



Clawhammer Illuminations

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Five high-profile progressive clawhammer artists answer
common questions concerning the banjo

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Online banjo forums are filled with all sorts of questions from players interested in instrument choices, banjo set up, personal playing styles, technique, etc. As valuable as these forums might be, they can also be confusing for players trying to navigate advice posted from banjoists who's playing experience might range from a few weeks to literally decades. It was these forum discussions that started me thinking about how nice it would to have access to a collection of banjo related questions that were answered by some of the most respected "progressive" clawhammer banjoists performing today.

I am very excited about this project as I don't believe any comprehensive collection of this nature has been published before...

Mike Iverson

Background Information:

Can you describe what it is about your personal style of play that sets you apart from other clawhammer banjoists? What recording have you made that best showcases this difference?

Michael Miles: As musicians, I believe we are the sum of what we have heard. So the more you listen, the richer you get. My personal musical style on the banjo is in great part rooted in Doc Watson and JS Bach. Through Doc Watson, I learned about the phrasing of traditional music. Through Bach, I learned the majesty and reach of all music. Whatever I play on the banjo sits on the shoulders of their music.

But there is more than Doc & Bach. I am of Chicago and I have a deep interest in New Orleans funk, Stevie Wonder, Little Feat, Allman Brothers, Beatles, Cole Porter, Johnny Mercer, Fats Waller, and Great American Songbook. All of that music also has worked its way into my bones. My father played the player piano and sang old show tunes. That was the sound of our house. So aspects of blues and jazz rhythms and harmonies are central to my thinking as a player.

My first paid gig was in 1967. I've been at it a while, and have learned and relearned that the reach for music is joyful, challenging & unrelenting.

My two most recent CD's *New Century Suite* and *Col•lage* provide a window into some of this.

Ken Perlman: I have always tried to make the banjo sound like a real instrument, and to capture the feeling and phrasing of a tune on its own terms without giving in to the easy tendencies the banjo offers.

Probably the best showcase available right now is my recording, *Northern Banjo*.

Mark Johnson: Well, I use many of the same techniques in clawhammer playing as does everyone else; nothing new here. But I apply those techniques differently based on a broader knowledge of musical styles that incorporate different genres and in accompanying different musical instruments.

I do not play in patterns and I have incorporated much of my knowledge playing bluegrass banjo into my clawhammer playing.

Some people think that if you play a bluegrass tune using a standard old-time “note, brush-thumb” right hand pattern, then you are “applying” clawhammer to playing bluegrass. Yes, you’re “applying it”, but does it sound good to the overall sound of the band? Bluegrass music is like jazz music, and each instrument has to learn how to accompany all the other different instruments. Each instrument requires a clawhammer style accompaniment that compliments the instrument you are playing along with.

There is back-up playing, lead playing, embellishments, tags, fill-ins, timing, timing, timing, and most importantly, the knowledge on when and how to use all that knowledge. Just playing a right hand “note, brush-thumb” pattern playing in a full ensemble will just sound muddy and not compliment the overall sound, and this is even more critical when playing in a duet.

I think all of my recordings best showcase what I am talking about. But my first project with Tony Rice and his brothers is the first attempt at capturing these concepts. It was my first recorded project and the sound is raw and new.

The *Acoustic Rising* project with Emory Lester got us a nomination in 2007 for the IBMA “Instrumental Album of the Year Award” at the Grand Ole Opry; we did pretty good on that one.

John Balch: Most of the material I play is original. Much of it was composed during a time when I travelled a good bit for my work. I always carried a banjo and played to occupy my time away from home. During those years, I had very little direct contact with other clawhammer players. My knowledge of traditional tunes was limited. But I had a deep passion for the sound and feel of old time music (as I understood it). With such a short list of authentic old tunes in my repertoire, I began making up my own melodies and finding tricks and techniques on the banjo that pleased me. After a while, I began naming and recording my tunes. Before too long, I had documented more than one hundred.

Some of my original tunes can be heard on two CDs *Carry On John* (2002 whippoorwill records) and *~HOT~ Biscuit Jam* (2004 Pure Mountain Records). More music is posted on my homepage on the [Banjo Hangout](#). I have been casually working on a third cd of new music for a few years. I hope to complete it for release in the near future.

Mike Iverson: I suspect it might be the use of the banjo as backup for my voice. This has caused me to approach the instrument from a different standpoint than most clawhammer banjoists. Although I love to play “old-time” music, it’s just a small part of my repertoire and my playing style has had to evolve as I tackled other genres of music.

The only official album I’ve released is my *Blue Sage: Live At The Junction Theater*, but it provides some good insight into my personal banjo style. You can find other recordings on the tab page located on my website.

Which clawhammer banjoists most influenced your playing?

Michael Miles: Kicking Mule records put out an album in the 1970’s that featured a number of clawhammer players. The message from the record was that anything is possible. That message was huge for me--larger than the voices of the individual players.

I taught myself using the clawhammer banjo book by Mel Bay written to Barbara Koehler and Eric Muller. It took me a year to figure it out, but their book opened the door to the banjo for me. I’ve never either of them, but I hope to do so someday.

