

April 22 banjo class resources

Hello banjo friends,

Another week of Round Peak tune- and technique-learning behind us—and we aren't quite done yet! These tunes are—for me, anyway—so very satisfying to play that the phrase-looping in class feels almost meditative. I hope that you too are savoring their nuances as you finesse the necessary mechanics while getting to more deeply know where the melodies are going.

You may notice that I keep a watchful eye on my own marked-up copy of the tunes' tablature while teaching, in part to keep from overlooking subtle details but also using the tab as a rough (that is, not particularly detail-oriented) roadmap through the tunes. Even if you prefer not to learn directly from tab, you might find a visual reference useful as you work to separate recycled content from new and unique content, which is a lot of what my marking-up helps me to achieve. Listen as well as look for recurring elements: two-measure phrases as well as smaller segments of music, and consider ways to visually indicate these recurrences, such as highlighting or like-numbering the bits that are associated. This could help you to not get lost in a truly meandering tune context like "Roustabout," as well as to streamline your practicing of even a more formulaic tune.

Fred Cockerham's playing is typically weird and wonderful, but seldom are these qualities found in such abundance as in his "Roustabout" arrangement, which I have always thought of as a kind of signature tune for him. As mentioned in class, his structure is fluid, with sections sometimes truncated or elongated from how he first plays them and from how we learned them, making it a true solo piece.

This rendition is from a live concert performance, with some amusing commentary at the top from Fred himself; scroll to find track 7 (not to be confused with a completely different alternate setting of the tune in track 8): <https://fieldrecorder.bandcamp.com/album/frc-101-fred-cockerham-ray-alden-collection>

You have heard Kyle Creed's characteristic rich, clear tone on display in the first week's class resources, but we haven't really discussed how he achieved it. He played with his right hand over the base of the fingerboard, sometimes as high up as the twelfth fret, and as far as I know, he was the first widely-recorded clawhammer player to do so. While the banjos that he himself built never had scooped fingerboards (instead, their necks were pitched far enough forward to create sufficient string height for over-fingerboard clawhammer work), the tremendous popularity of his sound among younger players—remember his feeling that "Everywhere I go, I hear myself playing"?—I feel indirectly contributed to the similar popularity of scoops in the decades since his recordings were made, a seemingly more straightforward way of achieving the same kind of space for over-fingerboard playing.

Enjoy Kyle's distinctive tone on "Liberty" (and all of the other tracks, of course!) from his same-named 1977 album (the tune in question starts at 7:47): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LpybcdOKr0>

Here is an additional performance of “Liberty” from an unreleased Mountain Records LP:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHDGAiwTSiA>

Since this is the only week in which we are experiencing Fred’s and Kyle’s styles side-by-side, I thought it the perfect opportunity to share a link to Fred’s own fretless banjo, crafted for him by Kyle, now in the collection of the Smithsonian: https://www.si.edu/object/creed-five-string-fretless-banjo-used-fred-cockerham%3Anmah_606739

I wish you all much meditative pleasure as you practice these tunes! Until next week....

Cheers,
Adam