

## Free Banjo E-Book

Excerpt from  
*Beginning the Five-String Banjo*  
by Ross Nickerson

# BEGINNING THE FIVE STRING BANJO

**Everything you need to know to start  
having fun playing the banjo!**



**Ross Nickerson covers all these subjects with you in a personal and informative way:**

Banjo rolls and picking patterns, picking hand positioning, fretting hand techniques, reading tablature, tuning the banjo, how to play slides, hammer-ons and pull-offs, practice habit tips and techniques, memorizing tab and songs, understanding banjo timing, how to use a metronome, learning the chords up and down the neck, ten complete easy to play songs, playing songs using the chords and much more.

#### **High Quality DVD with Split Screen Close-Up Video**

In addition to all the techniques, examples and songs being demonstrated clearly, the DVD includes a special feature lesson on tuning the banjo, changing a string, putting on a strap, using the picks, tightening the head and other important banjo basics. The DVD also features easy to use with click through menus with an added menu option for scrolling through the songs separately at the slow, medium or fast tempos.

#### **Two Audio CDs**

The two audio CDs feature Ross Nickerson demonstrating all the lessons clearly at three speeds. The songs you'll learn also include a backup play along practice track so you can have more fun practicing.

**BY ROSS NICKERSON**

## Holding the Banjo



Holding the Banjo

When sitting, I recommend balancing the banjo between your legs with your feet flat on the ground. Tilt the banjo back slightly towards your chest and apply just enough pressure with the right forearm to steady the neck. The neck of the banjo should never be held up or supported with the left hand.

## Using the Picks



The finger picks go on as shown in the photo above.



You can curl the picks on a hard surface by rolling your finger forward.



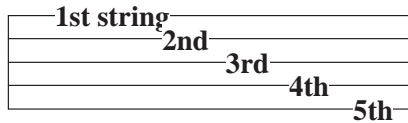
Here is how the thumb pick goes on.

You can trim the thumb pick where it wraps around the thumb if it is getting caught in the strings, or trim the blade if it's too long.



# How to Read Tablature

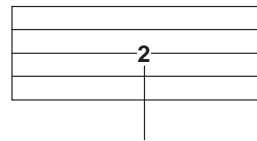
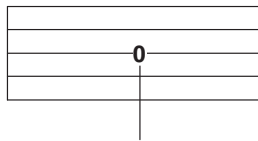
Each horizontal line of the music staff represents a string on the banjo.



In the songs we will be learning there are four beats in each measure. A measure is the space between the lines. The 4/4 indicates the song has four quarter beats in each measure.



If there is a 0 on the line, you play that string open. The number on the line is the fret you play with the left hand.

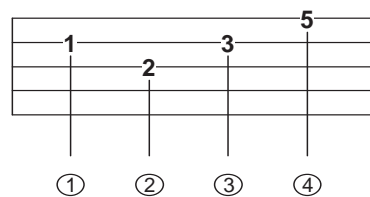
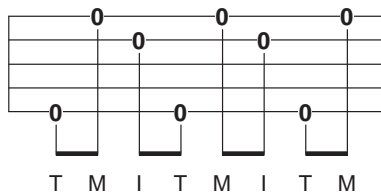


Right hand picking is indicated under the note you're picking, below the tab lines.

Left hand indications are under the note and circled as shown below.

**T = thumb    I = index    M = middle**

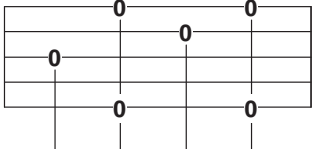
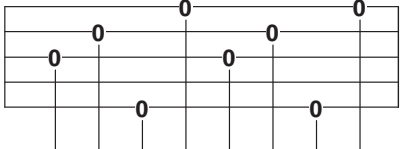
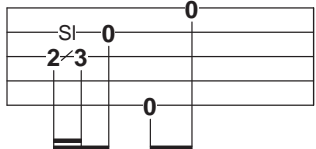
**① = index    ② = middle    ③ = ring    ④ = little**



>

Symbol for accenting or emphasizing a note

Timing in the tablature is indicated with stems coming off the notes. The notes with only a single stem are quarter notes. The notes with the stems connected by bars are eighth notes. Sixteenth notes are connected by two bars.

Quarter notes have a single stem	Eighth note stems are connected	Sixteenth note stems use a double bar
		

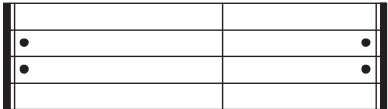
The chord of the measure you are playing is indicated above the tab. The chord stays the same until another chord is indicated.

