

Zen in the Five-String Banjo

*Or, What the uniquely American art of frailing
banjo taught me about music, life, and love.*

By Patrick Costello

For my mom and dad.

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Mess with me on this, and I'll spank you like a circus monkey.

Introduction

The history of the banjo attracts more theories and speculation than Area 51.

The instrument was developed, and its ways taught through the oral tradition. We are the folk music equivalent of druids. Nobody knows the whole story. We piece together what we can from songs, stories, and personal encounters.

So, when we pick up the instrument for the first time, it is very much a blank page.

Whatever the banjo was before you came along is only relevant if you make it so. The instrument is yours to discover and interpret.

As for frailing, the discipline defies all categorization. I cannot tell you what frailing is. Nobody can. The technique itself is simple, if counterintuitive. Understanding and, in time, mastery, requires context only afforded from practical experience.

I took up the craft to win a bet. I realize that sounds like Han Solo winning The Millennium Falcon gambling, but it is the truth. My time with the instrument started with the humble goal of aggravating my dad.

I am not suggesting that being a juvenile delinquent is a requirement for learning the banjo. Although, it does help.

What I am saying is that my lack of specific goals gave me the freedom to experience and explore.

I never cared where or when I was going, so I was never lost. I was not on a timeline, so it never seemed as if I was falling behind. Because of this, the five-string banjo has always been, for me, a source of inspiration and joy.

In these pages, you will find more than forty years of experience condensed into the written word. It is not a method. That would not only be a waste of my time and your money, but it would also be disrespectful to the spirit of frailing banjo.

Being a banjo player is not a matter of memorizing a couple of songs or dressing up in some sort of costume. We are musicians and mechanics. Poets and dance callers. Teachers, entertainers, healers, singers, and painters that work in sound rather than color. You can't learn these skills in thirty days or by following a recipe. You've got to live the craft.

Learn the mechanics at home to train the body and mind. Then go out into your community. Inject yourself into the bloodstream of the people (credit goes to Woody Guthrie for that apt analogy).

Practice is safe when you are alone. The real lessons will come while under the pressure of playing for and with other people. This is when the heart will take over, so the real learning and making of music can begin.

Well, that's enough talking to get started. There is a whole world of music out there waiting for you to discover. If you are just starting out, look to the appendixes for tips on tuning, setup, and banjo lore.

What are you waiting for? Come on! Let's get you started.

Patrick Costello

April 2022

Draft

The First Lesson

Rather than diving into the facts, the people who helped me teach myself were big on the moment. It is one thing to have a chunk of information handed to you. Cold facts tend to be greasy and dropped from our memories. The same data in context, presented in a moment comfortable or unusual, is easier to retain.

My banjo dojo was Kitt Foster's house. Her boyfriend, Paul, was a Washington Square beatnik. He performed, jammed, and got himself into trouble with legendary folk singers. Always telling stories. Chasing girls with Ramblin' Jack Elliott. Performing with Dave Van Ronk, and hilarious accounts of a young Bob Dylan crashing on his couch.

I met Paul at the Radnor Memorial Library, about a mile from Kitt's place. He had been volunteering at a local living history thing. They called it a farm, a farm museum, or some such nonsense. Their idea of being authentic was allowing everything and everyone to be caked with horse manure.

Paul was still in his costume of filthy buckskins, beshitted to a degree of authenticity that made him a fixture at the whateverthehellitwas.

He was skinny with long fingernails tougher than talons. His white beard streaked with nicotine over eyes that shone with bright intelligence.

I approached Paul to ask him about his banjo. He dropped to one knee and swung his banjo into position with a single graceful motion.

Without a word, right there in the hallowed silence of the library, he began to play. His right hand seemed to just bounce over the strings as the left played chords and notes.

The sound filled the building. Melody, rhythm, harmony, and percussion seeming to fall out of the instrument in waves.

“This” he said, “is frailing.”

He played effortlessly, maintaining eye contact the entire time. I stood there in awe. The music washing over me. My heart beating like a hammer. Then Paul began to speak over the music without dropping a beat.

I grabbed him by the wrist and dragged him to my father’s hoagie shop, just down the road. A true beatnik, Paul never turned down an opportunity to share his knowledge or partake of a free lunch.

My dad, by the way, made the best cheesesteak in the city of Brotherly Love. His breakfasts were so delicious I witnessed people devour themselves into a carbohydrate and cholesterol state akin to the devout speaking in tongues.

