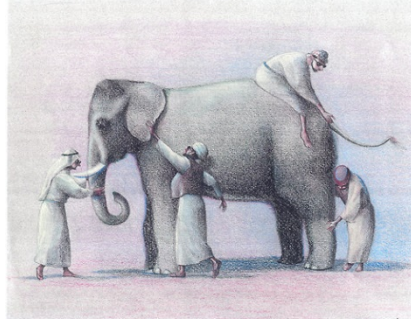


Preface



What is “Early Banjo”? It is much like the story of the blind men and the elephant. The “elephant” represents all the banjo history and music that came before us which we can no longer see nor hear. We are left with fragments which we must piece together to get some sense of the “whole”. We have a rich but limited written record of banjo music, instruction, and descriptive narratives. There is also a living tradition of playing that has been passed down through time. A dogmatic stranglehold on any one of these views will be restrictive. We must “back away from the elephant” to get a better view of the entire situation.

My approach is to extract the written record left to us in the instructional books of the time and combine them into a meaningful performance driven format.

Some of the books have a great amount of detail on how to play the banjo. The Phil Rice Method of 1858 and the Converse Analytical of 1886 are two such examples. The Briggs’ Banjo Book of 1855 also lays out similar technique. What I have done in this Early Banjo Primer book is to extract what is common between all the books from 1855 – 1886 and present the techniques in a musically consistent manner.

Hopefully, this approach will provide a simple introduction and understanding for the novice player, and yet lay a foundation for those willing to dig deep into the more complex material available. Although music is indeed a living tradition and forever in a state of flux and growth, this music had some sort of a beginning and some sort of end. That is why we can step away and examine what we have. I do not wish to state that what you find in these early banjo books is the **only way** the banjo was played, but rather to appreciate that they provide a baseline from which to deviate.

There is a written record to help us realize a representation of the 19th Century style of play. From there, we can be free to use our interpretive expression and incorporate living traditions.

The Early Banjo tradition is like many other things. It is easy to play, but difficult to master. Not everyone will choose the path that leads to playing more challenging songs. I hope to launch the beginner with a simple foundation to enjoy the instrument. It is much more enjoyable to play well than to play poorly. Please take the time to observe a few basic principles and it will enhance the pleasure you derive from how it sounds and how it feels. Be patient and you will get satisfying results.

Introduction

This illustration from the cover of Buckley's New Banjo Banjo Book of 1860 is a very fine example of how to sit and hold the banjo. The dimensions should be close to what you have, if you own a 19th Century reproduction instrument. Make any effort you can to have or borrow an instrument with gut or nylgut strings, no frets, a skin head, about a 12" or 13" pot, a 25" to 27" (or close) scale length, and friction pegs. This is the ideal instrument to bring out the best in this music. The technique, sound, and feel are intrinsically bound into the old designs. Tune it low, to the original Briggs' tuning of dGDF#A or the Rice tuning (and thereafter) of eAEG#B which is a step higher. You will feel the growling, low, and haunting tones come to life as you strike the strings and set the old skin head in motion and feel the tone pot vibrate against your body. The simplest melody will bring delight as you experience it in the same way your ancestors heard it. There are a number of fine makers today, and a decent instrument can be had for a reasonable price. You will NOT find a Chinese import of a Minstrel style banjo. Appreciate the beauty of the instrument for its aesthetic appeal, and notice the uniqueness from one instrument to the next. No two will be exactly the same.