I like the banjo brother/sisterhood. I like Ken Perlman because he fearlessly will take on great music and build around that. His dedication is second to none and that inspires me. Reed Martin in Washington DC is a lesser known player but in my view he's the best banjoist in America. John McEuen's collaboration with Earl Scruggs on the Will The Circle Be Unbroken record thrilled me. Doc Watson didn't play the banjo as much as guitar, but when he did it was so exquisite. Bela Fleck and Jens Kruger are not clawhammer players, but their vision and warm-hearted generosity has touched me greatly. In Chicago, there is Greg Cahill, the leader of the Special Consensus Bluegrass Band---again not clawhammer but his work is truly special. And of course, there is Mike Seeger, Pete Seeger and Earl Scruggs. Were it not for their work, I don't think I'd have ever discovered the banjo.

Ken Perlman: Art Rosenbaum, John Burke, Howie Bursen, Reed Martin, and Henry Sapoznik.

Mark Johnson: I would have to say that Ken Perlman's book helped me with the basics of how to drop my thumb, Jay Unger for teaching me how to frail, Steve Martin back in 1976 for showing me and the audience what it sounded like to perform frailing on stage and how it affected the audience (it was amazing!). Other players: David Holt, Happy Traum and David Lindley. (*Note: Mark thought his original answer to this question was too lengthy and provided the condensed version found above. His unedited version is well worth reading and I've included it at the end of this questionnaire - Mike Iverson)

John Balch: Very early influences were recordings by: John McEwen (John's clawhammer playing first inspired me to want to learn), Doc Watson, Uncle Dave Macon, David Lindley, Grandpa Jones

More...

Important influences came during workshops and performances at the Tennessee Banjo Institute and Uncle Dave Macon Days: Clarke Bueling, Kate Brislin, Ken Perlman, Pete "Oswald" Kirby, Bob Flesher, Doc Watson... and many more.

I have been blessed to meet lots of players, of all ages, through my three-decade association with Uncle Dave Macon Days. I also have a decent collection of banjo CDs and recordings. I am continually inspired by the amazing range of folks playing great clawhammer music. I won't try to name them all for fear of leaving someone out. But "you know who you are..." Thanks for the music!

Mike Iverson: Art Rosenbaum, Tommy Thompson, Ken Perlman, John McEwen, John Burke, Leonard Coulson, Miles Krassen, Mike Seeger...

What non-clawhammer artists most influenced your playing?

Michael Miles: I named a few artists in the first question, but here are few more. Janos Starker, cello. John Williams, guitar. Zoot Sims, saxophone. David Grisman, mandolin. John Renbourn, guitar. Carlos Santana, guitar. Lowell George, multi instrument. Joni Mitchell,

songstress. John Martyn, guitarist/singer. Rene Marie, jazz singer. Jackie Allen, jazz singer. Cassandra Wilson, jazz singer. John Moulder, guitar.

Ken Perlman: Guitarists Dave Van Ronk, Doc Watson, Robert Johnson, and Mississippi John Hurt. Fiddlers Allan Block, Michael Coleman, Tommy Peoples, Winston Scotty Fitzgerald, “Young Peter” Chaisson, Eddy Arsenault, George MacPhee, Alan Jabbour, and Brad Leftwich.

Mark Johnson: Tony Rice, John Carlini, Bill Emerson, Bela Fleck, Earl Scruggs, and almost every great 5-string Bluegrass/Melodic banjo player in the world...

Specifically: Earl Scruggs, Bill Keith, Tony Trishka, Pete Wernick,, Bela Fleck, Bill Emerson, Courtney Johnson, Jerry Garcia, Ralph Stanley, Alan Munde, JD Crowe, Terry Baucom, Sonny Osborne, Carl Jackson, Tom Adams, Ben Eldridge, Eddie Shelton, Roger McGuinn, David Lindley, Alison Brown, Joe Mullins, Ron Block, Jason Burleson, Don Reno, John Hartford, etc.

But having mentioned most of my banjo playing influences, I would have to say that the most influential person directly tied to my style of playing (Clawgrass) was and still is, Tony Rice, the great guitar player. Tony loved my clawhammer style and would often request me to perform it for him. He would often play along and correct me on song structure when he heard something that was not right sounding; i.e. Ralph Stanley’s “Clinch Mt. Backstep” where he taught me a simple choke on one string that put the “backstep” timing in that tune. Priceless.

I was discovered by Tony and his brothers Larry, Ronnie and Wyatt when I moved to Crystal River, Florida back in 1981 and I was raised musically for about ten years by these people. Through them, I was heavily exposed to some of the most amazing training in how to listen to what was being played around me and how to interact with other musicians in an ensemble, and most importantly, about timing. I was exposed to musicians like Jerry Douglas (the great Dobro player), Mark O’Conner (guitar and fiddle), Mark Schatz (world class bass and clawhammer banjo player), Jimmy Gaudreau (mandolin master), and the Simpson Brothers.

Tony Rice would invite me out on the road to work with the Tony Rice Unit to get stage, microphone, and performance experience as I was as green as could be. This experience was a direct result of Tony Rice and his brothers recording my first album, *Clawgrass*, back in the winter of 1992 in Gainesville, Florida.

Yes, overall I would have to say, unequivocally, that guitarist Tony Rice, along with his brothers Larry, Ronnie and Wyatt, took me under their musical wings and taught me how to “listen”. Tony taught me, in detail, everything and anything I could absorb about taste, touch, tone, timing and tuning, as well as recording techniques and stage craft.

Meeting that family and being befriended by them was like lighting hitting the same spot a hundred times. I was raised by “musical wolves”...

