

The Irish Tenor Banjo

by Don Meade

The tenor banjo is only about a century old and was not widely played in Ireland before the 1960s. Until recently, in fact, the instrument had a fairly poor reputation among traditional music cognoscenti. Times (and banjo players) have changed, however, and the oft-maligned “bodhrán on a stick” is now one of the most popular “traditional” instruments in Irish music. According to banjo virtuoso Mick Moloney, Irish banjo maker Tom Cussen’s contact list of Irish tenor players now includes some 7,000 names! There are now more people playing Irish dance music on the tenor banjo than are using the instrument for anything else. Before going into details of Irish banjo style, a bit of a history lesson is required to explain this development.

African Roots

To music scholars, the banjo is a “folk lute,” one of many such instruments with a drum-like soundbox. Others of the breed include the Persian *tar* and the Japanese *shamisen*. The banjo’s origins, however, are in the American south, where slaves crafted instruments like those they remembered from their native Africa.

The origin of the word “banjo” is still debated. It has been suggested that it derives from the Portuguese *bandurra* or from similarly named European or Arab stringed instruments. Others think it no coincidence that *bangoe* is the Mandinka word for the bamboo stalk used to make the neck of the *akonting*, a banjo-like instrument still played in Gambia and Senegal. A now-extinct Senegalese folk lute was called the *bania*, and *mbanza* was also the word for a similar instrument in the Kimbundu and Tshiluba languages of Angola and the Congo. All these words sound like the “banza,” “banshaw” and “banjar” mentioned by 18th-century writers who attempted to transcribe the name applied to the instrument by the slaves themselves.¹

¹ For more information on west African lutes and banjo history, see musician and historian Shlomo

Early banjos were not standardized instruments but typically had a soundbox made from a dried gourd with one end cut off. A small drumhead made from the skin of a raccoon, groundhog or other animal was tied or tacked in place over this opening. The neck was fretless, sometimes little more than a stick thrust through the gourd body. Strings might be made from braided horse hair, thread, gut, hemp or any other tough fiber. Unlike African lutes, on which the strings are attached to sliding tuning rings set around the neck, American banjos were, from an early point in their evolution, tuned with violin-style pegs.

The banjo in its classic form has a short, high-pitched string (“chanterelle”) that terminates at a peg on the side of the neck, as well as several full-length strings. The high string is the one closest to the player’s thumb, which strikes it as an unstopped drone. In the oldest banjo styles, the remaining strings are played with downward strokes of the index or middle finger. Both the high thumb drone string and the down-stroke style were carried over from African traditions. On modern banjos, the short drone is the fifth of five strings, but surviving 18th-century banjos, as well those in shown old illustrations, have a chanterelle and just three full-length strings.²

Before the Civil War, the banjo was regarded as the quintessential African-American instrument. By the late 19th century, however, black

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- Pestcoe’s website www.shlomomusic.com
- ² See: Philip F. Gura and James F. Bollman, *America's Instrument: The Banjo in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Robert Lloyd Webb, *Ring the Banjar!: The Banjo in America from Folklore to Factory* (Anaheim Hills, CA: Centerstream Publishing, 1984); and Leo G. Mazow, *Picturing the Banjo* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2005). Another excellent source is Karen Linn, *That Half-Barbaric Twang: The Banjo In American Popular Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

musicians had largely abandoned it. In part this was because the guitar was better suited to ragtime and other popular string-band styles of the day. Another reason, however, was the banjo's close association with the noxious racial stereotypes of the blackface minstrel show.

As offensive as it now seems, blackface minstrelsy was extremely popular on both sides of the Atlantic for more than a century. Minstrelsy melded African rhythms (however poorly understood) and European musical forms, a fusion crucial to the development of truly American popular music. And whether we like it or not, the banjo as we know it today was adapted from African-American folk instruments by white minstrel performers and the instrument builders who catered to them.

Virginia native Joel Walker “Joe” Sweeney was the most famous banjoist of the early minstrel era. Sweeney has often been falsely credited with inventing the modern banjo by substituting a round wooden rim for the traditional gourd and adding the drone fifth string. In fact, he did neither, but Sweeney was the first white performer to popularize the banjo, which he played in circuses and theaters in America and Britain.³ Sweeney’s success encouraged the production of five-string banjos by instrument makers of the 1850s, notably Baltimore drum maker William Boucher, whose design included drum-style adjustable tension screws, a great improvement over primitive tacked-head banjos.

After the Civil War, the five-string banjo was elevated from a minstrel show prop to a popular parlor instrument in middle- and upper-class households. Once associated only with clownish blackface performers, the banjo was taken up by proper young ladies in frilly dresses and college men who formed banjo clubs and posed for group photos in formal wear.

Professional banjo players performed

3 Bob Carlin, *The Birth of the Banjo: Joel Walker Sweeney and Early Minstrelsy* (Jefferson NC and London: McFarland & Co., 2007)

arrangements of classical music favorites and borrowed finger-picking techniques from classical guitarists. Banjo makers put frets on the fingerboard for better intonation and introduced other alterations that transformed the plunky, low-volume banjo of the minstrel era into a loud, brilliant-sounding instrument better suited to the variety theatre or concert stage. These improvements included shorter necks, higher-pitched wire strings, a “resonator” back to project the sound forward and a metal “tone ring” for extra volume and a brighter timbre.