G

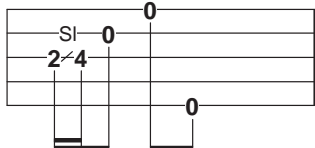
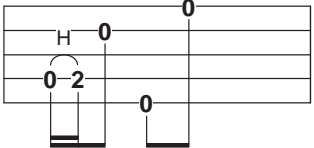
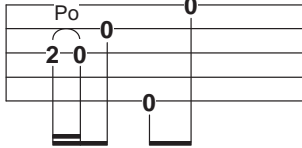


When you see dots like pictured below in the music, it means to repeat. When you reach the dots on the right, repeat back to the dots on the left.

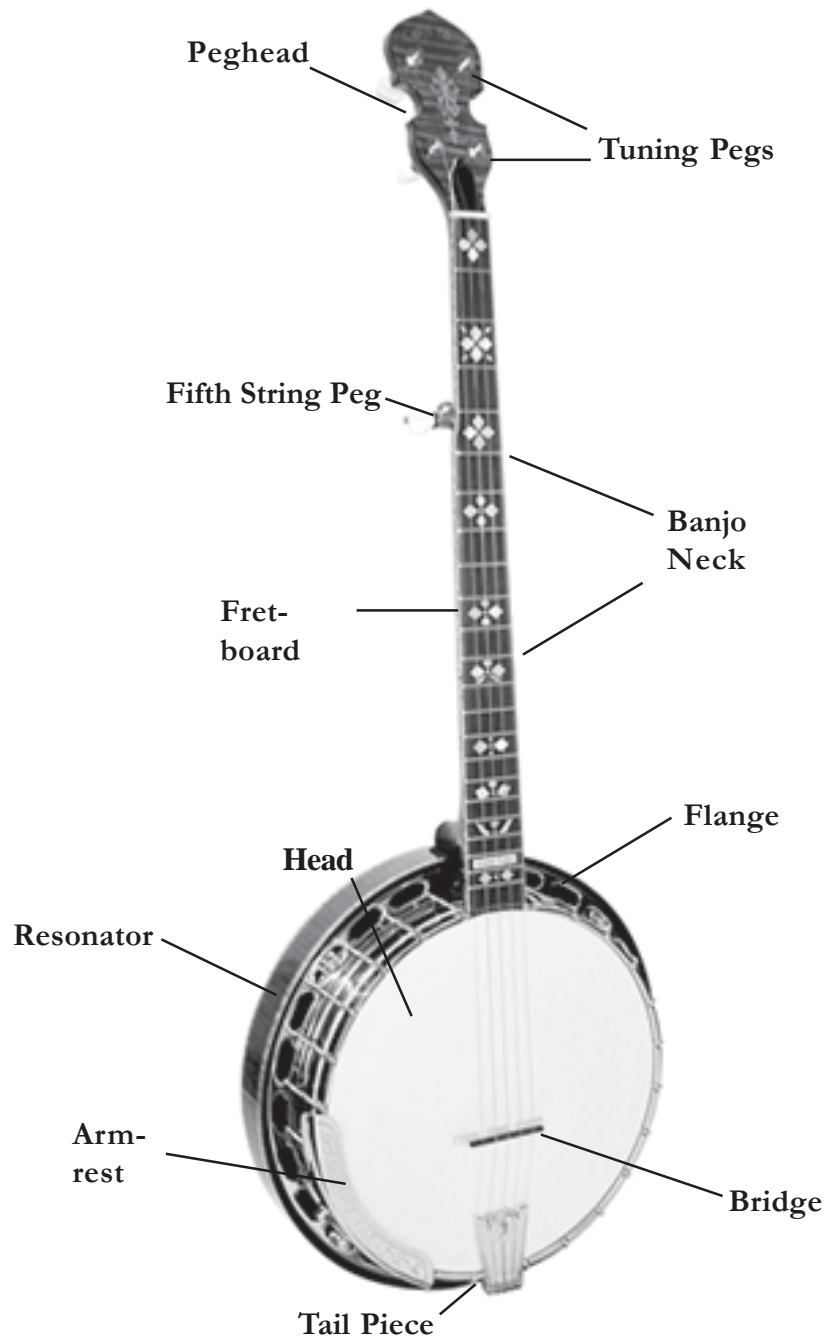
In some cases, first and second endings are used. After repeating once, skip the *FIRST ENDING*, then play the *SECOND ENDING* and continue on in the song.

	FIRST ENDING    SECOND ENDING
	

Here are the indications for slides, hammer-ons, and pull-offs.

