

Course Description

Clawhammer Banjo Basic Technique Intensive with Ivan Rosenberg

May 7, 14, 21, 28 at 7:30PM Central

This workshop series is for everyone from beginners who bought their first banjo yesterday to experienced players who are unsatisfied with their technique. We're going to meticulously train our hands to strike clean, powerful notes on all strings, with a real focus on the inside strings, where most players have trouble getting good tone, volume, and accuracy. We'll learn and refine "double thumbing" technique and the "bum ditty" rhythm, which is THE make-or-break rhythmic technique for clawhammer. We'll learn a few options for doing it well and learn to avoid the many pitfalls aspiring players encounter.

After sufficiently focusing on the right hand (which we'll continually revisit throughout the workshop series), we'll add the left hand and learn the fretboard up to the 5th fret in G major tuning, a few chords, and good hammer-on/pull-off/slide technique. In the latter portion of the workshop series, we'll apply what we've learned to a couple of songs, and I'll send you off with drop thumb technique. All the while we'll be refining our hands, fingers, fingernails, arms, and banjo hold to optimize our sound and consistency. I even have games and prizes planned to encourage y'all to practice the fundamentals in a way that will truly drill them into your muscle memory and tactile memory.

In addition to the four classes, I'll hold some office hours during Week 1 and Week 2 (date and time TBA) to check in with anyone who has questions or needs help, and if you still need attention after that, I'll find time for more office hours or even short one-on-one sessions. Our motto for this workshop is "No claw left behind!"

Throughout the workshop, we'll be laser-focused on developing an easy-to-follow practice routine that will deliver real results. All classes are recorded—they can be streamed and downloaded, and you can keep them forever. I'll also provide tablature of exercises, songs, and chords.

Sidebar: I'm better known as a Dobro player/instructor, but I released two well-received clawhammer albums, one of which was given a full spread in *Banjo Newsletter*, before I was even aware of many technique-related details I'm going to show you. After setting the banjo down for years, I relearned clawhammer from the ground up, so the technique-refinement process is relatively fresh for me, and I'm looking forward to showing you all the details nobody talked about back when I was first learning.

If you have any questions about the workshop series content, please email me at ivanDrosenberg@gmail.com. If you have questions about registration, payment, or using Zoom, please contact our Nashville Acoustic Camps host, Megan Lynch Chowning, at fiddlestar33@gmail.com. Hope to see you there! *Ivan*

p.s. you need some amount of fingernail beyond the flesh of your fingertips to play in this style – try not to clip the nails of your index and middle fingers of your claw hand too short during this workshop series and especially before the first class!

For Brand New Clawhammer Beginners:

The good news is that clawhammer is one of the easiest musical styles to get started with, and you'll all be playing some clawhammer music in just weeks, but there are a few important ways clawhammer is different from any other instrument or style you might be familiar with.

No Picking Allowed

There is no "picking" aka "up-picking" in the clawhammer or "overhand" style of banjo. The muscles you'd use to fingerpick a guitar, banjo, or Dobro are NOT used at all in clawhammer. Getting one's hands and mind around this idea is the hardest thing about going from another stringed instrument style to clawhammer banjo. There is "up-picking" in *other* kinds of old time banjo, but not in clawhammer.

In clawhammer style, the hand moves in towards and away from the banjo. The hand and thumb make this movement together: hand and thumb in, hand and thumb out.

Downstrokes are made with the **back of the fingernail** using a motion that comes from the wrist and/or forearm, *not* from the fingers. **Thumb upstroke notes** are *not* made by picking with the thumb muscles, but rather by pre-engaging the thumb string simultaneously on the preceding downstroke, and then simply lifting the thumb away as the hand travels away from the banjo on the upstroke.

All of this will be explained in class, but keep this document as a reminder! Any time you start "picking" or using those picking muscles, it's going to throw off the clawhammer rhythm.

Clawhammer practice checklist:

1. Check how you're holding the banjo.

- Find a good chair that's the right height to play comfortably
- Lean the top of the banjo towards you a little to help stabilize it
- Get your claw forearm resting on the armrest area but clear of the banjo head
- Check the angle of the neck – find what's most comfortable and try for consistency. Remember that the angle of the neck affects the angle of your finger and brush as they strike the strings.

