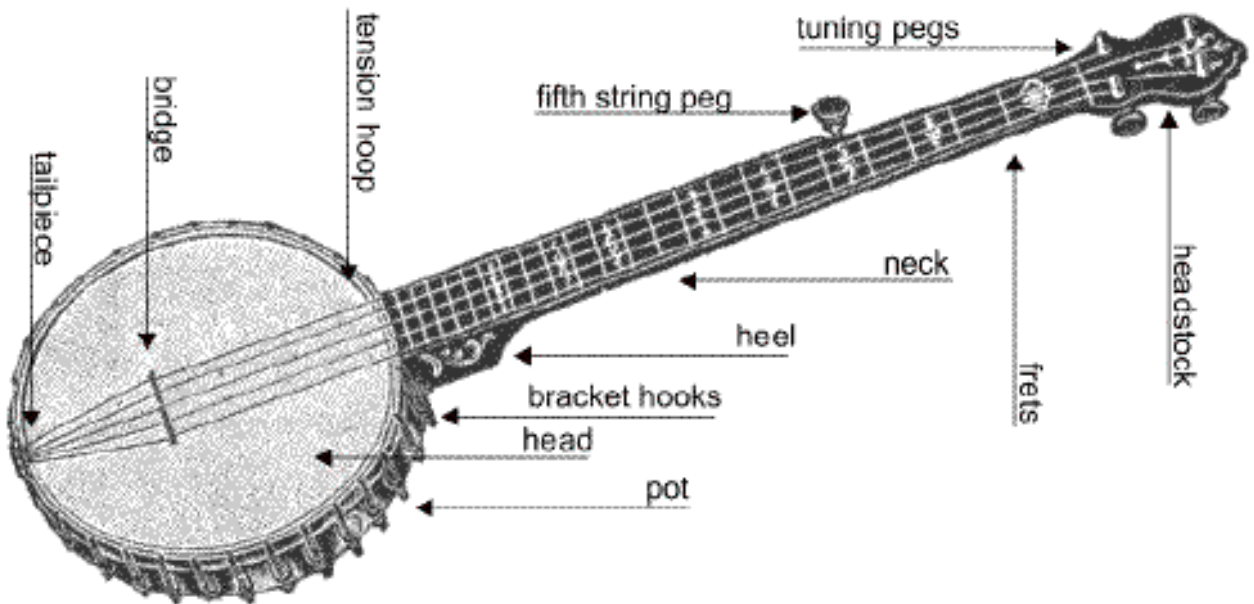
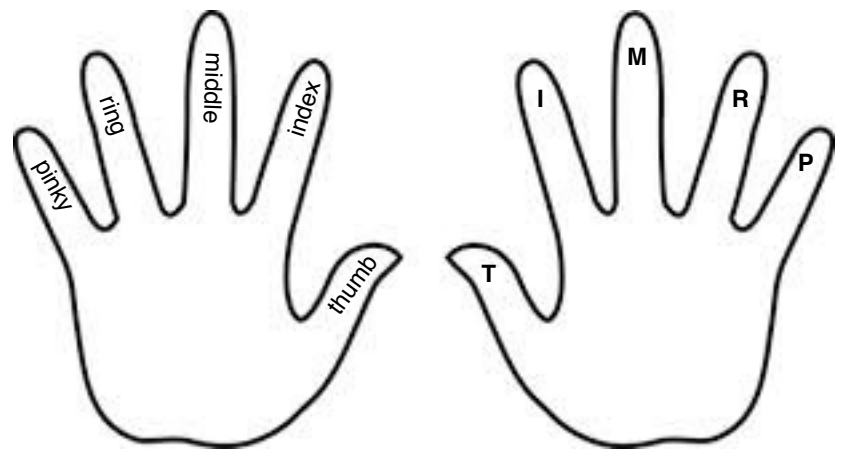
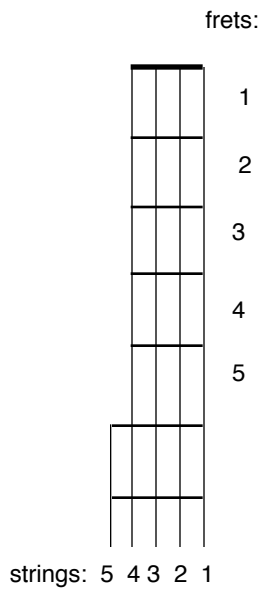


