

Old Time Clawhammer Banjo Workshop

2005 Edition By Steve Arkin

Steve Arkin was interviewed by Jody Stecher in the February 2006 edition of Banjo Newsletter. For more info go to www.banjonews.com

A) *The Clawhammer Style*

To those hearing it for the first time, the sound of clawhammer banjo can be strange and wonderful. The player makes rapid, subtle, and unintelligible hand motions and the most unexpected sounds bubble out of the instrument--both a peculiarly schematic version of the melody and a simultaneous, propulsive, self-contained rhythm track. Watch a good player clawhammer away all day long and, if you don't already know how it's done, you might never figure it out.

Many assume that there was always a banjo in old time music (not so)—and that the banjo was always played in the clawhammer “style.” In fact, clawhammer is merely one of a broad variety of banjo techniques in the history of old-time music. Also popular were a combination of “up-picking” and brushing (like Pete Seeger’s “basic strum”), various two-finger styles (including two dissimilar ones, each of which is sometimes called “double thumbing,”) and assorted three-finger styles—including the ancestors of Earl Scruggs’ bluegrass banjo style.

But there’s a reason so many assume that clawhammer is synonymous with old time music: It has become the banjo style most often associated with the old time revival and it’s by far the most common method for playing the banjo at old time festivals, contests, and fiddlers’ reunions. Clawhammer (also known as frailing, drop thumb, rapping, knocking, etc.) evolved from the “stroke style,” probably brought from Africa by slaves, passed on to whites by African Americans, and popularized in the pre-Civil War minstrel shows.

While it’s accurate to say that clawhammer dominates today’s old time festival scene, I should clarify that even further—today’s most common

clawhammer approach has evolved from the style of playing that developed in the “Round Peak” area between Mt. Airy NC and Galax VA. At festivals, square dances, contests, and parties across this country, the elements of the Round Peak approach to clawhammer are now commonly used not only to play the tunes of that region, but also to play music from just about everywhere else. This workshop is primarily about that approach, which has become known in some circles as “the festival style.”

Some people are uncomfortable about the way this single regional style has become so universally popular, and at the fact that so many tunes originally recorded with another banjo style or without any banjo at all, are now played with clawhammer accompaniment. There is a good reason for that popularity--it’s exciting to listen to, fun to play, and a very effective rhythm accompaniment for the fiddle. That’s why I’m focusing on that “Round Peak/festival” style. However, one of the great joys of old time music is the tremendous diversity of styles and sources. Therefore, despite the allure of the festival style, I strongly recommend that you investigate the full range of the old time universe. For leading contemporary players of other regional styles I suggest you talk and listen to Mike Seeger, Paul Brown, Tom Sauber, and others who have mastered some of the alternative old-time styles (the three I mentioned have been widely recorded and Mike Seeger has a videocassette demonstrating alternate styles).

B) *This Workshop*

Rather than teach you a couple of tunes or arrangements, I thought it might be more useful to go over all the things I could think of that an aspiring clawhammer banjo player should know (like the old saying: “give a person a fish and you feed them for a day; teach them to fish and they can feed themselves for a lifetime”). Much of this information will seem overwhelming, but if you hang on to this, I suspect it will answer many questions that come up over the next few years.

There are many books, periodicals,

videotapes, and workshops from which you can learn tunes -- whether from sheet music, tablature, or demonstration. But, if you rely too heavily on that strategy, you’ll ultimately develop your ability and repertoire only at the rate at which you can find tablature or else people (live or recorded) willing to sit down and teach you new tunes. And learning this way is actually a hindrance if your goal is to be able to sit in on a hot session and play-- with drive and flair--whichever tunes the fiddler decides to throw at you. You simply won’t be able to participate in most sessions if you’re limited to tunes you already know and have already worked out.

Rather, you should build your repertoire by listening to, and playing along with, a lot of recorded music (played by the best musicians from varied backgrounds). While it’s true that in a jam, the role of the banjo player is to be able to play along on every tune that’s thrown at you, it’s also true that the more tunes you know, the easier that will be. For every new tune you learn, you will pick up techniques, fingerings, or licks that will help you play a whole lot of other tunes. It would be accurate to say that, as your repertoire increases arithmetically, your ability to play unfamiliar tunes--and the speed with which you learn them--increases geometrically.