Slide	Hammer-ons	Pull-offs
		

# The Parts on a Standard Five-String Banjo



**Goldtone OB 250 Plus**  
Goldtone Banjos at [BanjoTeacher.com](http://BanjoTeacher.com)

# TUNING YOUR BANJO

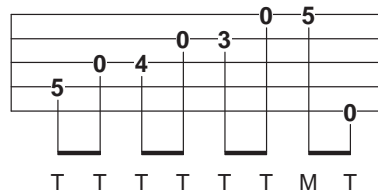


Tuning your banjo can be very difficult. To make it easier I recommend buying an electronic chromatic tuner. There are many types available at a reasonable price. Below I will show you how to tune your banjo without one and some of the tips I give you below will also make it easier to tune when using the tuner.

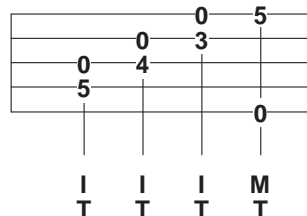
Standard Bluegrass tuning for the five-string banjo is as follows:

**5<sup>th</sup>=G 4<sup>th</sup>=D 3<sup>rd</sup>=G 2<sup>nd</sup>=B 1<sup>st</sup>=D**

Match the open strings to the fretted one



Try pinching these notes together in unison to see if they match.

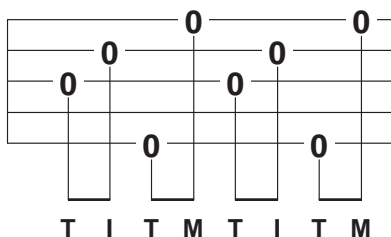


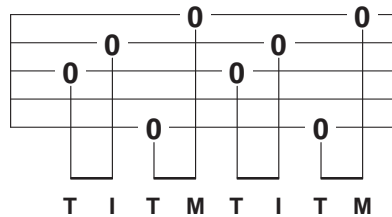
Here are some tips on tuning:

- If the string is flat, it's pitch or tone is lower than it should be. If the note is sharp, it's pitch or tone is higher than it should be.
- Start with the fourth string. As long as the fourth string is reasonably close to standard pitch you can tune all strings by starting there.
- Remember you are tuning the open string. Only turn that peg.
- Use small movements on the pegs. In most cases you will only be slightly out of tune or only have one string that is out.
- It is easier to tune and the string will hold pitch better if you tune up to the note (tightening the string not loosening it).
- After you've tuned, go back and check the tuning again as the bridge moves slightly when the strings are tightened and loosened and you may have to fine-tune the banjo.

## Learning the Rolls

- Be careful to position your right hand correctly and use the correct finger to pick the string.
- The eighth notes should be spaced evenly. The timing of these rolls is crucial. Pay close attention to this.
- Playing these rolls is very much like playing a drum roll. Each roll pattern has a rhythmic value as well as a melodic value. Try pounding out the notes in rhythm with a pair of drumsticks or two pencils. Try this when looking at the tablature and also try pounding out the rhythm along with me on the CD demonstration.
- Memorize each roll immediately and by name. The object of this is to play them over and over by memory and in time so they become automatic. This will not take as long as you think if you memorize them.
- Don't pause between repeats when playing the rolls. Never let the difficulty factor of different segments of the roll change your timing. Only play at a speed in which you can play the hardest parts.
- I recommend making full use of the CD and/or DVD that comes with the book to see and listen to the demonstrations many times over.
- Let's learn and try a basic 3-finger banjo roll pattern. This roll is normally called the "alternating thumb roll" and is sometimes referred to as the "box" or "square" roll.
- The picking pattern is, TITM, memorize this as the "Alternating Thumb Roll."
- Now memorize the roll by saying out loud, "Thumb Index Thumb Middle" several times.





Memorize this simple pattern above, and repeat it over and over, spacing the notes evenly apart. Do not pause before repeating this rhythmic pattern and play it at least 10 or 20 times in succession.

When you can do this comfortably, read the sections on “Right hand Positioning,” “Basic Rolls,” and “Learning the Rolls” again, as well as the “Final Tips on Right Hand Positioning” below. Be sure that you have an understanding of how those lessons apply to the roll exercise you are playing before moving on in the book.

## Final Tips on Right Hand Positioning

- Place the little or ring finger on the head, or both. Keep your right hand stable.
- Do not stare at your right hand when picking; the idea is to be able to pick without looking.
- Arch your wrist and pick straight up on the strings. If you are flat wristed with you elbow pointing out and away from your body, you will likely lose leverage and attack.
- Do not allow your index finger to retract too far away from the strings or below the first string.
- You should not be hitting the head with the thumb or finger picks when picking. It is a common problem but if you are doing it, do your best to overcome it from the start.
- Pick hard in the beginning. This will help you develop ability and control. If you are disturbing anyone, mute the banjo, not your picking. You can do this by buying a banjo mute or taking off the resonator and stuffing a towel up against the head.
- Strive for balance of tone (the same volume for each string), control of your picking, and accuracy, not speed, in the beginning.
- Memorize the rolls you are practicing so you can focus on your technique.



