one of these, so I've had to evolve something. Although for the player it's confusing to have two drone strings, on certain songs it's fun to hear them sustain a whole tone apart as they're being played together in an accompaniment or picked alternately when the instrument plays melody.

The song is from John and Alan Lomax's 1933 field recording of Mose "Clear Rock" Platt at Central State Farm (a prison farm) at Sugarland, Texas. My mother included the song in her 1950 book *Animal Folk Songs for Children*. Platt had an exceptionally fine voice, but the early field recording machine malfunctioned after the first three verses. To fill out the missing text, I use some verses from "Old Chisholm Trail" as printed in *American Ballads & Folk Songs* by John and Alan Lomax.

9. **FLOP EARED MULE** *gCGBD*

This is basically played in a three-finger up-pick-down-stroke style, though there are practically no down-strokes. On the high parts, the melody is played mostly on the first string with first finger, while the thumb "double-notes" the inside string. I learned this from Tennessee fiddler Arthur Smith, who played it on the banjo during a recording session at Kirk McGee's home in 1957. As I recall he used only his first

finger and thumb. I consider this style to be an early relative of the "ripple" styles of both Omer Forster and Will Keys, also from Tennessee.

Arthur played the A part in the upper register and the B part in the lower register. I also heard a circa 1950 recording of one of the Stoneman family playing both parts of the tune in the lower register, clawhammer style.

I use a 1970s copy of the early-20th-century Vega Whyte Ladye model, made by Richard Scott Newman.

10. **LOST GANDER** *f#DEAD*

I call this style "thumb-lead" because the thumb plays melody on the second, third, and fourth strings in between thumbing the fifth string. First finger plays the first string mostly as a secondary drone and occasionally as a melody note. In this particular case, I thumb the first string harmonic so it sounds like the others on the middle strings. Although the right hand is fairly basic thumb-lead, special effects evoking sounds of geese flying overhead are made by a special tuning and harmonics, or "touch notes" as Dock Boggs called them, made by simultaneously picking while touching the strings lightly over either the 12th or 7th fret.

I learned the piece from Tennessee ballad singer and banjo picker Dee Hicks during a visit with him and his wife Delta in the late 1970s.

His recording of the piece is on *Ballads and Banjo Music from the Tennessee Cumberland Plateau by Dee and Delta Hicks* (County 789). I use a contemporary Deering Black Diamond banjo. It has no tone ring, and its plastic head rests directly on a thick, wood-laminate rim. Resonator was off.

11. **THE SAILOR AND THE SOLDIER**

gDGAD (pitched a half step down, in F sharp)
I play this in a two-finger, thumb-lead personal style I learned from Ivory Howard during a visit with him at his home near Hippo, Kentucky, in the early 1970s. He played nearly everything in this tuning and style, using a lot of left-hand pull-offs and hammer-ons. My touch is lighter than his as I recall—we had only one meeting, and I didn't record him. I learned this song about the same time from Nancy Jones, an elderly woman from around Laurinburg, North Carolina. I didn't have a tape machine this time either, and I learned the tune vocally and on the banjo while Alice Gerrard took down the words.

I used a late-19th-century instrument, an August Pollman "Mandoline Banjo," a mandolin body with a five-string neck. I believe it was designed for either gut or steel strings, and I use steel.

Many homemade banjos were made with

wooden rather than skin sounding surfaces. Bascom Lunsford played a Pollman on some of his recordings.

12. AMERICAN SPANISH FANDANGO

gDGBD

This piece, along with this three-finger style of playing, come from mid- to late 19th-century Northern, urban, written tradition. Nonetheless, a great variety of versions in both 2/4 and 3/4 can be found in the repertoire of Southern traditional players.

I learned the core of this piece from a recording I made of an elderly man at a North Carolina fiddler's convention in 1961. It sounded to me like his source was sheet music. He was using thumb and finger picks and, although he had a gold-plated Gibson Mastertone flat-head (the most highly prized bluegrass banjo), he was playing poorly and his musical intent was hard to perceive. I've arranged this version from his outline.

I use a circa 1920 Bacon Blue Ribbon banjo with gut strings and the in-the-hoop resonator off. I think that the gut strings, the original very light Bacon bridge, and the holes through the tone ring and hoop give it that typical Bacon "plink." Fred Bacon was a performer of classic banjo music as well as a designer and manufacturer of banjos during the early 1900s.

13. GOT NO SILVER NOR GOLD BLUES

gCGCE (pitched a whole step lower, in B flat)

I consider this to be Uncle Dave Macon's personal three-finger version of minstrel-style banjo, which is partly adapted from late-19th-century guitar picking. My thumb plays the fifth string occasionally, melody on the fourth and third strings, and shares melody with the first finger on the second and occasionally the first strings, where they sometimes pick the same note in rapid succession; the second finger plays melody on the first string. I don't think of this style as having a particular pattern; melody is played during and between verses with occasional accented notes and bass-chord accompaniment figures. Uncle Dave played this piece in G tuning, but I like the sound of the C tuning better, and the bizarre two-octave melody fits best in this key. Macon used this tuning on other songs. I expect he put this eccentric song together, originally recorded on Vocalion 5164A.

I use the same Farland banjo as on "Jim Crack Corn" (track 3), this time with steel rather than gut strings.

14. WE'RE UP AGAINST IT NOW *gDGBD*

This is an early three-finger arpeggio style.

This type of playing, like that on the previous track, was certainly a product of late-19th-

century Anglo/European-American banjo playing. I include it because of the way it uses arpeggios to outline the song melody, which could be considered the basis of present-day bluegrass style. But there's little use of the fifth string, certainly not as a drone. The song accompaniment consists mostly of early parlor-guitar style.