C) *Summary of The Round Peak and “Festival” Styles:*

- Largely derived from the playing style of Charlie Lowe, Fred Cockerham, Kyle Creed, Tommy Jarrell, and other musicians from the Round Peak area.

- In descending order, used for

- 1) accompanying fiddle tunes,
- 2) accompanying songs and ballads,
- 3) as a solo instrument (Q: “How do you tell old time banjo tunes apart?” A: “By their names”)

- The “Festival Style” comprises a number of recent variations of the Round Peak style--with some inspiration from the players of other regions (such as West Virginia and Kentucky) and some new

elements that have little or no historical precedent.

- The focus of jamming at festivals has shifted to a repertoire derived largely from field recordings, with less emphasis on the commercially recorded early country music that was prominent in the early years of the revival. The repertoire consists mostly of a huge range of fiddle tunes (and, to a lesser extent, songs), from far-flung areas (N. Carolina, Kentucky, West Virginia, Tennessee, Virginia, Georgia, Missouri, Illinois, Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Texas, etc.)

- Regardless of a tune's origin, the "Festival" banjo style remains primarily anchored in the playing of the Round Peak area.

D) *The basic kinds of 5-string banjo used for Old Time Music:*

- "Round Peak style" banjos (either fretless or fretted): open back; plunky sound; "no-knot" tailpiece; lightweight rim with little or no tone ring; large (usually 12") rim; fingerboard scooped out above the 17th fret; short scale (usually 25-26"). NOTE: The "scale length" is the distance from the bridge to the nut. Kyle Creed made some of the earliest Round Peak style banjos. David Forbes developed them further. Today, Mike Ramsey (Chanterelle), Kevin Enoch, Will Fielding, Bob Flesher, and other independent makers make this type of banjo today (and makers noted for producing other types of open back banjo are often willing to produce one to your specifications).

- Fretted, open-back, long-scale (27-28") banjos that evolved during the classical banjo period (c. 1875-1915) —often with early types of tone ring -- (Fairbanks, Stewart, Vega, Bacon, Cole, etc.) These were originally used for playing in the "classical (3-finger) style," often in banjo orchestras, along with other banjos of various scale lengths and head sizes (such as "banjeurines," and cello & piccolo banjos). Classical banjos became the archetype of the "folk" banjo popular during the 60's folk revival (sometimes with 3 frets added to the neck to copy Pete Seeger and provide easy access to other keys). Banjos of this ilk tend to sound pretty bright. A number of companies and craftsmen make them today--most notably--Bart Reiter, Deering, and Wildwood.

- Resonator back (e.g. Gibson Mastertone) banjos with heavy tone rings, long, "pressure type" tail pieces, and (on 5-string models) long scales evolved in the 1920's—often as tenor banjos designed to compete with the sound of a large orchestra. Surprisingly, this is the type of banjo that many Southern old time players prefer (especially around Galax, VA)—but up North and among younger Southerners they're usually considered too "blue-grassy." They have a loud, bright sound.

- Mountain (or "Dixie Can") banjos—one form of early southern home made instrument: very small head (5-7"), no brackets, fretless, sometimes a section of tin can forms the rim, wood around the top and bottom of the rim is held together by screws which tighten the head. Frank Profit made these famous; Frank Warner used to sell replicas. Very quiet.

- Minstrel banjos: Usually fretless; always with gut strings, friction pegs, often with oversized pots (12-14"), frequently tuned lower than standard—for the deep, ultra-plunky minstrel sound. George Wunderlich makes faithful replicas of pre-Civil War instruments. Bob Flesher, Mike Ramsey & others make updated versions.

- Gourd banjos—reproductions of the earliest plantation instruments: plunky & quiet with little sustain. Made by Pete Ross, Bob Thornburg and others.

- There also exists a tremendous diversity of homemade instruments that defy categorization.

E) *Clawhammer pointers*

Clawhammer (as I recommend it) is usually played in 2/4 or 4/4 time. It consists of:

- 1) The 1st beat ("the downbeat") is a downstroke (hitting down on the first string with your middle finger or on the 2, 3 or 4th string with your index finger.

- 2) The 2nd beat can either be a rest, or the playing of a melody note on the inside (2nd, 3rd, or 4th) strings with your thumb, or by sliding up (or down) from the first note, pulling off or hammering on.

- 3) The third beat ("the backbeat") consists of a brush across the first 2 or 3 strings with your right index & middle fingers (see "chunka chunka" sound, be-

low).

