



How to play
the 5-string Banjo

by
Pete Seeger



Folkways Records FI 8303

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HOW TO PLAY THE 5-STRING BANJO / Pete Seeger

DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

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the 5-string BANJO INSTRUCTOR

with
 Pete Seeger



Few music schools anywhere teach at this time the folk technique of playing the almost extinct five-string banjo. The instrument was first brought here by American Negro slaves, recreating the music of their lost homeland of West Africa (where a distant cousin of the banjo is still played). They developed African styles of playing the new hoedowns, breakdowns, and other dance melodies learned here. In 1831 a poor white farm boy in Virginia, Joel Walker Sweeney, learned the banjo from slaves near his home, and started putting on performances. The minstrel show was born. Within twenty years the banjo was the most popular instrument in the nation. Virtuosos with phenomenal techniques took it into the concert halls (with questionable success).

Around 1900 the shorter Tenor Banjo was invented, with heavier strings, the better to compete with the loud brass instruments of the newly popular jazz bands. The tenor banjo had its hey-day in the nineteen twenties, and in turn was left behind by modern dance bands.

But the old five-stringer lingered behind in the small towns, especially in the South, where it was used to accompany square dances and ballad singers. And precisely because it is so excellently suited for such work, it seems due for a comeback.

This Longplay record gives the main rhythmic patters 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 Peter 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.)



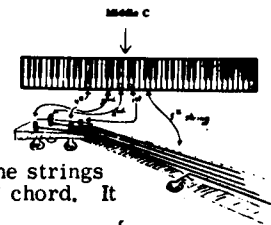
Side I, Band 1b:

"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:)



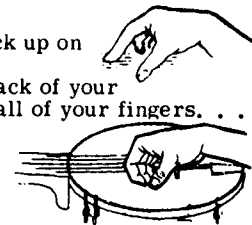
(The lower set of lines is not a music staff; they represent the five strings of the banjo, the fifth at the bottom, the first at the top. The numbers tell at which fret the string is stopped. A zero means the string is played open. Tablature was a system of music writing used by lute players of the 16th Century, and a simplified version is used here to help explain how the strings are fretted.)



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. . . brush down 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. . . ."

SKIP TO MY LOU

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. . . now come down on that third string with the middle finger of your left hand so hard that you can hear it. . . ."



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 thumb 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 fifth string. . . your index finger on the 1st string. . . all together, it should sound like this. . . "



Side I, Band 5d:

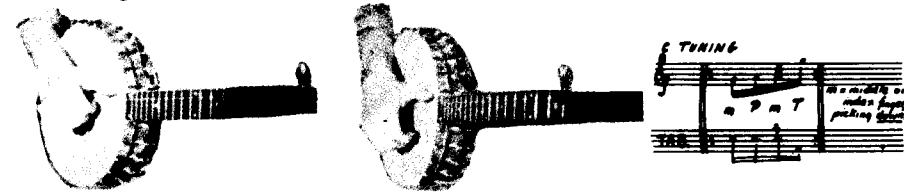
"Here's the song, 'Hard, Ain't It Hard'."



Side I, Band 6a: FRAILING

"Here's a new way of strumming the banjo, called 'frailing'. On music paper the notes you are playing may look the same, but they sound differently.

"Try picking down on the 3rd string with the fingernail of your right index finger (or middle finger) - the back of the fingernail. . . now hammer on with your left hand. . . then with that same back of the fingernail, go across the top three strings. . . and thumb the 5th string. . . All together it would sound like this. . . ."

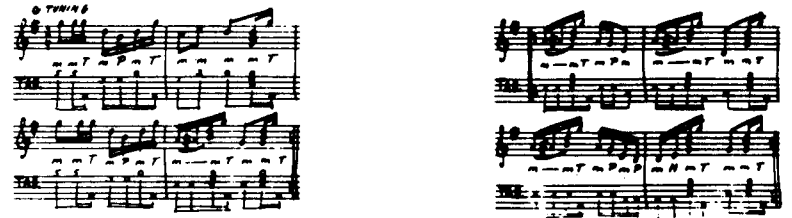


Side I, Band 6b:

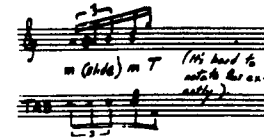
"In the G tuning, you might try it this way. Retune your 4th string. . . Try plucking down on your 3rd string with the fingernail of your right index finger. . . and pull off on the 1st string with your left hand. . . then with your right index finger go down across the top three strings. . . and sound the thumb string. . . All together, it would sound like this. . . ."

