

Chapter 1

You Want to Play What?: Banjo Basics

In This Chapter

- ▶ Connecting to the world-wide banjo community
 - ▶ Getting to know different kinds of banjos
 - ▶ Exploring the banjo and all its parts
 - ▶ Starting on the road to becoming a great player
-

Before you begin any trip, you probably like to know where you're going. If you're new to the banjo and don't yet own an instrument or if you're wondering about your eventual musical destination, this chapter is definitely the place to start your *Banjo For Dummies* excursion. The key is in the ignition, so put this thing in drive!

In this chapter, you spread out your banjo road map and start planning what I hope will be a wonderful, lifelong musical journey with the five-string banjo. You see what makes the five-string banjo different from other kinds of stringed instruments, and you get to take a look at some of the various kinds of banjos available today. I name the parts of the banjo and preview the musical skills you'll master in this book on the way to becoming a great banjo player.

Getting into Banjo

There's something about the five-string banjo that brings out strong feelings in people. Folks who like the banjo usually *really* like it, sometimes to the mystery, confusion, and even chagrin of those loved ones around them. What is it about this instrument that inspires such passion, and how can you tell if you've been bitten by the banjo bug? This section explores some answers to these questions.

Loving that amazing sound

You know the sound of the banjo when you hear it: the bright, rhythmic waterfall of short, cascading notes that can conjure up just about any emotion (but *happy* is usually the first to come to mind for the typical guy or gal on the street). The banjo is usually associated with folk, country, bluegrass, and old-time music, but these days, you can also hear the instrument in rock, jazz, and even classical settings.

Over the years, I've asked hundreds of amateur and professional players why they initially got interested in the banjo, and the usual answer is "I fell in love with the sound." I think an equal attraction is the lure of hearing a lot of notes compressed into what seems like the smallest of musical spaces. In the hands of a skilled player, the banjo is an instrument that's capable of amazing virtuosity.

Becoming a true believer

Banjo players usually remember well the precise moment in time that they became hooked on the instrument. For me, growing up as a suburban teenager far from significant hills of any kind, that moment arrived when I was watching Roy Clark play banjo on *Hee Haw* and thinking to myself, "If I can somehow sit through this show every week, I think I can eventually learn 'Cripple Creek.'" I didn't especially like country music at that time, and I'd never heard of bluegrass music — but I really loved the sound of the banjo.

Growing up in the 1970s, I could also hear the banjo as a background instrument on hit songs from the Eagles, the Doobie Brothers, Neil Young, and James Taylor. Hearing the banjo in these contexts made me believe that the banjo *must* be cool if those musicians used it on their recordings, despite what my friends thought about this disturbing turn in my musical tastes.

Today, you can hear the sound of the banjo in just about any style of music, short of Gregorian chant (although I bet there's a monk in a monastery somewhere in the world learning "Foggy Mountain Breakdown"). More than ever, the banjo is an integral part of contemporary music, showing up on stage with Mumford & Sons, Taylor Swift, the Avett Brothers, and most of the biggest hat and hair acts in country music.

The path-breaking banjo player Béla Fleck has performed with jazz artists Chick Corea and Marcus Roberts, and he has composed a concerto for banjo and orchestra. The actor/comedian/writer Steve Martin is bringing the banjo to thousands of new listeners who come to his concerts for the jokes but leave humming Steve's original banjo music. In addition, thousands of banjo players come together every year at their favorite bluegrass and old-time music festivals, camps, and workshops to make music together, as they have for many decades.

My own youthful enthusiasm for the banjo evolved into a wonderful, lifelong relationship that's still going strong. I get a joyful feeling every time I play a tune on the banjo. I'm also amazed at how my love for the instrument has opened the door to many new and wonderful experiences (such as graduate school, international touring and teaching, and this book!) and is at the basis of many of my most cherished friendships. When you play the banjo, you're not just playing a musical instrument; you're opening a door to new life experiences, such as the joy you'll experience playing music with others. Even if you never become as obsessed about the banjo as I am, I believe that the banjo can improve your life and make you a happier person if you give it the chance.

