

Melodic Clawhammer Banjo Workshop – 2012
Paul Clarke

Melodic clawhammer banjo playing is in part a revival of the minstrel style of playing that started to become popular in the 1840's. The minstrel style or "stroke style" came from Africa and was played by white minstrels who learned it from slaves playing banjos that they made in North America.

There are some differences between the current melodic style and the old minstrel style, largely because of changes in banjo construction. The short thumb string came from Africa, but the metal hoops, hooks, and brackets were American innovations. Frets were added and steel strings came into use in the late 19th Century, but the down-picking or stroke style persisted in rural areas while efforts were made to "civilize" the banjo and the up-picking or "classical" style of playing developed among professional musicians and some city folks.

I was exposed to the modern Scruggs style of banjo playing in the early 1960's, but didn't hear any but the very simplest frailing style until about 1978. I attended a presentation of various banjo styles that Bill Rogers did at Gryphon Stringed Instruments in Palo Alto. Bill played a rather melodic arrangement of "Turkey in the Straw" that grabbed my attention and induced me to take lessons from him for several weeks. From the very beginning I found it difficult *not* to play the melody if I knew it. I guess Bill noticed this, because he recommended to me an LP record named "Melodic Clawhammer Banjo." The record was produced by Bob Carlin and featured Carlin himself and a number of other players including Ken Perlman, Hank Sapochnik and Andy Cahan. My experience with melodic playing paralleled that of Andy Cahan, who is quoted in the tablature book that accompanies the record:

"By the time I started really listening to a lot of banjo players, my melodic clawhammer had already emerged. It seems to me that it is easier for the modern musician to first pick up and understand the melodic, rather [than] the rhythmic content of Old Time and Irish Music."

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In May 2012 I met Ken Perlman at a house concert he did in Mountain View with Alan Jabbour. He told me that he may be the only one still playing the melodic style, of all the players featured on the “Melodic Clawhammer Banjo” recording. Regardless of whether you choose to concentrate on the melodic style, the techniques necessary to good melodic playing are servicable in all down-picking styles. Ken's tablature book, also named “Melodic Clawhammer Banjo,” came out about the same time and Bob Carlin's album. I recommend his book.

Online source of Bob Carlin's LP in mp3 format:

<http://timesaintliketheyusedtobe.blogspot.com/2010/09/melodic-clawhammer-banjo.html>

Tab book for Carlin's LP available on Amazon.com as of August 7, 2012:

<http://www.amazon.com/MELODIC-CLAWHAMMER-BANJO-BOOK-RECORD/dp/B000HUBRM8>

Ken Perlman's pricelist page including re-issue of "Melodic Clawhammer Banjo" with accompanying CD:

<http://www.kenperlman.com/pricelst.htm>

This same pricelist page also includes "Everything You Wanted to Know About Clawhammer Banjo," which comes with two CDs, plus other books, CDs, and DVDs.

The first two tunes presented here both use the “sawmill” tuning, with capo on fret two or tuned a whole tone higher than given here: gDGCD. Booth Shot Lincoln is in open G tuning, gDGBD.

Tabs are inconsistent; I recently got software for creating them and haven't yet decided how best to use it.

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Henry Reed learned several tunes from Quince Dillion, who died his late seventies in 1901. Quince Dillion was a fifer in the Mexican war, and this tune apparently celebrates the American's victory over the Mexican army led by Santa Anna. This version of Santa Anna's retreat is one I learned from a recording by Alan Jabbour called "A Henry Reed Reunion."

A strange thing about this tune is that the pickup to the first full measure is included in the repeat. At least that's the way I chose to represent it, rather than dealing with a meter change for one measure.

The banjo player in "A Henry Reed Reunion" is Bertram Levy. My arrangement may be very similar to the way he plays, but I concentrated on playing as much as I could of what Alan Jabbour played on fiddle.

Santa Anna's Retreat

from Henry Reed
collected by Alan Jabbour

Sawmill tuning, capo 2

i h i p | i t i t i t i t i | i i i i t i t i h i i p

i i i i i | t i t i i t | i i t i t i i i i

i h i t i h i h i i t | i i t i i t | i i t i t i t i t i t i

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This version of Shady Grove is another tune I learned from “A Henry Reed Reunion.” I already knew two other versions, a two part version in A major and a one part version in the A dorian mode (one sharp) that some bluegrass musicians play. The tonality of this one may also be A dorian, but it definitely has one sharp, F.

Shady Grove

from Henry Reed
collected by Alan Jabbour

Sawmill tuning, capo 2

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Booth Shot Lincoln

First system of musical notation for 'Booth Shot Lincoln'. It features a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. The notation includes a capo on the second fret and a D major chord. The melody is written on a five-line staff with notes and stems. Below the staff, the following fretting patterns are indicated: f b t, f b t, f f b t, f, f f t, f f t, f b t, f b t.

Second system of musical notation. The fretting patterns are: f b t, f b t, f f b t, f, f f t, f--h f, f b t, f b t.

Third system of musical notation. The fretting patterns are: f b t, f b t, f f t, f f t, f f t, f f t, f b t, f b t.

Fourth system of musical notation. The fretting patterns are: f b t, f b t, f f t, f f t, f f t, f f t, f--h f, f b t, f b t.

Fifth system of musical notation. The fretting patterns are: f b t, f b t, f t, f f t, f f t, f f t, f b t, f b t.

Sixth system of musical notation. The fretting patterns are: f b t, f b t, f f b t, f, f f t, f--h f, f b t, f b t.

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Santa Anna's Retreat

Traditional

$\text{♩} = 100$



The musical notation for 'Santa Anna's Retreat' is written on three staves in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The tempo is marked as quarter note = 100. The first staff contains the first two measures of the melody. The second staff contains the next two measures. The third staff contains the final two measures, which end with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Source: Henry Reed

Shady Grove

$\text{♩} = 200$



The musical notation for 'Shady Grove' is written on six staves in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The tempo is marked as quarter note = 200. The notation consists of six staves of music, each containing a line of notes. The first five staves end with a double bar line and repeat dots, while the sixth staff ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Rhythm: Reel

Source: Henry Reed via Alan Jabbour

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Booth Shot Lincoln

Traditional

$\text{♩} = 160$