I especially like this topical song from a 1920s recording by Uncle Dave Macon (Vocalion 5003). I'll bet he wrote it—animal power versus petrified-animal-powered gasoline-driven vehicles was one of his favorite song subjects. I've tried to play this pretty close to the way he did, though I've left off a couple of verses.

I use a rare, hollow-laminate-rim banjo with a metal bracket-flange around the rim to which the neck is attached. There is no dowel stick, so there's absolutely no hardware inside the wooden hoop. Since the neck is connected only to the bracket-flange, its flexing makes tuning unstable. It's a neat, probably early-20th-century design, possibly English, and possesses no hints of its maker. It has some of the qualities of the early Gibson banjos which Uncle Dave played.

15. THAT'S WHAT THE OLD BACHELOR'S MADE OUT OF

gCGBD (pitched three half steps down, to A)

On this, the third waltz-time piece on this CD, I play a hybrid three-finger style of melody picking and several different backup styles during harmonica breaks and vocals.

The banjo was rarely used for waltzes and other slow songs in traditional music, probably due to its lack of sustain and its general rowdy nature. In a sense, my playing on this song is a compilation of techniques I've heard several banjo players use for waltzes. The melody is played by the second finger on the first string, the first finger on the second string, and the thumb on the third, fourth, and fifth strings with occasional first- and fifth-string pinches (simultaneously playing the two strings).

Accompaniment during mouth-harp breaks and vocals progresses as follows: a thumb-and-first-finger bass-chord similar to Maybelle Carter's guitar style; a three-finger bass-chord parlor-guitar-like motion similar to the technique used by Charlie Poole, with no use of the fifth string; a few arpeggios and use of the fifth string added to previous technique; melody played along with mouth-harp and vocal; and finally, a return to the first technique.

The song is well known; this version is from a string band arrangement by Kenneth Borton on a vintage 78 rpm recording, Challenge 331-B. Borton was a pseudonym for banjoist and singer Marion Underwood.

For this recording I borrowed a friend's Chopourian banjo built by Weymann in the early 20th century. It's an altogether over-size banjo—it has a long, ornate, neck, 2–3 inches longer than most banjos; a deep 12-inch spun rim with marquetry inside; and an easy-off resonator, which I didn't use. It lent itself well to this low tuning.

16. **THE LAST OF CALLAHAN** *gDGBD*

This three-finger melody-picking style is based on the playing of Arthur Smith on "Uncle Buddy" on *The McGee Brothers and Arthur Smith: Milk 'Em in the Evening Blues* (Folkways 31007). I think he actually used just thumb and forefinger. About the same time that I recorded him for that LP in 1965, I was trying to learn "The Last of Callahan" on the fiddle without much musical success, and it soon became a banjo tune. Notice that I play a note on the high part by fretting the fifth string, so that the note fits more naturally into the rhythm of the right-hand motion. The fifth string is not often fretted.

My source for the melody was Alan and Elizabeth Lomax's 1937 recording of Luther Strong of Dalesburg, Kentucky, released commercially by the Library of Congress on the LP *Anglo American Shanties, Lyric Songs, Dance Tunes and Spirituals*.

This is played on a Kraske banjo, an early-20th-century hollow-laminated-rim instrument, similar to and a predecessor or contemporary of Gibson "trapdoor" banjos. This is one of my especially favorite banjos because of its balance between plunk and clarity and its relative lack of metallic overtones.

17. **LADY GAY** *f#CGAD*

(pitched one half step lower, in C sharp)

I play this in the style that Dock Boggs used on "Country Blues," "Oh Death," and many of his other songs in the key of D.

Basically, this is a combination of a parlor-guitar-like picking pattern and a three-finger up-pick-down-stroke style. Dock used this to play the melody behind vocals and for occasional instrumental breaks. In my playing of this style, my thumb plays melody on third and fourth strings, first finger up-picks melody on first or second string, and second finger sometimes strokes down on first and second strings between melody notes. For occasional "fills" or "vamps" between phrases, thumb plays fourth string on the downbeat, first finger plays second string, and second finger plays first string. The fifth string is only occasionally thumbed, and only during melody playing. This is a simplification of the way Dock played it; for a description of Dock's

styles see *Dock Boggs: His Folkways Years 1963-1968* (Smithsonian Folkways 40108).

I sing this song with an early-20th-century spun-rim Sears Roebuck "Supertone" banjo similar to the one with which Dock Boggs first recorded. I learned this classic English ballad from two recordings by Buell Kazee, Brunswick 212 (1928) and June Appal 009 (recorded in the 1960s and early 1970s). Kazee was from Magoffin County in eastern Kentucky. Like Dock Boggs, he took many of the older unaccompanied traditional songs and adapted them to the banjo. Kazee played this in a different tuning, style, and pace.

19. **DOWN SOUTH BLUES** *gGGBD* *(pitched a half step lower, in F sharp)*—*Note that the fourth string is tuned an octave below the third.*

I learned this song from Dock Boggs in the 1960s, when we toured together and I recorded him. My right-hand technique is similar to his on this song: a three-finger up-pick-down-stroke style in which I pick melody with my index finger and stroke down occasionally with my second finger. My thumb plays the fifth string and occasionally "double-notes" the second and third strings. This blues is played with a "slide," a metal tube on the third finger of my left hand, used as a kind of moveable fret. I only occasionally note the third string

with my first finger. I've heard "slide" playing of a five-string banjo only twice, on early 78 rpm recordings by Dock Walsh and Gus Cannon, though I'm certain that others must have experimented with it.

I use a banjo built in the late 1970s by Richard Scott Newman, a model he calls the "Holophonic," based on the early-20th-century banjo by V. Kraske that I used on "The Last of Callahan" (track 16). This is the banjo I use most of the time, especially in public performances.

