

**OLD TIME BANJO LESSONS**  
**FRAILING & CLAWHAMMER STYLE**

by Alec Slater



## THE BANJO

There is some demon turning me into an old man,  
Living like a tapeworm in my gut,  
Turning me into a snowman  
Of cleaned-up fingernails and shaving cream,  
While somewhere in the life I forgot to live  
An old rascalion banjo sleeps with dust.

I'd like to take that banjo to my job  
And sit cross-legged, strum and strum  
And wake those rigid people into dancing ---  
Those white men so white their smiles are water,  
Those camouflaged men who cruise  
Around each other like soft battleships.

I'd like them to remember their bare feet,  
The bite of dust and sun down country roads,  
The face they forgot to desire  
Carved and wrinkled like a peach pit...

All of them nailed to their careers  
Like handles on boxes!  
There is some other game for me,  
Another reality could walk in anytime  
And become the boss,  
Shouting Dance! Dance! Dance!  
Dance through partitions!  
Dance through stairwells, envelopes, telephones!

It's hard to know which life is sleep  
Or where the door is with my real name on it.

----- Robert Winner

## Old Time Banjo / Frailing Lesson #1

### A. Tuning

There are over 50 different ways to tune the old time banjo. Thankfully, we only have to worry about two or three tunings most of the time!

The first tuning we'll learn is called the Open G tuning, the most common. The notes of each string (from the small 5<sup>th</sup> string on up to the first) are: **g D G B D**. The small "g" represents the short high sounding fifth string, "D" is the heavy bass fourth string, "G" the middle third string, "B" the second string, and "D" the high first string.

Here's the easy way to tune your banjo to itself. First, tune the bass fourth string to the note "D" (above middle C). If you don't have a pitch pipe or piano to tune to, tune to any string tension that sounds good to you, but not too high! Next, tune the middle third string until it sounds the same as the bass fourth string played at the 5<sup>th</sup> fret. Then, tune the second string to sound the same as the middle third string played at the 4<sup>th</sup> fret. Now, tune the first string to match the second string when it is played at the 3<sup>rd</sup> fret. Lastly, tune the high fifth string to sound the same as the first string when played at the 5<sup>th</sup> fret. After tuning this way, you may need to do some fine tuning so all the notes sound just right together.



With this Open G tuning we can only play in the major key of G (and any related minor and modal keys).

However, by using a capo at the 2<sup>nd</sup> fret, and tuning the high fifth string up a whole tone from "G" to "A" (or using a fifth string capo or "tuning nail") we obtain the Open A tuning: **a E A C# E**, to be able to play in the key of A.

## **B. The Basic Strum**

This is the basis for everything we will do in learning to play old time style banjo. First we learn up-picking. Pick up on the first string with the index finger to play a melody note. You can also pick up on the second, third, or fourth strings after you feel comfortable doing this on the first string. IMPORTANT: This picked string is the down beat, so tap your foot down for this beat.



Next, brush down across the first three or four strings with your other fingers (but not your index finger) to play the chord. This brushed chord is the up beat, so your foot comes back up.

After you've mastered this simple index pick and chord brush rhythm, start sounding the fifth string immediately after every chord you play. This is done right before the index finger plays the next melody note on the down beat. Here's how to do this:

As your hand is coming down to brush the chord, the thumb comes to rest on the fifth string. Think of the fifth string as the thumb's "home", a place it always wants to go back to. After the chord has been played, as the hand is coming back up, the fifth string is sort of "cocked" back and plucked by the thumb. This gives that distinctive ringing droning sound for which old time banjo is so well known. Practice this sequence of brushing a chord and thumbing the fifth string until you automatically ring the fifth string after every chord you brush.

Overall, the rhythm of the whole basic strum is a sort of Bump-Dit-ty, Bump-Dit-ty, Bump-Dit-ty, Bump..., etc.. Musically, this would like a quarter note (the index finger melody note) followed by two eighth notes (the brushed chord and the fifth string together). As I said before, this rhythm is the basis for everything we will do in learning to play old time style banjo - once you've got it you can play anything! Really!

## C. Tablature

Tablature (or just plain "Tab" for short) is the easiest way to notate a banjo tune, and is a kind of banjo shorthand. It is much easier to learn from, and is more descriptive for stringed instruments than standard musical notation.

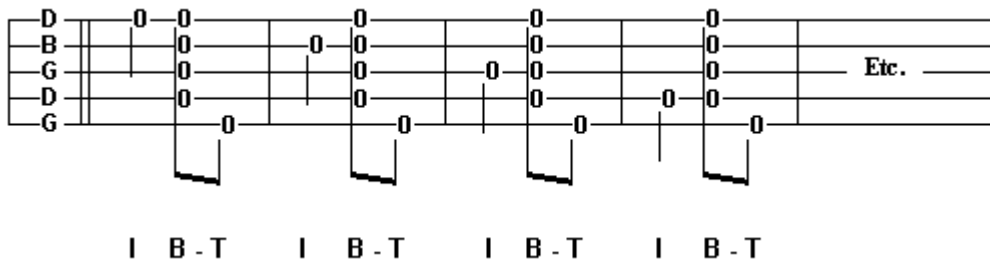


Each line of the tab represents one string of the banjo. The letters at the far left show the note each string is tuned to. The bottom line is the short fifth string, the next line up is the fourth (bass) string, etc., on up to the first string on top.

The number sitting on each line shows which fret to press. For example, the number "2" would mean to press the 2<sup>nd</sup> fret. A "0" means the string is played open; in other words, the string is not fretted at all.

An "I" under the note means the string is played with the index finger. The "B-T" refers to the brushed chord and thumbed fifth string sequence.

So, in tablature the basic strum for the Open G tuning looks like this:



## D. First Song: Fly Around

D 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0  
 B 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0  
 G 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0  
 D 0 0 0 2 2 0 0 0  
 G 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

I B-T | B-T | B-T | B-T | B-T | | | B-T | B-T

D 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0  
 B 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0  
 G 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0  
 D 0 0 0 2 2 0 0 0  
 G 0 0 0 0 0 2 4 0

I B-T | B-T | B-T | B-T | B-T | | | B-T | B-T

Fly around my pretty little child, fly around my daisy,  
 Fly around my pretty little child, you almost drive me crazy.

Over the river to feed my sheep, over the river Charlie,  
 Over the river to feed my sheep, I feed them on barley.

Wished I was a June apple, hang'in on a tree,  
 Every time my true love passed, she'd take a little bite of me.

I'm gonna get some weavily wheat, I'm gonna get some barley,  
 I'm gonna get some weavily wheat, and bake a cake for Charlie.