There's no doubt about it: The banjo is *hot* right now — and it's time for you to join in on the fun!

Identifying Different Kinds of Banjos

Although the five-string banjo is by far the most popular type of banjo being played today, decades ago the most popular banjos in the first half of the 20th century were four-string tenor and plectrum banjos. These banjos are really different instruments and shouldn't be confused with the five-string banjo. Understanding the differences between banjos is important, because before you begin your adventure, you need to make sure you're traveling with the right kind of equipment.

In the following sections, I compare and contrast the different instruments in the banjo family, so you don't mistake one type of banjo for another.

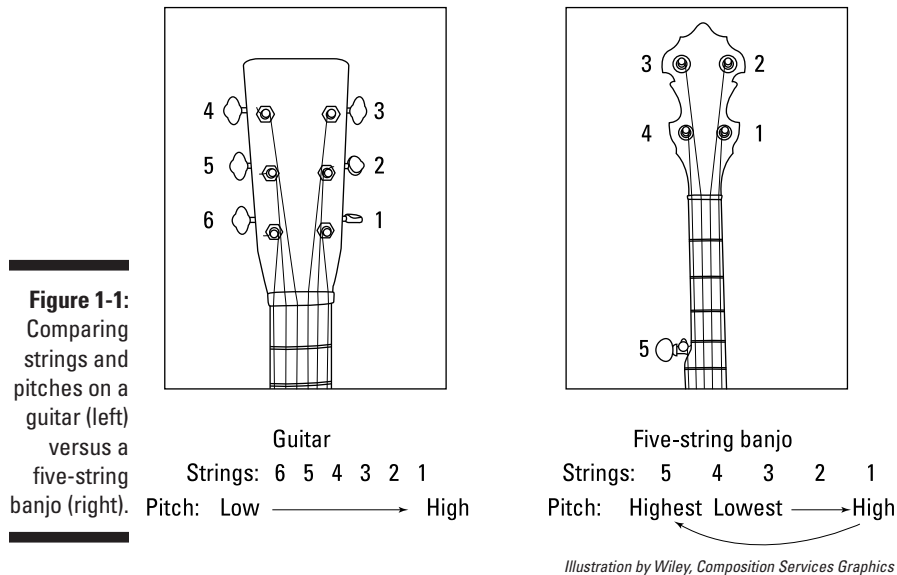
Five-string banjo: The subject of this book

The short 5th string is what makes the five-string banjo different from other types of banjos and from just about every other instrument in the known universe. Most of the time, you know immediately that you're looking at a five-string banjo when you see a *tuning peg* (a geared mechanism that keeps the string in tune) sticking out almost halfway up the *neck* (the long, narrow piece of wood where you fret strings with the left hand; for more on these terms, see the later section "Knowing the Parts of a Banjo"). This tuning peg holds the 5th string of the banjo (see Figure 1-1).



The 5th string is a crucial distinguishing characteristic of the five-string banjo, both in the instrument's appearance and in the sound of the music. The 5th string is not only shorter than the other four banjo strings, but this string is also the highest in sound (*or pitch*). The 5th string on a banjo lies within easy reach of the right-hand thumb, which you use to play this string in all kinds of banjo music. Having the highest-pitched string next to the string with the lowest pitch is unusual in comparison to how pitches are arranged on the strings of a guitar

(as you can see in Figure 1-1), but this is one of the things that makes the banjo sound so great! This characteristic of the banjo is also one part of the instrument's ancient African ancestry (for more on this, see Chapter 11).



Tenor and plectrum banjos: Look for another book

In the early decades of the 20th century, folks loved the quality of the banjo's sound so much that they attached different kinds of necks to the banjo body to create new instruments with different numbers of strings. These hybrid instruments were tuned and played differently from the five-string banjo.

Tenor and *plectrum* banjos are examples of this phenomenon. These four-stringed instruments are commonly used in traditional jazz, Dixieland, and Irish music. They don't have the short 5th string and are usually played with a flatpick instead of with the fingers. Although these banjos make the same kinds of sounds and look a lot like the five-string banjo, tenor and plectrum banjos use other tunings and playing techniques and are viewed as different instruments by banjo fans.



