How to play
the 5-string Banjo
by
Pete Seeger
HOW TO PLAY THE 5-STRING BANJO
Pete Seeger
FOLKWAYS RECORDS CRB 2

TECHNIQUES

1. THREE FINGER PICKING
   - Band 1: a-c-d
   - Band 2: a-d-a
   - Band 3: a-d-a
   - Band 4: a-d-a
   - Band 5: a-d-a

2. FINGERPICKING
   - Band 1: a-c-d
   - Band 2: a-d-a
   - Band 3: a-d-a
   - Band 4: a-d-a
   - Band 5: a-d-a

3. DOUBLE THUMBING
   - Band 1: a-d-a
   - Band 2: a-d-a
   - Band 3: a-d-a
   - Band 4: a-d-a
   - Band 5: a-d-a

4. PULLING OFF
   - Band 1: a-d-a
   - Band 2: a-d-a
   - Band 3: a-d-a
   - Band 4: a-d-a
   - Band 5: a-d-a

5. HAMMERING ON
   - Band 1: a-d-a
   - Band 2: a-d-a
   - Band 3: a-d-a
   - Band 4: a-d-a
   - Band 5: a-d-a

6. THREE MISCELLANEOUS POSTSCRIPTS
   - Band 1: a-c-d
   - Band 2: a-d-a
   - Band 3: a-d-a
   - Band 4: a-d-a
   - Band 5: a-d-a

Photo by Raeburn Flerlage
This Longplay record gives the main rhythmic patterns needed to accompany oneself in the singing of folksongs. It is designed to accompany the more complete manual, "How To Play The Five-String Banjo" by Pete Seeger. It can, however, be used by itself.

Of course, in a 30 minute recording, it is impossible to go into much detail. There are many ways of playing the banjo in America, and this record touches mainly on the technique of one person.

It is as though a man asked you to teach him how to build a house, and all you have time to do is teach him how to mix and pour cement, hammer a nail, and saw on the square. From there on you can only hope that he will have sense to go look at some houses, examine closely the ones he admires, and then construct likewise, adjusting the architecture to fit his own needs.

"So, now, this is how you hold a hammer. . . . ."

Side I, Band 1a: A BASIC STRUM
"Well, now, to begin, hold the banjo somewhat as shown in the picture, and tune it up. This is what we call the C tuning. . . . ."
(The 4th string is C, one octave below middle C, the 3rd string is G, four notes below middle C, the 2nd string is B, one half tone below middle C; the 1st string is D, one whole tone above middle C, the 5th string is G, a fifth above middle C. Note that in turning the peg, pluck the string constantly, so that you know just when to stop.)

Side I, Band 1b: "Now, with the left hand, put your fingers down on the strings where the dots are on the little diagram, and make a "C" chord. It should sound like this. . . . ."
(And would look like this on music paper:)

Side I, Band 1c: "Now, with the index finger of your right hand, pluck up on the first string. . . . ."
". . . . then brush down across strings with the back of your fingernail, either of your ring finger (or another) or of all of your fingers. . . . ."

"Try that, over and over again, in rhythm."

"That's what we call The Basic Strum. Here's a song you can start right off playing."
Side I, Band 2a: THE FIFTH STRING
"Now we're going to add the fifth string. You pluck it with your thumb.

"Take the pattern you had before. That is, you pluck up with your right index finger on the first string, then brush across all strings then with your thumb pluck the fifth string, all together it would sound like this.

"Bump-ditty, bump-ditty, is the rhythm you're aiming at."

Side I, Band 2b:
"Now take that same song you played before, and play it again, using the fifth string."

Side I, Band 3a: HAMMERING ON
"Now, some notes can be sounded by the fingers of the left hand, fretting a string so sharply that you can hear it. I call this 'hammering on'. For example, pluck the open third string with the index finger of your right hand, come down on that third string with the middle finger of your left hand so hard that you can hear it.

"The first time you heard the note it was made by your right hand. The second note was actually made by the middle finger of your left hand. Now try this. Pluck up with your index finger, hammer down with your left hand, brush down with your ring finger, pluck the fifth string with your thumb, a little faster."

Side I, Band 3b:
"Here's a little bit of the song 'John Henry', with some of this 'hammering on' in it."

Side I, Band 4a: PULLING OFF
"Now, the left hand can also make notes by actually plucking a string. Usually works most easily on the 1st, 2nd, or 3rd strings, I call it 'pulling off'. Now, put your fingers on the strings, as shown in the diagram.

"It should sound like this..."

"Then with the ring finger of the left hand, actually pluck the first string.

"Now, the way it'll sound is like this: Pluck up on the first string with your right index finger, pull off with the left hand, brush down with your ring finger, sound the third string, all together it would sound like this..."