John Balch: I hope that I'm positively influenced by all the great music that I love. My interests have always been very diverse. In addition to Old-Time music, I listen to early Country Music (Delmore Brothers, others), Bluegrass (Flatt & Scruggs, Bill Monroe, Reno & Smiley, more), Newgrass (Sam Bush, David Grisman, Tony Rice, Bela Fleck, more), Classic Rock and Blues (Allman Brothers Band, and many more from the 1970s), and Jazz (Joe Pass, Oscar Peterson, and more).

Mike Iverson: Doc Watson, Norman Blake, John Hartford, Sam Bush, Tony Rice, Pete Seeger, Bill Keith, David Grisman, Bela Fleck, Bill Monroe, Alan Munde, Tim O'Brien, Matt Flinner, Jay Unger, Ricky Skaggs, Raymond McLain, Gordon Lightfoot, John Prine, Bill Staines, Utah Phillips, Emmylou Harris, John Denver, Steven Stills, Woody Guthrie, Rosalie Sorrels, James Taylor, Michael Martin Murphy, Peggy Seeger, Nancy Griffith, and Neal Young. It's important that I also include all the other singers, songwriters and instrumentalists who's music I've been privileged to play (and sing) over the years...

At what age did you first start playing the banjo?

Michael Miles: 21 on banjo, but guitar at age 12.

Ken Perlman: 19

Mark Johnson: I was 15 years of age when I started playing the banjo.

John Balch: Approximately age 14.

Mike Iverson: 17

How much practice do you average per day? (then/now)

Michael Miles: (none/ from 0 to 6 hours depending on time. I also work a great deal on the guitar & vocals.)

Ken Perlman: I tend to average 1-2 hours per day, when I have time to practice.

Mark Johnson: Then: Every chance I had during any given day. It wasn't practice, I loved doing it.

Now: Every couple of days. Sometimes a week or two will roll by and I have not picked up the banjo, but it makes it all that much better when I do pick it up and play.

John Balch: I am not disciplined to practice every day. I play every day that it is convenient to do so and whenever the mood strikes. Time ranges from 20 minutes to a few hours.

Mike Iverson: I played every spare minute I could when I first started. Now I probably practice at least a couple of hours per day but it's unstructured; I really should start each day with a standard set of technical exercises (scales, chords, etc.).

Do you read tab? (then/now)

Michael Miles: yes/yes

Ken Perlman: From the beginning.

Mark Johnson: Back then, I tried to read tab. I have severe visions issues and scored music and tab looked like “fly poop” moving on the page. No, I guess I don't read tab.

John Balch: I don't use TAB.

Mike Iverson: Yes. I was introduced to tab in Pete Seeger's book (which reintroduced tab to the modern world) and I've tried to modify it in such a way as to make it a more efficient form of notation.

Did you ever take banjo lessons? Lessons on other instruments?

Michael Miles: No banjo lessons. I have studied guitar and voice.

Ken Perlman: No banjo lessons. I took a few guitar lessons at one point. I reluctantly took 5 years of piano as a child.

Mark Johnson: Yes. As mentioned above, I took five lessons on how to frail a banjo from Jay Unger and John Cohen when I was 15 years old. I taught myself how to drop my thumb and how to pick Scruggs Style Banjo.

Lessons on other instruments? No, But I play guitar too... I love it.

John Balch: I took bluegrass banjo lessons from a fellow named Johnny McLaren for about three months in around 1973. Otherwise I'm self-taught (can't you tell).

Mike Iverson: I haven't taken banjo lessons, but I did take some guitar lessons my first year of high school. My instructor was Blair Adams who owned the only music store in my home town of Layton, Utah.

If you ever worked out of banjo methods or collections, which ones most impressed you?

Michael Miles: I did like that Kicking Mule Melodic album and it had a book. And I mentioned Mel Bay's book by Koehler and Muller. The ones I like the best are fiddle tune fake books.

Ken Perlman: I've just written my own.

Mark Johnson: I have never worked out of "Banjo Methods". Back in 2005, my partner Emory Lester and I were booked at the Bean Blossom Bluegrass Festival in Bean Blossom, Indiana. My friend Abigail Washburn was playing there with her new band "Uncle Earl" with guest banjo player Bela Fleck. Bela surprised me by asking if I would not mind giving him a banjo lesson on clawhammer. Abby, myself, Bela and Emory sat back stage and I showed him how I got my clawhammer sound. We had a great time that evening.

The next day, Bela asked me if I "sight read" music. Embarrassed, I said no. I have lived with a blindness in my left eye and a rather nasty version of dyslexia in my working eye that prevented me to be able to read music. I told him, I just hear it in my head and heart I told him so. He said I should never feel that way. He said that I was an "instinct player", a rare thing in the music world, and to keep on what I was doing.

I finally felt validated for once, and by this great banjo player/musician who had befriended me. It was a good feeling.

John Balch: I don't really learn that way and have not used books, TAB or video lessons.

Mike Iverson: A few favorites come immediately to mind.

How To Play The Five String Banjo by Pete Seeger. I love this book for Pete's musings as he takes the reader through a wide variety of banjo styles and techniques including "frailing".

Melodic Clawhammer Banjo by Ken Perlman. This book opened my eyes to the potential of a technique Ken called "M Skipping" (what I call "skips"). It's this, more than any other technique, that has allowed me to explore non-traditional music styles. It didn't hurt that the book was full of great tunes, all of which were skillfully arranged.

The Art Of The Mountain Banjo by Art Rosenbaum. Originally published as separate tab books to accompany the LPs of the same name, this collection is now available in one volume with a CD containing the original recordings. Art's playing on these two albums influenced my playing more than that of any other clawhammer banjoist...

