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LESSON 5: THE FRETTING HAND

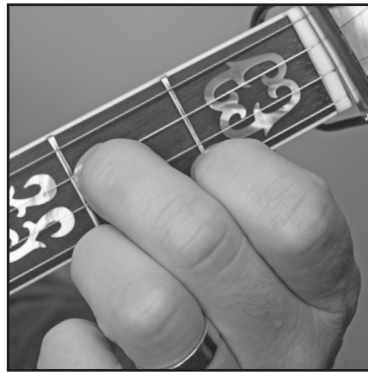
We change the pitch of a string by making its vibrating length shorter or longer, which is done by pressing it onto a *fret* (see Parts of the Banjo, page 6); this is called *fretting*. To fret a note, hold down the string just behind (to the left of) the fret you wish to play. If you hold the string down directly on top of the fret, your finger will mute the note. If you place your finger too far behind the fret, you may not get enough pressure to make a clear note. Also, try to fret the strings with just the tips of your fingers, with your fingertip pointing straight down (as opposed to slightly sideways) in order to avoid touching strings other than the one you are playing. The fingers of your left hand are numbered as shown.



Left-hand finger numbers.



Too far from fret.

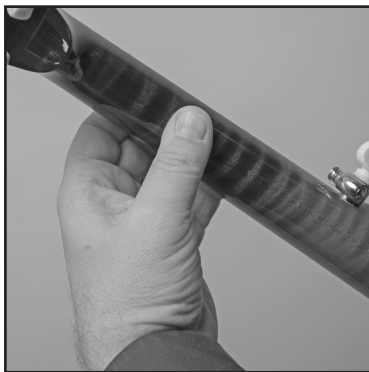


Too close to fret.



Correct.

When fretting a note, your left thumb should be behind the neck (not wrapped around the top) and your wrist should be slightly bent so that the palm of your hand is not touching.



Correct thumb position.



Incorrect thumb position.

The Banjo Neck Is Not a Handle

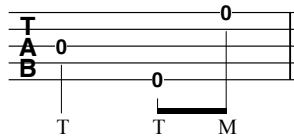
The first time you sat down with your banjo in your lap you probably noticed that, since the body of the banjo is round, the neck started to drift down toward the floor. The natural thing to do is hold the neck up with your left hand, right? *Don't do it!* Try to get used to holding the banjo in your lap by using your right arm on the armrest and your two right-hand fingers planted on the banjo head. A strap can also be helpful to keep the banjo in playing position. Holding the neck up with your left hand not only limits the mobility and agility of your left hand, it's also a tough habit to break later.

LESSON 10: FILL-IN NOTES

Fill-in notes are notes used to fill the spaces between the melody notes. You probably noticed that the songs we've played so far don't sound much like real banjo playing. Fill-in notes will help create that signature sound.

THE 5TH-1ST FILL-IN

As the name implies, the *5th-1st fill-in* is done by playing the 5th string and then the 1st string as eighth notes, creating a *syncopation*. Syncopation is a shift of the emphasis to an unexpected place, such as from the first beat to the second, or from the first eighth note in a beat to the second. Inserting a 5th-1st fill-in in eighth notes is one way to accomplish this.



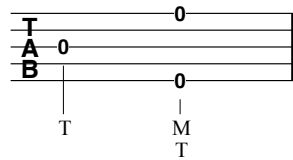
Instead of the straight 1-2-3-4 rhythm of quarter notes, the 5th-1st fill-in will give it a rhythm of 1-2&-3-4&. Try to count that rhythm aloud when you play the next example.

1

Count: 1 2 & 3 4 & 1 2 & 3 4 & 1 2 & 3 4 & 1 2 & 3 4 & 1 2 & 3 4 &

THE PINCH

A *pinch* is a technique where you play two strings together, one with the thumb and the other with I or M. The most common pinch is one that we use as a fill-in, also on the 5th and 1st strings. In TAB it looks like this:



Let's try alternating pinches with 5th-1st fill-ins.

2

Note that while most banjo music is usually written in $\frac{4}{4}$ time with eighth notes, implying four beats with eight eighth notes per measure, we're typically feeling only two beats per measure with four eighth notes in each beat when we get it worked up to speed. Most of the music in this method can be felt this way.

“Waterbound” uses several of the techniques we’ve learned so far. Pay attention to the note on the 2nd fret right after the slide in measure 2 as it may be tricky. Also keep an eye on the slides in measures 1 and 6. These slides are the same but their rolls differ.

WATERBOUND

Wa - ter bound and I can't go home, wa - ter bound and I can't go home.
 Wa - ter bound and I can't go home, back to North Car - o - lin - a.

LESSON 6: MORE LICKS

Here are a few more essential licks to add to your banjo vocabulary.

THE FOGGY MOUNTAIN LICK

By adding a hammer-on to the 2nd string, you can play one of the most useful and recognizable licks in the banjo repertoire.