20. **LAST NIGHT WHEN MY WILLIE COME HOME** *gCGBD*

Melody is played in two different styles adapted from guitar styles, the first a three-finger style based on the country ragtime guitar picking of Tennessean Sam McGee and the second a two-finger technique played by Kentuckian Virgil Anderson and others. The latter style is very close to the guitar style evolved in the 1920s by Virginia's Maybelle Carter. Back-up is played in four different styles in the following order: a simple three-finger parlor-banjo back-up style as used by Charlie Poole and others; a North Carolina three-finger style similar to Poole's, this one using the fifth string; a pattern based on Maybelle Carter's guitar playing; and finally, playing the melody behind the vocal as Sam McGee did behind Uncle Dave Macon on his

original circa 1930 recording of this song on Vocalion 15319. McGee- and Poole-type patterns are played with thumb alternating between third and fourth strings (as on the bass strings of a guitar) and the first two fingers picking melody or chords on the first two strings. With the Carter-type pattern, melody or accompaniment is played with the thumb on the third, fourth, and occasionally fifth strings while first finger strokes up and down on the first two strings. I've added verses from more recent versions of the song.

On this piece I play a late-19th-century Fairbanks banjo, one of the first "Electric" models, a predecessor to the popular Vega Whyte Ladye. I used gut strings and play "quills," or panpipes, in a harmonica rack.

20. WABASH BLUES *eAACD (the fourth string is tuned an octave below the third)*

This is a hard-as-nails clawhammer style played with a hard metal finger pick on my index finger. It is a tune played by combining an unusual tuning, pull-offs and hammer-ons only on the first string at the second fret, and a variety of right-hand patterns. My wife Alexia calls it a "tunoid." I think of it as a banjo piece, not exactly a tune. Although the left hand frets only one string at one fret, the right-hand work is the core of the piece and

tricky. Some of the seemingly simplest pieces in Southern music can be difficult.

I learned this from a home tape recording of Hobart Smith made by Chicago banjo picker Fleming Brown in October 1963. Hobart played the piece at length in an improvisational way at top speed, faster than I do here, and commented that "hesitation" licks sounded to him like a steam train whistle which he "blew" a little differently each time. At a University of Chicago Folk Festival workshop in the 1960s Hobart told us that the reason he used a pick instead of his index nail when he clawhammered the banjo was because he bit his fingernails. He was a great musician but didn't record very much. You can hear his playing on *America's Greatest Folk Instrumentalist* (Folk-Legacy FSA 17), and along with other musicians on compilations from the Alan Lomax Collection, especially *Southern Journey Volume 2: Ballads and Breakdowns* (Rounder 1702)

I use a Blue Comet banjo, a very light and inexpensive resonator banjo of a type that has been used by many traditional players since the 1930s. This one probably dates from the 1940s. It sounds like one that Hobart played on some of his recordings.

21. BRIGHT SUNNY SOUTH *gDGCD*

(pitched a whole step lower, in F)

This style is related to the two-finger "up-pick, up-stroke" style on "Devil's Dream" (track 5), though with thumb and finger picks, it is simpler. I've only heard this style used by players using resonator banjos, and it was probably evolved in the late 1920s and early 1930s to adapt to the need for louder sound in public performance. Amongst players using this style were Hayes Shepherd, an eastern Kentucky acquaintance of Dock Boggs who played a Gibson banjo similar to his; Wade Mainer (on most of his recordings); and Ralph Stanley on his Rich-R-Tone recording of "Little Maggie." I learned the song from Dock Boggs and play it on his 1928 Gibson Mastertone banjo. As I recall, the heavy-gauge Gibson strings, including the wound third string, are the ones Dock put on the banjo about 1970.

22. ROLL ON JOHN *f#DF#AD*

(pitched a whole step lower, in C)

This is a thumb-and-index-finger style used by Roscoe Holcomb on several of his songs in this tuning. He usually pitched this tuning a whole tone higher, in D. He usually used thumb and finger picks, as I do here. Several other players of his generation used a style similar to this, which is a more syncopated, semi-blue-

grass version of the thumb-lead style used on "Lost Gander" (track 10).

This version of this well-known eastern Kentucky song comes from the singing of Palmer Crisp on Folkways FA 2342. Roscoe Holcomb's version of this song, "Roll On Buddy," can be heard on Smithsonian Folkways *The High Lonesome Sound* (SFW 40104). He used a different tuning and banjo style.

I use my favorite banjo, Richard Scott Newman's "Holophonic."

23. NEEDLECASE *gCGBD*

(pitched a half step higher in C sharp)

This is an early-20th-century three-finger-style banjo piece played with thumb and finger picks: thumb plays third, fourth, and fifth strings, first finger plays second string, and second finger plays first string. It is one of many predecessors to the style evolved by Earl Scruggs in the 1930s and 1940s. Metal finger picks give a clear, loud sound and certainly have changed the sound of mid-20th-century banjo picking.

I learned this piece from Sam McGee of Franklin, Tennessee, whom I recorded in 1957 for *The McGee Brothers and Arthur Smith, Old Timers of the Grand Ole Opry* (Folkways FA2379). I use a depression-era Gibson Mastertone RB 3, a clear plastic thumb pick, and medium brass Dunlop finger picks.

24. COME MY LITTLE PINK *gDGBD*

This is my version of Earl Scruggs's style, undoubtedly the single most imitated/emulated banjo style. Earl Scruggs based his playing on the three-finger arpeggiated styles of older regional North Carolina banjoists such as Smith Hammett and Snuffy Jenkins. By the late 1940s, he had evolved an entire banjo language, which is now the predominant banjo style amongst players all over the world. As opposed to every other piece on this recording, it is essentially an ensemble style and really should have at least a guitar and bass, if not also the fiddle and mandolin that completes a bluegrass band. In the 1950s, I used to play bluegrass style music with Bob Baker, Hazel Dickens, and others, but since I play mostly solo old-time music now, I rarely play this style anymore.

