



## Introduction to Clawhammer Banjo Styles

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Basic Tuning - Open G - GDGBD

Clawhammer stroke - called a clawhammer - looks like claw.

- Rapping - knocking on door - or using hammer to hit left thigh -  
- THERE ARE NO RULES.....
- *Single string* - use index or middle - forearm or wrist
- TAPS
- *Thumb and single string* - Shortening Bread
- *Bum ditty* - note, brush, thumb - Boil Them Cabbages
- Dit Bum Ty -

**MOST IMPORTANT** - keep the beat - tap foot, metronome, computer...

Accompaniment - Alternating 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> string bum-ditties

Learn 3 chords - G, D7 and C and you can play 1000's of songs

Frills - add variety to playing

*Hammering On* - Angeline The Baker

*Pulling Off* - Shady Grove

*Slides* - MTA

*Brush* - Red Wing

*Rolls/back thumb* - Jamaica Farewell

*Alternate/double thumbing* - Old Joe Clark

*Galax Lick* - Marching to Georgia

*Drop Thumbing* - Bill Cheatum

*Reverse brush* - Ain't She Sweet

*Triplets and bends* - Groundhog

Chord shapes - Up the neck (Bar, D, F) - Aloha O'e

*Other tunings* - G Modal - Cluck Old Hen (cluck sound)

Learn a tune - Happy Bluebird

## Clawhammer Banjo Introduction

Clawhammer banjo is distinguished by a “frailing” pattern in the right hand. In this pattern, the back of the index or middle fingernail plucks a melody note or strums on each beat, while the thumb plays between beats by plucking the fifth string (and occasionally other strings).

### **The Basics**

#### ***Numbering the Strings***

On the banjo, the strings are numbered 1 to 5, with the 5 string being the short one on the top of the banjo if it is resting in your lap in playing position. The next string down is 4, and so on down to the 1 string.

#### ***Tuning Your Banjo (Buy a tuner)***

There are many different tunings for banjo, but most people start with a simple “Open G” Tuning. This is 5<sup>th</sup> string — G, 4<sup>th</sup> string — D, 3<sup>rd</sup> string — G, 2<sup>nd</sup> string — B, and 1<sup>st</sup> string — D or GDGBD.

#### ***Holding The Banjo***

Sit up straight, but not ridiculously so. Set the pot of the banjo (the round part) in your lap, with the top rear of the hoop resting against your lower chest. Grasp the neck of the banjo near the head with your left hand. Ideally, your thumb should be resting against the back of the neck, but most folks find this harder at first than just placing the back of the neck in the webbing between your thumb and index fingers. Position the head of the banjo so that vertically it is on a level with your shoulder. The neck of the banjo should be at roughly a 45 degree angle from the ground. Rest your right forearm on the top front of the metal tension hoop. Half of your forearm should be projecting across the head of the banjo, such that your wrist is a few inches from the head of the banjo. Rest your thumb on the fifth string near where the fretboard starts and the back of your curled fingers rest on top of the rest of the strings.

### **Frailing: Right Hand Technique**

#### ***The Basic “bum-diddy” Pattern***

Put your thumb on your banjo head so that you are just a little but shy of touching the rim with the tip of your thumb. The pad of your thumb should be against the fifth string. Now rest your middle fingernail on the first string. Take a look at your hand and where it's at on the banjo. You'll see that you can just raise it up a hair and drop that middle fingernail down to strike the first string. Do that.

Don't flail around or open and close your hand or flick your fingers. Just use your thumb as a sort of pivot point to rear back (you won't have to go very far) and swing in down to strike the string with your nail. Let the string pop off of the fingernail.

Once you get comfortable with the idea of just dropping your hand down to strike the first string try the same thing on your second, third and fourth. To hit those inside strings - well, look at your hand again. Your thumb is lying on the fifth string. If you close that webbing between your index finger and thumb you should see that you can swing you hand so that it's over the string you want to hit.

We're not talking big motion here. It's just a hair this way and a hair that way. Don't be all stiff and rigid. Relax. Mess with it a while. You'll drive everybody in the house nuts, but that's why you wanted to play the banjo, right? After the strike the next step is the strum.

Hit a string. Any string. After you do that close the webbing between your thumb and index finger so that you hand comes back over the strings and your middle fingernail is over the third or fourth string. While all of this is happening your thumb is staying in place. Once you've reared back enough (and what that is is up to you but three strings is a safe bet) strike down across the strings with your middle fingernail. So it's pick, rear back, strum.

Do that a few times. Get used to it. Keep the thumb in place. As you pick and as you strum it's a good idea to keep a sort of straight wrist. Your forearm is doing all of the work here using your thumb as a pivot point. After you extend your hand for the strum you'll see that your thumb is putting pressure on the fifth string. Roll your thumb off of the fifth string, bring it up to your hand and then drop it back in place on the fifth string. It's sort of a rolling motion. Pick- Strum- Thumb. Bump Dit- Ty. A quarter note and two eighth notes.