From Dixie to Dublin

The first banjos seen in Ireland arrived in 1844 when the Virginia Minstrels performed in Dublin, Belfast and Cork. This pioneer quartet of “blacked-up” white entertainers included five-string banjo ace Joe Sweeney and Dan Emmett, an Ohio-born fiddler, banjoist and singer credited with composing the southern anthem “Dixie.”⁴

Minstrel entertainers like Sweeney and Emmett styled themselves “Ethiopian delineators” and claimed to play the authentic music of the plantation slaves. Underneath the burnt cork makeup, however, they were most often Irish or of Irish descent. The music they played, as documented in period sheet music, was more Irish than African – reels, flings and hornpipes played with a syncopated rhythmic accent.

The Irish influence in minstrelsy can also be seen in the fact that minstrel dance tunes were generically referred to as “jigs” regardless of the actual time signature. Minstrel “jig dancing” blended Irish steps, English clogging and African-American dance elements into an eclectic amalgam that gave rise to modern American tap and soft-shoe stage dancing. White southerners, many descended from Irish or “Scotch Irish” (Ulster Protestant) immigrants,

4 Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962). Some writers maintain that the credit really belongs to the Snowden family, a group of black Ohio entertainers.

also took up the slaves' instrument and created their own Afro-Celtic sound. Appalachian "claw-hammer" banjo playing is a direct descendant of the old down-stroke, minstrel-era style.

Fainter Hibernian echoes can be heard in bluegrass, a post-World War II idiom that borrowed from many musical styles, including blues, old-time fiddle tunes, minstrel songs and gospel harmony. The sophisticated three-finger picking of bluegrass banjo pioneer Earl Scruggs, which has its roots in the guitar-influenced "classical" banjo style of the late 19th-century, helped bring the five-string banjo to new heights of popularity in the 1950s and '60s.

If American banjo music has significant Irish influences, in Ireland itself the banjo remained

outside the core musical tradition until the mid-20th century. Five-string banjos were played in Ireland before that time by street musicians and blackface music hall performers. One of the latter was Percy French, now more famous as the composer of "The Mountains of Mourne," "The Darling Girl From Clare" and other enduringly popular Irish songs.

The illustration above, taken from Francis O'Neill's fascinating 1913 book *Irish Minstrels and Musicians*, depicts John Dunne, an Irish five-string banjo player, with uilleann piper Dick Stephenson, but such collaborations were not common.⁵ The banjo that eventually came to be played by Irish traditional musicians was not the five-string version favored by hillbilly and minstrel pickers but the four-string tenor model.

Four Strings Good, Five Strings Bad

The tenor banjo was one of a number of new banjo types created in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Some, like the guitar banjo and the ukulele banjo (introduced in 1917 by the English music hall duo of Alvin and Kelvin Keech), were hybrids that used a banjo "pot" to amplify another type of stringed instrument. The tenor banjo, however, is one of a family of four-course banjos based on pre-existing five-string instruments. All the various sizes of five-string banjos made for the banjo clubs and orchestras of the 1880s and '90s were, early in the new century, re-made in four-course versions.

Of all the four-course banjos, the tenor became the most popular. It was rivaled (and preceded), however, by the "plectrum banjo," which is really just a normal five-string banjo without the fifth string. It has the same body, same 22 frets and same 26- to 28-inch scale length of a regular five-string, and was originally tuned CGBD (from low to high), which is five-string "C tuning" without the high drone string. Some later players tuned it DGBE ("Chicago style") like the highest four strings of the guitar. The first plectrum banjos were played by minstrel



⁵ Francis O'Neill, *Irish Minstrels and Musicians* (Chicago: Regan, 1913).

show strummers who adopted a plectrum-based style. They didn't need the thumb string and took it off. There were eventually enough such players that banjo makers in the early years of the 20th century began to build instruments with four-string necks. The plectrum banjo was used as an alternative to the tenor in the rhythm section of 1920s dance bands, and was championed as a solo instrument by virtuoso pickers Harry Reser (who also played tenor) and Eddie Peabody.

The plectrum itself was preceded by the "banjo thimble," a short metal cylinder placed on the index finger that was introduced in 1848 by minstrel banjoist Tom Briggs to amplify stroke-style minstrel playing. The thimble was later adapted for plectrum-style playing. That usage seems to have died out in the U.S., but it was taken up by itinerant Irish musicians. The late Johnny Keenan and Tony "Sully" Sullivan of Manchester are the best known Irish thimble players of recent decades.

The banjo mandolin, first patented in 1882 by a Benjamin Bradbury of Brooklyn, has a mandolin neck attached to the body of a "piccolo banjo," which was a five-string model tuned an octave above a full-length banjo. Once produced in both eight- and four-string ("melody banjo") versions, the banjo mandolin is rickety little noisemaker that could really cut through the sound of an early 20th century dance band, which made it the most popular four-course banjo before the tenor boom of the 1920s. Instrument makers also tried, without much success, to inspire the creation of four-string banjo orchestras by complementing the banjo mandolin with four-course versions of five-string cello and bass banjos.

