

April 1 banjo class resources

Hello banjo friends,

Well, this month of learning feels off to a promising start! Thanks to all of you for joining the banjo party on Zoom, whether in real-time or after the fact. I'm especially excited to be covering bonafide banjo material this time, and from my favorite of the historical clawhammer styles, no less. The Round Peak aesthetic has inspired me so much over many years—and its particular banjo tools have proven so useful to me—that I can't wait to explore more of it with you and hopefully help you fall in love with this special sound.

If you wonder what the heck “Round Peak” refers to, I can help! Old-time music enthusiasts today use the term to refer to a group of musicians, a collection of tunes, and particular ways of playing the banjo and fiddle all closely associated with the Round Peak community of Surry County, North Carolina, in the northwestern part of the state just below the Virginia line. The epicenter of this community lies very near the modern-day junction of Interstate 77 and NC-89, should you care to pull out your maps and plan your next road trip. Travel there with me now, at least in your mind's eye, as we get to know some of the denizens of Round Peak!

Tommy Jarrell (1901-1985) may have been better-known as an old-time fiddler, with a distinctive highly syncopated bowing style that caught the attention of an entire generation of younger musicians, but he is among my favorite banjo players anywhere. His tune settings are to my ear very fully realized: packed with interesting, complex, and seemingly thoughtful detail, and rather fixed in their design, not the sorts of renditions that are merely tossed off in markedly different ways every time.

Here is Tommy playing “Cripple Creek” on the banjo, on Volume 2 of the must-have “Clawhammer Banjo” anthology, originally released in 1969 by County Records: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPbXVfTaSiM>

Just for fun, here is a 1983 video clip of Tommy leading a session with the fiddle, playing “Cripple Creek” in a way that he may well have imagined his banjo setting complementing: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivKzFCbN9u4>

Kyle Creed (1912-1982) played banjo in such a distinctive and wonderful manner that for a time, it seemed that every younger banjo player wanted to sound like he sounded. In fact, he was famously quoted near the end of his life saying, “Everywhere I go, I hear myself playing.” Once you experience his beautiful bell-like tone, his driving rhythm, and his clever efficiency, you will likely understand why he has become so legendary.

Kyle's “Liberty” album from 1977 centers the banjo in a fiddle-less stringband context, for a big, smooth sound that doesn't detract from his playing. The entire album has been uploaded to YouTube as one continuous audio file; “Sail Away Ladies” starts at 18:38. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LpybcdOKr0>

Since all of Kyle's renditions are slightly or considerably different from one another, it's worth listening to these additional recordings of "Sail Away Ladies." This track comes from County's "Legends of Old-Time Music" anthology: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYrqsAMkUWQ> ...and this one from an unreleased Mountain Records album: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SdE8GxhTuPI>

Please feel free to connect with me this week and beyond if I can support your learning in any way. Most importantly, remember to have fun!

Cheers,
Adam