Clawhammer Banjo by Miles Krassen. This collection of brilliantly arranged traditional tunes from the Galax region of Virginia is one I love to revisit again and again; highly recommended.

Instruments and set up:

What make was the first banjo you owned?

Michael Miles: Ode

Ken Perlman: I have no idea. It was a cheap knockoff made somewhere in the orient.

Mark Johnson: I played a Harmony banjo with the “Bakealite” rim. I purchased it with help from my Mom for \$62.50 back in 1971

John Balch: Harmony Resotone (borrowed). The first banjo I bought was a student-grade Aria. However, I quickly ended up with a pre-war Gibson parts banjo that I kept for about ten years. I used that banjo for all styles.

Mike Iverson: An inexpensive Iida banjo with an aluminum pot. I may be nuts, but I’ve always loved the sound of cast aluminum pots. I still own this banjo and it still sounds great.

What banjo(s) do you consider your primary stage instrument(s)?

Michael Miles: I have many, but the main one I play is a Fairbanks Little Wonder, built in 1907. It has an 11 + 13/16” head, and a 5-string neck that was built and installed by Bart Reiter. The other banjo that I have that I play the most is my Ashborne fretless 1855 replica built by James Hartel (minstrelbanjo.com).

Ken Perlman: Ome 11” with silverspun tone ring and Renaissance decorative pattern.

Mark Johnson: I have endorsed Deering Banjos for the past 16 years. When I perform on stage, I take two Deering open back banjos on stage. They are tuned to Standard G Tuning and Double C Tuning.

The first banjo they set me up with is an “Ivanhoe” model open back banjo that I recorded three albums with.

The second banjo is the new Deering Clawgrass model banjo that has my specifications added to it. They are truly amazing banjos and I recorded my last project with this instrument.

John Balch: 2006 Bart Reiter Galax-plus, 1993 Bart Reiter custom 12” internal resonator, 1994 Bart Reiter custom a-scale Grand Concert-plus, Goose Acres T-12

Two of these banjos have Bart’s “hot-rod” combination of a Bacon tone ring on top of a Whyte Laydie ring. That is the meaning of his designation “plus.”

Mike Iverson: Vega (Deering) Long Neck. An updated reproduction of the original “Pete Seeger” model that Martin made under the Vega name. This is my “G” banjo which I use for “Standard G”, “Sawmill” and “G minor” tunings.

My “C” banjo is a Bart Reiter Special. I use it for “Double C”, “Open C” and “C minor” tunings.

What other banjos, if any, do you own?

Michael Miles: Too many to mention, with the exception of one. I have Stelling White Dove open back banjo that was custom made for me. It is spectacular. I used it to record the Bach Cello Suites and without Stelling’s brilliant work and generosity, it would have never been possible.

Also some of them are pictured on my website and some I have created video demos of.

Ken Perlman: A second Ome (silverspun ring with Wildflower/Renaissance pattern), Tubaphone conversion with neck by Arthur E Smith Company, Banjola by Ed Dick, Maybelle Tenor.

Mark Johnson: I have a 1927 Vega Tu-Ba-Phone #9 banjo that I recorded my first CD, *Clawgrass*, with, and I have a 1988 “Greg Rich Era” Gibson Granada bluegrass banjo that I love.

John Balch: Custom Wayne Sagmoen Dobson banjo for travel, Bart Reiter fretless, Williams Kenny Ingram model, 1929 Gibson TB-1 (converted) for bluegrass, Minstrel & Gourd banjos by Jeff Menzies & George Wunderlich, Bacon & Day (B&D) tenors.

Mike Iverson: Gold Tone Cello Banjo. This very cool instrument is especially nice for solo shows. Tuned almost an octave below a standard banjo, it’s a great way to add variety to my performances.

Gourd banjo built by Bill Van Horn. The tone coming out of this instrument constantly surprises listeners as they expect it to sound thin, but it’s got a deep, robust tone that’s very appealing.

S.S. Stewart Banjeaurine. Built in the early 1890’s, this is my oldest banjo. It’s strung with Nylgut strings and, like my gourd banjo, it constantly surprises folks with it’s rich tone.

Richlieu Lyte Ladie. This banjo is set up with the Kavanjo pickup system mounted in an Elite head. I use it as my electric banjo. The Kavanjo system is the only one I’ve found that gives me the option of going “all out” electric with full distortion and modulation effects.

Stelling Staghorn. This is my “bluegrass banjo” and I usually don’t play it clawhammer style.

What type of banjo head do you prefer?

Michael Miles: Just started trying a Renaissance head. Seems pretty good. There are so many things that influence the sound though, that I would hesitate to say this is the right one.

Ken Perlman: The best one so far has been the Ludwig heads used by the Ome Company.

Mark Johnson: Five Star, but the new Deering banjo heads are great too.

John Balch: Calf or goat skin. I buy un-mounted hides from Bill Miller, Jeff Menzies and/or Jeff Stern and install them myself.

Mike Iverson: I prefer the sound of the standard Elite fiberskin heads (although I love the sound of natural calfskin as well).

How tight do you keep the head? (loose, medium, very tight)

Michael Miles: Pretty tight

Ken Perlman: Very tight.

Mark Johnson: In between medium and very tight. I like a crisp sound.

John Balch: Medium/tight tension.

Mike Iverson: Very tight.

What make of bridge do you use? It's height?