John Farris (1826-1911) of Hartford, Connecticut is often credited with making the first tenor banjo. Farris actually invented a whole family of four-course "banjolins" around 1885. His patent drawing and earliest advertising showed an eight-string model but he soon converted it to a four-string instrument available

in soprano, alto, tenor and bass versions.⁶ The soprano model had a mandola-length 16³/₄" scale and a 25-fret fingerboard that extended over the top of the head. Meant to be played with a "shell," i.e., a tortoise shell pick, it was tuned GDAE like a mandolin. It is possible that his longer models were tuned CGDA like later tenor banjos but it is not clear that he really made many of these. The dearth of surviving examples suggests that the time for such an instrument had not yet arrived.

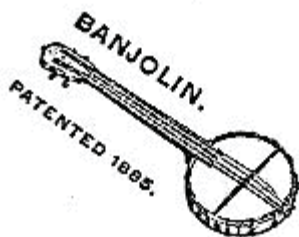
After Farris' false start, the tenor banjo really took off in the first decade of the 20th century when instrument makers started putting a four-string neck on the "banjorine" (or banjeaurine), a scaled-down five-string tuned a fourth higher than a standard banjo. The first to do this seems to have been J.B. Schall of Chicago who, sometime before he died in 1907, advertised (see below) a four-string banjorine that was essentially the first modern tenor.

Many early tenor banjoists were violinists or mandolinists who began doubling on the banjo mandolin when that instrument was adopted by dance bands but later switched to the longer four-string instrument. Schall's four-string banjorine design was suggested by Louis Stepner, a California violinist and mandolinist who, according to an interview with five-string virtuoso Fred Van Eps, got the idea from automated banjos operated, like player pianos, by perforated paper rolls. These instruments were tuned in fifths, which inspired Stepner to ask Schall for a four-string, mandolin-tuned version of the company's five-string banjorine.⁷ Other makers soon followed. In 1912, for example, New York wholesaler C.F. Bruno advertised a GDAE-tuned "banjorine mandolin" very much like the Schall/Stepner model.⁸

6 Ads in *The Hartford County Directory for 1885* 86, Briggs & Co.: Boston, p. X and *The Yale Banner*, vol. 47, 1888, Yale University: New Haven, p. 78. Both books are available online via Google Books

7 wfmu.org/playlists/shows/9392

8 1912-1913 Bruno catalog



JOHN FARRIS' Patent Banjolin, ◇

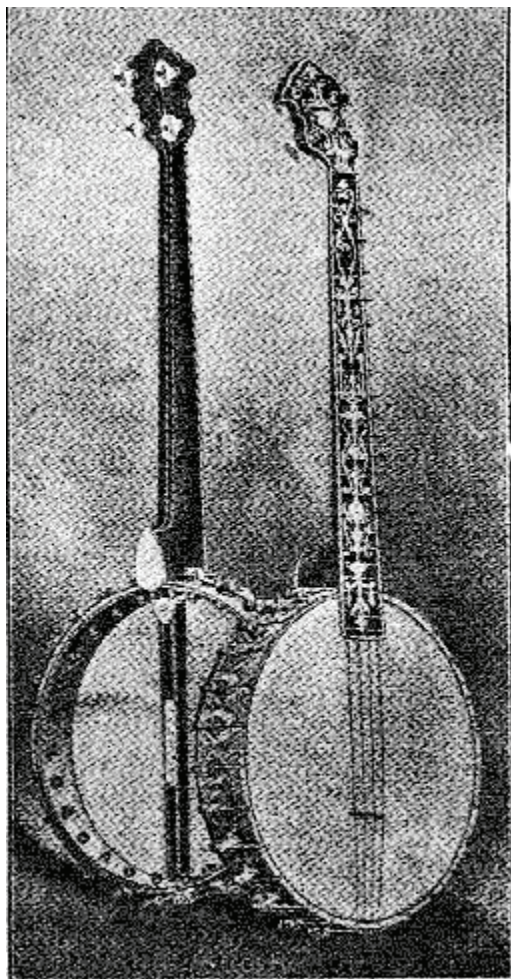
Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass,

WITH WATERPROOF HEADS.

Banjolin Quartette and Quintette.

This is finest toned and most musical stringed instrument in the world. It has four strings, E, A, D, G, tuned and fingered like the violin, and vibrated with a shell, and the twenty-five frets on the finger-board make it the easiest instrument in the world to play. The patent graduating sounding post and lever increase and diminish the tone. Everybody is pleased with it. It has no equal. There is but one step between it and the harp of Heaven.

The Diamond Banjolin is used nightly in the leading music halls of London, England, by Miss Lillie Western, the great musical artiste of the world, who says it is the king of all instruments. Prices from \$16 to \$45. The only instrument you can live a life-time with.