- 4) The 4th beat usually consists of plucking the 5th string with your thumb.

The rhythm produced via this process sounds like "bump-a-ditty" (or, if you rest on the second beat, bump-ditty).

When you're between phrases in the melody, or to follow the melody in tricky passages, it's often better to alternate between your index or middle finger on the 1st (or other) string and your thumb on the 5th (middle/thumb/middle/thumb = "ticka-ticka"). I've heard this called "double-timing the 5th string."

- Driving rhythm is the most important ingredient ("it's the rhythm stupid")

- But, melody (or at least the key passages) is also important.

- Still—never sacrifice rhythm on the altar of melody!

- Use a variety of rhythm licks to create a percussive texture in your playing.

- Don't attempt all the notes that the fiddle plays—listen for the basic melody and its "distinguishing characteristics." Most of the top players don't try to play all the notes in the fiddle tune, but by choosing carefully which notes to play, they produce the illusion of playing the tune note-for-note.

- Don't start out slow-learning a knuckle-busting arrangement and expect to bring it up to speed later. It's better to start out playing simply so you can play at the same tempo as others—then, over time, you will gradually pick up refinements.

- Tap your foot while you play—it really helps you stay on the rhythm.

- To get that characteristic percussive ("chunka chunka," "click," or "cluck") sound: Instead of the downward brush across all strings (on the backbeat), strike 1st (& sometimes the 2nd as well) string(s) with middle finger, then instantly mute with index (some strike with ring finger and mute with middle). At its best, this technique can enable you to provide the clear rhythm that fiddlers love. It can sound like anything from a series of sharp clicks to a bubbling sound not unlike a pot of thick pea soup when the heat is turned up a little too high (see E3 above). But it is NOT the main point of clawhammer playing and it can wear out its welcome if you do it constantly. (By the way, as far as I

can tell, the earliest recorded use of this style comes from Clarence Ashley, who called it “the cluck.” He employed it in his recordings from the early 1960’s (but not in 1929!). Also, he primarily used it on the downbeat—not the backbeat.

- Many players use just the index or middle finger for playing non-thumb melody notes. However I recommend using your index finger or thumb for inside strings; middle finger for first string. It really helps with accurate phrasing and many top players do this, including John Hermann and Dan Gellert.

- Don’t use the same finger or string twice in a row unless there’s at least a beat between them. It will throw off your rhythm and slow you way down.

- The preferred right hand position is over the end of the fingerboard (although players with long-scale, classical-style banjos usually play over the head).

- Crook your thumb and bring it to rest on the 5th string whenever it’s not actively plucking (when raising your hand for a downstroke, slightly push off from the 5th string with your thumb (thereby sounding it) and it will (sort of) help to propel your hand upwards.

- Some people avoid fretting the 5th string, but it is another place to look for the hard-to-find notes of some tunes.

- Drop-thumb—bringing your thumb down (usually on the off-beat to play melody notes and for syncopated “pops”—preferably not for a steady rhythm (many people regularly alternate their thumb between the 5th and 3rd strings just for rhythm. I don’t recommend it).

- “Galax lick”—sort of a flamenco strum to start a measure—you strum your middle and/or index fingers across the strings and finish by plucking down on the 5th string with your thumb (on the downbeat)—sort of like: brrring! A variant is the “slow brush” where you brush all your fingers (starting with the little finger and ending with the thumb). More like brrrrrrrrrrrinnngg!!!

- A really neat technique which is not traditional but which Richie Stearns (Horseflies, Improbabilities, Bubba George) and some other players use effectively is to strum up and down across all strings with the tip of the index finger (sort of like strumming a uke with a felt pick). While you’re doing this it helps to play

full (four-string) chord patterns which you damp rhythmically lifting your fingers slightly off the fingerboard) at the end of each stroke. This sounds much easier than it is—I can’t even begin to do it. Sounds great if you do this one time through on a tune and then morph seamlessly back into clawhammer.

- Listen to recordings of today’s top fiddlers (Bruce Molsky, Rafe Stefanini, Dirk Powell, etc.) and you will notice that their accompaniment tends to sound “austere” (banjo & guitar alike) without a lot of extraneous notes. There’s much to be said for this approach—it creates a strong rhythm groove and a beautifully simple setting in which the fiddler can really stretch out without fighting extraneous notes from his accompanists.