Side I, Band 4b:
"Well, now, if you study the notation and the tablature given, you ought to be able to play this song. I think you know it..."

Side I, Band 5a: DOUBLE THUMBING
"Now, at times you'll want to bring your thumb over to play a single string. Try this for example: Pluck up on the first string with your right index finger, then pluck the second string with your thumb, again pluck up on the first string with your right index finger, and then sound the thumb string. All together, like this:"

Side I, Band 5b:
"Now, for just one more time, here's our old friend, Skip To My Lou, written out for a lot of double thumbing."
Side I, Band 5c:
"Now, not all songs, after all, can be conveniently sung in the key of C. If you want to play in the key of G, it's best to retune the 4th string, up one whole tone from C to D..." (Double check by checking with the 1st string, which should be exactly one octave higher.)
"...here's a tune you played a little while ago, only we're going to play it a different way, with a lot of double thumbing.
First put your thumb on the 2nd string...index finger on the 1st string...your thumb on the 5th string...your index finger on the 1st string...all together, it should sound like this..."
Side I, Band 7c:
(Here's the song, 'Cindy', written out as played in Scruggs' clawhammer style, on this record.)

Side II, Band 1a: A LOUD STRUM
"Sometimes, however, you'll find yourself in a large and noisy crowd, and your accompaniment won't be heard at all unless it's quite loud. Try this, for example:
(1) Pick down on the 4th and 5th strings with the back of your middle finger, using a fingerpick. . . .
(2) Hammer on, or pull off, with the left hand. . . .
(3) Brush down across the first three strings with the same back of your middle finger. . . .
(4) And brush up across all five strings with your index finger. . . .
See, that stroke takes the place of the 5th string. . . .
"Try it all together:

Side II, Band 1b:
"Here is a variation of the above, for a little bit of slower tempo. Pick down as before on the 4th and 5th strings, . . . again pick down on the 4th and 5th strings, with the middle finger, with a fingerpick on it . . . and again go down, only this time across the first three strings, . . . and brush up with your index finger. . . . Now this would sound as follows:

Side II, Band 2a: THREE MISCELLANEOUS POSTSCRIPTS
"Here are three miscellaneous postscripts. First, if you want to play a single melody, try using the thumb and forefinger alone, thus. . . .
Play the whole example as written":

Side II, Band 2b:
"If you ever want to play a tremolo (like a mandolin), brace the ring finger and little finger of your right hand against the drum, as shown in the picture."

". . . and then brace the right thumb gently against the joint of the index finger, and move the index finger lightly and quickly up and down across, say, the first string. Let's try it. . . .

(Easier said than done, I agree. Try not to get tensed up.)
"You can actually go across two strings if you want. . . . and play a tune. . . ."

Side II, Band 2c:
"A roll is a special banjo effect. Double up the hand as shown in the picture, and suddenly unwind it, first the little finger, next the ring finger, and so on until the whole hand is open, as shown in the second picture."
Side II, Band 3a: 3/4 AND 6/8 TIME

"Till now we've steered pretty clear of waltz rhythm, that is, 3/4 time. For this you simply repeat the second stroke in your basic strum, as follows:

. . . . . . . .

try it all together."

Side II, Band 3b:

"Using this method, and a little double thumbling, try the song 'Down In The Valley'."

Side II, Band 3c:

"For a more sustained effect, try the following. Each string is plucked separately. . . . as if you were playing the Spanish Guitar. . . . Try it all together." (The rest of the words of this song can be found in 'The Caroler's Songbag'.)

Side II, Band 3d:

"Incidentally, this type of finger picking can also be used for 2/4 time. Now, in this song I've got the capo up two frets, so even though I am playing just as though I were in the key of C, it actually comes out the key of D. . . . All together:"

"Try this:"

Side II, Band 3e:

"Now, 6/8 time is the same as that of an Irish jig, or the Sicilian tarantella, or some marches, such as 'Johnny Comes Marching Home'. For example, try this. . . .

"Now, those six things put together should sound somewhat as follows:"

"Of course, there are many variations possible."
Side II, Band 4c:
"Here's a sample blues passage notated in detail. . . ."

Side II, Band 5a: SPANISH AND SOUTH AMERICAN GUITAR TECHNIQUES
"Now, Spanish and South American guitar techniques can also be transferred to the banjo. Here's a typical flamenco run. . . . That should go quite fast. . . ."

"Try this run. . . ."

Side II, Band 5b:
"Here's one way to get a rhumba rhythm.
(1) Brush down across all strings with the back of your middle finger. . . .
(2) Brush down across all strings with your thumb. . . .
(3) Brush up across all strings with your index finger. . . .
(4) (5) and (6) Now repeat (the first three strums). . . .
(7) Then again brush down with the back of your middle finger. . . .
(8) And brush up with your index finger. . . .
"All together. . . . the accent falls on the 1st, 4th, and 7th beat. . . .
(try it faster)."

