

Old Time Banjo / Appendix 3

Applying the different modes to tuning the banjo

As we have come to see, old-time banjo grew up playing music which used many different musical modes. This was a natural progression of the musical traditions early Appalachian settlers brought with them from the British Isles.

To accommodate all these different modes in different keys, and yet still maintain a relatively simple way of playing and approaching the instrument, the strings of the banjo were re-tuned differently depending on the mode and key of the piece. In fact, over 100 different ways to tune the banjo have been documented. The idea behind all these tunings is simply to allow as many open, unfretted strings as possible that are the main notes of the scale.

For example, take the most common banjo tuning, the Open G (g D G B D). Now compare these notes the strings of the banjo are tuned to, with the G Major scale: G A B C D E F# G. The first degree of the scale is G, which is the note the middle string of the banjo is tuned to. The high and low strings of the banjo in this tuning are both tuned to D. In the G Major scale D is the fifth degree which, after the root or first note, is probably the most important in the scale. Finally, we have a B in the banjo tuning which turns out to be the third degree of the scale, another very important note besides the first and the fifth. (In fact, the first, third, and fifth notes played together create a G Major chord).

Thus the most important notes of the G Major scale are *already right there* on the open unfretted strings of the Open G banjo tuning. You don't have to do anything to play them but pick the string! That's why this tuning is naturally used to play songs and pieces in the key of G Major. Naturally, this holds true for the Open A tuning as well (a E A C# E); the open strings are tuned to the main notes of the A Major scale (A B C# D E F# G# A) and so the tuning best fits songs in the key of A Major.

Here's another example. The Sawmill or Mountain Minor tuning in G (g D G C D) accommodates those old-time mountain tunes in the Mixolydian mode in the key of G (G A B C D E F G). Shady Grove for instance. Again, the main notes of the scale the tune is played in also happen to be the same open notes the banjo is tuned to. Only this time the fourth degree of the scale (also a very important interval) is used for one of the strings.

Sure, you can play any piece of music in any banjo tuning (all the notes are always there of course), but getting to the frets and notes will be measurably more difficult if the strings are not already tuned to make it easier to play the notes you need. So, feel free to make up new tunings to try and fit that special tune and make it easier to play in this style. You're limited only by your imagination – and the relative frustration of having to retune all the time!

