



Learn to Play the 5 String Banjo in 10 Minutes

Following these instructions, you should be able to play the 5 string banjo at a basic level in a little over 10 minutes.

Tuning

Start with tuning your banjo to open G (g D G B D). Tune the 3rd string to G, fret it behind the 4th fret and tune the open 2nd string in unison. Now fret the 2nd string behind the 3rd fret and tune the open 1st string in unison. Now tune your 4th or bass string, in unison with the open 1st string, but an octave lower. Fret the 5th fret of the first string and tune your 5th or short string in unison.

If instead of tuning to G, you tuned your 3rd string lower to A, then your banjo would now be in the key of E (aEAC#E). Whatever note you tune your 3rd string to will determine the key of your banjo. Many 19th Century minstrels used this method.

If you have a good ear and already play other string instruments, then this process is a piece o' cake. Otherwise I recommend that you use an electronic tuner until you learn to trust your ear. A word of caution: Novices often break strings by missing the proper octave and attempting to tune strings higher than their tolerance. Always start low and gradually tune up.

Playing Chords

The key to this method is learning the three basic I, IV and V chords of your chosen scale. In the above example of the G scale the chords are G, C and D. (Don't worry about 7th chords. For the purposes of this simplified method the major chords will sound fine.) In the key of A the I, IV and V chords are A, D and E. In the key of C the I, IV and V chords are C, F and G, etc..

The "I" Chord - No fingering is required. Strum the strings open.

The "IV" Chord - Left index finger on the 2nd string behind first fret.
Left middle finger on the 4th (bass) string behind the 2nd fret.
Left ring finger on the 1st string behind the 2nd fret.

The "V" Chord - Left index finger on the 3rd string behind first fret.
Left middle finger on the 2nd string behind the 3rd fret.

Strumming

With the I, IV and V chords you can now accompany anything from "Eensy Weensy Spider" to "Sweet Home Chicago". Start by strumming all down strokes with your right hand. As you practice and develop your ear and timing, you can start to vary your right hand strumming rhythm and get into more advanced picking patterns. In the mean time, play on!



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This method may not make you another Flatt or Scruggs, but if you can carry a tune, it will get you playing the banjo and accompanying yourself or others in about 10 minutes. Playing a first position melody in G tuning is quite simple and using the chords below, you can accompany virtually any song performed in a major or minor key.

BANJO TABS FOR OPEN G TUNING

Tuning	g	D	G	B	D	C	Em	D	F						
String No.	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1
Frets	1					●					●				
	2					●		●		●			●		
	3														
	4														
	5														
	6														
	7														

● = Finger Position

Using an electronic tuner is the simplest way to get in tune, but here is a manual way to get the banjo in tune with itself.

	g	D	G	B	D	A	Am			
	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1
Frets	1									
	2									
	3									
	4									
	5									
	6									
	7									

TUNING IN OPEN G

Tune the 3rd string to G.

Fret the 3rd string on the 4th Fret to get a B and tune the open 2nd string in unison.

Fret the 2nd string on the 3rd fret to get a D and tune the open 1st in unison.

Tune the bass or 4th string an octave lower in unison with the open 1st.

Fret the 1st string on the 5th fret to get a G and tune the short 5th string in unison.

You can start by tuning the 4th string to D, fret the string on the 5th fret to get a G and then tune the 4th string in unison, but starting with the G is often easier.

Whatever note you tune your 3rd string to will be the key of this open tuning.

Open G (D G D G B D) is a common modern slide tuning for resonator guitars. It was very likely adapted from the old 19th Century open G fretless banjo tuning. On the guitar, the additional 6th bass string was simply tuned to a low D.

For you guitar players, please notice that strings 2, 3 and 4 in open G banjo tuning are the same as strings 2, 3 and 4 in standard Spanish guitar tuning. You can therefore “cheat” any guitar chord you already know by using the same shapes of chords that you use in standard guitar tuning on those 3 strings. Play on!