- People often mute their banjos in a variety of ways—the goal is not so much to make them quieter as to make them sound plunkier and to eliminate harsh overtones. Try the following (experiment by varying the tension against the head):

- 1) wadded up cloth (a sock?) between the dowel stick and the head (where the neck meets the rim)

- 2) a chunk of Styrofoam in the same location

- 3) a rectangular strip of duct tape stuck on the back of head (close to where the neck meets the rim)

- 4) a tiny wad of duct tape under the 5th string at either the bridge or the nut (cuts down the ringiness of the 5th string)

- Bob Carlin, Frank Lee, and Brad Leftwich all have videos focused on Round Peak style clawhammer.

F) *Fingernails*: (This sounds ridiculous, but it’s actually important).

- Right Hand, Middle Finger: When this nail is too long, your playing will sound hollow. When it isn’t there, your playing will be barely audible and your nail bed will start to hurt. Optimally, there is just a tiny little sliver of nail protruding beyond the nail bed, and if you view your finger head on, the tip of your finger will actually protrude about 1/16th of an inch beyond the tip of your nail. Believe it or not, this makes for the best sound. If you are at a festival where you have to play for hours—or days—at a time, consider using

glue-on nails (that you get from a drug-store). You have to glue them on with nail glue (a crazy-glue-like substance available wherever fake nails are sold) and you have to be very careful with it (or you’ll glue your fingers together, glue them to the banjo, or worse). Before you apply a fake nail, cut it to roughly the right size. After it’s on and the glue is dry (15 seconds), cut it way down so that it’s at optimal nail length (with the tip of your finger protruding 1/16th of an inch beyond the tip of the nail).

- Right Hand, Index Finger: You want to have a fairly long nail on this finger (to help you cleanly hit notes on the inside strings). A fake nail is really helpful here. Shop around for one that is straight (not one of those claw-like horrors) and that protrudes about 1/3” of an inch or more beyond the tip of your finger. I used to file the corners of the business end so they were a bit rounded but now I actually prefer having almost a right angle.

- Keep your left hand nails short enough to not tear up the fingerboard.

G) *Chords and Left Hand Techniques*

- Some Round Peak players don’t really use full chord positions—they just play the melody notes. I personally prefer using chords when you can fit them in (any banjo book will provide the positions for each tuning) because you can find your melody notes inside them. If you’re going to use chords, you need to understand how the ones in each key work in relation to each other. Here’s a start:

Tonic (key): D A G C

#4 Chord: G D C F

#5 Chord: A E D G

#2 Chord: E B A D

#7 Chord: C G F Bb

- One school of thought holds that minor chords are not appropriate in old time music. I disagree, but be prepared to encounter this point of view. Actually, chords didn’t really enter old time music until the guitar did—around the turn of the century. For chord choices it actually helps to become familiar with the types of chords used by the source musi-

cians (“dead guys”) of the particular region where the tune (or the version being played) originated.

- Some left-hand techniques for producing melody notes don’t require a right hand finger:

- 1) Hammering on: once a string has been sounded you can get another note out of it by hammering on at a higher fret with a finger of your left hand.

- 2) Pulling off: once a string has been sounded, you can also get an additional note by pulling your finger off it (either returning it to the open position, or having a finger on another, lower fret on the same string).

- 3) Sliding: A specialty of fretless banjos (but it works on fretted banjos too). Slide from one fret to another (usually the 3rd string from the 2nd to the 3rd or 4th frets; the first string from the 2nd to the 3rd fret, or the 1st or 4th strings from the 2nd to the 5th fret. You can also slide downward.

- A widely practiced rhythm lick is to strike the 3rd string with your index finger, next pull off from the 1st string, 2nd fret, then do the brush and the thumb on the 5th string. Do this repeatedly when you’re filling up time, or when you can.

- A cool technique for playing up the neck is to fret both the first and 5th strings above the 5th fret (same fret for both strings), alternating with the thumb and middle finger (ticka ticka, again). Then just go and pick out the key melody notes. It sounds a little like a series of 2-note tremolos (as on a mandolin).

H) Keys, Tunings, & Strings

- 1) Most old time tunes are in one of four keys: A, D, G, or C (most Kentucky, North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia tunes are in A or D. G&C are more prevalent in the Ozarks, Deep South, and Mid-West.