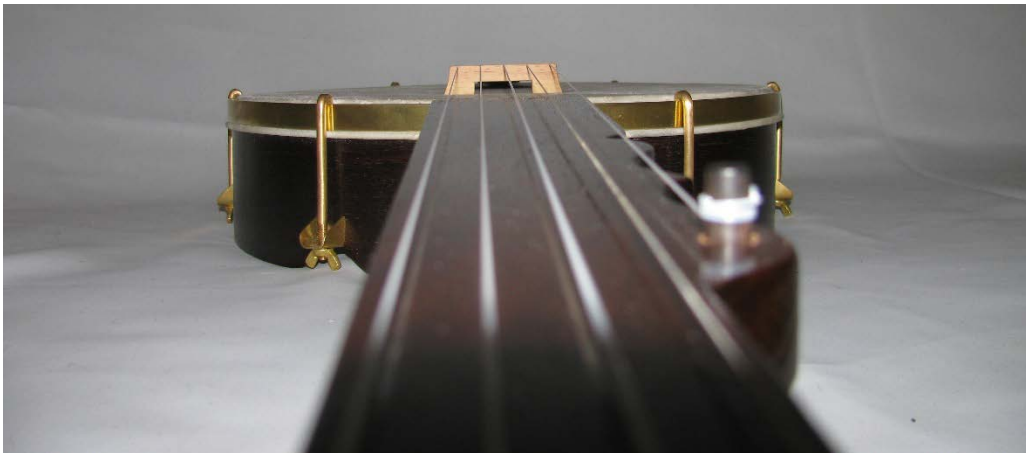


This music can be very easy to play, yet difficult to master. Of course, there is plenty of room in between these two extremes. For maximum enjoyment, please take the time to become proficient at the basic moves and skills. You can play a great deal of the material with no special preparation and enjoy yourself very much. However, many people hit a wall and never stretch beyond that. With patience, discipline, and time, you can reap the rewards of being a competent player and open up the world of Early Banjo in a different way. You will not be limited by your technique or knowledge.

I have studied each of these 19th Century books and played all the music. In addition, I have arranged hundreds of other songs and written my own. What I present to you are not my own original thoughts, but rather my presentation of what I have discovered in these books. The written record is quite descriptive and more than sufficient to recreate the style of the 19th Century player. This is no claim to say that Minstrels played like this. There is no claim that amateurs studied these books and played these songs. Nor has it been proven that what is written here was authentically passed down to us by African Americans.

What I can say for certain is that this music and technique *did* exist in our past and is part of our musical DNA. The evidence is far too compelling to ignore. The detailed written record spanning three decades with similar information displays that it was a vital and valid part of our American musical fabric.

That being said, we must still rely upon the musician's hands and soul to breathe life into the written page. Let us move forward with this music dynamically. Use the music as viewing a snapshot in time and then move forward into today, bringing new audiences to it.

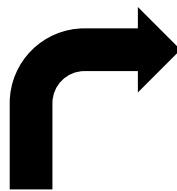


These are my sources

- Briggs' Banjo Instructor of 1855 published by Oliver Ditson & Co.
- Phil Rice's Method for The Banjo 1858 - Oliver Ditson & Co.
- Buckley's New Banjo Book of 1860 – Firth, Pond, & Co.
- Winner's New Primer for The Banjo 1864 – William A. Pond & Co.
- Frank B. Converse's New and Complete Method for The Banjo with or Without a Master 1865 – S.T. Gordon (The "Green Book")
- Frank B. Converse's Banjo Without a Master 1865 – Dick and Fitzgerald (The "Yellow Book")
- Buckley's Banjo Guide 1868 – Oliver Ditson & Co.
- The Banjo, and How to Play it 1872 – Dick and Fitzgerald
- The Analytical Banjo Method of 1886 by Frank Converse - S.T. Gordon & Son

Use this book on several different levels. Start with a few of the basics and just dig in. Many players will ignore fingerings and try to play a piece the best they can by using some tab and also what their ear tells them. Try and stick to some detailed instruction and lay a foundation for yourself. Frank Converse said in his Analytical Banjo Method of 1886 that essentially there are but two movements used in the early banjo style, that being the use of **Combinations** and the **Hammer Stroke**. The evidence of this is true. The Briggs book is not as well defined as the 1886 book, but a careful examination will bring it to light that those two movements will provide sufficient technique. The Rice Book of 1858 deviates from this, in that the thumb is used more. The thumb should certainly be in your arsenal of banjo skills, and often the choice between execution of single notes with the thumb or a Hammer Stroke is only a matter of the player's preference.