Mandolin Players TAKE NOTICE

This Banjorine was designed by Prof. Stepner, the celebrated mandolin soloist, and is played by him in his concert work. It is the only Banjorine on the market that retains the true banjo tone. It has four strings, and is tuned like a mandolin, and plays with a pick. To play this instrument it is not necessary for the mandolinist to learn a new system of fingering. The mandolin or violin score can be played. These instruments are now played by the following artists in their concert work: Prof. Louis Stepner, Aubrey Stauffer, J. J. Hill, F. J. Brooks, Frank Ryan and many others.

Send for Catalog. Made by

J. B. SCHALL, 146 S. Water St., Chicago, Ill.

Unless these GDAE-tuned banjorines were actually tuned an octave below a mandolin (as is the case with modern “Irish” tuning), the high tension required to get them up to the required pitch would have made it very difficult to string them. Farris, in an attempt to keep the string tension from driving the bridge into the head of his banjorins, had a bridge wider than the head itself, as well as a support post under the head. The tension problem may also have influenced his decision to change what was originally an eight-string instrument to a four-string model.

Lowering the pitch of the strings to CGDA was a better solution. It is a lot easier to mount mandola-tuned strings on a banjorine-length neck than it is to get such an instrument up to mandolin pitch. Just as the plectrum banjo was foreshadowed by five-string players who removed their thumb strings, the modern tenor banjo may have been suggested by plectrum-wielding banjorine players who removed the fifth string from their instruments. In 1929, banjo ace Charles McNeil wrote:

In about the year 1900 I heard an old time mandolinist play a banjourine [sic] tuned in fifths, CGDA (reading from the lowest pitched strings to the highest). He had eliminated the fifth string as being unnecessary.⁹

McNeil also wrote that he ordered, but never received, a 21-inch-scale “Cello banjo” from Schall, and had gotten his first tenor banjo “about 23 years ago” (i.e., about 1906) from an unnamed maker.

According to banjo historian James Bollman, Vega started making tenor banjos around 1908, but it took a while for the instrument to become popular enough for major banjo makers to advertise and market them.¹⁰ In 1913, the Bacon Manufacturing Company (which at the time sold some banjos produced by other firms) listed a

“Tenor Banjo-Mandola” on the same catalog page as their five-string “banjeaurine” and eight-string banjo mandolin. But the instrument was still a niche item at that stage and was not even pictured.¹¹ Rettberg & Lange’s early Orpheum models used the same body with a mandolin, five-string or four-string “tango tenor” neck, but the banjo-mandolin version was the most popular at first, and was the one featured in illustrations in trade journals as late as 1916.¹²

Early 20th-century tenor banjos had open backs, a scale length of 19½ - 21½ inches and a fingerboard that extended over the head with 15 or 16 frets free of the body and five or six more over the head. Sometimes called “cello” banjos because of the CGDA tuning (though true cello banjos are pitched an octave lower), they were advertised as “tango” banjos to appeal to musicians playing for the Argentine dance craze of the pre-World War I years. Whatever they were called, these instruments gradually took the place of the banjo mandolin as a high melody instrument in dance bands. A November, 1916 article in the music journal *Crescendo* asserted: “Without doubt the tenor-banjo is now considered the best instrument of the banjo family for playing lead in dance orchestras...”¹³

Notwithstanding its success with tango bands, the tenor banjo only became really widely popular when it was adopted for strummed accompaniment by Dixieland jazz groups. As early as 1917, a music business writer told his readers that “A jazz band consists of a clarinet, cornet, tango banjo, saxophone, slide trombone, piano, drums and traps [drumset]...”¹⁴ The writer was still calling it a “tango” banjo, but as the tango fad faded in the jazz age, “tenor banjo”

⁹ “The Ludwig Banjoist,” Fall 1929

¹⁰ Hoft, John, “The Birth of the Tenor Banjo in America,” *AllFrets*, March/April, 2010.

¹¹ “The Bacon Professional Banjo,” 1913.

¹² *Music Trade Review*, Vol LXIII, no 23, December 2, 1916

¹³ “The Tenor Banjo, a Fixture,” cited in George Gruhn and Walter Carter, *Acoustic Guitars and Other Fretted Instruments: A Photographic History*, San Francisco: GPI Books, Miller Freeman, Inc., 1993.

¹⁴ “What is Jazz?,” *Music Trade Review*, August 18, 1917

was universally adopted as the standard name of the instrument.

In a 1928 article, Louis Calabrese, a prominent jazz-age banjoist, described the evolution of tenor banjo style during his career:

Years ago, when mandolin banjos were used in orchestras, the musicians catered more to lead and melody playing.... The developed banjo, the instrument with the longer neck and the larger body, brought with it a change in the attitude of the players. Striving for leads and melody effects became supplanted by the desire and strife for rhythmic effects and chord production.¹⁵

Calabrese attributed the changing playing style to the change in banjo construction, but instrument makers were themselves reacting to the demand from jazz banjo players who found the old short-neck tango banjos inadequate for loud chordal accompaniment. As tenor banjoists took on this new role in the rhythm section, banjo makers adapted the instrument to suit their needs.