2. Check your “claw” shape and your forearm

- Try to find and maintain a consistent shape for your claw hand
- Unless you find a good reason not to, keep the fingers of your claw hand together and in contact with each other, which can help stability, tone, and volume
- Try that little downward bend in your thumb that I mentioned in class. Similar to striking with index or middle, this is something that roughly half of clawhammer players do. I think it's worthwhile to see if it's comfortable for you, as it can 1) help prevent unwanted tapping of the thumb on the banjo head, 2) help maintain a consistent 'claw' shape (preventing your thumb from falling too far down after every 5th string note), 3) provide just the tiniest beneficial amount of very slight muscle tension in the claw hand, and 4) provide a more precise contact point on the 5th string and when drop-thumbings to other strings (which we'll get into in the fourth class).
- Make sure that your wrist isn't preemptively and excessively “dorsiflecting” (bending upward towards the back of the forearm)
- Most players will want a wrist that's relaxed and in line with the forearm, or possibly with the tiniest bit of “palmarflexion” in the wrist: a very slight and relaxed bend towards the palm, probably no more than a 20-degree angle. This means that if you do the “door-knocking” motion at the wrist, you're moving from slight palmarflexion to a wrist position that's more or less in line with your forearm.
- Relax your shoulders and try to have good posture so you don't feel like you need to see the chiropractor every time you play banjo (feel free to remind ME of this one!)
- Remember that the basic note striking motion is primarily *towards* and *away* from the banjo strings, aka in and out, not up and down like you might be used to with guitar or other flatpicked instruments. The motion towards the strings is what enables rest strokes to work, and practicing these rest strokes is in my opinion the key to accuracy on the inner strings especially.
- There are two ‘best practices’ ways to do the basic brush, and personally I do both depending on the situation: The motion could come from the forearm as more of an up-down motion, or alternatively for a more percussive brush, with a trajectory that's more similar to our note striking, i.e. towards the banjo, letting the fingers fall through the strings towards a destination at the banjo head. This is hard to describe in words, so please see Class 1 for a demonstration. I've seen some people teach

Clawhammer Banjo Basic Technique Intensive with Ivan Rosenberg
Class 1 – May 7, 20205

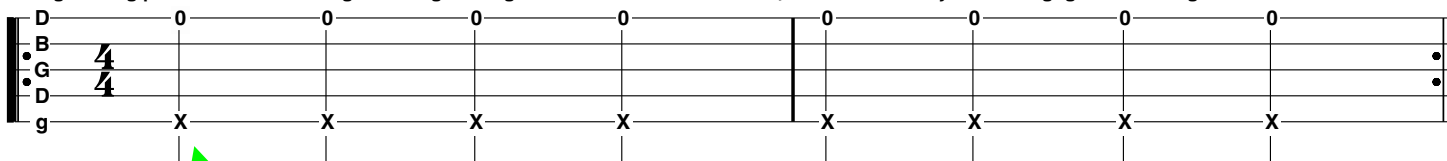
that the brush should come from an up and down wrist motion, which to me seems unnecessary and inefficient, but there are players who make that work...

3. Each time when you sit down to practice:

- *First* try to get some clean notes on the 2nd string, 3rd string, and/or 4th string.
- Make these your *first claw moves of every practice session* rather than first playing the top string (aka “the easy string”). Our goal is for it to feel natural and comfortable to play the inner strings cleanly, rather than spending most early learning time on the high string while neglecting the others.
- There’s no reason for accuracy on inner strings to be some far-away lofty goal achieved after months or years. Just learn it now so you can spend the next months and years on learning repertoire, increasing speed, and learning to use different tunings.