- Take the time to feel comfortable in playing the basic **Strikes**
- Learn to use the **Hammer Stroke**
- Work out with the **Movements** and **Converse Combinations** on a regular basis
- Carefully apply the techniques to the entry level repertoire
- Be conscious of your intonation, checking yourself often with a tuner or a piano
- Use a metronome to enforce rhythmic accuracy
- Devise a practice routine that includes a balance of working on technique and exploring repertoire



Optional

Skip Ahead

Perhaps you have enough experience in Clawhammer and want to start playing songs. If so, skip the next part. You can play the tunes in the back. If you want to really dig in and learn the original technique, turn the page and go for it.

Early Banjo Rosetta

Briggs' Rice

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is labeled 'Briggs'' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Rice'. Both staves are in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The top staff contains a melody with a half note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note C5, a quarter note D5, and a quarter note E5. The bottom staff contains a melody with a half note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note C5, a quarter note D5, and a quarter note E5. The bottom staff also includes a bass line with a half note G2, a quarter note A2, a quarter note B2, a quarter note C3, a quarter note D3, and a quarter note E3.

Juba Briggs' Jig

2

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is labeled 'Juba' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Briggs' Jig'. Both staves are in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The top staff contains a melody with a half note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note C5, a quarter note D5, and a quarter note E5. The bottom staff contains a melody with a half note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note C5, a quarter note D5, and a quarter note E5. The bottom staff also includes a bass line with a half note G2, a quarter note A2, a quarter note B2, a quarter note C3, a quarter note D3, and a quarter note E3.

This "Early Banjo Rosetta" may be useful to those of you interested in reading regular notation. Banjo music of the 19th Century was written in two different "keys", or tunings. The Briggs' and Winner's 1864 were written in the G/D tuning shown above, and the Phil Rice of 1858 and almost every book thereafter used the A/E tuning. As you can see, when reading tab, it is not relevant which tuning you use. The intervals and relationships on the fingerboard remain the same. **Therefore, to play tab, use any banjo in any key.** To experience the music as it was, tune down to the designated pitch. Most players today tune to G/D and that is how I referenced all the music you experience in this book.

Stroke Style Technique

Our focus will be on setting up the right hand and executing the basic moves needed to play Stroke Style Banjo. The descriptions found here are from the original source of this style, and unaltered in any way. Included will be examples from the *Briggs' Banjo Instructor* of 1855, *The Phil Rice Method for The Banjo* of 1858, and the *Converse Analytical Banjo Method* of 1886. Each one offers a slightly different view of a similar idea.

Setting up the hand:

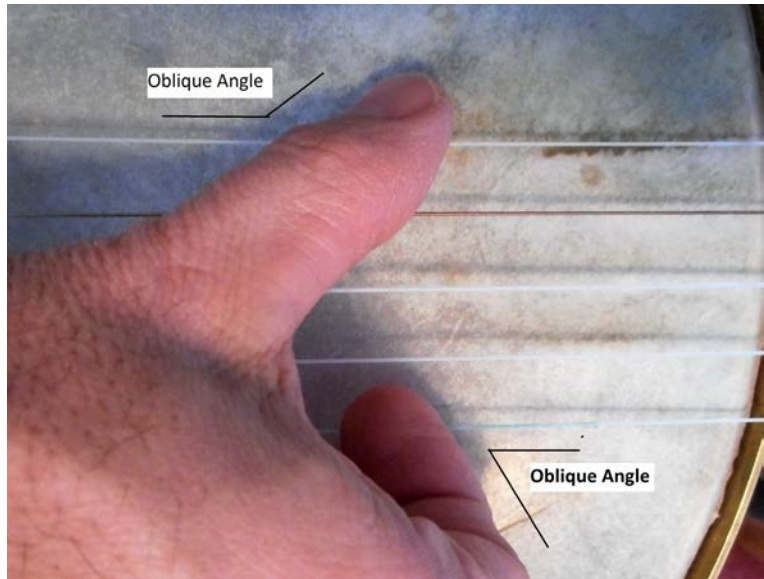
- **Briggs' Banjo Instructor of 1855.** This is the first significant book to be published that specifically provides instruction and repertoire for Stroke Style Banjo. Here is what the book on page 8, has to say. *"The thumb should be extended and rest on the 5th string. The fingers should not be separated, but held closely together, and move simultaneously with the first finger; the first finger should be held a little further out from the hand than the other fingers. The fingers should be held stiff, except at the 3rd joint. The wrist should be held limber."*
- **Phil Rice's Banjo Instructor of 1858.** This one, published a short time after the Briggs' book, gives us perhaps the most detailed information about this playing style. On page 9, it states: *"The hand should be bent so that the end of the first finger should point to the ball of the thumb. The space between the end of the finger and the ball of the thumb should be about an inch and a half."*