I heard Stringbean (David Akeman) play this song on the Grand Ole Opry in the mid-1950s. It's also on one of his long-out-of-print recordings, *Way Back in the Hills of Old Kentucky* (Starday SLP 260). Additional verses come from William May of Mingo County, West Virginia, recorded on *Folk Songs and Ballads Volume 4* (Augusta Heritage Recordings AHR 010).

I use a clear plastic thumb pick and two .0225 brass Dunlop finger picks and play a

late-1920s gold-plated tube-and-plate Gibson Mastertone TB6 with a 1957 Joe Wallo neck. It was originally a tenor banjo.

25. BATTLE IN THE HORSESHOE *gDGCD*

The style here is a basic thumb-and-index-finger mountain clawhammer, prevalent during the late 19th and early 20th centuries—nothing real fancy, just some occasional “drop-thumb” licks, that is, using the thumb on the middle strings. This brings our banjo journey back to old-time home-grown music.

My source is an aluminum field recording that I've heard since I was a kid. The player was J. W. Russell of Marion, Virginia, recorded in 1936 by our family friend Sidney Robertson Cowell. I suppose you could say there's nothing special about this tune, and that's one reason I like it—it's comfortable. And it does have a tricky place or two.

I believe “Horseshoe” refers to a creek.

This anonymous-maker, early-20th-century, thin-wood-rim banjo is fretless, and I keep it with a loose head. It sounds a lot like Mr. Russell's instrument, and I'd bet that he and a lot of other old-timers played instruments like this. It came to me from south central New York State.

And to conclude, after a short pause, my own mix of Scruggs' and clawhammer styles:

26. I'M HEAD OVER HEELS IN LOVE

(Lester Flatt, Peer International Corp./BMI)

gDGBD (pitched three half steps lower, in E)

This is played with a two-finger clawhammer technique. A few players like Lee Sexton have devised ways of adapting some of Earl Scruggs's right- and left-hand patterns into clawhammer style. In the 1950s, I occasionally amused my bluegrass-playing friends by playing a few of Earl's breakdowns and songs clawhammer style, and this is an evolved version of that. Since the song is fairly slow I can attempt to follow some of Earl's right-hand rolls fairly closely.

The song was written by Lester Flatt, and is classic early Flatt and Scruggs. The song is so widely traveled now that it's practically a traditional song, but you can hear the original on Rounder CDSS19 or *Flatt and Scruggs—1948-1959* (Bear Family 15472).

To take this idea to its illogical extreme, I play it on a fancy circa 1870 fretless minstrel banjo that was restored by Ed Cherniss of Fresno, California, in the mid 1970s. Of course it's strung with gut.

Mike Seeger

Rockbridge County, VA, August 1998

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Solo Old-Time Country Music (Rounder 0278)

Grammy nominee, 1991

Third Annual Farewell Reunion (Rounder 0313)

Mike Seeger with 23 different guests or bands, including L-7's, Hazel Dickens, Bob Dylan, Tommy Jarrell, Tim O'Brien, etc. Grammy nominee, 1994

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Way Down in North Carolina (Rounder 0383)
Mike Seeger with Paul Brown

Videotapes

Elizabeth Cotten and Mike Seeger in Concert (Ramblin' 804)

Mike Seeger—Fret 'n Fiddle (Vestapol 13008)

Talking Feet, a documentary of Southern dance. (Flower Films FF 115, 10341 San Pablo Ave, El Cerrito, CA 94530)

Instructional Tapes

Audio tapes:

Autoharp, Jaw Harp, Old Time Country Mandolin

Videotapes:

Old-time Banjo Styles with Etta Baker, Greg Hooven, Kirk Sutphin, Joe and Odell Thompson, and Doc Watson

Above instructional tapes available from Homespun Tapes, P.O. Box 694, Woodstock, NY 12498.

Books

Old-Time String Band Songbook (formerly *The New Lost City Ramblers Songbook*), edited by Mike Seeger and John Cohen (Music Sales Corporation).

Other style-focused collections of traditional banjo music on County, and other labels are yet to be released in current formats (1998).

For a complete discography and other information, see Mike Seeger's website:
<http://mikeseeger.pair.com>

Credits

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Cover art by Dane Penland

Photos of banjos on insert by Jeremy

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Mastered by Charlie Pilzer, Airshow, Springfield, VA

Sound supervision by Pete Reiniger

Production supervised by Anthony Seeger

Production coordinated by Mary Monseur and Michael Maloney

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Special thanks to Alexia Smith for support, good counsel, and editing notes.

Thanks to all of the banjo pickers from whom I've learned, including the younger (than me) generations; the banjo makers; and those who recorded the players that I wasn't fortunate enough to meet. Thanks also to David Grisman, Jerry Garcia, Acoustic Disc, and the Rex Foundation for their support and encouragement; Moses Asch, Gene Bluestein, Paul Brown, Joe Bussard, Bruce Clark, John Cohen, Pat Conte, Karin Hamingson, Loyal Jones, Eli Kaufman and the American Banjo Fraternity, David McLaughlin, Gerry Milnes, Richard Nevins, Toni Williams, Charles Wolfe, and many others.

Banjos on cover, from front to back: Gourd banjo by Ed Cherniss, Fresno, CA, early 1970s; Tilton banjo, circa 1870, one of the earliest manufac-

tured banjos; Gibson Mastertone, used on track 24. I'm holding the Weymann I use on track 7.

Banjo on CD label is used on track 6.