- 2) If you have a Round Peak style banjo with a short scale (26” or less) you can dispense with a capo and tune up a whole step to A&D.

- 3) The principal tunings are the open G (GDGBD)—which is the open A when

moved up to the second fret; and the double C tuning (GCGCD)—which becomes the double D when moved up two frets.

- 4) Three other common tunings relevant to festival style playing:

G modal (GDGCD)—A modal when moved to 2nd fret, Open D (ADF#AD or F#DF# AD), and G minor (GDGBbD)—becomes A minor on second fret. There are many other tunings, you will rarely meet them in jam sessions.

- Strings: With a short scale banjo you may enjoy the sound of heavy strings (more plunk/more volume). I use the following gauges (starting with the 5th string): 11,26,16,12,11. But try various weights to find what works best for you. For a longer scale use lighter strings.

I) Jamming tips (parties & festivals)

- Everybody hates this part—but it just comes down to basic etiquette.

- Most of repertoire at jams consists of fiddle tunes

- Whatever you do, make sure you’re in tune with the participants before you even think of joining a session! In this era of electronic tuners, it probably suffices to make sure your “A” note is the standard 440.

- Usually the fiddler calls the tune—and the banjo player is expected to rise to the occasion and be able to play it (even if you never heard it before). If you’re playing with old friends this rule can go out the window—but if the fiddler doesn’t already know a tune, it’s unlikely that he/she is going to learn it satisfactorily from the banjo player.

- Usually, everyone plays at the same time—without “breaks.” However, there are dynamics (sometimes everybody plays a little more quietly in order to showcase one instrument or while a verse is being sung).

- People play in the same key for a long time—sometimes for hours (mostly because it’s hard for instruments to retune for different keys, and partly because it’s fun to extensively explore the repertoire in a particular key or tuning.

- Usually the decision to change keys is up to the fiddler(s).

- Listen to what the other instruments (especially the fiddles) are doing, and occasionally try to play in a way that complements it (e.g. if the fiddle is playing up

high, try playing in a low register).

- Make sure the sound of your instrument is directed toward the center of the jam and not into the ear of the person next to you.

- If you’re not invited into a session, stick around and observe it. If you detect the vibe that others are not welcome, don’t crash it.

- In my experience, nobody has ever been dissed for discretely recording a session. This is one of the very best ways to learn.

- If you discover a jam whose core consists of players who are more advanced than you are but who seem open to others joining in, it may be best to stay in the outer ring and play along quietly. If the members of the jam want to make you feel welcome, they will (sometimes they’ll enlarge the inner circle and motion you to come in and sit down).

- The less well you know the people in the jam, and/or the more advanced they are (in relation to your level) the more laid back you should be about trying to join in (and the more quietly and unobtrusively you should play if you do get in).

- Many people prefer small jams in which every instrument is distinctly audible. In such cases, even another top-notch player will not be considered an asset.

- If you come upon a jam with very few players (regardless of how good they are) try to be sensitive to the fact that they may be:

1. A band rehearsing

2. A gathering of good friends who don’t see each other very often

3. A session of strong players who want to play with people at their level and don’t want a wall of sound from a lot of extraneous instruments.

If any of those appear to be happening, pass that session by or consider leaving your instrument in its case and, if the participants don’t seem to mind, just listen carefully (or record it). Later on you may get an opportunity to play with some of the same people in a larger, less exclusive session.

- While it’s good experience to play along with a jam of stronger players, you should focus on finding peers and starting sessions with them.

- There's a lot of controversy surrounding the question of how many banjos one should have in a session. Many musicians (whatever instrument they play) prefer only one banjo—on the theory that multiple banjos conflict with each other and muddy the rhythm. This depends to an extent on who the banjo players are and on the compatibility of their styles. Often it makes sense to have one banjo played in two or three-finger style while the other is doing clawhammer, or for one to play up the neck when the other is playing in the first position. It really comes down to how it sounds. There certainly shouldn't be more banjos than fiddles (except under extraordinary circumstances)—and probably a ratio of no more than one banjo per every 3 fiddles. Most people agree, however, that one banjo per jam is really best (and lots of people also think that two fiddles is the limit).