By the early '20s, the extended, over-the-head fingerboard disappeared and the 17-fret neck / 21-inch scale length adopted by Vega and Orpheum briefly became the industry standard. Orpheum designer William L. Lange pioneered a new style of instrument with his Paramount line, which featured a longer neck, a louder tone ring and a "resonator" back to project the sound forward. Lange's innovations were soon adopted by other leading makers and by the mid-1920s, the tenor had reached its final evolutionary form as a loud, resonator-backed rhythm instrument with a 19-fret neck and 23-inch scale length.

Irish Tenors

The Irish dance halls of New York and other American cities were the route by which the tenor banjo entered the Irish tradition. The bands that played these halls had to perform American as well as Irish music, so like most dance bands

of the 1920s, they often included a tenor banjo player. English dance bands emulated the American groups, and banjos from the U.S. and Britain began to appear in Ireland as well. Most early Irish tenor banjoists, like most jazz-band players, were content to strum chords in strict tempo. In 1916, New York resident James Wheeler, about whom little else is known, became the first Irish tenor banjo recording artist when he accompanied button accordionist Eddie Herborn on the earliest Irish traditional music disc ever made.

Some 1920s Irish banjo players did pick out the melodies of jigs, reels and hornpipes, decorating the tunes with snappy triplet ornaments. Far and away the most important Irish banjo player of the 78-rpm era was Mike Flanagan of the New York-based Flanagan Brothers, one of the most popular Irish-American groups of the day. Mike made dozens of recordings with his brothers Joe on the accordion and Louis on the harp guitar. These discs sold well in both America and Ireland, and Mike's brilliant and innovative playing inspired many Irish musicians to take up the tenor banjo.

Other influential Irish tenor banjo or banjo mandolin players of the pre-World War II years included Neil Nolan, a Prince Edward Island native who recorded with Dan Sullivan's Shamrock Band in Boston, and Jimmy McDade, who recorded with the Four Provinces Orchestra in Philadelphia. Michael Gaffney cut discs in New York on tenor banjo and banjo mandolin, including duets with flute player and fellow Leitrim native John McKenna. Back in Ireland, Bill Whelan played banjo mandolin over Radio Éireann Athlone with the Moate Ceili Band.

Changing musical tastes and the development of arch-top (and eventually electrified) guitars made the tenor banjo obsolete in American popular music by the mid-1930s. A dwindling corps of tenor and plectrum banjoists carried on their ragtime and Dixieland specialties, but most four-string banjos ended up in attics and pawn shops. Just as Irish traditional musicians took advantage of the supply of cast-off wooden

¹⁵ *Music Trade Review*, March 26, 1928

flutes created when classical players switched to metal instruments, discarded American and English banjos soon found their way into the hands of musicians in Irish rural dance halls.

In some areas, the Public Dance Hall Act of 1935 led to a ban on house dances, which the clergy viewed as “occasions of sin.” Partly for this reason, but probably also in imitation of English and American dance halls and dance bands, traditional dancing in Ireland moved in this era from crossroads and cottage kitchens into village or parochial halls. The need for an ensemble loud enough to be heard in the new environment led to the rise of “ceili bands” with a lineup that added accordion, piano, drums, banjo and the occasional piccolo, clarinet or saxophone to the more traditional fiddles, pipes and flutes.

The appeal of the banjo had a lot to do with the fact that it was loud. Like the accordion (another relative newcomer to Irish traditional music), the tenor banjo was strident enough to cut through the noise of a big dance hall in the days before amplification. It was favored for the same reason by street performers, including the famed Dunne Brothers of Limerick (relatives of the John Dunne pictured above), traveling musicians who performed for decades at race meetings and fairs.

Few recordings of Irish tenor banjo players were made in the 1950s and ‘60s, but noted players active in those years included Offaly’s Owen Hackett, Clareman Des Mulkere (a son of Aughrim Slopes Ceili Band fiddler Jack Mulkere), and Wexford hurling star Tim Flood. Tyrone native Liam Farrell made a name for himself as the top Irish banjo player in London. Prominent ceili band banjo players of the period included Jimmy Ward of the Kilfenora, Dan Tracey of the Aughrim Slopes and Seamus Cooley (better known as a flute player) with the Tulla Ceili Band. The banjo-mandolin was still popular in this period, especially in ceili bands. Prominent players of the smaller instrument included Anna Boyle, Noel Strange and William Power, this last a Wexford man who recorded

impressive note-for-note duets with fiddle great Seán McGuire and his Four Star Quartet.

From the Dance Hall to the Pub

Ceili bands reached their peak of popularity in the 1940s and ‘50s, after which more versatile “show bands” playing a blend of American pop and country music came to the fore in rural Irish dance halls. In the 1960s, the focus of traditional music making shifted from the dance hall to the pub, but the popularity of the tenor banjo survived the change of venue. Like the accordion, the banjo is well suited to a noisy pub session. The banjo was also given a boost by the U.S. folk music revival, in which the success of the New York-based Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem led to a proliferation of guitar- and banjo-strumming Irish “ballad” groups.