- **Converse Analytical Banjo Method of 1886.** This publication came out a long time after the other two, but represents a consistent and refined version of the ideas found earlier. On page 12 it says *"Only the first finger and the thumb are used. Partly close the hand until the little finger just touches the palm, and in this position press the fingers closely together, thereby forming a support for the first finger."*

We are preparing the right hand to execute what we call a "STRIKE." Basically, strings are hit by the back of the nail on the first finger as a result of the hand coming down upon the string. The thumb also strikes a string in a pulling motion on the way back up. These are the principal motions used to play the banjo. Here is what the books say about right hand execution:

- **Briggs' Banjo Instructor of 1855.** On page 8, it says *"In playing, the thumb and first finger only are used; the 5th string is touched by the thumb only; this string is always played open, the other strings are touched by the thumb and the first finger, the thumb and finger should meet the strings obliquely, so as to cause them to vibrate across the finger-board. The strings are touched by the ball of the thumb, and the nail of the 1st finger. The first*



finger should strike the strings with the back of the nail and then slide to. When using the thumb, the first finger nail should rest against the first string; when using the first finger, the thumb should rest on the 5th string; when the first finger strikes any one of the strings, other than the first string, the finger should slide to, and rest on the next string to the one struck; when the 1st string is struck, the finger should slide to, and rest on top of the instrument."

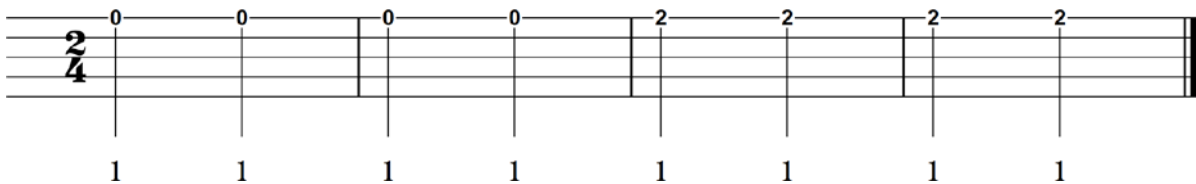
- **Phil Rice Method of 1858.** This book proceeds to explain the motion through a series of STRIKES. It says on page 9: *"In making a strike, the first finger and thumb should come down at the same time on the first string and thumb string; sound the note on the first string by letting the fingernail slide off, then sound the thumb string immediately after with the thumb. The fingers should not rest on the head, or skin of the banjo. The wrist of the right hand should be held immediately over the bridge. The first and second fingers of the left hand can be down or up in practicing a STRIKE."*
- **Converse Analytical Banjo Method of 1886.** Instead of referring to this motion as a STRIKE, Converse calls it a COMBINATION. *"To execute the first (or "COMBINATION") movement, close the hand as directed, and, carrying it quickly to the strings, strike, with the first finger, the string required, at the same time placing the thumb, in anticipation, on the string that is to produce the following tone; then while raising the hand, vibrate, with the thumb, the string upon which it was placed, accompanying the action with a slight turning – outward and upward – of the hand in restoring it to its original position."*

To begin with, the most basic motion is simply the hand coming down with the first fingernail hitting the first string. The finger should remain in its fixed position as it comes down. The finger is supported by bracing it against the other fingers, creating a relaxed but controlled motion as it comes down to strike the string with the back of the nail. This is called the **Half Strike**, the **Strike** being the complete motion of the finger and thumb.