Side I, Band 6c:

"Now, frailing is the best way of playing a lot of fast square dance tunes. Here's the tune 'Cripple Creek'. . . ."



"That slur is got by fretting the 3rd string on the 2nd fret, and sliding it right away up to the 4th fret, like this. . . "



Side I, Band 7a: THREE-FINGER PICKING

"If you play often with other musicians, you'll want to play fewer full chords. . . and do more single string work, such as double thumbing. . . And for a driving square dance rhythm it's hard to beat the syncopated brilliance of a style best heard on the records of Earl Scruggs, these days. It involves three fingers of the right hand in picking. Try this:

- (1) Pluck up on the 1st string with your right middle finger. . . .
- (2) Then sound the thumb string. . . .
- (3) Then with your right index finger play the third string. . . .
- (4) Then with your middle finger the first string. . . .
- (5) Thumb the fifth string. . . .
- (6) Then with your index finger play the 2nd string. . . .
- (7) Middle finger plays the 1st string. . . .
- (8) Thumb the 5th string. . . .

"All together:. . . ."



Side I, Band 7b:

"Here's another development of the same idea:

- (1) Fret the 2nd string two frets up, and pluck it with your right index finger. . . .
- (2) Hammer on (on the 2nd string, on the 3rd fret). . . .
- (3) & (4) Try it again (repeat (1) and (2)). . . .
- (5) Thumb the fifth string. . . .
- (6) Index finger on the second string (stopped at 3rd fret). . . .
- (7) Middle finger on the first string (open). . . .
- (8) And thumb the fifth string. . . .

"Now, if you put those eight notes together, it would sound like this: "



Side I, Band 7c:

(Here's the song, 'Cindy', written out as played in Scruggs' claw-hammer style, on this record.)

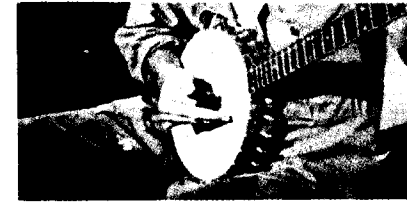
CINDY

G TUNING

MTI MTI MTI MTI MTI MT
 MTI MTI MTI MTI MTI MT
 I I M T I M T I M T I M T
 MTI MTI MTI M B
 I I M T I M T I M T I M T

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.

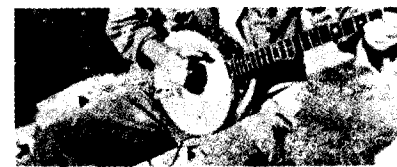
(Index finger, up and down)

(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."

(Index finger, moving up and down)

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 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: "

Brushing

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: "

G TUNING

Side II, Band 2a: THREE MISCELLANEOUS POSTSCRIPTS

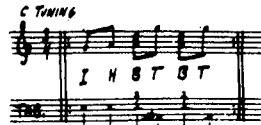
"Here are three miscellaneous postscripts. First, if you want to play a single melody, try using the thumb and forefinger alone, thus. . . . Play the whole example as written"



C Tuning

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 thumbing, try the song 'Down In The Valley'."



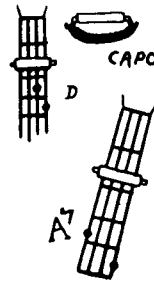
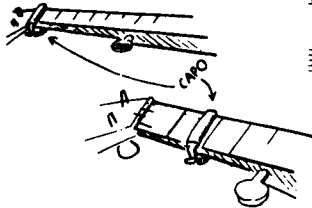
Side II, Band 3c:

"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").

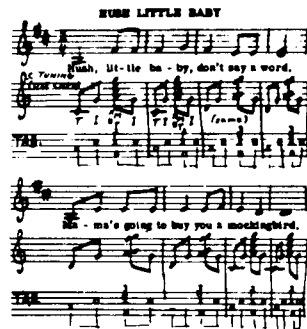


Side II, Band 3d:

"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: "

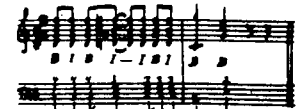


"Of course, there are many variations possible. "



Side II, Band 4a: BLUES AND JAZZ

"For playing many popular songs and jazz tunes, your best bet is to simply play full chords, and simply strum across all strings. . . ."