## Timing Explanation



Timing when playing the banjo is very important. It can be difficult to learn and difficult to teach. When listening to the banjo most people hear many notes and might consider them all to be part of the melody. However, this is not necessarily the case. It would be better for you as a student to view your banjo playing in this way. As you pick the banjo you are creating a rhythm with your picking consisting of quarter and eighth notes. Within the constant and consistent rhythm that you are producing, your job is to accent melody notes or notes that are to stand out and be heard more clearly. Accenting notes usually means hitting them harder than the others. Another way you can accent a melody note is by playing that note as a quarter note within your stream of eighth notes which will bring the note out to the listener also.

Learning and understanding timing can be difficult or intimidating as I mentioned in the above paragraph. However, if you take some time at the beginning to understand and realize its importance and value you will reap the rewards later. The reason most students have trouble with it is because they are anxious to let the fingers fly and just skip over the timing lessons. It is not hard to learn if you take the time.

When the timing is right not only will the listener enjoy it more but it will be much more satisfying to you. Most people will notice a rhythm mistake long before they will notice that you've played the second fret instead of the third. In other words, place a lot of value on your timing accuracy in the early stages. Everyone can miss a fret or string but if you don't develop a sense of timing everything played out of time will be wrong regardless if you are playing the right fret or string.

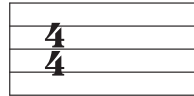
One thing to your advantage when learning and playing the banjo is you will only be playing quarter and eighth notes. This is unlike learning many other instruments that would require you to learn to count many varieties of notes. The reason for this is the banjo is limited on how long it can sustain (hold) a note, much like a drum.

On the next page I will provide some timing examples. Please take the time to tap out these rhythms. I recommend that you emphasize learning them by tapping them out before trying to play them on your banjo.

Listening to the CD carefully and using my suggestions on the next page will help you as well. Good Luck!



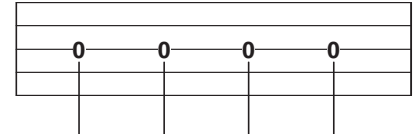
Here is an example of a measure. A measure is a unit of time. Each song you learn will be consisted of a number of measures.



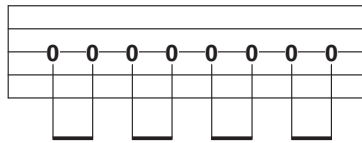
There are four beats in each measure in the songs and exercises we will be learning. That means that any combination of quarter and eighth notes will equal four quarter beats in each measure.

1 2 3 4

This example is a measure with four quarter notes. The stems on quarter notes aren't connected. Try tapping your foot, pencil, or banjo head once for each note and count to four out loud.



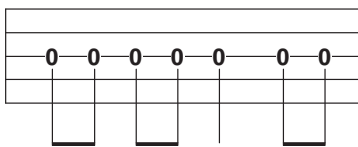
1 + 2 + 3 + 4 +



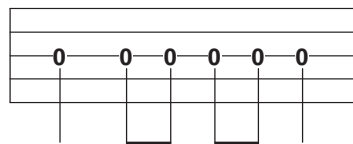
This example is a measure with eight eighth notes, which totals up to four quarter beats. Now, try tapping these notes by counting out loud 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and. When you tap your foot for example, the 1 or the numbered note is the foot going down and the + is the foot coming up. In other words you are fitting a note between each quarter note.

The next three examples are a combination of quarter and eighth notes. Count them out by adding the + beat for the eighth notes, and leaving it out, and resting after the quarter notes.

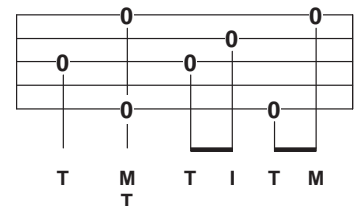
1 + 2 + 3 4 +



1 2 + 3 + 4



1 2 3 + 4 +



## Left Hand Positioning

Left hand technique is very important to your ability to play and has more to do with your sound, timing and overall banjo playing than most students realize. Although it is fair to say that without good picking you are severely limited, it is also safe to say that a little further down the line in most students progress, it is the left hand that is limiting their progress the most.