Dad once sandwiched his way into deluxe seats at The Philadelphia Spectrum to watch a WWF match. We even had the Snyder family parking pass for Blue Thunder, dad’s blighted Chevy station wagon. When we pulled in, security came running yelling, “Get that piece of junk out of ...” Dad flashed the pass and suddenly we had mooks in suits redirecting traffic to make our parking experience more luxurious. Our buttocks were soundly kissed - something our cadre of truck drivers and rednecks reveled in as George the Animal Steele ate a turnbuckle.

Anyway, few sandwiches later, Paul started teaching my dad the art of frailing at Kitt’s house. After dad bet me his banjo that I couldn’t teach myself to play, I started hanging out there too.

Since this is a book, we could set the lessons and discussions anyplace imaginable. Since I am the author, teacher, and narrator, I get to choose. For the moment, I pick Kitt's house. I visit this place often in my memory. When I am under pressure onstage, or simply fighting my deafness and arthritic hands, I come here. This place comforts me.

Let's set the stage. We are in the parlor of a cottage along suburban Philadelphia's Main Line.

Kitt was a hippie and Paul, as I mentioned, was a beatnik. So, the place is filthy. Both were intellectuals. Old books, some fabulously rare, are stacked everywhere. Paul was something of a mechanical genius. The place overflows with vintage clocks, blacksmithing tools, samurai swords, rare instruments, antique tools, and all manner of knickknacks ranging from Revolutionary War artifacts to McDonald's Happy Meal toys.

Paintings and photographs are hanging on the stained wallpaper. Vines block the sunlight from the windows and serve to muffle the sounds outside. Making the room cozy and warm. Various cats and dogs, all of them friendly, come and go as they please.

The place smells of various kinds of smoke, dust, and funk – and it doesn't matter because Kitt and Paul welcomed anyone who walked in the door as if they were family. Above the clutter and chaos, the overriding sensations and emotions are warmth and love.

Presently, it is just the two of us and our banjos. The room is full of empty chairs, all old and worn to that point of perfect comfortableness. Those chairs will fill up for the jam. It's you and me, for now.

You are in a straight-backed chair with no arms because that is the best way for a student to practice.

I am sprawled out on a Victorian sofa-shaped thing that used to be red but is now a funky orange-brown shade.

I get to be comfortable because I have been playing for forty years. When you are teaching down the road, you'll sprawl out, too. It's part of the thing for some reason. Paul could and would play the banjo in just about any splayed-out position. Usually while smoking and drinking coffee.

The coffee here, by the way, is excellent. Beatniks know coffee.

I am gulping down great mugs of a loose Chinese tea Paul kept in a crusty paper bag. It's called Lapsang Souchong. Most find it anywhere from unpalatable to gorge-rising, but I got a taste for it at Kitt's house. It's a black tea smoked over a pine fire, and tastes of smoke and wild places. Like sipping the wilderness.

I am having a mug of the same tea as I write this. My family says it smells like a trash fire.

We have set the stage for our lesson.

We have also casually introduced one of the key components of teaching in the folk tradition: the conversation. It isn't just storytelling. That would be too one-directional. No, the conversation is both a lesson and a dance. A flowing give and take where people share of themselves. Just like music.

This place, where we are now, is special to me. This is one of the arenas where I learned to play and teach. The details etched on my heart and mind, so deeply I could go back

and walk through with my eyes closed. The love and kindness I experienced here is all over my music, the same way my Philly accent flavors my speech.

It is places like this where old-time banjo players share their craft. It is not just a demonstration of skill, but the sharing of self. This is what personalizes folk music.

Where regional styles and vernacular comes from. As you go on to play, there will be places like Kitt's house for you to discover on your own to later share with students.

We are all a patchwork, and now, just in a few paragraphs, we have each added a block to our respective quilts. Isn't that marvelous?

If you have gone through the appendixes, your banjo should be set up and in open G tuning. If not, go do that while I drink more tea and browse Paul's epic library.

Go on now. I won't do everything for you. Learning folk music is not a matter of memorizing songs and factoids.

All set? Okay, let's begin.

Sit up straight with the banjo pot flat against your belly. Use a strap to support and balance the instrument.

The fifth peg should be, as Paul would say, in your ear. You can see what he meant from the photo

POSTURE IMAGE HERE

There are reasons for the formalized posture that we will explore later. Also, if you have a physical limitation that prevents you from following my instruction as described do not hesitate to make necessary adaptations. I have worked with students who were

forced to play with the instrument laying across the arms of their wheelchair. Do what you gotta do.