The Pete Seeger-style five-string was the banjo of choice during the ballad boom, but the tenor version had an influential champion in Barney McKenna of the Dubliners, a group that pioneered the now common practice of mixing jigs and reels with guitar-backed vocals. McKenna is undoubtedly the most influential Irish banjo player of the post-World War II era. With few exceptions, today’s Irish tenor players have followed his lead by tuning to GDAE, an octave below the fiddle or mandolin. While not as bright-sounding as the standard CGDA tenor tuning, Barney’s lower-pitched setup made it easier to play Irish dance tunes in the keys preferred by pipers, fiddlers and flute players.

As the traditional music revival gathered pace in the 1970s, the tenor banjo became more popular than ever and many a guitar-strumming folkie discovered that his or her picking skills translated easily to the instrument. Many players were inspired to take up the instrument through recordings made by Charlie Piggott of De Dannan, Kieran Hanrahan of Stockton’s Wing, Mick Moloney, Gerry O’Connor, Seamus Egan and Cathal Hayden, all of whom were raising the reputation of the tenor banjo in the 1970s and ‘80s. As the demand for tenor banjos in Ireland began to outstrip the supply of imported instruments, a market was created for Irish banjo

makers, most notably Tom Cussen of Galway and Dave Boyle of Kildare.

There are still a few fussy purists who dismiss the tenor banjo as a noisy nuisance taken up by those without the talent or taste to play a “real” instrument. But the standard of Irish banjo playing has soared in recent decades and today’s Irish banjoists have brought their instrument to the very forefront of the contemporary traditional music scene. The Irish tenor banjo has truly come of age.

How to Learn the Tenor Banjo

If you can hum, lilt or whistle an Irish tune, you can learn to play it on the banjo or any other instrument. The music has to be in your head, however, before it can get it to your fingers. The rest is just a matter of practice. Instrumental technique is important, but it's not the key to playing Irish music. Anyone who has ever heard a classical violinist stiffly bow through an Irish tune understands that technical competence is no substitute for an understanding of traditional style. That understanding can only be acquired by listening to and emulating good traditional players. If you want to play Irish music, you should listen to as much of it as possible, and not just banjo music! Listen especially to the uilleann pipes, fiddle and flute, the instruments on which the style and repertoire of Irish traditional music were largely created.

Lessons can be helpful in establishing good technique, but many people have learned to play Irish music without formal instruction. Trial and error is the best teacher. Once a tune is in your head, just try to play it. The more you play, the more you learn about the structure of Irish tunes. The more tunes you learn, the easier it becomes to learn new ones. Guitarist and fiddler Mark Simos put it this way: at first Irish music all sounds the same, but after a while you realize that each tune is different. Eventually, however, you discover that they really are all the same!

Getting a Banjo

Thousands of tenor banjos were made in the U.S. and England in the 1920s and ‘30s. Since

only Irish musicians, Dixieland jazz players and banjo band strummers want them now, prices are lower than for other fretted instruments of similar age and quality. Many top quality vintage tenor banjos sell for well under \$1000. Some of the rarest and most elaborately decorated banjos are priced for collectors rather than players. Pre-World War II Gibson Mastertone models are disproportionately expensive because they are coveted by bluegrass banjoists who want a pre-war five-string like those played by Earl Scruggs and Ralph Stanley. As Gibson made many more tenor banjos in those years, modern bluegrass players seek out old Gibson tenor models and put five-string necks on them.

In addition to Gibson, then based in Kalamazoo, Michigan, more than twenty “golden age” firms made tenor banjos, many of them as good as any Gibson but with different tonal qualities that non-bluegrass players might prefer. Gibson actually borrowed many innovations from William L. Lange, designer of the Orpheum, Paramount and Langstile models made in New York. Other New York banjo makers included the House of Stathopoulos (Epiphone), Iucci, Majestic and Gretsch. Wholesalers Bruno and S.S. Stewart (a famous name in 19th-century banjos) distributed cheaper instruments, and the Oscar Schmidt company made La Scala and Stella brand banjos in Jersey City, New Jersey.

The Bacon Banjo Company led by five-string virtuoso Fred Bacon and businessman David Day made the famous “Silverbell” and other Bacon & Day models in Groton, Connecticut. Weymann made superb banjos in Philadelphia. Vega (one of the few banjo makers to survive the depression) made banjos in Boston, as did the lesser-known Stromberg company. Lyon & Healy manufactured the Washburn line of banjos in Chicago. Drum manufacturers Ludwig and Slingerland (makers of the May Bell line) made fine banjos in Chicago, as did the Leedy drum company in Indiana. Many good banjos were made in England by John Grey and the Clifford Essex company. Players in Ireland have often favored these, especially the high-end

Paragon models made by Clifford Essex.

The vintage banjo buyer must typically choose between an open-backed 17-fret model and a 19-fret resonator banjo. Short-scale banjos are usually cheaper, and make it a bit easier to finger notes at the fifth or higher frets. The longer scale length evolved when the tenor banjo changed from a melody to a rhythm instrument, and, as Irish stylists are melody pickers rather than chord strummers, it makes some sense to consider a short-scale tenor.