### Do's and Dont's for Common Problems With Left Hand Technique

- Don't hold the banjo neck up with your left hand.
- Fret each note just behind the fret. Use the tip of your finger to fret with by bending at the knuckle. (see photo below) Your finger should be resting against the fret wire but not on top of it. This will help your sound and your ability to reach other notes.
- Only use enough pressure to sound the note clearly. Pushing too hard will cause the note to be pushed sharp, and it is not necessary. It hurts too!
- Don't grip the neck or hold on to it in any way that impedes the movement of your hand or fingers.
- Keep the fingers that you are not using or ones that you may have just lifted up close to the fret board at all times. Keeping your fingers in close striking distance is very important and makes it much easier and quicker to reach the notes you want to fret.
- I don't recommend pointing your thumb towards the peg head. I recommend letting your thumb rest up and slightly over the neck in the beginning. (see photos below)
- Exercise your left-hand fingers frequently and challenge yourself everyday to improve your ability.
- Concentrate on accuracy not speed when developing your left hand. Your left hand does not have to move that quickly especially in the beginning. However it does have to be accurate, controlled, and coordinated.



Place the tip of the finger just behind and resting against the fret wire and not directly on top of it. Bend the finger at the knuckle and try to come as straight down on the string as possible.



# Left Hand Exercises



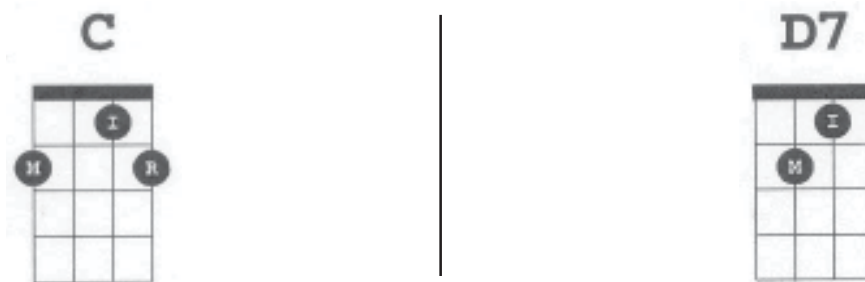
The object of these exercises is to make your left hand fingers more responsive, accurate, coordinated, and flexible. Be sure to play these exercises slowly. Concentrate on accuracy not speed. These exercises may be difficult but try to keep in mind that when you take the time to exercise the left hand you will make everything you do with the left hand in the songs ahead easier.

- All left hand exercises should eventually be picked by alternating the thumb and index.



## Learning Some Chords

The banjo unlike the guitar and many other instruments is tuned to a chord. Simply strumming all five strings on the banjo when tuned to standard G tuning will produce a G chord. Let's learn a couple of more basic chords in the examples below.



Here are some very important things to keep in mind when doing this chord exercise.

- Don't pause to reset your fingers. This will not help your progress! Learning to put all your fingers down at the same time will move you forward.
- When you're first learning try not to be discouraged by mis-fretted notes. Plug ahead and learn by retrying to do it correctly as you repeat the exercise, not by stopping to get it right.
- Do the exercise slowly to give yourself more time to find the frets.
- If your fingers aren't cooperating the way you would like, go back and work the left hand exercises some more.

Now let's try playing the three chords we've learned. Remember the G chord is, all strings open.

Strumming with the thumb, play:

**G C G D7**

Repeat this exercise over and over, slowly, without pausing.

## Learning to Play a Song by Rolls and Chords

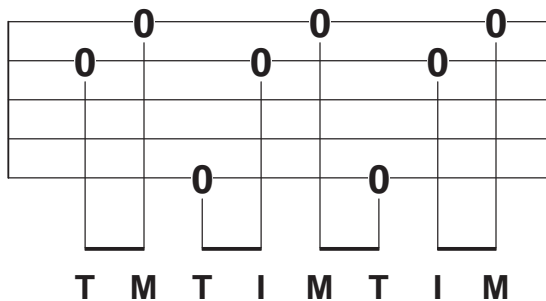
### “Boil That Cabbage Down”

Here are the chords for an old traditional song, Boil That Cabbage Down, which I sometime call, “Boil That Garbage Down.” Start by strumming these chords with the thumb while at the same time being sure that you can do this at a steady beat without having to pause between changing chords. / = one strum with the thumb.

G C G D7 G C G D7 G  
 // // // // // // / / /



Now practice this one measure forward roll over and over without pausing.



Next, look above at the chord progression for “Boil That Cabbage Down”

Now play the song substituting the forward roll for the strums, while following the chord chart for the song above. If you are proficient at the roll it shouldn't take any more effort to play the song with the forward roll than it did with the simple strum.

// = one forward roll as shown above

/ = one half measure or 4 notes of the forward roll shown above

Note: When fretting the D7 chord as you pick and fret the chords: Start the forward roll on the 3rd string with the thumb and then strike it with your index finger on the 3rd string as well, instead of the 2nd string as in the roll indicated above. This is an example of playing the same picking pattern but substituting which strings you hit to play the melody. You're primary goal in this song exercise should be to keep the roll and song going at a steady pace without pausing between chords, *even if you are slightly mis-fretting the chords*. It will only slow your progress to stop and adjust your left-hand, and it forms bad practice habits, as well as poor timing. Take another shot at improving how well you fret the chord the next time around, while steadily repeating the roll and chord changes.