The Half Strike

Rice 1858

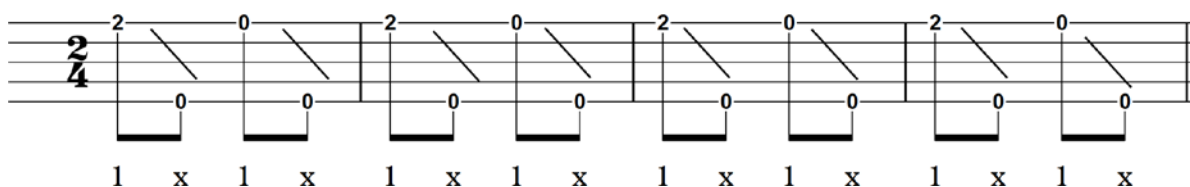


When you see the symbol “1” under the note, this represents the first finger of the right hand. In the Briggs’ notation, this will be replaced by an “F” for “finger”. “X” will represent the thumb. Try to relax, but maintain stiffness in your first finger. This will make guitar players crazy. Take the time to experiment, and make it feel right.

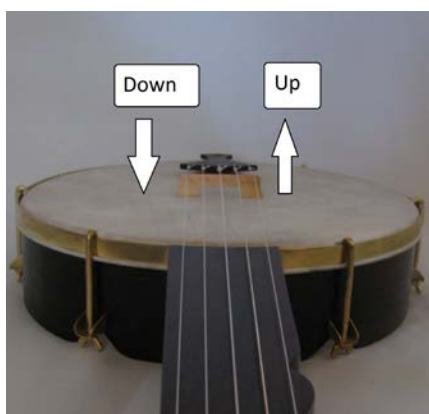
The next motion is called a **Strike**, or a **Full Strike**. This is when the hand comes down onto the strings and the finger will strike the first string with the back of the nail. The thumb comes down with the finger and goes to the fifth string but only makes the string vibrate on the way up as the hand is lifted back into its original position.



A Strike (or Combination)



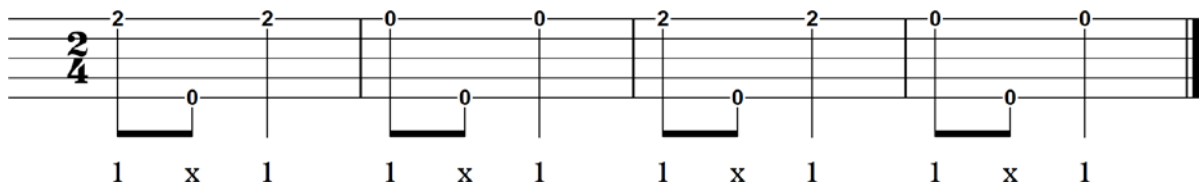
A Strike consists of two notes. **This move is essential.** Work it out well. The same movement is called a Combination by Converse and is signified by a solid line above the notes executing the Strike.



Down is a motion towards the head of the banjo - not the floor.

The hand goes down and up to play this. Although it may initially feel stiff, trust that it will flow and soon feel quite natural. Begin to think of Strikes and Combinations synonymously.

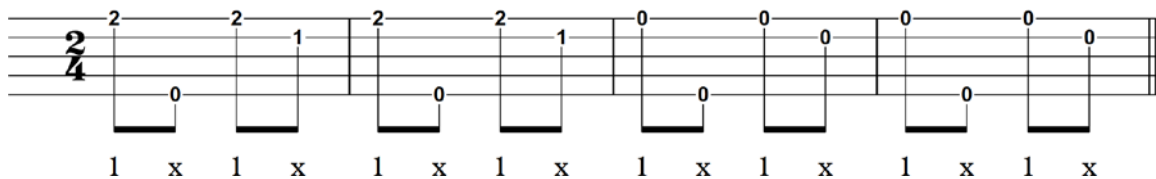
A Strike and a Half



The next movement is called a **Strike and a Half**. You play a full Strike, and then a Half Strike – two eighth notes and then a quarter note. *Short-Short-Long, Short-Short-Long*.