- Another area of controversy has to do with which chords to play. Many field recordings of fiddle tunes were unaccompanied or else had wretched accompaniment. In many cases there are a variety of chord progressions that can work with any particular fiddle tune—but they don't work if everyone in the jam is playing a different set of chords. There's no clear way around this—many people resent being told what chords to play by others in the jam. Best to let the guitar establish the chord progression. If you are really unhappy with the chords (on tune after tune), either find another jam, or risk people hurling fruit at you by unobtrusively whispering out what you believe to be the right chord(s). If fruit is hurled or people ignore you, drop it.

- Before you criticize somebody, always walk a mile in their shoes. Then, when you criticize them, you're a mile away and you've got their shoes!

- Make friends with a fiddler. Marry one if necessary (cautiously). But find a way to constantly play with fiddlers—because clawhammer banjo's main role is to accompany fiddles.

- Despite the power of fiddlers, think twice about giving up the banjo to learn fiddle—you'll be going back to square one for a decade or more!

J) *Short history of the Banjo*

1) African gourd instruments (espe-

cially the Akonting from the Senegambian region of West Africa)—any number of strings.

2) Plantation late 18th century (gourd instruments—“banjar,” “merrywang”)

3) Minstrel Shows: 1843 (Dan Emmett, Joel Walker Sweeney, etc.)

a) The “Minstrel line” consisted of a fiddle, banjo, bones, and a tambourine

b) Banjo played Stroke Style – large rim, fretless, thick neck, gut strings, few brackets, often tuned low (famous makers: Boucher, Ashborn, and Teed).

c) Blackfaced white people (NY, Philadelphia, etc.) copying traditional black music & dance (through Civil war).

d) By the late 1840s black people also performed in minstrel shows (route to stardom for Bessie Smith, WC Handy, Bert Williams, etc.)

4) 1870's--Converse introduces the “classical” 3-finger style

5) 1880's--SS. Stewart campaigns for “respectability”—banjo becomes a white person's parlor instrument

6) 1885-1915--Major makers during golden age (Fairbanks, Cole, Stewart, Washburn, Dobson, Bacon, etc.)

7) Survival of banjo in the south—esp. the mountains

a) In the mountains--stroke style to frailing, (aka drophumb, clawhammer)

b) 2 and 3-finger styles (up-picking, double-thumbing) in piedmont

c) Charlie Poole, Snuffy Jenkins, etc.—early three finger players

d) Earl Scruggs and bluegrass banjo-1945

e) Melodic Bluegrass banjo—1960's (Bill Keith, Bobby Thompson, Bela Fleck)

f) Melodic clawhammer—late '60's (Ken Perlmann, John Burke, Alan Feldman, early Bob Carlin, Reed Martin)

g) Emergence of dynamically complex rhythmic style—late '60's (the current “festival” style) (Al Tharpe, Richie Stearns, Stefan Senders, John Herrmann, Gordie Hinners, Mark Olitsky).

K) *Old Time Music*

1) Sources of repertoire:

a) Fiddle tunes (mostly of Scots Irish & German origin from the Appalachian and Ozark regions of the US)

b) Fiddle tunes from other sources (e.g., French Canadian, New England)

c) Minstrel show songs

d) Traditional ballads

e) Ragtime

f) Popular music of the 19th and early 20th centuries

g) Blues & gospel music

2) *A Few Key Sources (mostly bands & fiddlers) by State or Region—*

- Georgia (Skillet Lickers, Lowe Stokes, Clayton McMichen)

- Kentucky (Fiddlers W.M. Stepp, Luther Strong, Ed Haley, Doc Roberts, John Salyer, Clyde Davenport, Buddy Thomas) Clawhammer masters include Walter Williams and Buell Kazee.

- North Carolina, (Marcus Martin, Wade Ward, Charlie Poole)

- “Round Peak area” (mountainous Virginia/ North Carolina border) (DaCosta Woltz's Southern Broadcasters, Camp Creek Boys, Tommy Jarrell, Pilot Mountaineers, Fred Cockerham, Kyle Creed)

- Mississippi (Carter Brothers & Son, Floyd Ming & His Pep Steppers)

- Ozarks (Pope's Arkansas Mountaineers, Dr. Smith's Champion Hoss Hair Pullers)

- West Virginia (Edden Hammons, French Carpenter, Melvin Wine, Wilson Douglas)