### ***What NOT To Do***

It is important in frailing that you not pluck the string with a motion of your finger, but rather with the motion of your whole hand. Similarly, you should not really pluck the fifth string with your thumb as much as sound it on releasing your hand from the strings between beats. On each beat, when you sound a melody note or brush with the back of your fingernail, you should be cocking your thumb underneath the fifth string at the same time, so that it must of necessity sound when you raise your hand in preparation for the next beat. The importance of this cannot be overemphasized, since it is almost impossible to achieve an appropriate speed if you are plucking the strings with your fingers rather than letting the motion of your whole hand, or even forearm determine the music. Some people play by "rapping" on a string, like knocking on a door with wrist and forearm.. Others play with the same motion as using a hammer, with the entire fore-arm. Use whatever is most comfortable for you. Starting with grasping a credit card is sometimes helpful.

### **Left Hand Techniques**

#### ***Hammer-Ons***

Once you have gotten the hang of fretting a string, you may want to try a hammer-on. When you hammer-on, you pluck the string with your right hand, and then quickly and forcefully fret the string with a finger of your left hand. The force of "hammering" onto the string with your fingertip sounds the string again without the need for plucking it a second time with your right hand. This technique is used often in clawhammer banjo to add rhythmic variety and makes it possible to play more of the melody line than would be possible without it.

#### ***Pull-Offs***

The opposite of a hammer-on is a pull-off. In a pull-off you start by fretting the string with your left hand, while plucking the string with your right hand. Then you quickly and forcefully remove your finger from the string, pulling your finger towards your hand slightly as you release it so that it sounds as though it were plucked. Once again, this allows you to sound two notes in rapid succession while only plucking the string with your right hand once. Often, a pull-off follows a hammer-on, which is a nifty effect.

#### ***Slides***

In a slide you fret a string at one fret, pluck the string, and then quickly slide your finger to a different fret on the same string keeping pressure on the string the whole time so that the tone rings through.

#### ***Rolls***

A roll is basically a series of overlapping brush strokes. Starting with you index finger, initiate a brush stroke, as soon as the index finger completes the brush, start a brush with your middle, then ring, then pinkie. You are opening up you entire hand as you brush down the strings.

#### ***Back-brush***

This is basically the brush stroke but with a upward motion rather than a downward motion.

#### ***Drop or Double Thumbing***

To add variety, many clawhammer songs utilize a technique called drop thumbing. Drop thumbing involves thumbing on a string other than the fifth one. Often the thumb will alternate back and forth between the fifth string and one of the other strings. While some people use the term double thumbing interchangeably with drop thumbing, it is probably more accurate to say that double thumbing refers to the sounding of the fifth string between every beat rather than every other one.

## Internet Banjo Sites

<http://www.banjohangout.org/> The mother lode of banjo information

<http://www.jbott.com/> Wonderful site of fun songs

<http://www.mugwumps.com/> Interesting site of misc banjo stuff.

<https://ozarkbanjo.com/free-beginner-clawhammer-banjo-lessons> Basic clawhammer lessons

<https://clawhammerbanjo.net/8steps/8-essential-steps-to-clawhammer-banjo-lesson-1/> Free lessons

<https://clawhammerbanjo.net/clawhammer-banjo-tune-and-tab-of-the-week/> - 100's of tabs

<http://www.clawhammerbanjotab.co.uk/> The ultimate banjo site!

## Books:

The Banjo Players Songbook – Tim Jumper

Mel Bay – Frailing the 5 String Banjo – Eric Muller and Barbara Koehler

Clawhammer Banjo for the Complete Ingnoramus – Wayne Erbsen

Clawhammer Banjo – Miles Krassen - old timey banjo

Melodic Clawhammer Banjo – Ken Perlman

How To Play The 5 String Banjo - Pete Seeger - where I started

## BANJO JOKES

What's the difference between a banjo and a....

Chain Saw: you can make a living with a Chain Saw

Harley Davidson Motorcycle: you can tune a Harley

What do you call a banjo in tune? An Oxymoron.

How can you tell if the stage is level? If the banjo player drools out of both sides of his mouth.

Why do some people take an instant aversion to banjo players? It saves time in the long run.

What's the difference between a skunk run over on the road and a banjo player run over on the road?  
You see skid marks in front of the skunk.

What is the definition of perfect pitch? Throwing a banjo into a toilet without hitting the seat.

What do you call twenty-five banjos up to their necks in sand? Not enough sand.

What do you call one-hundred banjos at the bottom of the ocean? A good start.

How can you get a banjo player's eyes to sparkle? Shine a light in his ears...

Why do so many fishermen own banjos? They make great anchors!

Why did the Boy Scout take up the banjo? They make good paddles.

What's the best / fastest way to tune a banjo? With wire cutters.

What should you do if you run over a banjo? Back up...

When do banjo songs sound the best? When they're over.

Listener: Can you read music? Banjo player: not enough to hurt my playing.

Banjo players spend half their lives tuning and the other half playing out of tune.

A gentleman is someone who can play the banjo, but doesn't.

What is the difference between a banjo and a ukelele. A banjo takes longer to burn.

Why was the banjo player staring intently at the orange juice? Because it said, "Concentrate."