Don't confuse these tenor and plectrum banjos with the five-string variety. The bodies of these instruments are the same, but the necks reveal the difference (see Figure 1-2). You can't play five-string banjo music on a four-string tenor or plectrum banjo — these instruments aren't interchangeable! You need a five-string banjo to play five-string banjo music.

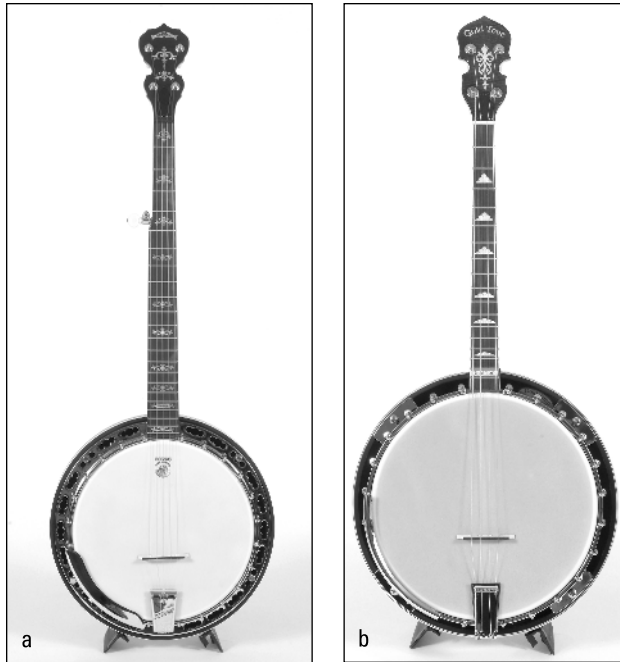


Figure 1-2:
Comparing
a five-string
(a) and a
tenor (b)
banjo.

Photographs courtesy of Elderly Instruments

Banjos of all sorts

In the early decades of the 20th century, America was mad for anything that sounded remotely like a banjo. (Amazing, isn't it? Just like it is today!) Instrument makers took guitar and mandolin necks and attached them to banjo bodies, creating new kinds of instruments of all sizes that had that great banjo sound but could be played using guitar and mandolin techniques.

Banjos with mandolin necks usually have eight strings and are called *mandolin banjos* or *mando-banjos*. These instruments are smaller than most five-string banjos. Banjos with guitar necks have six strings and are called *guitar banjos*. These instruments are perfect for guitar

players who want that banjo sound (and maybe are too lazy to actually learn to play the banjo — but you didn't hear that from me!). Guitar banjos have six strings instead of five and can be a bit larger than most five-string banjos.

Today, these more obscure branches of the banjo family tree are seen largely as novelty instruments and, like the tenor and plectrum banjo (see the section “Tenor and plectrum banjos: Look for another book” in this chapter), are considered to be a different kind of instrument than a five-string banjo. Mandolin banjos are played like mandolins, and guitar banjos are played like guitars.

Knowing the Parts of a Banjo

The banjo combines wooden, metal, skin, and/or plastic parts held together by rods, nuts, screws, and brackets to make some of the most incredible and beautiful sounds in the world. You could call the banjo the Frankenstein of musical instruments, but I like to think of it as the *Bionic Woman*. Practically all banjos share a common characteristic of having a replaceable top playing surface made of plastic or animal skin (called the *head*) that's stretched tightly across the body of the banjo (called the *pot*) to form the top of the resonating body of the instrument (see Figure 1-3).



Five-string banjos come in three different basic styles: open-back, resonator, and electric. Musicians select the kind of banjo they play based on their musical style and their personal tastes. Chapter 13 explains the differences between these kinds of banjos, along with tips for making an informed purchase.