There is one more movement to learn, and then we will apply them to playing **Juba**. The last one is called the Double Strike. As you can guess, this is two Strikes put together with the harmony changing on the second Strike.

A Double Strike



In all these Strike” motions, try to think of the hand as either up or down.

Juba

Rice 1858

2/4

1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x

5

1 x 1 1 x 1 1 x 1 1 x 1

9

1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x

FIRST LESSON.

JUBA, A JIG DANCE.

1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x

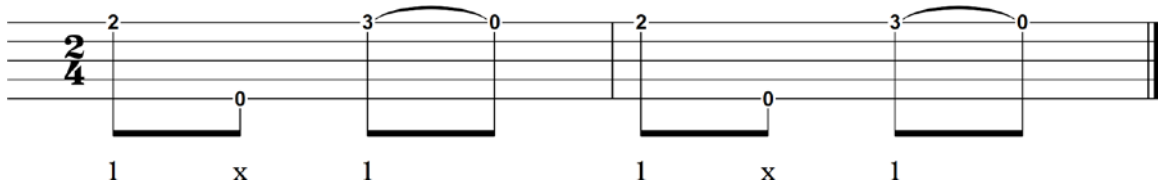
1 x 1 1 x 1 1 x 1 1 x 1

Count 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x

Make "Juba" the very first tune in your repertoire.

Pull Offs and the Triple

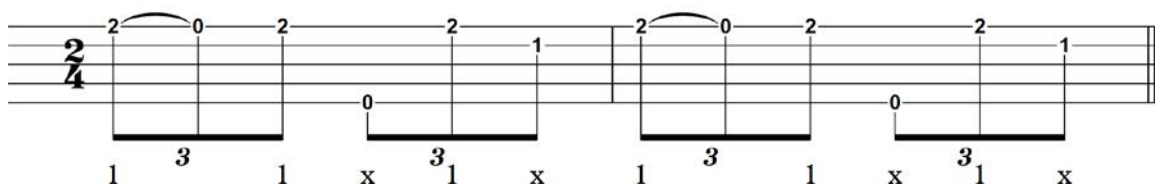
Now we will add to the Strike. You can change the articulation in the left hand with **Pull Offs**. Sometimes it is called a **Pull**. Rice calls it a False Note. They all refer to a note that is sounded NOT by the right hand, but by the left hand “pulling” on the string to produce the note. If you observe carefully and play it slowly, you will notice that the string is actually plucked by the left hand. Doing this in the right place adds character to the Early Banjo style.



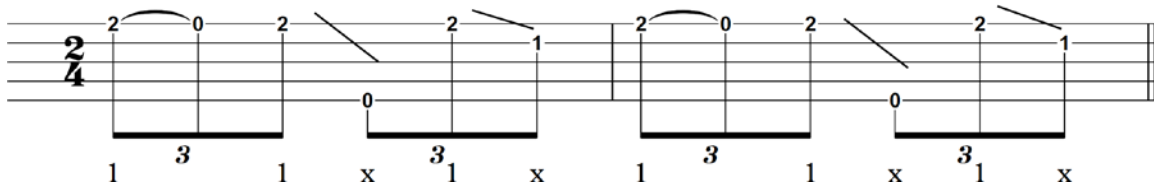
Here we see the Strike. Play a Half Strike on the first string with the first finger, and then pull off the note so that the first string will sound. The listener will hear four notes, but the right hand has struck only three. Generally, from a stopped note (where the finger presses down on the fingerboard) the Pull Off is indicated by the arch connecting the two notes. Sometimes it is called a Slur.

The Pull can be executed independently of the Strike and a Half. It can be at the beginning of a phrase, and can also be found within the inner strings (2nd, 3rd, and 4th). Anytime you strike the note on the first position or higher, you may pull the note off.