The thing is, I shouldn't need to coax you into good form. You either want to play and are willing to do the work, or you ain't. There is nothing wrong with getting a glimpse behind the curtain and walking away with a heartfelt nope. I wanted to be a clown until my dad took me behind the big top where I got to see the reality of circus life. One sight of men in clown shoes, baggy pants with suspenders dangling around their knees, shirtless, sweating clown white into their chest hair as they shoveled heaping mounds of steaming elephant shit into one, larger, mound moved by more clowns was more than enough for me.

So, if you want to do this, get yourself in posture. Angling the banjo so you can see the strings isn't going to help you. Sit up straight, banjo flat against your belly, use a strap to support the instrument, and keep the fifth peg close to your ear.

Hold up your right hand.

Lightly rest your forearm on the rim of the banjo.

Leave the thumb loosely extended.

Extend the index finger.

Bend the middle finger slightly.

Curl the ring and little fingers to your palm.

Place the pad of your thumb loosely on the fifth string.

Rest the middle fingernail on the first string.

~~POSITION IMAGE HERE~~

Your index, ring and little fingers are simply out of the way. They have no immediate task.

Everything in frailing banjo is accomplished with the middle fingernail striking down on one or more strings and the thumb plucking individual strings.

Your thumb will rotate to pluck strings.

Your middle fingernail is driven down upon the strings by your forearm. The wrist does not move. Your fingers do not move. The motion is driven from the forearm.

~~MOTION IMAGE SERIES HERE~~

Using your forearm on the rim as a fulcrum, with your thumb on the fifth string, raise your hand so the middle fingernail raises off the first string. Do not apply too much pressure with the forearm.

Drop your hand down so that your middle fingernail strikes the first string. Do not use the fingernail like a flat pick. Do not drive so hard that you strike the banjo head.

Strike the string and raise your hand back up. A single clear note.

It may take a bit of work to get that clear note.

If that initial clear note eludes your initial attempts, take heart. There is nothing intuitive about what you are doing, and that is okay. Do not overthink. Just try for one clear strike.

Remember, the motion must be from the forearm. We will get to the why of things in good time, but, for the moment, reasons do not matter. Thumb on the fifth string,

middle fingernail on the first. Raise the hand using your forearm on the rim as a fulcrum. The arm should rest lightly on the rim. Drop your hand down so that the middle fingernail strikes the string and immediately raise it back up.

Right about now, it may feel as if you are trying to wrestle with an insurmountable psychological and physiological riddle. My first attempts were as awkward and frustrating as the time my grandfather shoved me off the bleachers at the circus and allowed a pair of clowns to wrestle me into a bra and panty girdle, in the center ring, in a sold-out show.

I've looked at clowns from both sides now.

Stop frowning at me. Give me one clear strike.

Once you can play a clean strike, follow it with a downward strum. Experiment with the number of strings.

The pattern should be strike, recover, strum, recover. Lather, rise, repeat.

Once you can play a clean strike and strum, we can start counting out loud in groups of four.

On the strike, count one out loud. Count two on the strum, three on the next strike, and four on the strum. Take care to count each beat and space them evenly.

“One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four.”

Once you can run that four count, evenly spaced, on a steady beat, level volume at a reasonable tempo, and without stopping to restart the count, we can add in the fifth string.

There is nothing mystical about the fifth string. It is a rhythmic device with a single job: to cut notes in half.

After each strum, we are going to pluck the fifth string with the thumb.

On the strike, count “one” out loud.

Count “two” on the strum, and count “and” as you pluck the fifth string.

Count “three” on the next strike.

Count “four” on the strum, and finish by counting “and” as you pluck the fifth string.

Take care to count each beat and space them evenly.

“One, two-and, three, four-and. One, two-and, three, four-and.”

Strike, strum-thumb. Strike, strum-thumb.

As Paul used to count it, “Bump dit-ty”.

This, my friend, is the core skill of frailing banjo. There are no advanced techniques.

Being a frailing banjo player requires taking this counterintuitive downward strum and naturalizing it.

Keep on reading as you practice. I still have a big mug of tea.

If you hand a child a banjo, the kid is going to bang on it with absolute freedom.

Innocence has that effect on us. The small one is unaware of the technical and musical skills to make music, so there is no fear or hesitation when the strings are struck. It may be noisy, but there is a palatable joy in the chaos.