Michael Miles: I like the Moon Bridges, medium, 5/8"

Ken Perlman: Snuffy Smith 9/16"

Mark Johnson: Snuffy Smith and Silvio Feretti Banjo Bridges 3/4"

John Balch: Gary Sosebee – I have several of Gary's bridges. My favorites are made from the wood of an old bowling alley ball rack. Because I use calfskin heads and medium tension, I prefer taller bridges. Most are 11/16". I keep a few 3/4" height bridges for humid weather.

Mike Iverson: I use bridges built by the late Snuffy Smith. The height varies depending on the neck angle of my banjos. The Smith bridges produce a very consistent tone I can count on.

Do you angle the bridge? (string compensation)

Michael Miles: No (compensation built into the Moon bridge)

Ken Perlman: Yes, I try to match the harmonic and fretted note at the 12th fret for each string.

Mark Johnson: YES! If required...

John Balch: Not much. If intonation is an issue, I prefer to use a compensated bridge from Arthur Hatfield in Kentucky.

Mike Iverson: Yes. I use harmonics at the twelfth fret to adjust the intonation of the first three strings. Unless you use a compensated bridge, there's not much you can do to intonate the fourth and fifth strings.

What type of tailpiece do you prefer?

Michael Miles: No preference.

Ken Perlman: Kirschner

Mark Johnson: Presto!

John Balch: Presto. I have a punched pre-war Grover Patent Presto on my main Reiter banjo. The others have Prucha reproductions. Otherwise, I use no-knot tailpieces on banjos set up with nylon or gut strings.

Mike Iverson: Waverly. I've tried them all and the Waverly seems to be about the right length for me; not so long that it prevents the bridge from freely vibrating and yet long enough to effectively adjust string tension.

If it's an adjustable tail piece, how tight (close to the head) do you keep it?

Ken Perlman: I don't tighten it at all. I find that in its open position it puts sufficient pressure on the strings.

Michael Miles: N/A

Mark Johnson: N/A

John Balch: The presto is not adjustable. I set mine parallel to and approx. 1/4" to 3/8" above the head.

Mike Iverson: I've found that a minor adjustment in tail piece height can make big difference in tone and I use this to "fine tune" the sound when setting up my instruments. I usually don't have to tighten it very much before I find the tone I'm looking for.

What is your string height above the 12th fret? (measured from the top the fret to the bottom edge of the string)

Michael Miles: I don't know. I do a lot of playing up there so it needs to low enough to play in tune but high enough to have good sound.

Ken Perlman: Roughly 3/32"

Mark Johnson: I measure my string height at 10/64" or just under 3/16th".

John Balch: I like low action over the frets. Approx. 3/32" at the 12th fret (approx. 5/32" to the fingerboard). But I also like scooped necks for extra right hand clearance.

Mike Iverson: All of my banjos that are strung with steel strings are approximately 3/32" from the fret to the string. If I use nylon strings, the action is a higher...

What string gauges do you use? (from first to fifth)

Michael Miles: GHS 160 is the set I use (.011, .013, .016, .026, .010.) It has a 26 gauge phosphor bronze 4th string; I like a big bass sound.

Ken Perlman: Standard D'Addario medium (.010, .012, .016, .023, .010)

Mark Johnson: .010, .011, .013, .020, .010

John Balch: .010, .012, .014, .022 (bronze), .010 (or .011).

Mike Iverson: I use custom gauges on my banjos.

Vega Long Neck: 10 - 11.5 - 14 - 22w - 11.5 (the heavier fifth string is for a special capo setup I use on the long neck).

Bart Reiter: 9.5 - 11 - 14 - 24w - 10 (the lighter first string let me tune up to Open C tuning without fear of breaking a string. I like a heavier fourth string to accommodate the low C on this banjo)

Banjeaurine and gourd banjo: Standard Nylgut strings.

Cello Banjo: Standard Gold Tone light gauge cello banjo strings tuned to the key of low "A".

What brand of capo do you prefer?

Michael Miles: Shubb

Ken Perlman: Shubb

Mark Johnson: Custom made Elliot capos for my Deerings, and I have Paige capos as back ups.

John Balch: John Pearse Ole' Reliable – great sounding capo!

Mike Iverson: My favorite is the Shubb, but I use Paige capos on all my banjos as they are always attached to the neck and prevent me from showing up to a show without a capo!

What type of fifth string capo system do you use? If you use spikes, at what frets are they installed and why did you choose those particular frets?

Michael Miles: RR spikes at 7 & 9

Ken Perlman: Spike at the 7th fret only.

Mark Johnson: I use spikes and they are located at the 7th, 9th and 10th frets

John Balch: I don't use capos or spikes on my Reiter banjos. The pip is too high for them to be practical. I use several different 5th string tunings and simply change the pitch as needed. I use mini RR spikes on my bluegrass instruments.

Mike Iverson: I use spikes set at frets 7 and 9 on all my banjos (except my long-neck). I don't capo above the 4th fret and so a spike on fret 10 wouldn't make much sense.

When I purchased my Vega long-neck, I found that when I moved between the open and capoed neck, the increase in tension from tuning the 5th string up three half-steps would cause the other strings to go flat; a tuning nightmare on stage. I now use a heavier fifth string and keep it tuned a whole step low. My spikes are set on 10, 12, & 14 (comparable to 7, 9, and 11 on a standard neck). For instance, when playing in "G" I now capo the fifth up 2 frets (10 or 7 depending on how you look at it). With this system I never have to tune the 5th string more than a half step. I once had someone suggest placing spikes at 11, 13, and 15, which would eliminate even a half step re-tune for most keys...