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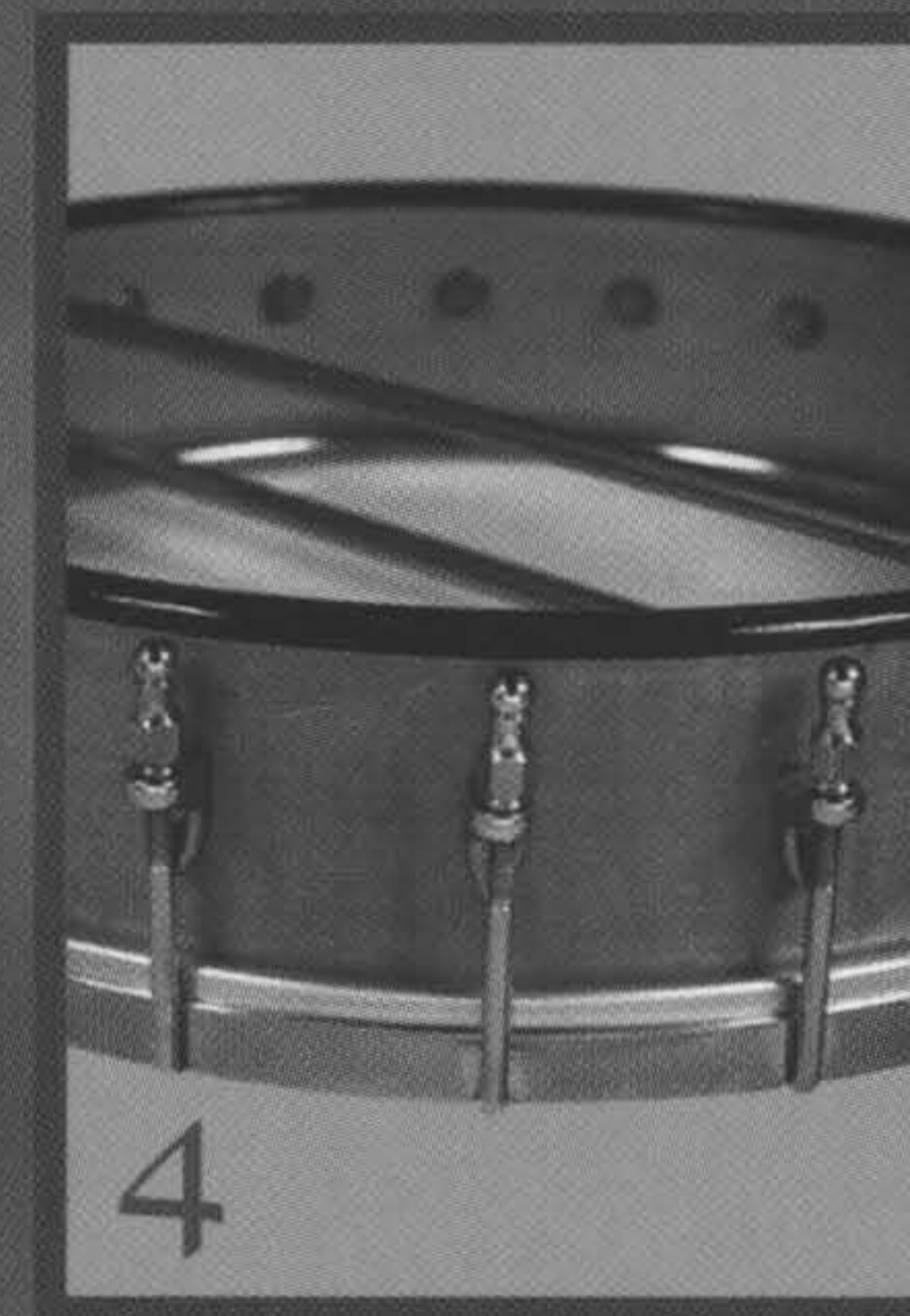
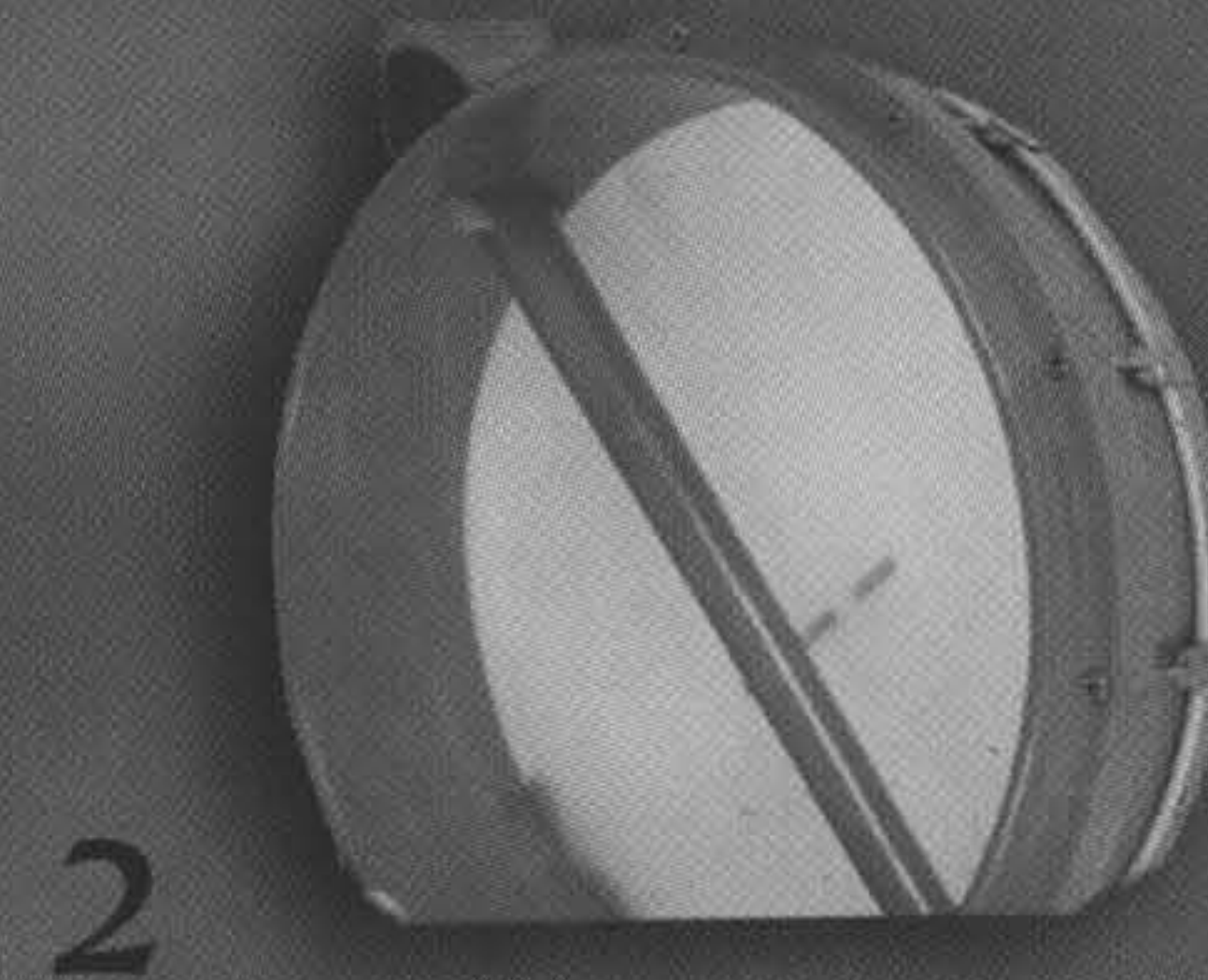