Hand the same instrument to a banjo student, and that freedom is lost. This is because innocence has been lost through the accumulation of knowledge. Now that you know there is a correct way to sit, hold the banjo, and strike the strings, it is impossible to be unselfconscious. The freedom you seek in music seems to become more distant the harder you try.

Put the same instrument in my hands, and I'll wail on the banjo like I caught it breaking into my house. Every bit as free as the child. While I am playing with wild freedom, the sounds are tempered with a lifetime of training. Innocent as a child, but now instinctively staying within the boundaries of making musical sense.

Practice does not make perfect. Nothing in life is perfect. Except for babies.

Practice makes familiar. We stumbled over our feet as we learned to walk and through sentences when we learned to read. Yet, right now, in this moment, your eyes are scanning letters in groups on a page or screen. Your brain juggles my writing, and suddenly, without fuss or fanfare, you are reading. Get up to grab a cup of coffee and you are walking. We do not think about the myriad of complex tasks in our everyday lives that we have repeated to the point of making them involuntary actions.

Everything I can do with a banjo is based on this one thing. Bump dit-ty.

Keep on practicing as you are reading - and stop slouching. The practice is not just the bump dit-ty pattern, but also naturalizing good posture and form.

When I started karate, I was told to stand in certain ways while practicing blocks, kicks, and punches. Feet shoulder width apart, knees bent to an almost sitting position, butt

tucked in so that all your weight is on the screaming muscles of your thighs, fists at the hip with palms up, and elbows tucked close to the body.

It seemed masochistic. A lot of kids my age would quit after a few lessons. My legs hurt and my arms would tire from the firm, snapping motions of the strikes. My teachers told me endurance and perseverance were part of the lesson, so I stayed at it. I was in the dojo training four nights a week. On my night off, I went in and mopped out the locker rooms so that I could watch the black belts train.

After a few weeks of this, I would wake up with my arms throwing blocks and punches. After a few months, I could eat lunch in the dreaded horse stance without breaking a sweat.

I eventually moved on to the next rank and began sparring. It turned out my hours of practice were not wasted. I did not have to think about having good form in the pressure of a fight. I did not have to plan out an offense or defense. The practice had made the basics so familiar, I no longer had to think.

If you go into a fight with a plan, prepare for a diet of soft food.

If you go into a song with a plan, the music isn't gonna flow. You will be half a beat off the entire performance or jam.

I didn't tell you to stop. Keep on going. Bump dit-ty.

I am just about as deaf as a doornail. I can play, not because of some natural talent, but because I practiced beyond the point a rational person would quit.

Keep on playing. One two-and, bump dit-ty.

Be sure to keep the beats flowing and even. The strike and the strum-thumb should take up the same amount of time.

Now this is the point of our first session where I tell you what my old pal Tiny used to say to me.

“Get lost and don’t come back ‘til you can do like we showed you.”

Until you master this basic frailing strum, there is no moving forward. This is the craft.

Take some time to make this familiar. That bump dit-ty pattern is the foundation for everything you do beyond this point. Take the time to not only savor the learning experience, but also to master this one simple thing.

Once you think you are ready for the next lesson, teach the bump dit-ty to another person.

Paul taught me that being a musician is not enough when it comes to the banjo. We are not only musicians, but also historians, teachers, clowns, coaches, entertainers, and so much more. Once you can clearly share this technique with another person, you will be on your way.

One two-and three four-and. Bump dit-ty bump dit-ty.

Go on now. Get lost.

Not Yet

Right about now, many folks reading this will ignore my cautions and boldly stroll through.

Everybody, and I mean everybody, comes into training thinking they don't need it.

In karate, an ass-whoopin' will quickly alter that perspective.

In music, it's usually some old-timer looking at you quizzically and asking if your parents had any children that lived.

Having experienced both, they are equally humiliating. In some ways, a cool old dude's cutting remark can sting more than a spinning back-knuckle to the jaw. As a newly forged old coot, I can warn you that we accumulate and polish these one-liners over decades. Rodger Sprung could lay me out flat with a single word, but he pushed me to be a better musician. Like educational wedgies.

Do me a favor and ask yourself why you are rushing?

In the next chapter, we will learn some chords as well as your first song. This is something to eagerly anticipate - but forging ahead before you are prepared will frustrate both of us.

Practice your bump dit-ty as you read this next part.

One two-and three four-and. Bump dit-ty bump dit-ty.

A short blade of grass conveys the glory of God and the wisdom of the Buddhas as much as a long blade of grass.