Technique:

What finger(s) of the right hand do you use to "strike" the strings?

Michael Miles: middle

Ken Perlman: Middle

Mark Johnson: I use all three fingers to strike the strings. Wherever the note is located, I will use the finger closest to the string; economy of movement in my right hand. Makes for smoother playing and , when called for, faster playing.

John Balch: Middle

Mike Iverson: I feel pretty comfortable using either the index or middle as my striking finger. I primarily use the middle for playing the first string and the index to strike strings two through four.

What finger(s) of the right hand do you use to "brush" the strings?

Michael Miles: middle

Ken Perlman: Same (middle)

Mark Johnson: Mostly the middle finger, but I also have used the index finger to achieve a different dynamic to the sound when I am creating a lead.

John Balch: Middle

Mike Iverson: Middle and ring played together as this gives me a “fatter” tone.

Do you regularly incorporate the "cluck" into your playing? If so, how do you create this sound?

Michael Miles: I have a lot of percussive sounds that I use that are accomplished through left hand muting and right hand attack.

Ken Perlman: No. I don't incorporate this sound.

Mark Johnson: No, I do not incorporate the cluck sound found in the Round Peak styles of clawhammer playing.

John Balch: No – my hand position does not create a “cluck”

Mike Iverson: I don't use the "cluck" but do incorporate a number of the other rhythmic techniques into my playing.

When you play single quarter notes, do you always bring your thumb into the fifth string (not sounding it), or does your thumb "float" above the strings? If you employ both methods, which one do you primarily use? If you "float", does your thumb rest against the index or middle finger during the "strike"?

Michael Miles: float and sometimes it will rest on the index finger

Ken Perlman: Thumb floats freely (it does not rest against the index or middle).

Mark Johnson: I am going to let you answer this one Mike. I'm not sure if my answer would fit your question correctly.

(Note from Mike: As I mentioned in his profile, Mark utilizes both techniques, using whichever is the most efficient approach for the particular passage he happens to be playing at the time.)

John Balch: My thumb usually comes to rest on the 5th string even if I don't sound it. I use a lot of "drop-thumb" on the inner string too.

Mike Iverson: I usually float, but for certain phrases it's often more efficient to "tag the fifth" on every down beat. My thumb will occasionally rest against the index while "floating", but it's a very light touch and I don't apply any pressure at all with my thumb. I always try to keep my right hand completely relaxed while playing.

Do you play with your right hand thumb over the head of the banjo or over the neck? If over the head, how far from the neck is the tip of your thumb?

Michael Miles: I generally stay entirely on the head, just adjacent to the neck.

Ken Perlman: Over the head. Tip of thumb varies position with sound I want. Maybe the average is about an inch in from the rim

Mark Johnson: I mostly play with the tip of my thumb up near the rim, but like a bluegrass banjo player, I will move my right hand up and down the strings to get a different dynamic to the sound.

John Balch: I sometimes play over the head ...other times over the neck or scoop.

Mike Iverson: I use generally play over the neck but will move my right hand over the head when I want a brighter tone. When playing over the head, my thumb remains very close to the neck. When playing the cello banjo, I position my right hand much closer to the bridge.

What banjo tunings do you frequently use? (from “most used” to ‘least used”)

Michael Miles:

g C G C D

g D G C D

g D G B D

f Bb F C D

g C Bb Eb F (double C with 3 string capo on string 1, 2, 3)

g E B E D (double C tuning with 3 string capo on string 2, 3 4)

Ken Perlman:

g C G C D

g D G B D

g D B C D

Mark Johnson:

Double C (g C G C D)

Standard G (g D G B D)

G minor (g D G Bb D) i.e. Jerusalem Ridge capoed up two frets in Am.

C minor (g C G C Eb)

Sawmill (g D G C D)

John Balch:

e C G C D

f C G C D

f D G C D

g C G C D

g D G B D

(or the above tunings with capo)

Mike Iverson:

Standard G - (g D G B D)

Open C - (g C G C E)

Double C - (g C G C D)

Sawmill - (g D G C D)

G minor - (g D G Bb D)

C minor - (g C G C Eb)

What other tunings do you use, but only occasionally?

Ken Perlman:

f# D F# A D

g C G B D

e D G B D

e C G C C

g C G C E

Michael Miles: N/A

Mark Johnson: Open F (fCFCD)

Drop C (g C G B D)

John Balch: N/A

Mike Iverson:

Sawmill Variant - (a D G C D)

Graveyard - (f# D F# A D)

Do you practice scales? if so, what scales do you work with? Do you practice closed position scales up the neck?

Michael Miles: no

Ken Perlman: I use scales as a warm up – I like to go up and down the neck using fingering forms that incorporate 5th string fretting.

Mark Johnson: No, I do not practice scales.

John Balch: I don't practice scales on clawhammer banjo.

Mike Iverson: I don't spend much time practicing open position scales, but I do practice closed position scales up the neck; usually major, dominant seven, and pentatonic scales (major & blues).

Many old-time banjo players discount the importance of learning and using chords, how critical a part do chords play in your own banjo arrangements? How important a role do they play when you are improvising?

Michael Miles: Very important. And knowing chords is a great way to make friends too. Everybody wants to play melody. But the role of the rhythm player is to make other people sound good. When you can make other people sound good, they will like that and treat you

well--and you just never know what happens next. Also it is a vital point of entry to participation in jam sessions of any sort.

