

April 8 banjo class resources

Hello banjo friends,

Two classes down, two more to go, and I couldn't be having much more fun than I already am. However, these classes are about YOU, so I hope that you are enjoying the experience of playing and learning in our virtual large group. (Let's all take a moment to be thankful for the Zoom workshop format, not just for the manner in which it brings all of us together but also for the fact that it doesn't permit the few dozen banjo players joining in real-time to all be heard at once; while that would be a glorious sound in a way, I have a feeling that it might quickly become a bit much banjo for most people's taste!)

As a music educator first and foremost, I'm always on the lookout for great tunes to share that also teach or reinforce technique. Lucky for me and for us all that the Round Peak tradition is chock full of exactly what I love to teach and what I feel is valuable for learners to experience: tunes with not just memorable melodies and rhythms, but recurring motifs. Did you notice how much content we first learned last week in Tommy Jarrell's shorter and simpler "Cripple Creek" and were then able to repurpose this week in Tommy's "John Henry," a much longer and more challenging tune but made fairly swift and smooth to learn thanks to our earlier hard work? Be sure to file away those common motifs—space-fillers, overlaps, half-time right hand, and more—for later use, this month and beyond.

Tommy's highly detailed banjo style is on fully-developed display in "John Henry." Note his remarkable precision in each of these renditions:

-the definitive audio recording, from "Come and Go With Me," Tommy's 1974 collection of banjo tunes (don't be fooled by the fretless banjo in the cover image from this album's reissue; he plays a fretted banjo here): <https://youtu.be/bbXjrrG-yQY?si=IjQt6NsnMpwgeZnb>

-an up-close-and-personal video from 1983 of Tommy playing the tune on the fretless banjo most closely associated with him: https://youtu.be/NiKFajGjzV_c?si=nGymy0949EqNWO42

-a rather dramatically-presented video, probably a bit earlier than the other, in which Tommy plays a borrowed fretted banjo: <https://youtu.be/UD9yYiOv6HU?si=7cXrPpmwx90y2nXJ>

For the sake of comparison, here is a fabulous recording of Tommy playing the tune on the fiddle from his 1976 album "Joke on the Puppy," ably supported by Steve Roberts on banjo and Chester McMillian on guitar. You can hear how very closely his banjo setting's melody and texture mimic the same qualities in his fiddle setting: <https://www.slippery-hill.com/content/john-henry-2>

Fred Cockerham (1905-1980) played both banjo and fiddle in a powerful, take-no-prisoners style and was a rare for his time and place "professional" musician. He used a Kyle Creed-built fretless banjo (complete with genuine Formica fingerboard!) and had a distinctive sense of pitch, fretting various notes sharp or flat of what our ears might consider "correct," but always in

intentional-sounding ways rather than haphazard ones.

Enjoy Fred's banjo playing all by itself on "Old Bunch of Keys" in this field recording by Ray Alden (scroll down to find track 27). The recording seems to fade in, but it clearly ends on what we learned as the B part: <https://fieldrecorder.bandcamp.com/album/frc-101-fred-cockerham-ray-alden-collection>

Here Fred plays the tune alongside his Round Peak compatriot Tommy Jarrell in a beautifully-shot video from 1971, beginning and ending with what we learned as the B part ("Old Bunch of Keys" starts at 3:07, but the whole video is worth watching): https://youtu.be/iukmb5OX_gc?si=m4rF87fKWvIYUmLA

If you agree with Fred and Tommy's porch-sitting companion that the above video's rendition was far too short, you might enjoy this commercial recording of the same duet configuration from 1973 for its generous length as well as its fun organization (or lack thereof), often five B parts to every pair of A parts, but sometimes fewer and sometimes even more: https://youtu.be/D5aAd3Tr82I?si=F5-A6Ko1mIQGa_la

Have fun getting to know this week's tunes as you continue smoothing last week's tunes, keep looking for familiar themes within each of them and among the collection thus far, and don't forget that we are SKIPPING next week. Here's looking forward to seeing you all in two weeks, on April 22: Earth Day Monday!

Cheers,
Adam