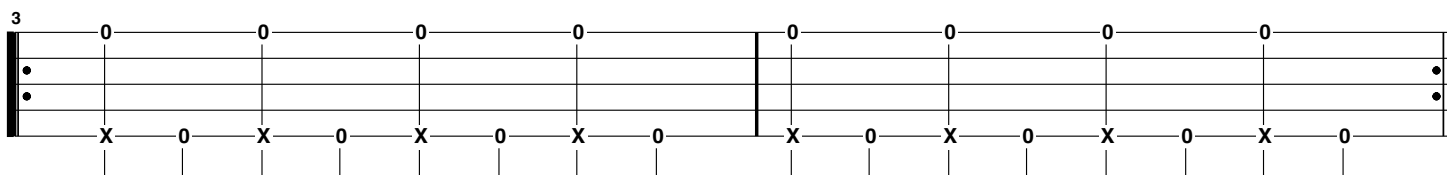
Note striking practice 1 © 2025 Ivan Rosenberg

1. High string practice: aim claw finger through string and land on head of the banjo. Simultaneously thumb engages 5th string

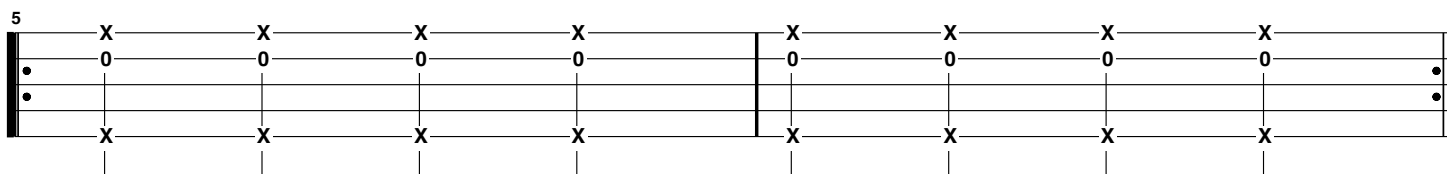


x on 5th string = engage thumb string but don't sound it

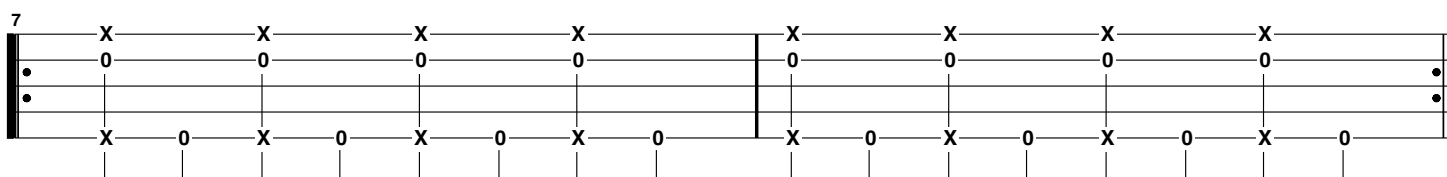
2. High string double thumbing practice. Sounded thumb note must be pre-engaged during preceding downstroke!



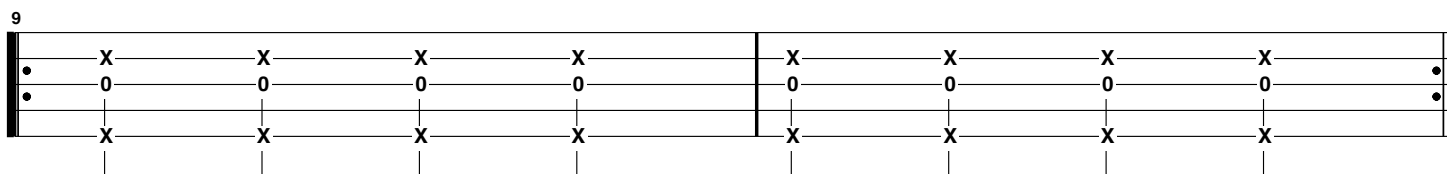
3. Second string downstroke practice: claw finger lands 2nd string rest stroke on adjacent 1st string (here x = rest stroke destination string).
Thumb engages 5th string every downstroke, regardless of whether the thumb string is about to be sounded.