In the following sections, you get to know the banjo from head to toe (well, really from the top of the headstock to the bottom of the pot). You also discover how the instrument captures the energy of a plucked string and turns it into that unmistakably great sound that banjo players love. You can refer to Figure 1-4 to see exactly where these parts are located on the banjo.

Looking at the neck

The neck is one of the two main sections of the banjo (the pot being the other; see the section “Checking out the pot”). The *neck* is the long piece of wood that supports the strings and tuners. Necks are usually made of maple, mahogany, or walnut.

To get a better feel for the banjo, take a look at the parts of the banjo neck:

- ✓ **Frets:** The thin, metal bars on the banjo neck that are positioned at precise intervals to give you the various pitches needed when fretting a string. (*Fretting* is what you do when you move a left-hand finger into position behind a fret to change the pitch of a string.) In the world of fretting, you use the term *up the neck* to refer to moving the left hand toward the pot and *down the neck* when you talk about moving the left hand toward the nut and peghead.
- ✓ **Fingerboard:** A thin, flat, wooden strip glued to the neck that holds the frets and is the surface upon which the left hand produces notes and chords.

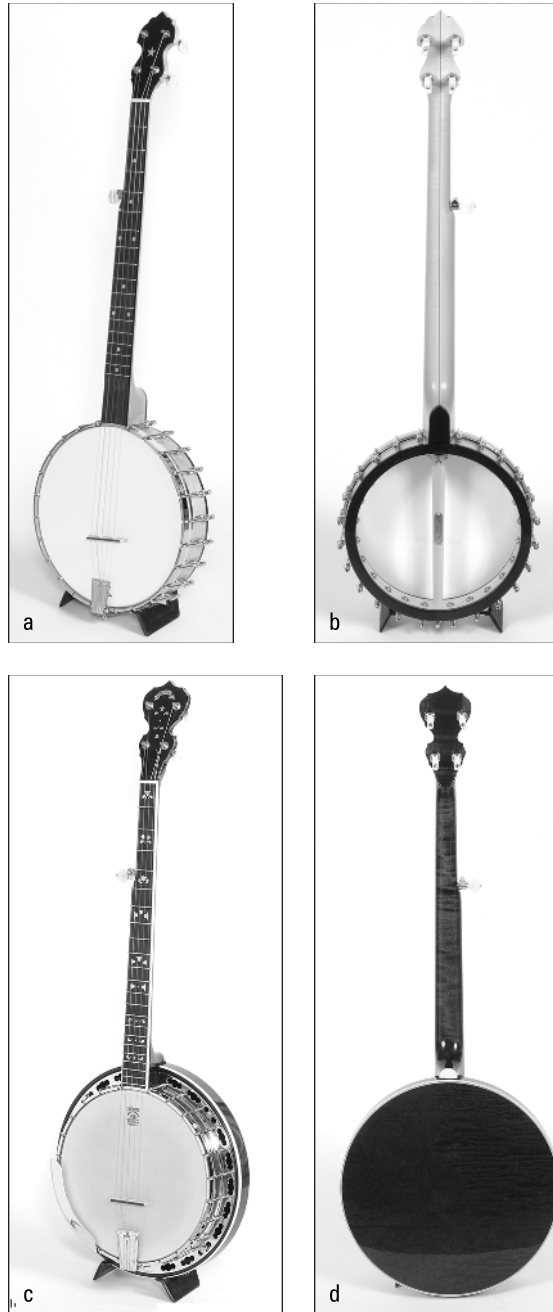


Figure 1-3: Comparing open-back (a and b) and resonator (c and d) five-string banjos.