"But many blues guitar techniques can easily be transferred to the banjo. Try this. . . ."

"Lots of variations possible. . . ."



Side II, Band 4b:

"Another common blues guitar effect is got by fretting a string a 1/2 tone below where it's supposed to be, and at the same time pushing it to one side, with your left hand, stretching the string, and thus raising the pitch half a tone. Try it yourself. . . ."

"You can do that on any string. . . and you can do it with two strings at once. . . ."



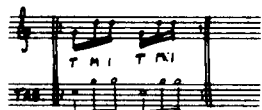
Side II, Band 4c:

"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 rumba 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. . . .

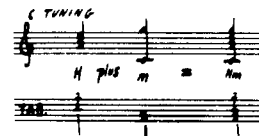
(try it faster).



Side II, Band 5c:

"Here's still another way of getting a rumba 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: "



- (2) and (3) Then you have a slow roll.

- (4) Then with your thumb pluck the 5th string and at the same time hammer down with the fingers of the left hand.

- (5) Then brush lightly up across the 1st and 2nd strings, with your index finger.

- (6) Brush lightly down across the first three strings with the back of your ring finger.

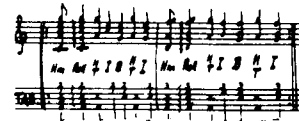
- (7) Again thumb the fifth string, at the same time hammering down with your left hand.

- (8) And then brush lightly up across the first two strings with your index finger.

"Now, all together, that should sound somewhat like this. . . "



"Try it a little faster".



Side II, Band 5d:

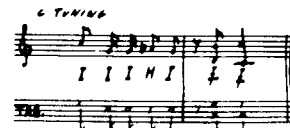
"This last pattern can be amended slightly to make a good square dance tempo."

- (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."



EPILOGUE

What has just taken less than thirty minutes to play, may take the student from three weeks to three years to duplicate. Each fifteen-second 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 hunt, your best bet is to hunt the second hand stores and pawnshops. Or place a classified ad in your local paper and hope for some attic 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 Monkey Ward.

The Paramount and Vega banjos are available these days only in the more expensive models, \$110. up. (The Vega Company, 155 Columbus Ave., Boston Massachusetts, sells the 'Whyte Laydie', a really fine model, for about \$150.)

In England banjos, accessories, and publications are readily available through the Clifford Essex Music Co. Ltd., 8 New Compton 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 best learn the style and sweep of the banjo. If the records are 78 RPM you can play them at 33 RPM and analyze what notes are being played. If they are already LP you could perhaps rerecord them on tape at a fast speed and play them back at a slower speed.

Some of the very best records of banjo playing are unfortunately now out of print, so to speak. They were recorded by the major record companies for their 'Country Music' catalogues in the '20's and '30's, and never re-issued. 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 folkmusic. Write for their catalogue and select the ones with banjo playing.

The Ethnic Folkways Recording Company, 117 West 46th St., New York, N. Y., has re-issued a few of the records by Uncle Dave Macon, Doc Boggs, and others recorded years ago. They also have an album by Bascom Lunsford, and several by the author. The '5-string Banjo Instructor' which explains most of this manual, can also be ordered from this company. Write for their catalogue. Everything is on LP.

The F-L Record Company, c/o West, 505 West 162nd Street, New York, N. Y., has re-issued a few fine old time banjo records, and can also order for you banjo records being put by small companies in the South, such as Blue Ridge and Acme.

Stinson Records, 27 Union Square West, New York, N. Y., issue several LP's of folksongs with banjo playing, as does also Elektra, 189 West 10 St., New York, N. Y.

Decca Records, 50 West 57 St., N. Y., N. Y., may still have on stock the fine albums 'Listen To Our Story' and 'Mountain Frolic'. The Commodore albums by the Almanac Singers can also be ordered from them.

Capital Records and Folkcraft Records also have some banjo playing on their square dance records.

See the catalogues of Columbia, Mercury, and King Records, for such contemporary artists as Earl Scruggs and Don Reno.