4. Second string double thumbing practice with rest strokes and engaged-with-thumb 5th strings every downstroke



5. Third string downstroke practice with rest strokes landing on 2nd string plus engaged 5th string every downstroke



6. Third string double thumbing practice with rest strokes and engaged 5th string every downstroke

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7. Low string note striking practice with rest strokes landing on 3rd string plus engaged 5th string every downstroke

13

8. Low string double thumbing practice with rest stroke and engaged 5th string every downstroke

15

Rest stroke, double thumbing, and bum-diddy exercises © 2025 Ivan Rosenberg

4/4

Exercise 1: Treble clef, 4/4 time. Notes: D (quarter), B (quarter), G (quarter), D (quarter). Bass clef: X (quarter), 0 (quarter), X (quarter), 0 (quarter). Measure 5: D (quarter), B (quarter), G (quarter), D (quarter). Bass clef: X (quarter), 0 (quarter), X (quarter), 0 (quarter).

3

Exercise 2: Treble clef, 3/4 time. Notes: 0 (quarter), 0 (quarter), 0 (quarter). Bass clef: X (quarter), 0 (quarter), X (quarter), 0 (quarter). Measure 5: 0 (quarter), 0 (quarter), 0 (quarter). Bass clef: X (quarter), 0 (quarter), X (quarter), 0 (quarter).

5

Exercise 3: Treble clef, 5/4 time. Notes: 0 (half), 0 (quarter), 0 (quarter), 0 (quarter). Bass clef: X (half), 0 (quarter), X (quarter), 0 (quarter). Measure 5: 0 (half), 0 (quarter), 0 (quarter), 0 (quarter). Bass clef: X (half), 0 (quarter), X (quarter), 0 (quarter).

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Exercise 4: Treble clef, 7/4 time. Notes: 0 (half), 0 (quarter), 0 (quarter), 0 (quarter). Bass clef: X (half), 0 (quarter), X (quarter), 0 (quarter). Measure 5: 0 (half), 0 (quarter), 0 (quarter), 0 (quarter). Bass clef: X (half), 0 (quarter), X (quarter), 0 (quarter).

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Exercise 5: Treble clef, 9/4 time. Notes: 0 (half), 0 (quarter), 0 (quarter), 0 (quarter). Bass clef: X (half), 0 (quarter), X (quarter), 0 (quarter). Measure 5: 0 (half), 0 (quarter), 0 (quarter), 0 (quarter). Bass clef: X (half), 0 (quarter), X (quarter), 0 (quarter).

Practice journal

1. note striking accuracy on downbeats (G major tuning)

At a slow and steady tempo, strike the 2nd string while landing your claw finger on the 1st string to complete the rest stroke and your thumb on the 5th string, Aim to produce a clean single note ending as a satisfying rest stroke, with no extra unwanted strings sounded. Every time you get a clean note, without speeding up, try immediately to repeat a clean note, trying to maintain everything about your arm and claw hand that enabled that first good note. Every time you get a good note, try for a series of successful notes and count how many you get. Try this both as individual quarter notes and while double thumbing eighth notes. We're going to make a little game out of this and keep track the same way fitness enthusiasts keep track of their steps and pull ups.

Each day, jot down

- your most consecutive clean strikes within the first 5 minutes of practice
- your most consecutive clean strikes for the day

Whether you get two or two hundred notes in a row doesn't matter—the goal is to recognize good technique and replicate it immediately, so we consciously reinforce success while being aware of our mistakes but ignoring them and moving on. Quality practice isn't just about time and effort—it's about recognizing and reinforcing what works!

If you like (totally optional), you can enter your 5-minute and daily best each day on this Google spreadsheet, where I have all your first names (with last initial) listed:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1aysricRk86nnPz3zipjLR50zwAfrCYWfuPquvzoi6mw>

2. Repeat the same process for the bum-diddy (G major tuning)

Use the third string as the strike note, and use the banjo head as your target destination for the back of your claw fingernails after the strum. Try to count to yourself “One, and-a Two, and-a Three, and-a Four” to get the feel of the bum-diddy pattern. One = downbeat strike, and = brush, a = thumb note.

3. Cold practice

Pick up the banjo at random times throughout the day. As quickly as you can, reproduce your best banjo hold, get your claw formed and in position, and try to hit a clean note on the 2nd string right away with zero preparation or warmup. If you get a good note, try to repeat it. Just for yourself, count how many times you get one or more good notes when you first pick up the instrument and jot it down. It may take several days or even weeks before you get a good first note just once—that's to be expected and it's all part of the process. But someday you'll pick up that banjo and play clean notes right away!