Ken Perlman: Chords are extremely important. Even when I'm not using a specific form I always have the underlying chord in mind, which tells me when I can leave notes linger and when they have to be cut short.

Mark Johnson: Chords are extremely critical as most all variations of chords can be found just from the major chord position. The best part is knowing that chords repeat themselves on the fret board and in any tuning. Therefore, all the variations of chords can be found anywhere on the fret board and in any tuning.

How important a role do they play when you are improvising? They are everything when improvising a lead or harmony in a piece of music.

John Balch: I do use chords in my original music. I assume that is because my first musical instrument was guitar. I like finding new chord forms and interesting voicings. In the past couple of years, I have become very interested in chord melody style on plectrum and tenor banjo. I am a rank novice with that style. But I'm sure it has influence on my clawhammer too.

Mike Iverson: I believe a familiarity with both open and closed position chords to be VERY important in both arranging and improvising.

Do you tend to stay in the lower region of the neck (frets 1-7) or do you use the entire fingerboard?

Michael Miles: entire

Ken Perlman: Entire fingerboard.

Mark Johnson: When called for in a piece of music, i.e. playing tastefully, I will use the entire fret board.

John Balch: I do play up the neck. But mostly I emphasize the melody in lower positions.

Mike Iverson: The entire fingerboard.

If you play in the higher frets, do you work out of (or visualize) closed position chords or do you tend to think in terms of scales? Do you visualize chord positions with the scales superimposed over them?

Michael Miles: sometimes. Visualizing is key. But ideally you just "sing" in your head what you want to be playing the technical foundation that lies below the surface fades away.

Ken Perlman: Well, I do a little of everything. I tend to rely very strongly on fingering shapes akin to those used in melodic bluegrass.

Mark Johnson: Closed position chords will always get you started into a musical phrase, especially when playing with any up tempo piece of music and playing up the neck. But once in those positions, scales can often be called upon to state a phrase that I am creating to provide the connective tissue between chords, i.e. using a portion of a scale to complete a passing tone.

John Balch: Truthfully, I just work out the melodies and licks without sufficient knowledge of the underlying chords or scales. I just find something that works and play it...

Mike Iverson: The latter. I usually start with a closed position chord form and then work out the appropriate scale pattern from there.

Fingernails:

Do you use artificial nails? If so, what type? (applied in salon, press on nails, cut from ping-pong balls, etc.)

Michael Miles: Used to use fake nails from the the drug store. Lately I've enjoyed the freedom of the Fred Kelly clawhammer picks. I tape them down to hold them in place.

Ken Perlman: No

Mark Johnson: Yes, always. I use acrylic nails applied in a salon. I will do anything and everything I can to achieve the absolute best sound out of my instrument and acrylic nails will provide that sound.

The interesting thing about acrylic nails is that you can shape the nail to shape the sound that you get from your banjo. A sharp edge will give me a crisp clean sound but, when I want a softer sound to accompany a vocal, I will slightly round off the edge to get a sound that will not sound too sharp over a vocal.

John Balch: No

Mike Iverson: My natural nails.

Do you use finger picks or a "thimble"? If so, what make and gauge? Do you modify them? (bend, cut, file, etc.)

Ken Perlman: No

Michael Miles: N/A

Mark Johnson: Never.

John Balch: I use my home made [ping pong ball picks](#). (*Note: visit John's website for instructions)

Mike Iverson: If I have broken a nail, or am just worried about wearing out my nails (long jam sessions, etc), then I use standard metal dunlop picks that I've cut down and reshaped. I use them all the time when playing my cello banjo as all the strings have a metal winding that quickly wears down my natural nails. There's a photo of my modified dunlop picks in my review of the Gold Tone Cello Banjo on my website.

If you use your own nails, do you use any product to strengthen them?

Ken Perlman: Yes, I use a nail conditioner. Nowadays the only people who make this seems to be Naitiques (on the net). I always cover my nail with cellophane tape when I play to protect it (tucking one end of tape under the nail...).

Michael Miles: N/A

Mark Johnson: N/A

John Balch: No

Mike Iverson: No products other than a series of progressively finer nail files. I use the files to make sure there are no microscopic nicks on the my nail edge that might catch and tear on something when working with my hands.

If you use your natural nails, do you also use (or have used in the past) artificial nails or picks?

Ken Perlman: I have tried everything, but natural is best.

Michael Miles: N/A

Mark Johnson: N/A

John Balch: N/A

Mike Iverson: I've tried just about everything and keep coming back to the natural nail. Acrylic nails and metal picks give the banjo more volume but create an annoying clicking noise as they strike the strings.

Miscellaneous:

What brand and model of strap do you prefer? At what brackets do you attach it? (example: two below the neck, one above the tailpiece)

Michael Miles: no preference

Ken Perlman: Levy cotton guitar strap to which I attach an extra lace. Looking down at the banjo, I tie one lace to the bracket under the heel to support the neck and another to the bracket under the tailpiece.

Mark Johnson: I use custom made “English Riding Leather” straps that are made by Dave Schenk at Dogwood Designs. They are backed with elk hide, are stitched like a quality english riding saddle, and they employ plastic hooks that can provide a quick change out of banjos on stage between songs. Dave makes a wonderful product.

Two below the neck, one above the tailpiece

John Balch: I use straps from Dogwood Designs, Lakota Leathers, and some that are home made.

Mike Iverson: I’ve got a variety of straps on my banjos, but I’m impressed with the PMB series straps by Levy.

I attach my strap below the neck and above the tailpiece.