Photographs courtesy of Elderly Instruments

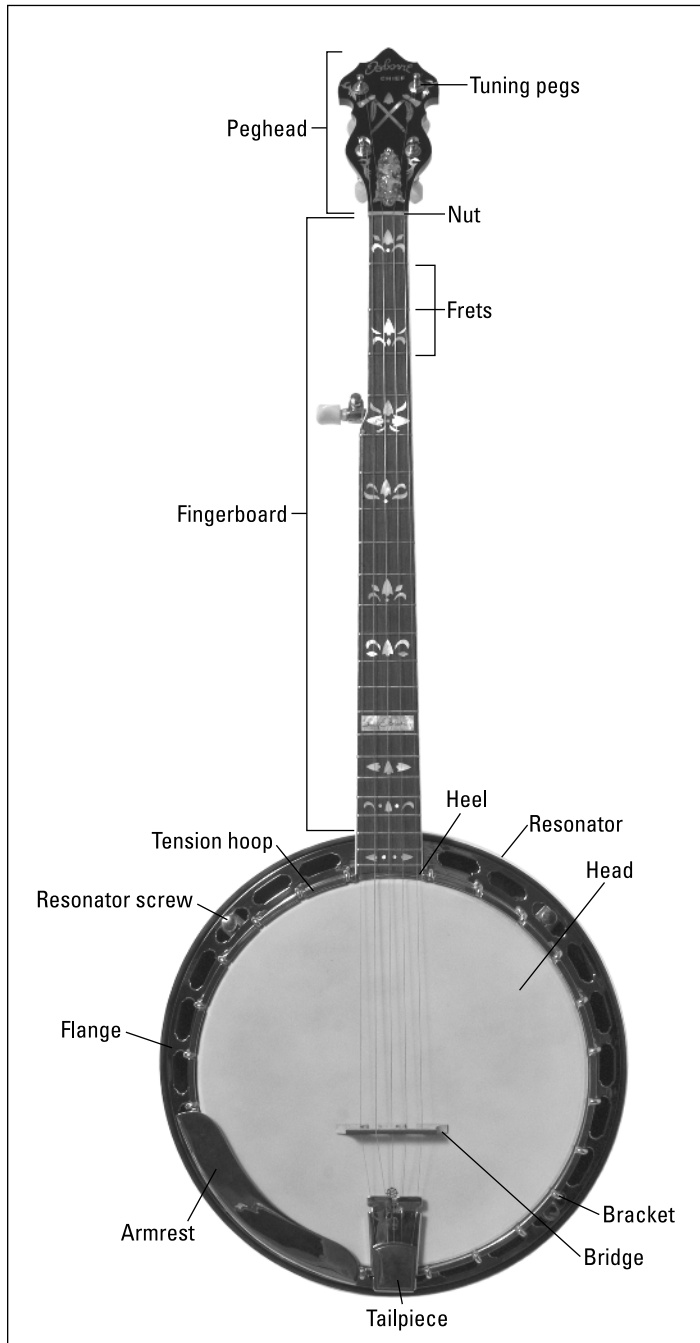


Figure 1-4:
The parts of
a banjo.

- ✔ **Peghead:** Also called the *headstock*, the peghead is the elaborately shaped end of the neck that holds the tuning pegs for the four lower strings of the banjo.
- ✔ **Tuning pegs:** Sometimes called *tuners* or *tuning machines*, these pegs are the devices that raise or lower the pitch of the banjo's strings with a turn of the buttons located on the backside of the peghead. The pegs for strings 1 through 4 are attached to the peghead, while the tuning peg for the 5th string is found on the top side of the neck near the 5th fret.
- ✔ **Nut:** A block of ivory, bone, or plastic that's glued to the end of the fingerboard where the peghead begins. Strings 1 through 4 pass through the grooves in the nut on their way to the shafts of the tuning pegs. The 5th string has its own smaller nut, located near the 5th fret.
- ✔ **Heel:** The name given to the part at the end of the neck that's attached to the pot of the banjo.
- ✔ **Truss rod:** You can't see the truss rod, but it's an important part of most banjo necks. The *truss rod* is an adjustable metal rod that runs down most of the length of the banjo neck in a channel underneath the fingerboard. This rod helps to keep the neck stable and controls the amount of curve in the neck to keep the strings from buzzing when playing. Although some banjos don't have truss rods at all, most banjos have adjustable truss rods, which can be accessed at the peghead by removing the truss rod cover located just above the nut at the peghead. (*Note:* This is a procedure best left to the pros.)