It doesn't matter whether it takes you ten days or ten months to master the bump dit-ty rhythm. What matters is allowing yourself the space and time to learn. To experience everything our craft has to offer.

The feel of the instrument as you heft its weight onto your lap. The smell inside a banjo case. The feeling as you tune the banjo – not just turning the tuning pegs. The tactile sensations as the string comes to pitch. The rasp of your fingernail on the strings. There is so much to experience.

Over time, these sensations become so familiar, they feel like home.

For me, these basics are so familiar, comfortable, and so natural that I only think about them when I am teaching.

Keep in mind, I'm about as deaf as a post. If I could do this, with my handicaps, nothing is out of your reach. You must practice.

One two-and three four-and. Bump dit-ty bump dit-ty.

Becoming an artist is more than checking off a list of skills and achievements. Life is not a video game.

For example, I have met an unfortunate number of black belts who couldn't fight my grandmother, and she's dead. They learned the movements and can perform in the dojo if an opponent cooperates. They did not learn how to think in the pressure and violence of facing an opponent. An opponent who will not cooperate and holds no warm feelings for you.

Take it from somebody so mouthy he needs mint-flavored shoes. Having a stranger take a swing at you is terrifying, no matter how tough you are.

Hell. Even when I won a fight, I still had to change my shorts.

We watch football games on television. It looks so easy to throw a touchdown pass. Even when walking sides of beef are throwing their considerable bodies at you. It looks so easy to catch said pass and run through the opposing team.

The wild thing about this perspective is that nothing can prepare us for the reality of being on that field. It looks easy, but these athletes train brutally hard to attain that grace.

What is grace but emptying yourself to be filled and used by something greater?

In frailing banjo, we create a wall of sounds. Melody, rhythm, harmony, and percussion. To accomplish this, we cannot allow our minds to become fixed on any single thing. Trying to force your mind to do anything is like asking a cat to make you a chocolate sundae. It's futile.

The trick, spoiler alert, is to practice until you forget to think.

The difference between casual practice and performing under pressure is striking. We convince ourselves that we did enough. Then we go to a jam and feel helpless.

To quote Mike Tyson, "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth."

So, you practice until there is no longer a need to plan. When the poo hits the fan, you will not feel helpless.

One thing my father and I both did was make practice part of our lives. We took our banjos everywhere. Waiting in the car for somebody? Time for practice. Sitting in the park? Time not only for practice, but for great conversations with random strangers.

My father was camping one weekend with my mom. We didn't have a tent or RV. My dad had a Sioux lodge.

Anyway, dad was playing his banjo in front of the tipi. He was singing The Wreck of the Old 97.

*They give him his orders at Monroe, Virginia
Sayin', "Steve, you're way behind time
This is not 38, but it's Old 97
You must put her in Spencer on time."*

*Then he look around and said to his black, greasy fireman
"Just shovel on a little more coal
And when we cross that White Oak Mountain
You can watch Old 97 roll."*

*It's a mighty rough road from Lynchburg to Danville
In a line on a three-mile grade
It was on that grade that he lost his airbrakes
You can see what a jump he made*

*He was goin' down grade making 90 miles an hour
When his whistle broke into a scream
He was found in the wreck with his hand on the throttle
And was scalded to death by the steam*

*Now ladies, you must take warning
From this time on and learn
Never speak harsh words to your true love or husband
He may leave you and never return*

This older gentleman was walking by and heard the music. He approached my dad, leaned on a finely crafted walking stick, and said, "Son, I was there."

Mr. Steptoe Honig lived near Danville, Virginia, back when the Old 97 derailed on September 27, 1903. He even went to the trestle bridge to see the wreck for himself.

He and his wife were wonderful friends who came into our lives because dad was playing the banjo.

If you think that's something, I'll tell you our Bonnie and Clyde story later.

Put yourself out there. Take yourself lightly, but your craft and the hearts of others seriously. You will be amazed at what the world can teach you.

You just gotta practice.

As you practice, let your mind wander. Stay in rhythm with a steady tempo as you count out loud but look around as you do this. Take in your surroundings. Interact with the world rather than shut it out. You are learning to play the banjo. People will want to hear your story, and in so doing become part of it. Part of you.

Like Tiny told me, get lost. Go practice until the next step feels natural rather than rushed.

Go on now. Shoo. Get lost.

One two-and three four-and. Bump dit-ty bump dit-ty.

The Second Lesson

Hopefully you have taken the time to become comfortable with the basic frailing strum. We will know for sure in just a bit.