Some early tenor banjos (notably Vegas with the famed “tu-ba-phone” tone ring) were fairly loud, but most vintage short-scale banjos are quieter than modern instruments. This might seem like a good thing, but keep in mind that while it is possible to play a loud banjo softly, it is impossible to play a quiet banjo loudly! Getting short-scale banjos to play in tune in the GDAE “Irish” tuning is difficult, partly because most older models have hard-to-adjust friction pegs. So while open-backed 17-fret instruments are often advertised by U.S. dealers as “Irish” or “Celtic” tenors, most players in Ireland opt for 19-fret resonator models with heavy tone rings.

You can find bargains at pawnshops, flea markets or on e-Bay. But for playable, quality instruments, try one of these dealers:

Bernunzio Uptown Music
122 East Avenue
Rochester, NY 14604
(585) 473-6140
www.bernunzio.com

Elderly Instruments
PO Box 14210-DK24
Lansing, MI 48901
(517) 372-7890
www.elderly.com

Intermountain Guitar and Banjo
712 East 100 South
Salt Lake City, UT 84102
(801) 322-4682
www.guitarandbanjo.com

Mandolin Brothers
629 Forest Avenue
Staten Island, NY 10310
(718) 981-8585
www.mandoweb.com

Gruhn Guitars
400 Broadway
Nashville, TN 37203
(615) 256-2033, fax (615) 255-2021
www.gruhn.com

McPeake's Unique Instruments
604 Guill Road
Mt. Juliet, TN 37122
(615) 758-9673
www.cmcpeake.com

Vintage Instruments
1529 Pine Street
Philadelphia, PA 19102
(215) 545-1100
www.vintage-instruments.com

New Banjos

A new instrument will usually cost more and, like a new car, depreciate greatly as soon as you take it out of the showroom. On the other hand, you can be sure that it will be in good, playable condition. Gibson, Deering and other American banjo makers will put a 19-fret tenor neck on their instruments but it's a custom order that will cost more. OME and some other makers produce high-end tenors based on classic Gibson, Vega or Bacon & Day designs. Lower-priced instruments are made in Europe and, especially, the Far East. The Gold Tone company sells 17- and 19-fret models assembled in the U.S. from parts made in Asia. They're cheap, but the quality is not consistent and you get better value for the same money by buying vintage American banjos.

Galway man Tom Cussen makes the fine Clareen-model banjos used by many top Irish players, including Mick Moloney and Enda Scahill. Tom sets up his banjos for GDAE tuning and will make short-scale necks on request (see www.banjoes.ie). Dave Boyle of

Leixlip, County Kildare makes standard and short-scale banjos played by Kieran Hanrahan, Gerry O'Connor, Dave McNevin and other leading Irish players. A good 17-fret model of the type played by Galway banjo ace Angelina Carberry is made in England by Oakwood (www.oakwoodinstruments.co.uk). Manchester banjoist Tony "Sully" Sullivan also sells new instruments made in England (www.halshawmusic.co.uk).

Stringing and Setup

Modern tenor banjos were designed to be tuned CGDA (from low to high), the same as a viola or mandola. The more usual Irish tuning, however, is GDAE, an octave below the violin or mandolin. The main advantage of the lower tuning is that a banjo player can use the same fingering as a fiddler. The low open D string also suits tunes favored by uilleann pipers with their D drones. In the CGDA tuning, on the other hand, it is impossible to play the lowest notes in many fiddle tunes and fingering in the common Irish key of D is awkward.

There are advantages to the standard tuning, which explains why some players, notably Tipperary virtuoso Gerry O'Connor, prefer that system. The sound of the instrument is brighter and louder. Set-up problems are minimized, as you can use a set of regular tenor banjo strings and don't have to make some of the adjustments required to get the banjo to play well in the GDAE tuning. In the CGDA tuning there is no need to reach up to the seventh fret to hit the high B's. Instead, you play B at the second fret of the first (A) string. With a capo at the second fret (a set-up frequently used before Barney McKenna's GDAE revolution), you get a very bright DAEB tuning that makes tunes in D easier to finger at the price of losing even more low notes.

If, like most contemporary Irish players, you choose the GDAE system, you'll need to get non-standard strings because a normal tenor banjo set will be very slack in the lower tuning. Slack strings give a poor tone, make it hard to play in tune and buzz against the frets.

Pre-packaged sets for the GDAE tuning have become available in recent years. The Bernunzio set includes a .013" plain steel E string and bronze wound .020", .030" and .040" strings. GHS's heavier "Celtic Tenor" set (best for 17-fret models) uses a plain .014" and nickel wound .024", .032", and .042" strings. D'Addario has a lighter "Irish" set with plain .012" and .016" and wound .024" and .036" nickel-wound strings. John Pearse now has three different Irish tenor sets (light, medium and heavy) using bronze-wound strings.

You can create an Irish set from individual guitar or banjo strings in the following gauge ranges:

E (1st):	.011 to .014" plain steel
A (2nd):	.014 to .018" plain steel <i>or</i> .018 to .024" wound
D (3rd):	.024 to .032" wound
G (4th):	.035 to .045" wound

Within these ranges the gauge and type of string is a matter of personal preference. Short-scale banjos need heavier strings than 19-fret instruments to get the same tension in the same tuning. Bronze-wound guitar strings sound a bit mellower than nickel-wound banjo strings.