Checking out the pot

The other major section of the banjo (other than the neck; see the preceding section) is the *pot*, the round lower body of the banjo including all of its constituent parts. You can see some of the following parts highlighted in Figure 1-5:

- ✔ **Head:** The head is the plastic or skin membrane that acts as the vibrating top of the banjo. The head is largely responsible for the unique sound of your new favorite instrument.
- ✔ **Rim:** Sometimes called the *shell*, the rim is the circular wooden ring that is the centerpiece of the pot and is made from laminations or blocks of maple or mahogany. A well-made rim is essential to a good-sounding banjo.
- ✔ **Tone ring:** This part of the pot is a metal circular collar that's machined to fit on top of the wooden rim, and the head is stretched tight across

its top outer circumference. Tone rings come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Together with the rim, the tone ring provides the fundamental color of the banjo's tone. However, tone rings aren't found on all banjos and having one isn't absolutely necessary to having a good-sounding instrument.

- ✔ **Brackets:** Sometimes called *hooks*, brackets are ringed around the banjo pot and are responsible for tightening the head via the bracket screws that are attached to each bracket on the underside of most banjos.
- ✔ **Tension hoop:** Sometimes called the *stretcher band*, this circular metal ring fits over the outside edge of the banjo head and helps to uniformly stretch the head down across the top of the tone ring as the brackets are tightened.
- ✔ **Bridge:** The bridge transmits the vibrations of the strings to the head. Bridges range in size from 5/8 inch to 3/4 inch. They are movable, but are held fast to the banjo head by the tension of the strings.
- ✔ **Tailpiece:** This part holds the strings on the pot end of the banjo. Many tailpieces are adjustable in various ways that can subtly affect overall banjo tone.
- ✔ **Armrest:** The armrest is attached to the pot of the banjo and extends over the top of the banjo head to make right-hand playing more comfortable while simultaneously protecting the head.
- ✔ **Coordinating rods:** Seen only from the back of the banjo, these rods are attached at opposite ends of the rim, parallel to the banjo strings. The primary function of the coordinating rods is to keep the neck securely attached to the pot. However, they can also be used to make slight adjustments to the height of the strings off of the fingerboard (called *string action*). Some banjos have only one coordinating rod, and many open-back banjos have what's called a *dowel stick* instead of a coordinating rod.
- ✔ **Resonator:** The bowl-shaped piece of wood that's attached to many banjos, especially those used in bluegrass music, is the resonator. The resonator projects the sound out and away from the instrument. It's usually constructed from the same kind of wood as the banjo neck. Open-back banjos don't have resonators (see Chapter 13 for more on the types of banjos).
- ✔ **Resonator screws:** Three or four resonator screws keep the resonator attached to the rest of the banjo pot.
- ✔ **Flange:** The flange is a circular metal piece connecting the pot to the resonator that helps to keep the resonator in place.