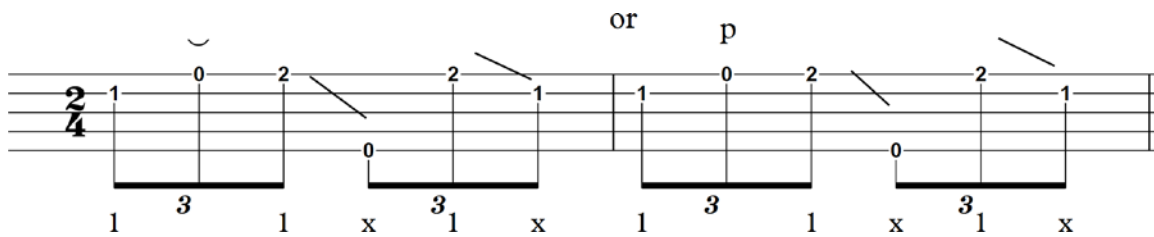
The **Triple** is a rhythmic figure. It places three beats in the time of two. The interesting thing about a Triple using Strikes is the displacement of two and three, meaning that the hand still travels in that “binary” manner of up and down, even though the phrase contains three notes. This is one of the fascinating moves in Early Banjo. One must use the idea of Pulls to make this happen.



Illustrated below is the Half Strike and the Pull, followed by a Full Strike. Notice that the Full Strike begins on a “weak beat”, meaning that it is not where the foot taps down (commonly called the downbeat). This displaces what the hand would feel as a strong beat and creates an interesting tension through the figure. Below is the same figure with the Combination marking, implying the hand coming down and up as a Strike.



This next one is a Triple with a Pull on the second note. It is independently set in motion by “plucking” it with the second finger of the left hand. You will see the first note played with a Half Strike on the second string. After you pull the second note, you are setting up a Full Strike, once again displaced on a weak beat. The thumb, which previously had a weak beat, now has a strong beat, appearing on the downbeat of the second triplet. This is a fascinating figure, and one you will see often. When you do, think of the Strike within the Triple. Either mark will suffice to indicate a pulled note.



Now we should introduce the Briggs’ **Movements** and the Converse **Combinations**. The Briggs’ Movements appeared in the 1855 book, and the Combinations were laid out by Frank Converse in 1886. They have similar elements, and if one were to place the Strike marks in the Briggs’ material, one would see a homogenous technique that binds the beginning to the end (of 19th Century Stroke Style). Certainly, as the best tip ever....**play these on a daily basis using a metronome.**

Movements

Briggs' Banjo Instructor

No. 1

2/4

2 3 2 0 2 3 2 0

1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x

No. 2

5

2 1 2 0 0 0 2 1 2 0 0 0

1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x

No. 3

9

2 1 3 2 1 0 2 1 3 2 1 0

1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x

No. 4

13

3 3 3 3

1 2 2 0 0 0 1 2 2 0 0 0

1 1 x 1 x 1 1 x 1 x 1 1 x 1 x 1 1 x 1 x

No. 5

17

3 3 3 3

1 2 2 1 0 0 0 0 1 2 2 1 0 0 0

1 1 x 1 x 1 1 x 1 x 1 1 x 1 x 1 1 x 1 x

Combinations

This is a "Strike" as described in the Phil Rice Book. The solid line indicates a Combination. Allow the hand to drop down on the notes indicated by the solid line AT THE SAME TIME. This is the essence of a "Strike". The nail of the first finger strikes the note as it goes down. The thumb is in place on its note, and is pulled as the hand rises. That simple!

The first combination exercise consists of three measures on a five-line staff. The first measure contains four notes with fingerings 2, 2, 2, 2. The second measure contains four notes with fingerings 2, 2, 2, 2. The third measure contains four notes with fingerings 2, 1, 2, 1. Below the staff, the fingering sequence is written as "1 x 1 x 1 x 1 x" for the first two measures and "1 x etc." for the third measure. Vertical double lines indicate the start and end of the combination.

4

The second combination exercise consists of three measures on a five-line staff. The first measure contains four notes with fingerings 2, 2, 2, 2. The second measure contains four notes with fingerings 1, 1, 1, 1. The third measure contains four notes with fingerings 0, 0, 0, 0. Vertical double lines indicate the start and end of the combination.