What is your favorite stage mic and where do you position it in relation to your banjo while playing?

Michael Miles: Shure SM98 mounted on a gooseneck and located 2” off the bridge.

Ken Perlman: AKG C-1000. I put it at the lower part of the head when banjo is in playing position.

Mark Johnson: Shure microphones are great but I also like the Neumann microphones.

John Balch: Audio Technica 4033. I prefer to play in a group gathered around the single mic.

Mike Iverson: On stage, I use the AKG C1000S with the hyper-cardioid adaptor installed. I position it between and below both hands as to not block the view for my audience. This mic seems relatively “warm” for a condenser mic, and with the adaptor installed, is highly resistant to feedback. When feedback does occur, it’s usually low end frequencies that travel up from the stage through the mic stand; a good shock mount mic stand adaptor will usually take care of this problem.

What is your favorite studio mic and where do you position it in relation to your banjo for recording?

Michael Miles: Not my domain. I've deferred to my engineers for that.

Ken Perlman: Varies. I like a blend of fat, warm sounding mikes and small, precise-sounding mikes.

Mark Johnson: I use Neumann mics and AKG mics in the studio. One near the lower portion of the head and one stick mic positioned at or near the fifth fret.

John Balch: I am currently using a matched pair of ADK Hamburg edition mics with Summit Audio 2BA-221 preamps. I position the pair parallel to the head and about 12" apart. One is aimed at the neck joint...the other at the bridge.

Carry On John was recorded by Jim Wood using a pair of AKG C-12 mics and Peavey VMP2 valve preamp. The mics were positioned to form a triangle with the center of the head. The mics were set about 21" apart and the same distance from the head.

~HOT~ Biscuit Jam was recorded by Jack Pearson using Shure SM81 mics (X-Y position) and a Presonus preamp.

Mike Iverson: I like to listen to a variety of mics in the studio and pick the one that sounds the best (warmest) in my headphones. I position the mic above, and slightly in front of, the banjo. I then direct the mic downward toward a point on the head that's located between my right and left hands and about halfway between the fifth string and the upper edge of the banjo.

Thanks go out to all of the other artists who took the time to fill out this questionnaire and share this information with the clawhammer community. Visit their websites and let them know how much you appreciate their work... Mike Iverson (September 2011)

* Here is Mark Johnson's full response to the following question:

Which clawhammer banjoists most influenced your playing?

Mark Johnson: Jay Unger and John Cohen taught me the basic frailing technique of “brush, brush-thumb” back in the summer of 1971. I did not know who they were when I first met them when answering a classified ad in a local newspaper for banjo lessons. I was unaware of any other banjo players in the New York City or Upstate Hudson Valley Region when I started. I had gone to them in the hopes of them teaching me how to play banjo like the music I had heard in the movie “Deliverance” that was released in that same year.

When I first met Jay and asked him if he could teach me that banjo sound, he chuckled and said no, he could not teach that style, but that he could teach me another style sound that would get me started. He called it “frailing”. I paid for 8 lessons that were held in Garrison, NY, in an old abandoned store front across from the old, and still very active, Railroad depot. I made five of eight lessons and my Mom had grounded me for something I had done (or not done). Those were five of the most important times I have ever spent in my entire life to date.

I was still burning with the passion to learn how to play banjo like Earl Scruggs though and I embarked on the road to do so by teaching myself three finger style while still playing my “frailing” Style.

Understand now, that at the time, (the seventies) any banjo playing other than three finger style Scruggs/Keith style was “uncool” and looked over in favor of the more flashy, hard driving Bluegrass Banjo styles of playing (my experience).

I was often embarrassed to play it in public and saved my frailing style for very personal moments when I was by myself. Not being aware of most any old time traditional tunes other than “Ground Hog”, I would sit and make my own music up on my banjo. This was another thing that seemed to come naturally to me back when I started and I loved doing it.

Earl Scruggs was the next banjo player I became aware of, but his banjo style, along with Bill Keith's banjo style, were intoxicating to me during the seventies. When I could afford to purchase the Scruggs LP records, and Bill Keith's banjo instructions on six cassettes, only then did I start to understand how the melodies and timing to songs that I liked were played.

I had the first Ken Perlman and John Burke clawhammer books but I had never heard either of their recorded music projects. Ken had a soft, plastic, 45 size record included in the early clawhammer book that he published back in the early seventies. You had to tear it out of the book and play it on a record player. I was too poor to own a record player when I was 15 years old so I never did hear that recording. I was relegated to trying to make sense of the tab without any reference to how the old time tunes sounded. But one thing I did learn from Ken's early book was how to drop my thumb. Thank you Ken.

In 1976, when I was 20 years old, I took a year off from college and moved to Colorado. While I was there, working at a tree service as a grounds man, I went to see Steve Martin perform frailing banjo at a show (along with John Prine and John Hartford) at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley, Colorado.

I had never heard anyone play or perform clawhammer on a stage and I was amazed at how beautiful his frailing style sounded, and even more amazed at how the crowd reacted to Steve's performance. He played "Loch Lomand" on his Gibson RB 180 open back banjo.

This moment was to prove quite profound later in my life as I found myself as an invited guest of the Martin's, sitting in Steve Martin's Living Room in NYC during the Christmas season of 2009, giving Clawgrass/clawhammer lessons to Steve. We have been "banjo friends" ever since. He is an amazing musician.

Happy Traum and David Holt were early banjo influences during my college years from 1973 to 1978 also.