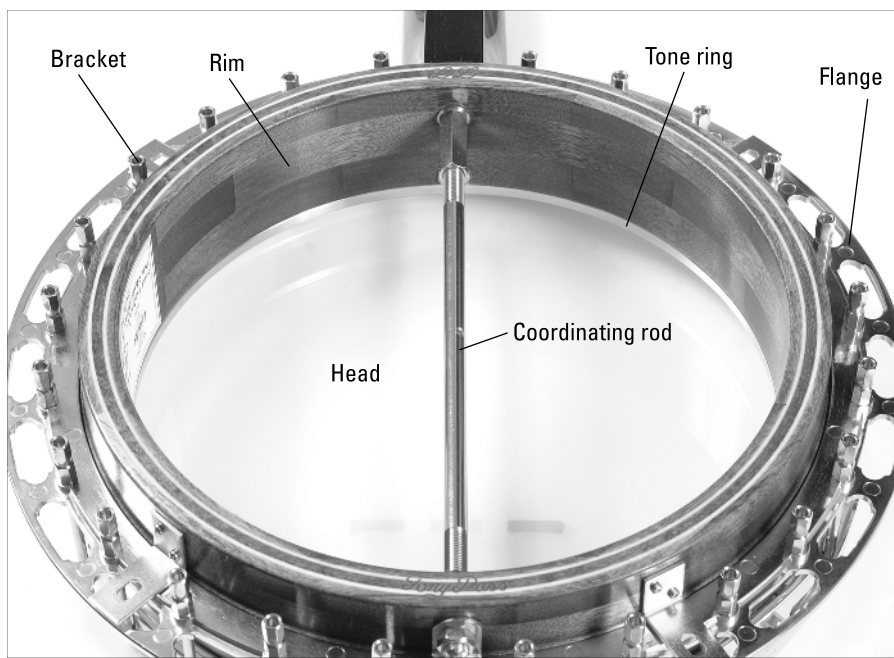


Figure 1-5:
The banjo
pot (as seen
from the
back).

Photograph by Anne Hamersky

Picking up string vibrations

When you strike a banjo string with a right-hand finger or thumb, the string starts to move back and forth. These vibrations move through the bridge (a piece of wood positioned on the banjo head) to the banjo head, which amplifies that sound. Banjo players frequently refer to right-hand playing as *picking* the banjo. You can read more about authentic right-hand banjo picking techniques in Chapter 5.

The *pitch* of any string (its sound as measured by how high or low it is) is determined by how much tension or tightness is in each string and how long or short it is. The tighter or shorter the string, the higher its pitch. You can change the pitch of a string in two ways:

- ✓ **Turn the tuning pegs.** A twist of a tuning peg in one direction or the other raises or lowers the pitch of a string. The direction is different for each string. (For more on tuning, check out Chapter 2.)

✓ **Fret the strings.** When you *fret* a string, you place a left-hand finger behind one of the 22 frets found on the fingerboard of the neck. As you fret, you're shortening the length of the string and raising its pitch. An *open* string is one that is unfretted in the left hand. A fretted string sounds higher in pitch compared to an open string or to that same string fretted on a lower fret (a lower fret is one that is farther away from the banjo body). For more on fretting with the left hand, see Chapter 3.

Becoming a Banjo Player

If the banjo is the first stringed instrument you've ever attempted to play, it may seem as if you have a million things to remember at this first stage. *Everything* feels so new and unfamiliar. Don't get discouraged! Banjo players tend to be perfectionists, so be careful not to let your desire to play things correctly overwhelm your love for playing (and remember that everyone learns from his or her mistakes — even banjo players). Having fun with the banjo is more important than playing everything perfectly.



When you want to become more proficient on the banjo, you can't find a substitute for time actually spent playing the banjo — the more you play, the faster you progress. Focus on one new skill at a time, and don't spend too much time on the Internet finding out what everyone else thinks about this or that aspect of banjo playing. Just *play* (and check out Chapter 16 for more great practice suggestions). After you've gained a few basic skills, find other musicians at your ability level to play with as soon as possible. Playing with others will significantly speed up your progress.

In the following sections, I present just a few of the skills you should strive to master as a banjo player (and as you make your way through *Banjo For Dummies*).

Making wise purchase choices



These days, new players can find good starter banjos that are affordable and easy to play. The crucial first step in your purchase is finding an acoustic specialty store that really knows banjos and actually *likes* banjo players. And as you shop, keep in mind that your choice of instrument should be based mostly upon the kind of music you want to play (and, of course, how much money you have to spend).

I cover everything you need to know about what to look for in banjos and playing accessories and how to find them in Chapters 13 and 14.

Tuning and holding your banjo

Keeping your instrument in tune is something that you practice each time you play — and an absolutely essential skill when playing music with others. Tuning your banjo can be frustrating at first, but with careful listening to compare one pitch with another and some trial and error, you can have this skill mastered in no time.

After you're in tune, you want to adopt a comfortable playing position for both sitting or standing. You have a lot of individual options in this regard. Just remember not to raise the neck too high and try using a strap. If you follow these two suggestions, you'll be well on your way to finding your personal comfort zone.

I cover getting your banjo in tune in Chapter 2. Check out Chapter 3 to help you get comfortable holding the banjo and fitting the strap.