Today we are going to introduce chords into the mix. I won't blow smoke up your wazoo, this is going to be about as rough as getting my cheeks pinched at Christmas by my great aunt Elizabeth – and she was crazy, strong, and mean.

Let's head over to Kitt's house. I want to get myself a mug of Lapsang Souchong and get comfortable. Good and sprawled out. We have much to discuss.

Sit yourself down in the posture we discussed on our first visit.

Play the bump dit-ty strum steadily on the open first string a few times.

Now I want you to accent the first and third beats. This would be each strike. Instead of bump dit-ty, we want **bump** dit-ty. **One** two-and, **three** four-and.

To accomplish this, we alter the force of the strike. Strike harder, strum-thumb softer.

On paper, this seems simple. In the real world, this can be difficult to the point where some players will permanently mute their instruments.

This is kind of like trying to learn whittling with a dull knife. It seems safer because the blade is dull. Unfortunately, when a novice woodworker tries to use the blunt tool, they tend to apply too much pressure and get hurt. The resulting injury is usually both avoidable and painful.

If there are people sleeping nearby, mute the banjo. A clothespin on the bridge works fine for this. Otherwise, make controlling the volume of the instrument through

technique part of your practice routine. It may not come easily. It took me what seemed like forever, but this is an essential skill if you want to express yourself with the instrument.

bump dit-ty. **One** two-and, **three** four-and.

Now that we have thrown a bit of nuance into the right hand, we can begin working with the left hand.

Maintaining the speed of the basic frailing strum, take your left index finger and press down on the first string at the fifth fret.

There will be a temptation to grip the banjo neck and pressure the strings like they owe you money and you saw them slurping down some expensive Starbucks concoction. It's tempting, but a banjo is not a lemon. You can't squeeze the notes out.

Sit with proper posture. Have the banjo pot flat against your belly, the fifth peg close to your ear, and use a strap to support the instrument. With your fretting hand, cradle the neck in the crook of your thumb. Move your shoulder, elbow, wrist, and hand until you can bring your finger straight down on the first string at the fifth fret.

Only apply enough force on the string to make the note ring clearly. Maintain pressure to keep the note ringing.

It may take you several attempts to fret the note cleanly. Several more to alternate back and forth from the open first string to the fretted and back without stopping, speeding up, or slowing down.

This is called fretting. Not as in worrying. Applying pressure to a string on the fretboard.

Banjo strings stretch and ring from the nut to the bridge. When you fret a string, it will now ring from that fret. The fret replaces the nut. You have now shortened the string, causing it to ring at a higher pitch.

I cannot stress the importance of being mindful of the fretting hand. Apply too much and your fingertips will bruise. Apply too little and the note will not sound.

Work on that open first string, **bump** dit-ty, first string fretted at the fifth **bump** dit-ty until you can play smoothly, evenly, and with emphasis on the first and third beats. Be mindful of the amount of pressure you apply on the string. Take care that the fretted and open strings are equal in tone.

bump dit-ty. **One** two-and, **three** four-and.

If your notes are muddy, stop and look at your posture and form. Adjust things a bit this way and that until things work.

Your fingers are fine. Every banjo student starts out thinking their hands are too this or lack that. The problem is not your hands or the spacing of the banjo strings. You simply need to practice.

Once you can play a single fretted note clearly, we can try some chords.

Let's start with a partial C major chord. I say partial because we will not be fretting the full chord.

It will make sense in a bit. Just trust me for now.

Sitting with proper posture and all the jazz about how to hold the banjo, bring your fretting hand up to the nut of your banjo. Cradle the neck in the crook of your thumb

but avoid supporting the neck with your hand. Do not try to clamp the neck between your fingers and thumb while fretting.

Angle your shoulder, elbow, wrist, and hand until you can bring your index straight down on the second string at the first fret.

If you are fretting more than one string, adjust your hand until you get a clear note.

Maintaining pressure on the second string, use your ring finger to fret the first string at the second fret.

Strum from the third string down, and you have a partial C major chord.

Sounds kind of pretty, don't it?

It's a simple partial chord. Two fingers. Do not underestimate the upcoming challenge.

Start playing the bump dit-ty rhythm at a slow tempo, then begin alternating from open G to the partial C major chord. The goal is to change chords without slowing down or stopping.

On paper, this is simple. In action, it presents a real challenge.

Music is not a matter of only playing notes and chords. The notes and chords must be played with proper timing and rhythm.