How to Play
the 5-string Banjo
by
Pete Seeger



A workshop for beginners
with Mark Dvorak
Old Town School of Folk Music
Chicago IL

Part One: Naming things



Part Two: A basic strum

- Holding your banjo in playing position, your strumming hand strums or plucks the strings somewhere down by the drum head, and your fretting hand, holds the strings down in various positions on the fretboard. Let's concentrate first on your strumming hand.
- We begin with two different actions. For the first action, use the **index finger** of your strumming hand to pluck "up" on the first string of your banjo.
- For the second action, use the back of the fingernail of the **middle finger** of your strumming hand and brush "down" across three strings.
- Perform these two actions in sequence while counting out a simple rhythm: "One" (pluck "up"), "two" (brush down). Both actions fall on the beat. Tapping your foot along with this strum you will notice your foot is on the ground when both actions occur.
- This sequence of plucking and brushing in time is an important building block to Seeger's style, and an essential beginning place for playing a 5-string banjo. Practice this until you've got it under control to some degree.

Plucking other strings

- Let's devise a simple exercise that goes like this: 1st string, brush, 1st string, brush, 1st string, brush, 1st string, brush. We can write that out like this:

1 V 1 V - 1 V 1 V.

- Next, let's use the **index finger** of your strumming hand to pluck the second string of the banjo. Use the back of the fingernail of the **middle finger** to brush "down" across the strings as before:

2 V 2 V - 2 V 2 V.

- Let's try two strings in sequence:

1 V 1 V - 1 V 1 V - 2 V 2 V - 2 V 2 V

- Next try the 3rd string, then the 4th:

1 V 1 V - 1 V 1 V - 2 V 2 V - 2 V 2 V

3 V 3 V - 3 V 3 V - 4 V 4 V - 4 V 4 V.

- The strings, or notes played by your index finger are sometimes called "lead notes." We often lead our strumming, or brushing, with different strings depending on which chord we are fingering, and later, where the melody note might be located.

Part Three: The fifth string

Now we'll focus on the role of the short "5th string," or "thumb string." It's what is most responsible for the unique and timeless voice of the 5-string banjo. Our first subject is **when** to sound the "5th string" in the sequence of our basic strum.

Let's review our first exercise of plucking the 1st string on the first beat, and brushing across the strings on the second beat:

1 V 1 V - 1 V 1 V

We can articulate this sequence in a rhythmic way by noting the down beats on which the "plucking" and the "brushing" occur:

1 V 1 V - 1 V 1 V
(1) (2) (3) (4) (1) (2) (3) (4)

When we tap our foot to a rhythm, the beats, or counts occur when our foot is on the ground. When our foot is off the ground, that small amount of time is counted as an "and" (+):

1 V 1 V - 1 V 1 V
(1) +(2) +(3) +(4) + (1) +(2) +(3) +(4) +

So the rhythm we are playing on the banjo when we pluck "up" on the first string and brush "down" across three strings in time, can be counted out loud as, "ONE and TWO and THREE and FOUR," Try counting it out loud while you pluck and strum in rhythm. Note how your foot is on the ground when you count a number, and your foot is in the air when you count an "and."

action:	1		V		1		V	
count:	(1)	+	(2)	+	(3)	+	(4)	+
foot:	down	up	down	up	down	up	down	up

Now we add the fifth string to our basic strum. It happens right after the brush on the beat we are counting as "(2) +. Like this:

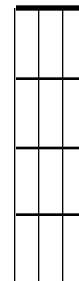
action:	1		V	5	1		V	5
count:	(1)	+	(2)	+	(3)	+	(4)	+
foot:	down	up	down	up	down	up	down	up

This entire sequence of action is what Pete called "a basic strum" in his famous book "How to Play the 5-String Banjo." Thousands of instrumentalists from Bob Gibson to Bela Fleck and thousands of others before us, have walked through this exercise on their way towards mastering the 5-string banjo.