Fretting chords with the left hand

A *chord* is three or more notes sounded together. Chords support a melody and are the building blocks for accompanying other musicians. The best way to begin your playing adventures is to become familiar with well-used chords such as G, C, and D7. A comfortable left-hand position makes forming these chords much more fun. Let your thumb touch the top of the back of the banjo neck, relax your shoulder and elbow into your body, and be sure you're using the tips of your fingers to press the strings just behind the frets — now you're in business.

In Chapter 3, you can dig deeper into finding a comfortable left-hand position and get used to fretting chords up and down the banjo neck.

Playing authentic right- and left-hand patterns

Coordinating right-hand picking techniques with the left-hand work of making chords and creating new notes is a full-time job for banjo players! Mastering exercises that isolate what each hand does by itself lays the foundation for making great banjo music with both hands together.

In Chapters 5, 6, 8, and 9, you take a look at these techniques, because you need them in clawhammer and bluegrass banjo to create melodies and to play with others in jam sessions.

Practicing some real tunes



The real fun begins when you utilize your technique to play melodies on the instrument in authentic banjo styles. Melody notes can usually be organized as a group of notes, called a *scale*. Finding melody notes in a song becomes easier after you've mastered a few scales on the banjo neck, so I recommend that you start with the scales I outline in Chapter 4.

After you get the feel for the scales, you can use the right- and left-hand techniques you master to capture as many melody notes as you can and create arrangements that sound good on the instrument.

In Chapters 7, 8, and 9, you can play beginner and more advanced versions of tunes in clawhammer, old-time fingerpicking, and traditional and contemporary bluegrass styles. Chapter 11 explores early banjo styles from the 19th and early 20th centuries. The online audio examples allow you to hear me play musical examples from this book, and now you can check out video online for the most important exercises and tunes presented. We banjo players have to stick together, and I'm there for you, online 24/7!

Jamming in good company

Banjo players love to make music with other musicians — guitarists, fiddlers, mandolin and dobro players, and bassists. When you're playing your banjo with others, remember to play in a way that enhances the sound of the total group. Active listening and playing in good rhythm play a big role in your efforts to make other musicians sound their best.

In Chapters 4, 10, and 12, I discuss the unique techniques and skills you need to accompany other pickers and singers on familiar bluegrass and old-time tunes in informal jam sessions. I also cover some of the unspoken ground rules of jam etiquette to make your transition into group playing go smoothly.

Meeting other banjo lovers

You may be amazed at how many opportunities you have to share your enthusiasm for the banjo with other like-minded players. From finding a teacher to attending a workshop, camp, or festival, you can have more fun with the instrument and become a better player faster by connecting with others who share your enthusiasm for the banjo. As a new player, don't wait until you've already acquired some playing skills before seeking help from others. You'll become a better player much more quickly by seeking out help

at the very beginning of your banjo adventure. In Chapter 12, I talk about the world of banjo that lies beyond your doorstep.



Camps and workshops are often designed for all levels of students. If you already play, you can recharge your banjo-picking batteries at a regional camp or workshop where you can hang out with the banjo stars, make many new friends, and come away with new playing ideas that will keep your hands busy for months to come.

Keeping your banjo sounding great

Banjos are much more adjustable than other stringed instruments such as the guitar or bass. However, you don't have to become an accomplished, all-knowing, instrument-repair person to keep your instrument in top shape.



Keeping fresh strings on your instrument is the most important thing you can do to keep your banjo running right. After a few weeks or months of playing, your strings will inevitably become harder to tune — or they may even break. Keep an extra set of strings handy in your case along with a small pair of wire cutters, and you'll be ready for all contingencies!

You may also want to check out all the movable parts on your banjo every couple of months. For example, keeping the head tight keeps your banjo sounding bright and loud, and checking to see that the bridge is in just the right place on the banjo head keeps your fretted notes in tune. I cover everything you need to know about these topics, as well as determining when you need to seek out professional advice, in Chapter 15.