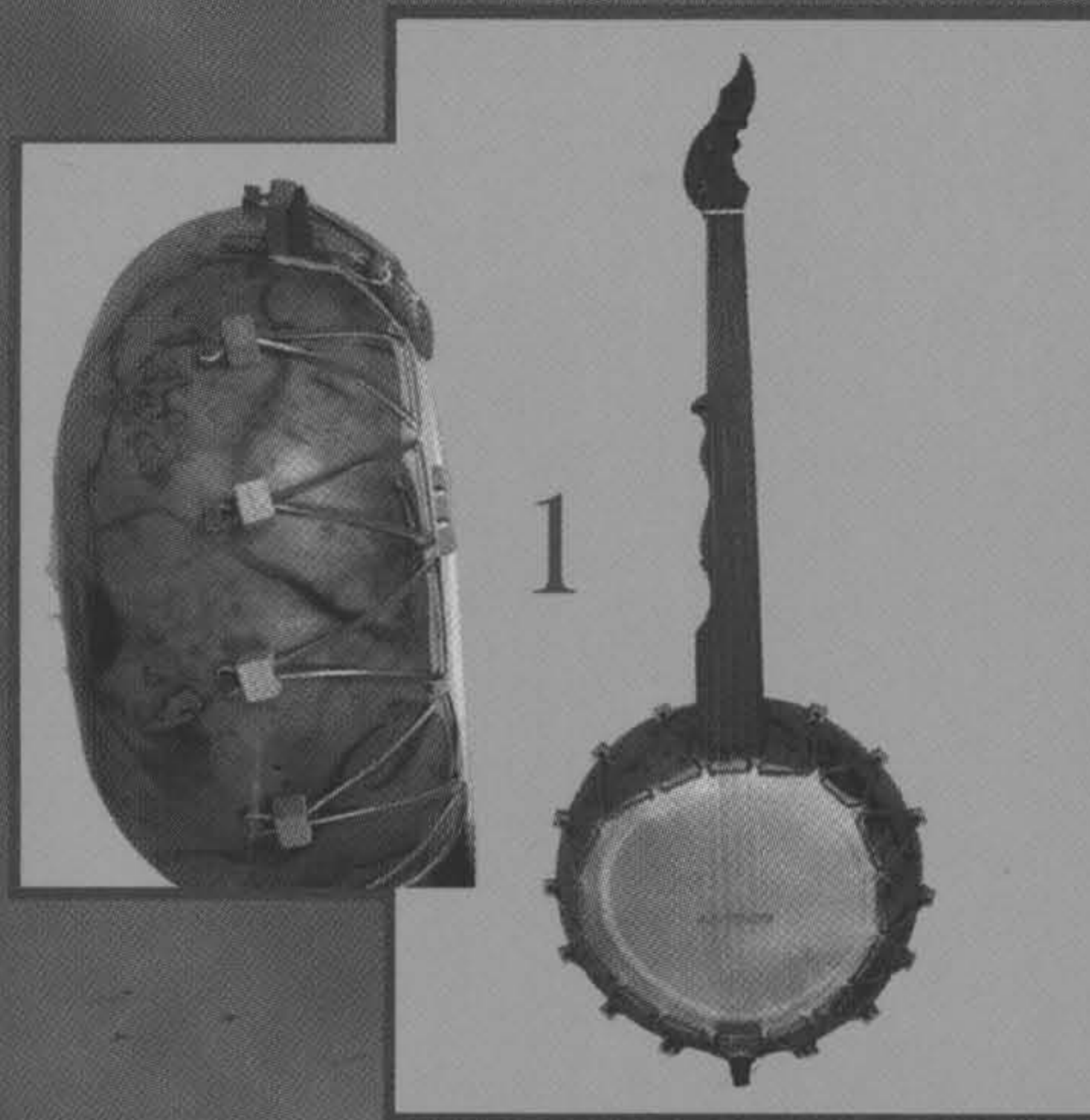
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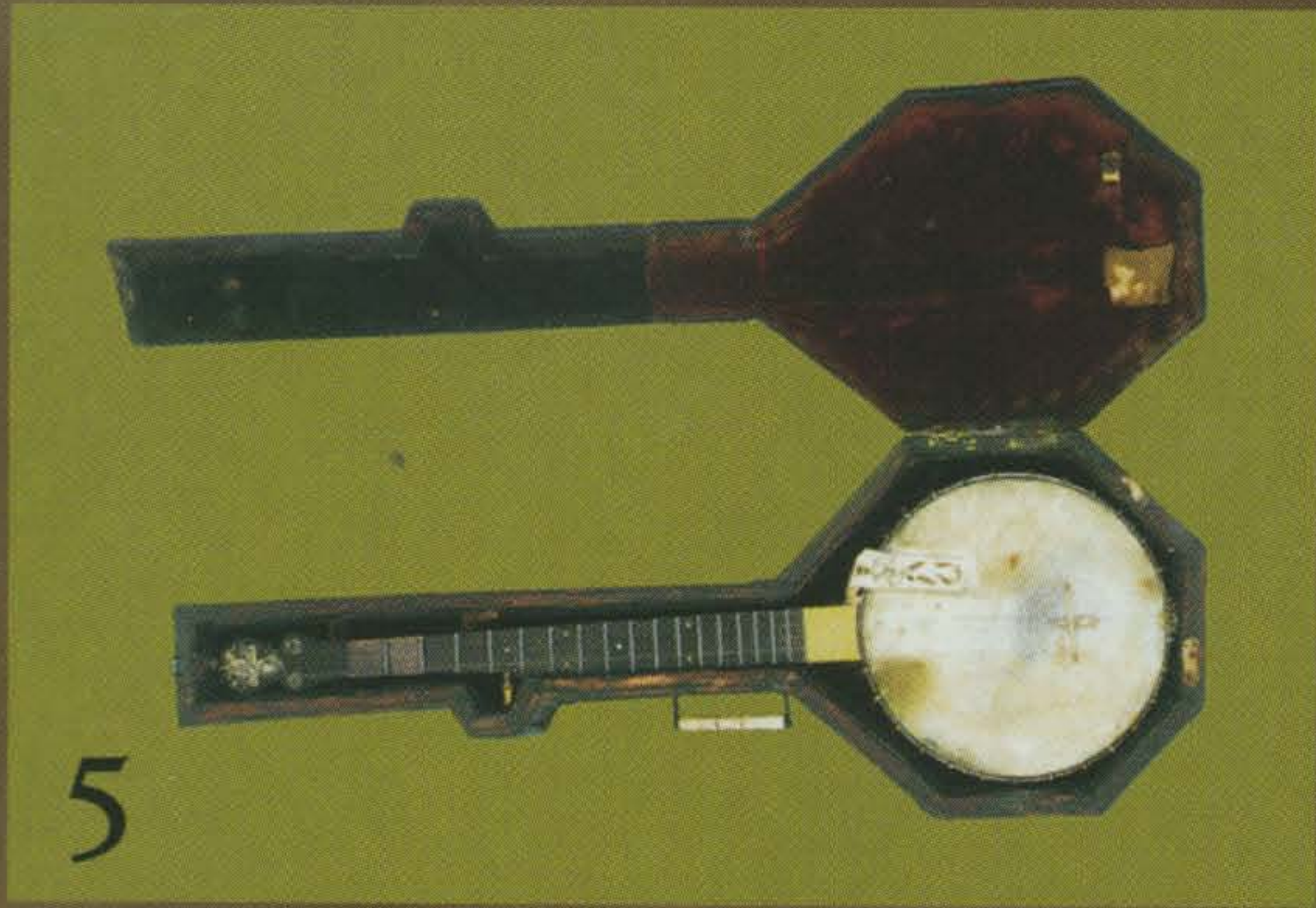