Part Four: Chords

On the banjo, let's say that a chord is the sound of two or more strings strummed or plucked at the same time. Placing fingers in the strings in various positions on the fret board in fact, changes the length of those strings. When strummed or plucked, the sounds produced is now organized in a specific way. Let's learn a few of those ways.

So far, we've practiced picking, or plucking, each of the four long strings on the banjo, alternating with a brush across a few of them. We haven't had to place our fingers in any position on the fret board, as the 5-string banjo is tuned in an "open tuning." Open tuning means each of the strings are tuned to a note, or tone, that belongs to a given chord. The chord to which a 5-string banjo is most often tuned is called a "G" chord. Each of the strings is tuned to a note, or tone, that belongs to the chord G. The three tones that make up this "major triad" are G, B and D.



Chord fingerings are often pictured on a grid resembling the fingerboard that looks like the image on the right. As you will see, little dots are added to the grid to show you where to place the fingers of your fretting hand to correctly finger a given chord. As our banjos are tuned "open," we needn't place our fingers anywhere. We've been playing a G chord the whole time.

Look at the diagram again and make certain you know which vertical line represents the first string, the second string and so forth. Make certain you know which horizontal line represents the first fret, the second fret and so forth.

Building a rhythmic structure

Folk songs typically have two, three, four or more chords in the progression. Our goal in playing the banjo here in the early going, is to create a plucking, or picking pattern particularly appropriate to whichever chord form we are fingering.

When playing the banjo on a G chord, the root tone of G is the third string (a G tone). When playing a G chord, the other important tone is the fourth string (a D). Without getting into the details of theory, we can agree on this pattern each time we want to play through a measure of G:

action:	3		V		5		4		V		5
count:	(1)	+	(2)	+	(3)	+	(4)	+			
foot:	down	up	down	up	down	up	down	up	down	up	

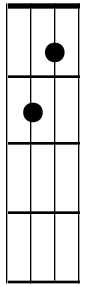
It's time to practice plucking first the 3rd string "up" with your index finger, followed by a brush "down" with the back of the nail on your middle finger, and then sounding the 5th string right after on the beat we count as "2+." On the next down beat, we pick the 4th string, followed by a brush and then the 5th string as before.

This is the basic strum specific to a G chord. As we learn to finger different chords, we will learn to pick a different set of "lead notes" to illuminate the sound of each fingering.

D7 chord

When playing songs that either begin or end on a G chord, often a chord called D7, and C are found in the progression.

We finger a D7 chord as in the diagram to the right and pick the strings in the sequence below:

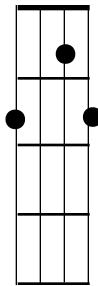


action:	4		V	5	3		V	5
count:	(1)	+	(2)	+	(3)	+	(4)	+
foot:	down	up	down	up	down	up	down	up

C chord

The fingering for a C chord is to the right and the picking sequence below:

action:	2		V	5	3		V	5
count:	(1)	+	(2)	+	(3)	+	(4)	+
foot:	down	up	down	up	down	up	down	up

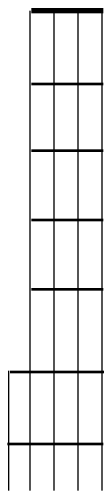


C tuning

Although Pete was a master of many tunings and rhythmic styles. He commonly used the "G tuning" that we have used so far, and the "C tuning."