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 Folksong, Kolb, Bantam Books, 35c. The cheapest, but one of the very best.
- 2) Various song 'kits' put out by the Cooperative Recreation Service, Delaware, Ohio, 25c each.
- 3) Lift Every Voice, People's Artists, 124 West 21 St., New York, N. Y. \$1.25.
- 4) The Weaver's and the Caroler's Songbag., P. Seeger, Folkways Music, 151 West 46 St., N. Y., N. Y. 75c.
- 5) Songs to Grow On, Beatrice Landeck, Marks and Sloane, N. Y.
- 6) American Folk Songs for Children, Animal Folk Songs, and American Folk Songs For Christmas, all edited by Ruth Seeger, 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 ones 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 large library, you'll uncover dozens of banjo books written fifty or a hundred years ago. Here are some, with their Library of Congress numbers.

The Universal Banjo Method -
Clarence L. Partee Mt-561 . P975
Practical Hints On Modern Banjo Playing -
Clarence L. Partee Mt-560 . P27
Christy's Minstrels Complete Banjo Tutor -
Mt-568 . R45
The Minstrel Banjoist - S. S. Stewart -
Mt-562 . S87 M5
Lagatree's Banjo Tutor - Mt-568 . L26
C Notation Excelsior Method for the Banjo -
G. L. Lansing Mt-562 . L297
Phil Rice's Method For The Banjo -
Mt-568 . R45

* 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.)

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History of the instrument
From Africa and Asia
Joe Sweeney, 1831
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Improvisation
Folk music

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Five songs to use for practice
Checklist for beginners

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'Go Tell Aunt Rhody'
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Photographs of Uncle Dave Macon, and other old timers.

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'John Henry' notated
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'Lady Margaret' notated
'East Virginia' notated

Pan-American School for the Banjo -
W. B. Leonard Mt-568 . L39
Sherwood's Imperial Diagram Method For
The Banjo - Mt 562 . S656
Tone And Technique - Edwin Pritchard
Mt-565 . P75
Crown Figure Method For The Banjo -
C. Himmelman & Co, Mt-568 . C78
Elias Howe's New Banjo Without A Master -
Mt-568 . H71
The Perpetual Banjo School, No. 3, 8, 9 & 10 -
D. Mansfield Mt-561 . M392, . M454
. M606, . M607
Shay's Banjo School - William Shay
Mt-562 . S660
Banjo Method, Lessons 1, 2, 3, 4 -
Royal Music Co. Mt-562 . R88
The Eclipse Self-Instructor For Banjo -
Paul De Ville Mt-568 . 494
Dobson's New System For The Banjo -
George C. Dobson Mt-568 . D673
New School For The Banjo -
George C. Dobson Mt-561 . D63

CHAPTER VIII

Three finger picking
('Clawhammer' style, Scruggs style)
'Cindy' notated this way

CHAPTER IX

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

CHAPTER X

Three miscellaneous postscripts
Single string work - melodies
Tremolo
Roll, or rascado

CHAPTER XI

3/4 and 6/8 time
'Down In The Valley' notated
'Rambling Wreck from Georgia Tech'
'Man Who Waters The Workers Beer'
Accompaniment for 'Burgundian Carol'
Accompaniment for 'All the Pretty Little Horses'
'Hush Little Baby, Don't Say A Word' notated
Counter rhythms, 'The Mexican Hat Dance'
Triplets: 'Leatherwing Bat'

CHAPTER XII

Blues and Jazz
A typical blues run notated in detail
Slurs
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 Summary

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) in both C and G tunings.

APPENDIX 3 How to lengthen the neck of a banjo

APPENDIX 4 How to read music - slightly

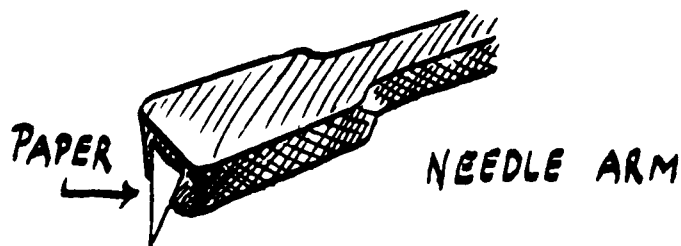
APPENDIX 5 Fingernails and fingerpicks

APPENDIX 6 Footnote to history
Where to buy a new banjo (if you can afford it)
Phonograph recordings of 5-string banjo music
Collections of American folksongs
Other books on the 5-string banjo
Pictures of Joe Sweeney and others. Sketches of his banjo, and earlier model. 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.