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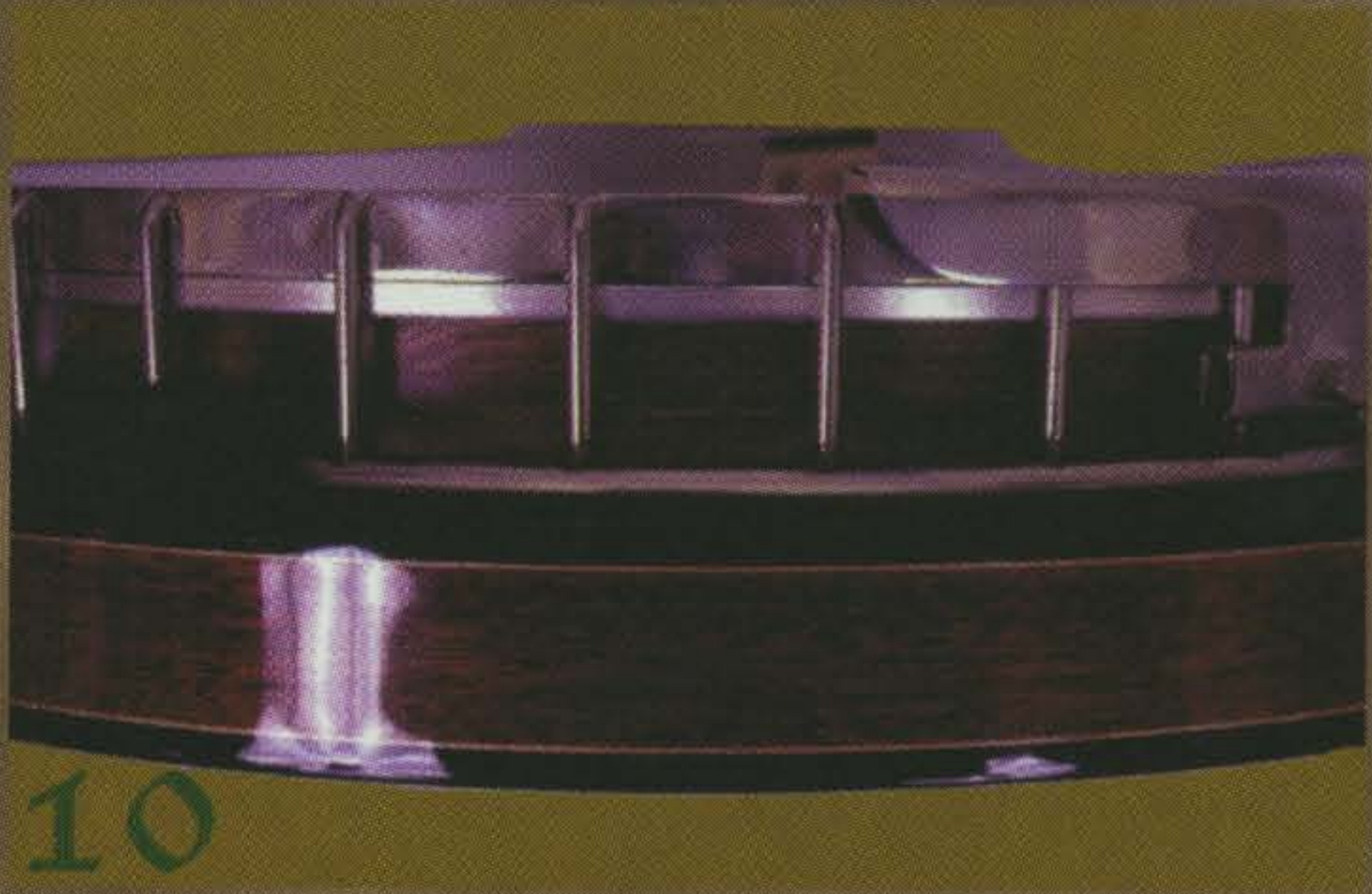
