

Hello banjo friends,

Well--are we exhausted yet? I'm sorry if I went on too long tonight, but I felt less bad about it in this videoed format that can be revisited later than if we had been live-and-in-person, perhaps awaiting a meal break. What can I say other than that banjo and old-time music make me very excited and prone to raving on and on....

Tonight's tunes are more playable than their peculiar structures might have made them appear. In order to take any crooked tune from a state of sounding and feeling "wrong" and weird to a state of sounding and feeling "right" and natural, you will need to come to know the contour of its melody. Once you know a tune's peaks and valleys, the exact length of these features will stand out far less than it does while we all are learning the tune and its layout on the banjo from complete scratch. My suggestion for getting to this point: put either my banjo audio or one of the fiddle references on in the background of your life, on repeat and at length, until you can sing or hum its basic melody, either out loud or to yourself, initially in sync with the track and subsequently on your own with only your memory of the track as your guide. Then, revisit the tune as you learned it on the banjo, and the elongated or truncated passages hopefully won't sound or feel strange. (At some later date, you may even find yourselves inadvertently making already-crooked tunes MORE crooked, because their original crookedness no longer seems irregular!)

Fifth-string behavior in Piney Ridge is admittedly odd; I could conduct an entire workshop on my feelings about fifth-string presence and placement generally, but to get that element on autopilot in this tune after learning the rest of it, try playing quietly along with my banjo audio, focusing your hearing exclusively on my fifth string, which happens to be the highest pitch in the entire tune by a fair margin. Once your ear can pick out the sound of my fifth string, your thumb will have less trouble matching its placement.

Here is a cross-section of recordings of Piney Ridge:

-fiddler William Stepp, from Lee County, Kentucky, recorded in 1937: <https://www.slippery-hill.com/content/piney-ridge>

-Nick Hornbuckle on fingerstyle banjo, with Katie Davis Henderson on fiddle and Eric Wright on cello, in a beautiful virtual collaboration from 2016 before such things were so commonplace: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvSV47ORfs4>

-fiddler Mark Campbell, from his 2002 "Deep Roots" album: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LBLsPQA5iXo>

...and here are the takes on Put Your Hand to the Plow that informed my arrangement:

-fiddler Estill Bingham, from Bell County, Kentucky, recorded in the mid 1980s: <https://soundarchives.berea.edu/items/show/448>

-fiddler Tatiana Hargreaves, whose dazzling playing coupled with her rhythmically consistent approach to the tune and its crookedness inspired me to learn it, here with her fantastic stringband Hard Drive in concert at the Rockbridge festival in Virginia last September: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0vENJLkBrY>

(If you like the sound of Tatiana and Hard Drive, you might enjoy the additional videos from this performance posted to YouTube by old-time music archivist Keith Stubbs. The entire show was also cleaned up and released as a digital-only album on Bandcamp, which I can't stop listening to: <https://hard-drive.bandcamp.com/album/live-at-rockbridge>)

Please reach out with any questions or other feedback--and be ready to start our next (and final, boo hoo) class session in regular-A tuning for a quick review of Put Your Hand to the Plow followed by new material!

Cheers,
Adam