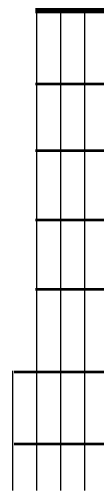
G tuning

g **D** G B D



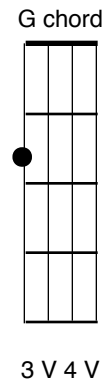
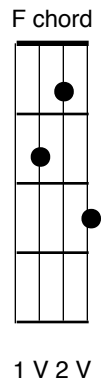
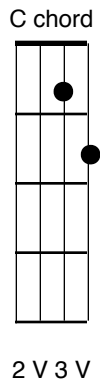
C tuning

g **C** G B D



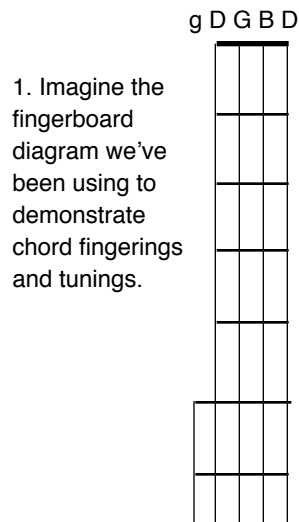
C tuning, or "low C," or "single C," or "standard C," requires changing the tuning of only one string. The fourth string, which is tuned to "D" in the standard G tuning is lowered one whole

tone to "C." This allows us to play songs in a different key, and with a different harmonic voicing on the banjo. Here are the three main chords to songs that either begin or end on a C chord.

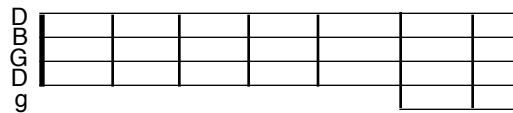


Part Five: Tablature

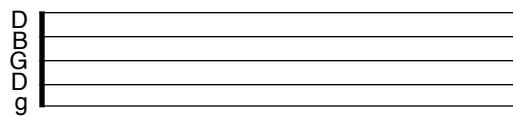
Many great musicians are not great readers of written notation. The same holds true for banjo players. A common method of writing banjo music is called "tablature." Here's how it works.



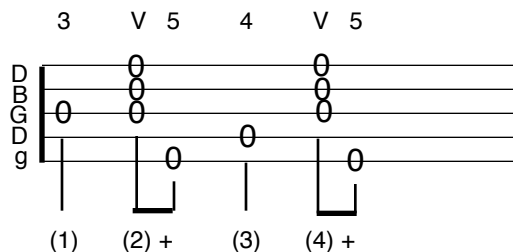
2. Turn it on its side, like so.



3. Imagine the "strings" in the tablature.



4. Our basic strum written as before appears in tablature as in the diagram.



The lines of tablature represent the 5 strings of the banjo. The numbers represent the fret on which you put your finger. The straight vertical line and the bracket represent the timing.

Part Six: Some songs using G, D7 & C

SKIP TO MY LOU

G G
Hey hey skip to my Lou

D7 D7
hey hey skip to my Lou

G G
hey hey skip to my Lou

D7 G
skip to my Lou my darlin

THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND

(G) C C G G
This land is your land, ___ this land is my land ___

D7 D7 G G
from California, ___ to the New York Island ___

C C G G
from the redwood forest ___ to the gulf stream waters ___

D7 D7 G G
this land was made for you and me ___

CRAWDAD HOLE

G G G G
You get a line I'll get a pole, honey ___

G G D7 D7
you get a line I'll get a pole, babe ___

G G
you get a line I'll get a pole

C C
We'll go down to the crawdada hole

G D7 G G
honey, baby, mine ___

PAY ME MY MONEY DOWN

G G
Pay me oh pay me

G D7
___ pay me my money down

D7 D7
___ pay me or go to jail

D7 G
___ pay me my money down

YOU ARE MY SUNSHINE

(G) G G G G
You are my sunshine, ___ my only sunshine ___

C C G G
you make me happy ___ when skies are gray ___

C C G G
you'll never know dear, ___ how much I love you ___

D7 D7 G G
please don't take my sunshine away ___

Part Seven: Hammer on

While playing the banjo, you can make some notes with your fretting hand. One method is to strike your fretting finger down on the string so hard you can hear. This is called a "hammer on," a term Pete actually invented. Let's add a "hammer on" to our basic strum.