You can't think about your left and right hand simultaneously. It simply is not possible.

Our brains don't multitask as well as we tell ourselves.

From what I have observed, and remember, I'm just a musician, our minds work on two levels: the conscious and unconscious.

When we learn to ride a bicycle, there is a beginning stage where we must think about maintaining our balance. This conscious stage of learning is stiff and wobbly because we are overthinking everything.

As we gain experience, the act of riding and everything involved become so familiar that we forget to think about it. The mechanics of operating the vehicle have moved from our conscious minds to the unconscious. We have attained fluency.

With frailing banjo, we must train our minds and hands to attain that same level of comfort. Changing chords, staying in rhythm, and all the other concepts or skills have got to be practiced to the point where everything comes together as natural as breathing. To shift from consciously putting your fingers in place for a chord or note, to playing with complete freedom of expression. Unselfconsciously.

There is no set number of repetitions or practice hours to accomplish this familiarity. In fact, anything you do to rush the process only slows things down.

When I was learning chords, my favorite practice spot was sitting under a dogwood tree with my great aunt Dora. She wasn't a musician, but I loved her company. We would sit in the shade sipping lemonade and I would practice while she talked endlessly about relatives I did not know. The conversation kept me from overthinking what I was practicing, and Dora would tell me honestly how I sounded. It was warm and comfortable. I loved her. She is part of everything I play now.

I am aware that the idea of practicing to the point of making the skill in question a reflex action goes against the grain of how we imagine learning. In our daydreams, arriving at the first lesson will find even the masters bowing to us as The Great Chosen One.

Discovering that work is involved is always a shock. Going on to discovering that the training and effort will be endless can be a kick in the breadbasket.

I won my first banjo on a bet. I also pulled my first guitar out of a trash can. Despite being nearly deaf, I have always had a burning desire to make music. It was well with my soul when I discovered that I was not only untalented but would also have to work at least twice as hard. I love music so much that it did not matter to me if I progressed. All I wanted to do was sit and sing to and with the people I love. It was never a burden to practice. In fact, I ditched most of high school to sing on subway platforms and bus stations.

As you practice the C chord and begin struggling with the riddle of coordinating the left and right hands, put aside your timelines and expectations. Really experience the moment.

The feel of the instrument in your lap.

The middle fingernail and fretting fingers on the strings.

The feel of the string vibrations traveling through the instrument.

Drink in the sounds of the instrument. Interact with your environment. Find joy just in doing the work, and it will never seem like practice time. Just having fun with the banjo.

Alright. Work on that C chord and accenting the **bump** dit-ty.

Now get lost. Don't come back 'til you can do like I showed you.

The Third Lesson

Hopefully, a bit of time has passed since reading the previous chapter. I am also moving forward with the understanding that you have been practicing both the **bump** dit-ty strum and the partial C chord.

If not, please take the time to master the earlier material before moving on.

Okay, start playing the **bump** dit-ty at an even rhythm.

Now alternate from the open G chord to the partial C.

As you go back and forth, look at how your hand and fingers make the C chord.

If you are making the partial C chord as taught, the index should be on the second string at the first fret. Your middle finger should be free and the ring finger on the first string at the second fret.

Keeping your index fretting the second string at the first fret, release the first string and drop your middle finger on the third string at the second fret.

Say hello to the D7 chord.

That wasn't hard, now, was it?

Be aware of your body posture and fretting technique as you make the D7. Do not stretch your fingers across the fretboard. Do not move the banjo around for easier fretting. Maintain posture. Move your shoulder, elbow, and wrist to position the fingers as you cradle the neck in the crook of your thumb.

One other thing; don't stare at your hands.

There will be a temptation to try and visually orient your hands and fingers. This is Quixotic from the start.

Okay, since this is an imaginary musical dojo of the mind, I don't have to worry about messing up the place. My tea is getting cold, so don't be alarmed as I pour the cup over my extended left hand. Instead, watch the tea.

The tea flows from the cup. When it meets my hand, it does not stop or even hesitate. Instead, it simply flows over my hand and continues its way to the floor.

Everything flows like this. When a hesitant driver wheels into the flow of traffic, chaos ensues. When a hesitant musician tries to jam with others, everything will be half a bubble shy of plumb.

Music flows like water, and, like water, hesitating or resisting the current will wind you up like the man in Winslow Homer's *The Gulf Stream*.

For you philistines, that's the painting of a man in a small boat in shark infested waters looking glumly at a looming hurricane. I'm not an art historian or anything. My dad would ramble about the painting whenever my math grades came up.