Side II, Band 5c:
"Here's still another way of getting a rhumba rhythm. A little tricky, but worth the effort. What you do is:
(1) Hammer down with your left hand on a C chord (with a 6th in it). Meantime pick down on the 4th and 5th strings, with the back of your middle finger, so that all together it sounds like this:"

"Try it a little faster."

Side II, Band 5d:
"This last pattern can be amended slightly to make a good square dance tempo,
(1) and (2) You go down (all strings).
(3) Down again (all strings).
(4) Then with your thumb (the fifth string).
(5) And up.
(6) Then down.
(7) Then thumb.
(8) Then up.
"That should come out like this. . . ."

"Okay. From now on, you're on your own. Take it easy, but take it."
EPISODE

What has just taken less than thirty minutes to play, may take the student from three weeks to three years to duplicate. Each fifteen-integer segment is worth an hour or two of repetition, to go smoothly. It is suggested that the student not think of himself or herself as practicing, in the formal sense, however. Rather, simply play a lot, for the fun of it, with other musicians whenever possible.

Harking back to our earlier simile of the man learning to build a house, now that you know, at least in theory, how to hammer a nail and saw on the square, practice must make perfect in the process of construction.

The student is therefore urged to get some of the many available recordings of the 5-string banjo, and listen closely, with an eye to developing style and repertoire.

After an initial period of imitation, which all students pass through, you will create original music for yourself, whether singing in the home, school, or elsewhere.

WHERE TO BUY A BANJO

If money is short, but you have the time to hand, your best bet is to hunt the second-hand stores and pawnshops. Or place a classified ad in your local newspaper and hope for some ailing to cough up.

As for a new instrument, the Kay and the Gretsch companies both sell models for around $30. - The latter can be ordered through Mosby Ward.

The Paramount and Vega banjos are available these days only in the more expensive models, $110. - ($The Vega Company, 155 Columbus Ave., Boston, Massachusetts, sells the "Whistle Line," a really fine model, for about $150.)

In England banjos, accessories, and publications are readily available through the Clifford Essex Music Co., Ltd., 1 Newcompton Street, London, W. C. 2, England.

RECORDINGS OF BANJO PLAYING

If you can beg, borrow, or steal some of the following phonograph records, you'll be able to see the style of the banjo. If the records are too RPM and analyze what notes are being played. If they are already LP you could perhaps record them on tape at a fast speed and play them back at a slower speed.

Some of the very best records of banjo playing that are unfortunately out of print, so to speak. They were recorded by the major record companies for their "Country Music" catalogues in the '20s and '30s, and have never been reissued. However, at the time of writing (1954) the following can be ordered by mail:

The Library of Congress (Music Div.), Washington, D.C., issues on LP and 78 RPM some of the very best recordings of folk music. Write for their catalogue and select the ones with banjo playing.

The Ethnic Folksways Recording Company, 117 West 46th St., New York, N.Y., has reissued a few of the records by Uncle Dave Macon, Doc Boggs, and other recorded years ago. They also have an album by Isaac Sterflin, and several by the author. The "5-string Banjo Instruct" which explains much of this manual, can also be ordered from this company. Write for their catalogue. Everything is on LP.

BOOKS OF AMERICAN FOLKSONGS

Literally hundreds of folk song collections are now available through bookshops and libraries. Here are just a few of them, with apologies to the many whose titles have had to be omitted:

1. A Treasury of Folk Songs, Kolb, Bantam Books, 35c.
2. Various songs listed in the Cooperative Recreational Service, Delaware, Ohio, 30c each.
3. Lift Every Voice, People's Artists, 124 West 21 St., New York, N.Y., $1.25.
4. The Carver's Songbook, 117 West 46th St., New York, N.Y., N.Y., N.Y., 75c.
5. Songs to Grow On, Beatrice Lauder, Marks and Slavice, N.Y.
6. American Folk Songs for Children, American Folk Songs, and American Folk Songs For Christmas, all edited by Ruth Sepp, Doubleday, N.Y.
7. The American Songbag, Carl Sandburg, Harcourt Brace, N.Y.
8. American Ballads and Folk Songs, Our Singing Country, and Folk Song USA, all by J. and A. Lomax.
9. Crown Publishers has the series of "Treasures", edited by Ben Botkin. Good also are the Treasury of Mexican Folklore and the Treasury of Jewish Folklore.