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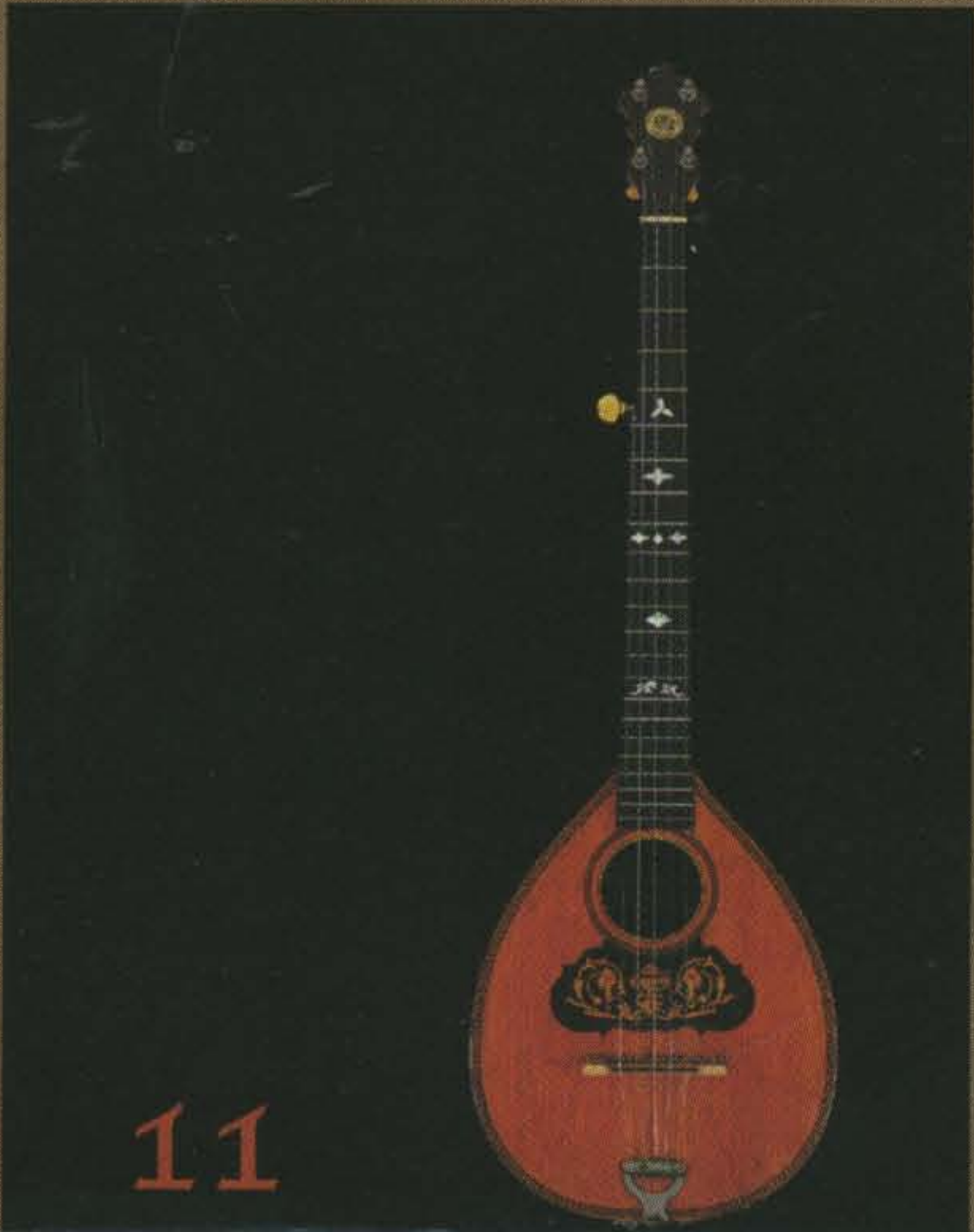
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