## Practicing Tips

Knowing what to practice and making the best use of your practice time has so much to do with how well you will ultimately play the banjo. I once described natural ability to a student as someone who enjoys practicing and has determination. Sure, music may come easier to others but many times the ones it comes easier to are the people who can sit around for hours at a time digging in for ways to improve and wouldn't want to be doing anything else.

### Practice Priorities Making The Best Use of Practice Time

To help you make the best use of your practice time I want to make a short list of some priorities that I recommend keeping in mind while practicing.

- Practice what you can't play.
- Practice building your overall playing ability rather than just trying to learn and play new songs.
- Memorize what you are learning and stop looking at the tab. That should be first on the list when learning a song.
- Make goals and lesson plans.
- Isolate the parts of songs or lessons that give you trouble and work them out.
- Play in time!!!

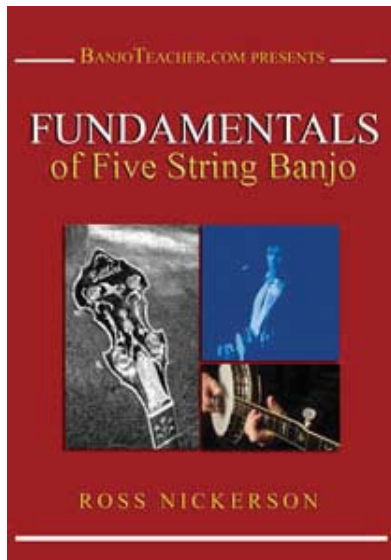
## Memorizing Tips

- Memorizing the song or section of tablature that you are learning is the very first thing you should do. Tablature is not intended to be sight read like a musician, for instance in an orchestra. It is a great way of writing down music to make it easier to memorize.
- Repeat short phrases (between 1 and 3 measures) over and over from the song you are learning and immediately try to play them without the tab by turning the tab over.
- Identify the spots you keep forgetting and simply repeat that over and over the most.
- Play the song without the tab as soon as you can. When you are absolutely sure you can't remember a spot, then open the book and take a peek.
- Songs are normally made up of a progression of chords that repeat themselves throughout the song. Many singing songs have a verse and a chorus and once that is established, the chords used in the verse and chorus, repeat themselves until the end of the song as well.
- *Memorize the chords to each song you learn.* It is like having an outline or a roadmap to help you find your place at all times. Writing down the chords to the song on a separate piece of paper is a good approach for learning and memorizing them.
- One of the things that happen when you repeat the phrases and songs over and over without tab is called muscle memory. Your mind doesn't have to do all the work! Your fingers will simply go in the right direction because you've conditioned them to.

Those are just a few suggestions but they may help. I'm sure if you make a conscious effort to memorize you will come up with some methods of your own. However, the best way to accomplish playing without the tab is to simply close the book and practice without it often.

Good Luck!

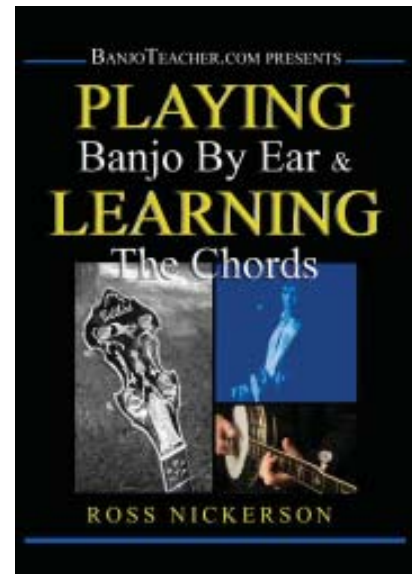




## Fundamentals of Five-String Banjo

**Ross Nickerson covers all these subjects with you in a personal and informative way:** Banjo rolls and picking patterns, left hand techniques, reading tablature, tuning the banjo, slides, hammer-ons and pull-offs, practice tips, memorizing, understanding timing, how to use a metronome, eleven songs, the chords up and down the neck, set up, and more