56

I M T M T I M T

This next lick is often played as an intro (see page 44 for more on intros) to banjo tunes and is usually repeated two or three times in a row. Remember to use your thumb on the 2nd string where indicated.

57

I M T M T I M T I M T M T I M T I M T M T I M T

This pull-off lick often follows the Foggy Mountain lick. It’s a forward roll starting on the 5th string. Play it slowly and when you get to the 3rd string, 3rd fret, pick that note and then play the pull-off and 1st-string note at the same time.

58

T I M T I

The next pull-off lick uses the same forward roll as the last four notes of the Foggy Mountain roll. Just move your 1st finger to the 3rd string and play the pull-off instead of the open string.

59

I M T M T I M T I

LESSON 3: PLAYING IN THE KEY OF C

In the previous lesson, we learned that by placing a capo at frets 2, 3, 4, and 5, the keys of A, B \flat , B, and C, respectively, were easily accessible—but what about the other keys? Placing your capo at the 5th fret allows you to play in the key of C using the same techniques and licks that you would use for the key of G, but playing in the key of C *without* a capo is also fairly easy. And once you know how to play in the key of C, you would then be able to play in the keys of D, E \flat , E, and F by using the capo at frets 2, 3, 4, and 5.

The keys of G and C are closely related keys, because they share many of the same notes. In the key of G, the 1, 4, and 5 chords are G, C, and D. In the key of C, they are C, F, and G. The two keys have two chords in common. What this means to a banjo player is that you can still make good use of the open strings in the key of C.

Remember, to transpose a piece of music means to change its key, or pitch. Let's transpose the melody of "Red River Valley" from the key of G to the key of C. We'll take a look at the theory involved, as well as a few practical ways of doing this on the banjo.

First, let's look at the melody of "Red River Valley" in the key of G. The example below begins with a half rest, which is silence for the duration of a half note. In measure 4, the second note (open 3rd string) uses a new note value called a *dotted half note*. Dotted notes are notes with a small dot after them. The dot increases the duration of the note it's attached to by half of its value. So, a dotted half note equals a half note (two beats) plus half of its value (one beat) to total three beats.

RED RIVER VALLEY IN G

From this valley they say you are going.

We will miss your bright eyes and sweet smile.

To transpose this song to the key of C, we will need to raise the pitch of each note by the same amount, as if we were using a capo at the 5th fret. One way to do this is to play every note five frets higher, like this:

RED RIVER VALLEY IN C (NO. 1)

From this valley they say you are going.

We will miss your bright eyes and sweet smile.

LESSON 2: ADJUSTING YOUR BANJO

Major repairs to any instrument should be taken to a qualified repair shop, but there are a few basic maintenance issues that you can easily take care of yourself. Check your banjo periodically to ensure that it stays in tune and is at its peak playability.

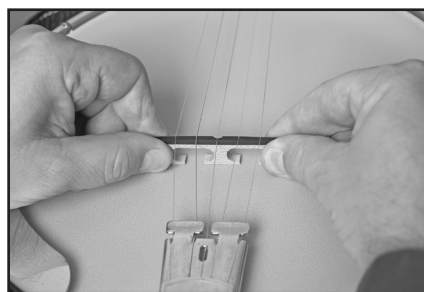
BRIDGE PLACEMENT

The bridge on your banjo is not glued in place (at least, it shouldn't be). It is held in place by the tension of the strings and can move if accidentally bumped. The placement of the bridge is critical to being in tune. Following are a couple of ways to check its placement:

1. **Measurement.** The 12th fret should be exactly halfway between the nut and the bridge. Carefully measure the distance from the nut to the 12th fret (measure to the fret wire itself), and then measure the distance from the 12th fret to the bridge. The two distances should be equal. If you need to move the bridge, hold the banjo in your lap and grip the bridge between the thumb and index fingers of both hands. Then, gently slide the bridge toward or away from the neck until the measurement from the 12th fret to the bridge is the same as from the 12th fret to the nut. This method will get you very close, but for more accuracy, it's best to set the bridge using harmonics.



Measuring the bridge placement.



Moving the bridge.

2. **Harmonics.** *Harmonics* are pure, clear tones produced by picking the string while gently touching it at a specific division of the string length, usually the 12th fret. With harmonics, you don't fret the string in the traditional way. Rather, you barely touch the string just over the fret wire, pick the string, and then immediately let go after picking. You should hear a bell-like chime, which is a harmonic. Once you're able to play the harmonic, compare the note that you hear with the fretted note at the same fret. If the fretted note is sharp (slightly higher than the harmonic), then you'll need to move the bridge back toward the tailpiece. If the fretted note is flat (lower than the harmonic), then you'll need to move the bridge forward (toward the neck). You probably won't have to move it very far. Move the bridge in the manner described above.



Finger touching the string at the 12th fret to produce a harmonic.



Finger depressing the string at the 12th fret to test the tuning and bridge placement.

The bridge usually only moves if it's been bumped or deliberately moved, but it's a good idea to check the intonation as described above if the tuning on the banjo has changed significantly (often a sign that it's been bumped).