7

The third combination exercise consists of three measures on a five-line staff. The first measure contains four notes with fingerings 0, 0, 0, 0. The second measure contains four notes with fingerings 2, 2, 2, 2. The third measure contains four notes with fingerings 2, 2, 2, 2. Vertical double lines indicate the start and end of the combination.

10

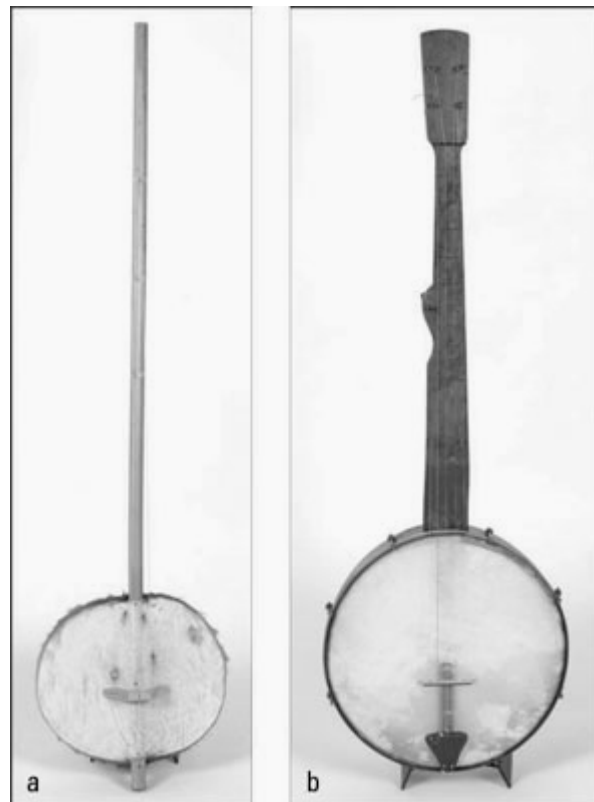
The fourth combination exercise consists of two measures on a five-line staff. The first measure contains four notes with fingerings 1, 0, 1, 0. The second measure contains four notes with fingerings 0, 0, 0, 0. Vertical double lines indicate the start and end of the combination.

The Hammer Stroke

Now we have all the tools needed to play most of the repertoire. I would like to summarize the moves, and introduce one final concept, that being the **Hammer Stroke**.

The Hammer Stroke was formally introduced into print by Frank Converse in 1886 thru the Analytical Banjo Method, and was given a mark of notation to indicate when to play it. I believe that the Hammer Stroke existed long before but was never notated. If you try this technique and get comfortable with it, the Hammer will become a natural part of your banjo language, and you will use it easily ALL THE TIME. Converse himself stated that *“there are but two really fundamental principles, or movements governing the action of the right hand in this style”*. This would be the Strike, or Combination, and the Hammer Stroke. If we can assume this “schema” in our interpretation of banjo playing, it simplifies everything immensely. The majority of the repertoire falls neatly into this way of thinking and playing, and you will develop a good eye and a sense of how to play almost any passage. This is very useful as you encounter music with no fingerings, such as fiddle music (which is a great source of our banjo repertoire).

Since the Hammer Stroke marking (indication of use) is a simple dot below the note, inserting it is of no major distraction. You may choose not to use it.



The Hammer

Close the first finger and thumb together, like you are picking up a piece of paper. I adjust it just a bit so that the ball of my thumb touches the first finger. Strike down on the string with the back of your first fingernail. Your hand will look like you are playing with a pick....minus the pick. This provides a firm and controlled execution of single notes



2/4

2 2 2 2

1 1 1 1

1 1 1 1

0 0 0 0

0 0 0 0

1 1 1 1

1 1 1 1

5

2 2 1 1

0 0 0 0

2 1 0 0

0 0 1 2

1 1 1 1

1 1 1 1

1 1 1 1

1 1 1 1

9

2 0 1 0

0 1 0 2

2 1 0 0

2 1 0 0

1 1 1 1

1 1 1 1

1 1 1 1

1 1 1 1

13

2 0 0 0

1 0 0 0

0 0 0 0

1 0 0 0

1 1 1 1

1 1 1 1

1 1 1 1

1 1 1 1