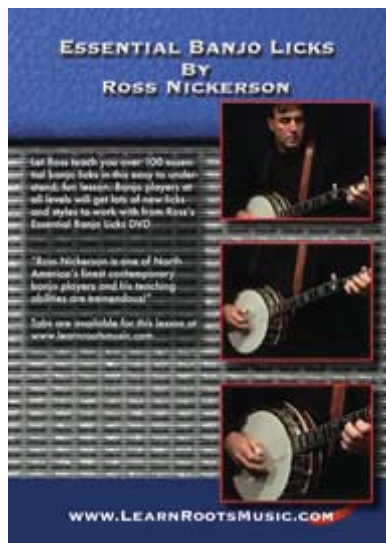
*... I have progressed farther than in the previous 20 years combined. I am so surprised at what I can still learn, even at 52, and the joy it has brought into my life.*



## Playing Banjo By Ear and Learning the Chords

*...This format is so different, it definitely is a jewel that stands alone. The "Playing Banjo by Ear" lessons are a tool kit for understanding how playing the banjo really works*

Ross Nickerson explains and simplifies banjo secrets that are hard to learn from books. Learn to develop your ability without tab, memorize quicker and see the forest through the trees.

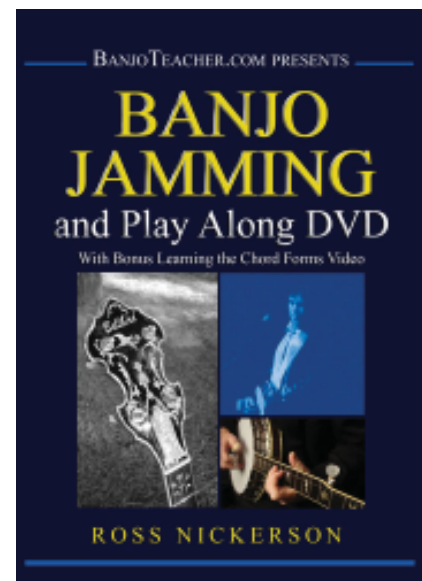


## Essential Banjo Licks

*...Your instruction is concise and very helpful causing immediate progress with a little effort and practice.*

DVD features over 100 useful and fun banjo licks demonstrated for you slow and fast with split screen closeups. Tab included.

*...thank you for the DVD! It will prove to be a valuable tool in completing my vocabulary and a great bag of tricks for constructing my solos!!*



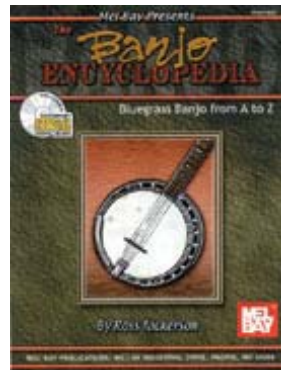
## Banjo Jamming and Play Along DVD

Play along with Ross Nickerson and a backup band at three different speeds. Includes tablature and split screen video.

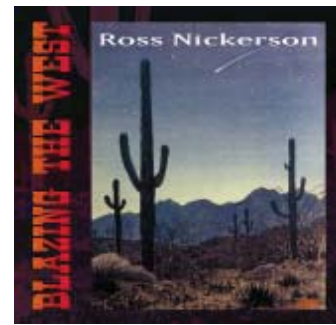
*...Superb help with many valuable thoughts and tips...the bonus learning the chord forms lessons on the "Jamming" DVD is worth the entire cost.*

*...Excellent! I can't stop practicing.*

## The Banjo Encyclopedia



## Blazing the West



### **The Banjo Encyclopedia**

*...most comprehensive work...a "must have"...all will benefit...Ross' leadership and clarity of instruction is tremendous.*

*...what a book!!! Blown away at the content...this book is gold...great curriculum!!!*

*...This book is one of the most comprehensive, well-structured, and interesting books I have ever seen for teaching an instrument.*

*...you name it ... this book has it ALL The complete book about bluegrass banjo picking. It is very well written and is full of solid good advice and information. Its a superb book by a knowledgeable and nice guy!! ... well worth the money...*

*...I think that what you have created is the new gold standard for banjo instruction.*

*...It covers everything I will possibly want to know for the next 20 years or so. It will in my opinion become the seminal book on banjo.*

**The Banjo Encyclopedia, "Bluegrass Banjo from A to Z"** is 240 pages of in- depth practical, straight forward instruction with a 99 track CD.

### **Ross Nickerson CD *Blazing the West***

*...Country Music Television voted *Blazing the West* one of the top ten albums of 2003 to pick up*

#### **What Radio is saying....**

*...BLAZING THE WEST...it should come with the following instructions:*

*Enter onto expressway, place in CD player, crank up volume, and put the pedal to the medal. – Joe Wills*

*"Blazing the West" is a lot less talk, and a lot more action! – Joey Black*

*Ross Nickerson sets his banjo on fire with his El Cumbanchero - Ted Clark*



# Pinycastle Recording Artist

## Ross Nickerson



Five-string banjo master Ross Nickerson performs in support of his CD *Blazing the West* on Pinycastle Records. Country Music Television named *Blazing the West* as one of the top ten CDs to pick up in 2003.