One of the scariest things in life is the surrender of control. When we first take up something like a fretted instrument, the difficulty of coordinating the left and right hands can make us cautious. We fear making a mistake, long before we begin to understand what a mistake means in art versus the rest of the world.

This fear leads us to frantically switching our attention from hand to hand, causing us to miss out or screw up everything else going on.

If nobody has told you yet, it is okay to make mistakes. We all fall. Sometimes on stage in front of multitudes. Sometimes live on the radio.

Heck, I did my first television interview as an author so sick I literally could not see straight. A massive ear infection was causing me extreme pain and vertigo. I had to wear an eye patch to keep the room from spinning. Right before we went on the air, the dizziness hit me like a wave. I wound up purging into the nearest trash can with such force that the backslash hit me like a gag from *Evil Dead 2*.

Ever the professional, I wiped off my face and sculpted my hair into something resembling order. I had to do this on my own. As much as Dear Old Dad and I love each other dearly, even best friends and fathers balk at scooping regurgitated potato salad out of your hair.

I covered up my shirt with my jacket. My heavy black leather jacket.

Then I went live on the air and had an intelligent conversation, coming across as both a new author with a voice and an experienced musician. I did this sick as a dog while wearing a worn biker jacket zipped to the collar, an eye patch, and puke in my hair.

My mother at home could tell I was not okay, but everybody else within the WBOC Channel 47 television audience across Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia, couldn't tell anything was wrong apart from I looked like fat Snake Plissken.

When the interview was over, I just about collapsed into a puddle. The camera crew, who had been behaving like bickering Vaudevillians up to the interview, gave me a round of applause. After I cleaned up, a few even wanted to shake my hand.

My point is, you can fail spectacularly and still give a smooth performance if you go with the flow.

As you practice **bump** dit-ty, accent the first beat and mix up the G, partial C, and D7 chords. Accept in advance that mistakes will happen.

There is nothing defeatist or pessimistic in this.

The audience will not notice the mistake. They will notice you stopping to berate yourself and apologizing every time you hit a bum note.

If you maintain composure and flow through mistakes in practice, they will stop being mistakes in front of an audience. Over time, the occasional wrong chord, note, or struck string will inspire cool improvisational riffs.

Wow. We covered a lot of ground, but there is one more thing to cover before I tell you to get lost.

First, a quick overview.

Presently, with three chords and a simple rhythm, you have enough knowledge to play and sing countless songs.

The **bump** dit-ty is in what we call 4/4 time. I'll get to the mechanics of what that means, but tens of thousands of songs use that rhythm as a framework. Ranging from Beethoven to The Beatles and beyond.

G, C, and D7 make up what we call the I-IV-V chord progression. Again, we will dive into music theory a bit farther along. The gist of it is, you can play these chords and play the **bump** dit-ty and sing everything from ancient ballads to heavy metal.

There is an old saying that goes, country music is nothing but three chords and the truth. There is much to ponder in this.

Now that we know the basic chords in the key of G, we may as well add more range to our musical palette.

Make a D7 chord. Drop your ring finger on the first string at the third fret.

Say hello to the partial F chord.

Use the same fretting technique for this chord as with the others. Gentle pressure. Do not strain your hand. Pain is a sign that something needs to be corrected.

C, F and G is the I-IV-IV progression for the key of C. The music theory stuff aside, this means you can play in two keys.

Practice mixing up partial C, partial F and open G for the key of C.

Practice open G, D7, and the partial C for the key of G.

For the partial chords, don't forget to skip the fourth string on the strum of the **bump** dit-ty.

You may notice that your fingertips will be tender from fretting. Mild discomfort is to be expected in the beginning as your fingertips get used to the steel strings of the banjo. Severe discomfort is a sign to call your doctor.

Oh. That thing about playing until your fingers bleed? I did that. All it got me was an entire summer forcing the strained tendons of my hand to fret like a musician rather than a cave dweller, and funky stains on my banjo fretboard.

When I told Tiny about the bleeding fingers routine, he motioned me close before cuffing me on the side of the head. Then he told me, in the kindest and most profanity-laden way possible, to stop being such an idiot.

I loved him. He was cool.

Work on your chords. Flow. Work with your body rather than forcing things. Most of all, give yourself time. While the **bump** dit-ty is repetitive for the moment, you are training more than your hands. Listen to the banjo. Listen to the chords.

Now get lost. Don't come back 'til you can do like I showed you.