BOOKS ON THE FIVE STRING BANJO

While a few leading music stores may carry five string banjo manuals, they are all among those that were written thirty or sixty years ago. Ones from Clifford Essex in England (see above) are an exception.

If you'd like to do some research in a library, you'll uncover dozens of banjo books written fifty or a hundred years ago. Here are some, with their Library of Congress numbers.


Phil Rice's Method For The Banjo - MI-568, J945

* Complete contents of the manual "How To Play The 5-String Banjo", by Peter Seeger, ($1, 75. May be ordered from the author, Box 452, Beacon, N. Y.)

CHAPTER I

History of the instrument
From Africa and Asia
Joe Sweeney, 1923
Scope and approach of the manual
Improvisation
Folk music

CHAPTER II

A basic strum
Tuning and position
Three basic chords
Explanation of tablature
Five songs to test your practice

CHAPTER III

The fifth string
"Bump-ditty, bump-ditty"
"Blue Tailed Fly"
"Go Tell Aunt Rhody"
"Skip To My Lou"
Harmony lesson: What is a chord?
A little rhythm practice

CHAPTER IV

Hammering
"Chattanooga Choo-choo"
Exact notation for "John Henry"
Harmony lesson: "Why" is a major chord?
When to play the banjo

CHAPTER V

Picking
Complete notation for "Hard Ain't It Hard" and "Joe Hill"
Chords for Harmony lesson: 6th and 7th

CHAPTER VI

Double thumbing
Skip to my Lou, written out in detail
Refusing to play in G
"Hard Ain't It Hard" notated
"Old Time Religion" notated
Use of the capo, to play in different keys
Photographs of Uncle Dave Macon, and other old timers.

CHAPTER VII

Picking
"Cripple Creek" notated
John Henry notated
Harmony lesson: minor modes and tunings
"Lady Margaret" notated
"East Virginia" notated


CHAPTER VIII

Three finger picking
"Claphammer" style, Scruggs style
"Chinny" notated this way

CHAPTER IX

A style of strumming when you're a crowd and have to make a lot of noise
Harmony lesson: the chain of chords

CHAPTER X

Three miscellaneous postscripts
Single string melodies
Tremolo, roll, or zascando

CHAPTER XI

3/4 and 6/8 time
"Down In The Valley" notated
"Ramble Wreck From Georgia Tech" notated
"Man Who Waters The Workers' Beer" notated
Accompaniment for "Grenadian Carol" notated
Accompaniment for "All The Pretty Little Horses" notated
"Rush Little Baby, Don't Say A Word" notated
Counter rhythms, "The Mexican Hat Dance" notated
Triplets, "Leathernease Band"

CHAPTER XII

Spanish and Jazz
A typical blues run notated in detail
Sharks
Harmony lesson: Basic blues harmony
"Easy Rider", and "Bottle Up and Go"

CHAPTER XIII

Spanish and South American Music
A Flamenco guitar run translated for the banjo
Rumba rhythm: two methods

CHAPTER XIV

A philosophy of music

APPENDIX 1

Beginner's guide for buying a second hand banjo, and how to care for it

APPENDIX 2

Eighty chord positions (for reference only) notated in both C and G tunings

APPENDIX 3

How to lengthen the neck of a banjo

APPENDIX 4

How to read music - slightly more advanced

APPENDIX 5

Fingertips and fingerpicks

APPENDIX 6

Where to buy a new banjo (if you can afford it)
Photograph recordings of 5-string banjo music
Collectors of American folk songs
Other books on the 5-string banjo
Pictures of Joe Sweeney and others, sketches of his banjos, and earlier models.

An African banjo.
HOW TO USE THIS RECORD

The student will find that one of the most difficult things about using this record is to put the needle down in the right band. Each band of the record, after all, has to be played many times over before the student masters that section. A new portable phonograph issued by the Du Kane Company of St. Charles, Illinois, has an automatic device to instantly stop a turntable from moving. This would be a help. Here, however, are two schemes which could with ingenuity be adapted to your present phonograph.

a) With rubber cement, paste a small triangle of stiff white paper to the end of the needle arm, so that it points to the exact groove the needle is in at the time. Then when lifting the needle arm, point the triangle at the groove you wish the needle to fall in, and set the arm down.

b) Glue a small block of wood to the phonograph, and with adhesive tape, hinge a 12" ruler, extending horizontally, under the needle arm, to rest on another block of wood, on the other side of the turntable. Glue a small coil expansion spring to the top of this second block of wood, which will push the end of the ruler up, thus lifting the needle arm off the record. Glue the end of a piece of string to the free end of the ruler, and extend the other end to the floor, where you make a loop in it, to fit around the toe of your shoe. Now, with your foot, you can depress the ruler, thus dropping the needle arm into the same groove it was in before it was raised by the spring.