Nickerson has recorded with some of the top names in Bluegrass music and was released this year on a compilation CD called *Ultimate Banjo* that included banjo legends, Earl Scruggs and Sonny Osborne. Ross recently appeared on stage with The Riders in the Sky and The Oak Ridge Boys and has picked and appeared with many of the best banjo players in the world including Earl Scruggs, Bela Fleck and Ralph Stanley.

Throughout his career Ross has always enjoyed sharing his knowledge and helping others to learn to play the banjo. His many years of experience teaching privately and traveling the world to hold group workshops has helped him gain many unique insights into the common obstacles facing banjo students today. He has listened to his students, seen the challenges they face, understands what students are craving for and always delivers his practical, focused instruction in a personable and easy to follow manner.

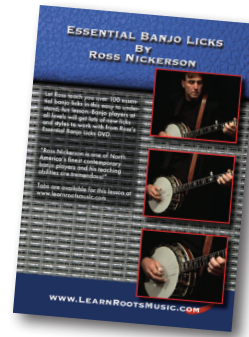
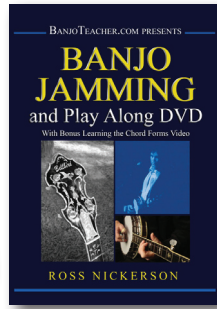
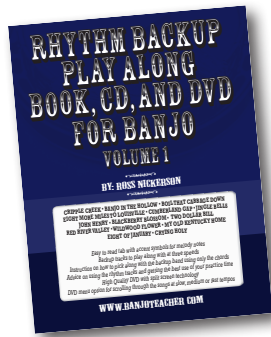
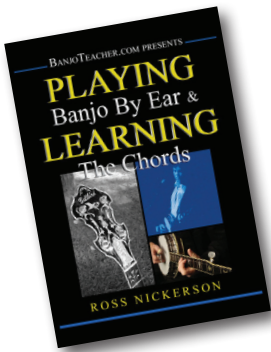
Ross Nickerson is the author of the top selling banjo book, *The Banjo Encyclopedia "Bluegrass Banjo from A to Z"*. He has also written and recorded many other books, CDs and DVDs designed to help banjo students save time and learn the fun of playing 5-string banjo easier.

Ross is a full time musician and on the road ten to fifteen days a month performing concerts, teaching banjo workshops and reaching new audiences. He has been selected as a faculty member for many prestigious bluegrass and banjo camps and is the founder and coordinator of the Nova Scotia Banjo Camp and the annual BanjoTeacher.com Banjo Cruise.

**BanjoTeacher.com**  
for book updates, support  
and continued instruction

1-866-322-6567

[www.banjoteacher.com](http://www.banjoteacher.com)  
[www.rossnickerson.com](http://www.rossnickerson.com)



## TESTIMONIALS FOR THE BANJO ENCYCLOPEDIA

...world class player... an exemplary teacher... tailored instruction... great resource... what a book!!!

Blown away at the content... this book is gold... great curriculum!!!

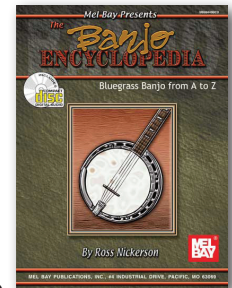
...most comprehensive work ...a "must have" ... all will benefit... Ross' leadership and clarity of instruction is tremendous...

You've done it! I feel your passion in your text, and in your playing. You have done the "banjo world of players" a great service...cudos!

...you name it... this book has it ALL! The complete book about bluegrass banjo picking. It is very well written and is full of solid good DVD advice and information. It's a superb book by a knowledgeable and nice guy!! ...well worth the money...

I think that what you have created is the new gold standard for banjo instruction...

It covers everything I will possibly want to know for the next 20 years or so. It will in my opinion become the seminal book on banjo.



### Find what you need at BanjoTeacher.com

Online Lessons with streaming video. Band Backup Tracks to play along with. Lessons, Tablature downloads, and DVDs. Members site with special lessons, video's and discounts.



**Super Banjo Straps**  
These straps are the best! They're really comfortable making the banjo feel lighter.



**Transcriber**  
Slow it down and play a long without re-tuning!



**Strum N Comfort**  
Join the thumb pick revolution. Several to choose from.



**Metronome**  
Features a built in tone chamber for louder play!



**Cobalt Coated Picks**  
Increase your speed, reduce string noise, and improve tone.



[www.banjoteacher.com](http://www.banjoteacher.com)

19.95/Book/CD

39.95/Book/CD/DVD