3) *Revival Chronology (very sketchy)*

a) Society ladies searching for their British roots—1890s-1910

b) Scholarly folklorists—20s-present

c) Popular front movement (Pete Seeger & 5-string banjo)—30's & '40s

d) The Weavers—late 40s-'60's (precursors of the '60's folk revival)

e) Kingston Trio and the mass culture “folk scare”—'58-'64

f) New Lost City Ramblers—1958 onward

g) Alan Jabbour & focus on field recordings, 1968: Hollow Rock, Fuzzy Mountain String Bands; Red Clay Ramblers, Highwoods, etc.

h) 2nd generation to contemporary old time revival: Hellbenders, Volo Bogtrot-

ters, Double Decker, Lazy Aces, Fly By Night, Big Hoedown, etc.

i) Ithaca sound & “modern old time”: Heartbeats, Horseflies, Chicken Chokers, Plank Road, Red Hots, etc.

j) Here are some of today’s hot fiddlers (most are multi-instrumentalists): Bruce Molsky, Dirk Powell, Rafe Stefanini, Dan Gellert, Brad Leftwich, Bruce Greene, Judy Hyman, James Bryan, Mike Bryant, Tara Nevins)

k) Some of my favorites among better-known clawhammer banjo players: Dirk Powell, Dan Gellert, John Hermann, Richie Stearns, Rose Sinclair, David Winston, Walt Koken, Reed Martin, Bob Carlin, Gordy Hinnens.

Some of my favorite recordings of clawhammer: There’s tons more besides these. Look for them at County and Elderly, or from Cleff’d Ear at festivals.

- Bob Carlin: BANGING & SAWING (w/ 4 great fiddlers: Bruce Molsky, Judy Hyman, James Bryan, Brad Leftwich)—a masterpiece, but it makes these great tunes sound more like chamber music than dance music. Rounder 0197

- Mark Simos: RACE THE RIVER JORDAN: Mostly great original tunes from a terrific fiddler, but notable here for Dirk Powell’s perfect banjo accompaniment—he’s all over these crooked tunes like a duck on a June bug. Some good banjo playing by Molly Tennenbaum, too. Yodel-Ay-Hee CD 017

- Tommy Jarrell & Fred Cockerham, TOMMY & FRED CD COUY-CD2702 and Tommy Jarrell & Kyle Creed, JUNE APPLE CD HER-CD038. Master fiddler Jarrell teamed up with each of the two greatest Round Peak banjo players.

- Reed Martin: OLD TIME BANJO: More melodic than percussive, but a brilliant player of southern music: private label (call Martin @ 301-229-3482)

- THE IMPROBABILLIES: Richie Stearns has a perfect touch and timing—

although no old timer ever sounded like that. Yodel-Ay-Hee CD 024

- The Freighthoppers: WAITING ON THE GRAVY TRAIN (This album is about as good as the one that preceded it (WHERE’D YOU COME FROM?). Frank Lee plays great rhythm throughout (with some neat tricks) Rounder 04332

- The Heartbeats: LIVING BLACK AN

D WHITE: Lots of great tunes (most blazing fast) with Rose Sinclair’s banjo sounding very much like a coffee percolator (a good thing). Maramac # 9048 (still available —look for it).

- DIRK POWELL & JOHN HERRMANN: This early recording shows Herrmann’s playing at its starkest and most powerful. Yodel-Ay-Hee 003.

- The Red Hots: READY TO ROLL: Basic, garage-band old time but there’s much to be learned from Tom Riccio’s up-the-neck playing (fretting the 1st & 5th as on page 4). Fire Ant Music FA CD-1003

- Mike Seeger: SOUTHERN BANJO SOUNDS: Some interesting clawhammer, but especially notable for providing examples of virtually every other possible old time banjo style. Smithsonian Folkways 40107

Always remember:

- Old time music comes down to us from traditional sources. While it’s OK to enhance, embellish, or soup up an arrangement, your rendition of any tune should be grounded in a familiarity with the source recording.

- As your playing improves you’ll discover that much of the joy of old time music comes from an understanding of the playing styles of key source musicians and those prevalent in key regions.

- There are many other styles for playing old time banjo—as people grow tired of ubiquitous and incessant clawhammering, these alternatives are coming more into vogue. So if you want to play clawhammer because it’s “cool,” you may

discover that alternative old time banjo styles are becoming even cooler.

- Still, to my ears, clawhammer banjo is the most driving, rhythmic, and exciting or all traditional banjo styles and its potential is great enough to absorb all the talent and hard work you can bring to it.

For more info, go to www.troublesomecreekstringband.com