Here is the tablature of our basic strum.

3 V 5 4 V 5

(1) (2) + (3) (4) +

Add the "hammer on" after plucking "up" on the 4th string

3 V 5 4 h 2 V 5

(1) (2) + (3) + (4) +

Part Eight: 3/4 time

Most songs built upon a time signature called 4/4 time. That is, the meter is measured, counted, in fours. We either pluck "up" or brush "down" on each of the four beats. Remember, the 5th string is sounded by the thumb after beat 2 (2+) and after beat 4 (+), and we count it as an "and."

Other songs are built upon a time signature called 3/4. That means we only count three beats per measure. We can adapt our basic strum easily 3/4 time:

On a G chord:

(1) (2) + (3) + (1) (2) + (3) +

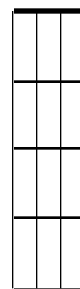
On a D7 chord:

(1) (2) + (3) + (1) (2) + (3) +

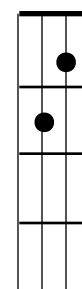
On a C chord:

(1) (2) + (3) + (1) (2) + (3) +

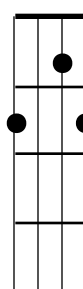
G chord



D7 chord



C chord



IRENE GOODNIGHT

G G D7 D7
 1 - rene good night _

D7 D7 G G
 1 - rene good night

G G C C
 good night Irene good night Irene

D7 D7 G G
 I'll see you in my dreams _

Part Nine: Other styles

Pete used any number of techniques to create different rhythms and sounds on his banjo. Everything from old-time mountain picking, to 3-finger bluegrass, to blues shuffles, to jazz and pop songs. Here are two other methods he commonly used. The first is called "the lullaby strum."

We begin by using our thumb to pick "down" on the 4th string (1).

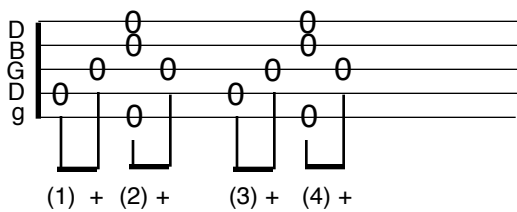
Next, we use the index finger of our picking hand to sound the 3rd string (1+).

Then pluck the 5th string with your thumb, the 1st string with your ring finger and the 2nd string with your middle finger, all at the same time (2).

Then sound the 3rd string again, using your index finger (2+)

Repeat all four steps, and you a measure of G

Here is the tablature for the lullaby strum.



HUSH LITTLE BABY

G D7
Hush little baby don't say a word

D7 G
mama's gonna buy you a mocking bird

G D7
and if that mockingbird don't sing

D7 G
mama's gonna buy you a diamond ring

One more. Here's a loud strum Pete called "whamming." A good place to leave off.

First, pick "down" on 5th string with the back of the fingernail of your index finger (1).

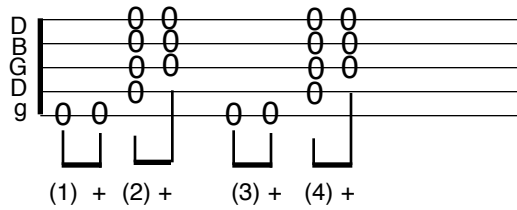
Do it again (1+).

Then, brush "down" across all the strings using the back of the fingernail on both your index and middle fingers (2).

Finally, brush "up" across all the strings using your index finger (2+)

Repeat.

Here is the tablature for "whamming."



OH MARY DON'T YOU WEEP

G D7
Oh Mary don't you weep don't you mourn

D7 G
oh Mary don't you weep don't you mourn

C G
Pharaoh's army got drowned

G - D7 G
Oh Mary don't you weep

Part Ten: Stay in touch

Please feel free to contact me directly with your follow up questions regarding this workshop. I'd be happy to meet with you for free to work further on any of the materials touched upon during our session.

Mark Dvorak
 PO Box 181
 Brookfield IL 60513
www.markdvorak.com
markdv@aol.com
 312 315 4273