Heavier-gauge strings are tauter, which makes them easier to tune and less likely to buzz against the frets. Some players, however, prefer the brighter tone of thinner strings or find it easier to pick triplets when the strings are a bit slack. Many players in Ireland got used to slack standard tenor banjo sets because custom-gauge strings were (and are) hard to find in Irish music shops. You will have to experiment to figure out what strings work best for you.

Depending on the tailpiece on your banjo, you may need to use loop-end banjo strings rather than ball-end guitar strings. You can change the tailpiece to one that accepts ball-ends, but you can also attach the strings with loops created by passing the plain ends through the balls. Or just cut off the balls (ouch!) and tie your own loops.

Using heavier strings will change the "action," the distance between the strings and the fingerboard. Too low an action causes the strings to buzz against the frets and also decreases volume. Too high an action causes notes to go sharp when fingered at the fifth and higher frets. For ease of play and best intonation, try to set the action as low as possible without producing string buzz.

Tenor banjo bridges come in two standard heights: $\frac{1}{2}$ " and $\frac{5}{8}$ ", though bridges of other heights can be found as well. Some have two feet, others three, which makes a surprisingly big difference in sound. In general, a thinner bridge gives a louder and brighter sound, but a lot depends on the type of wood – aged rock maple conducts sound better than soft pine. Bridges with plastic inserts where the strings sit produce a softer tone than plain wooden-topped bridges. And bridges topped with ebony have a brighter sound than those without ebony.

You can adjust the action significantly by changing the bridge height, which can be fine-tuned by sanding down the feet. Another way to adjust the action is to change the angle of the neck, which may involve inserting a shim between the banjo "pot" and the neck. Most banjos have truss rods or more primitive devices that can be used to make adjustments to the neck angle. Truss rod adjustments are tricky, however, and best handled by a professional luthier.

Heavy-gauge strings may not fit easily into grooves in the nut and bridge that were sized for standard-gauge tenor banjo strings. You don't want the strings to hop out of the grooves as you play. Slightly widening the grooves with a file will prevent this and improve the action as well. Left-handers will want to attach the strings in reverse order. If you do this, however, you must also reverse the bridge and nut. That way, the width of the grooves will match the gauge of the strings. On the other hand, there are left-handers like New York's Frankie McCormick who don't bother re-stringing the banjo and manage to play quite well upside down.

Skin Heads

Vintage banjos are often sold with the original skin head. This may well be a dried-out piece of parchment first attached to the instrument when Calvin Coolidge was in the White House. You'll probably want to replace it.

The tension on a skin head has to be carefully monitored and adjusted as humidity changes – too tight and it may crack, too loose and the bridge will sink into the head and the sound will die. Soaking, stretching and attaching a new skin is a major pain in the butt, although it is now possible to get skin heads already mounted on tension hoops, making them as easy to install as plastic heads.

A skin head produces a duller sound than a plastic head, especially when using the lower GDAE tuning used by most Irish players. If you really like the darker sound quality of a skin head, but don't want to deal with a genuine dead animal hide, there are "Fiberskyn" and "Renaissance" heads that simulate the look and sound of calf- or goat-skin heads.

Whether you choose skin or plastic, the tension on the head can have a major impact on the sound of the banjo. A tighter head generally produces a brighter sound and more volume, but there are limits. Over-tightening a skin head will usually burst the head, but over-tightening a plastic head can actually damage the banjo by warping the flange or the wooden rim. Some players maintain that you can tune the head to a tension that produces the optimal sound, and that this tension is lower for GDAE than for CGDA tuning. All banjo players should have a nut-driver or banjo wrench in order to be able to tighten or loosen the head. Gibsons and most recently made banjos use $\frac{1}{4}$ " bracket nuts, but some vintage instruments used $\frac{5}{16}$ " or $\frac{9}{32}$ ".

Getting in Tune

The bridge on a banjo is not fixed and your banjo will not play in tune if the bridge is not correctly placed. Test for proper bridge placement by playing what are called "harmonics." If you pluck a string while

touching it very lightly with another finger right above the 12th fret, you will hear a high note an octave above the string's normal pitch. If this harmonic tone is brightest and loudest when your finger is exactly over the 12th fret, then the 12th fret is at the midpoint of the string and the bridge is in the right place. Move the bridge forward or backward as necessary to get the correct placement.

One common method of tuning is to compare the pitch of each open string to the pitch of the adjacent lower string fingered at the 7th fret. This works, but tuning by harmonics is more accurate. Another harmonic note is produced by plucking a string while touching it lightly above the 7th fret. This note is a fifth higher than the 12th fret harmonic on the same string and so should be identical to the harmonic note produced at the 12th fret of the adjacent higher string. For example, the harmonic E that sounds when you touch the A string at the 7th fret is the same as the harmonic at the 12th fret of the E string.

Tuning by harmonics is a great way to put the open strings in tune, but that doesn't guarantee you'll play in tune when fingering the strings. Pressing the strings down to meet the frets pushes them out of a straight line, which affects intonation, as do differences in string gauges between high and low strings. You can compensate for this by angling the bridge slightly. The precise angle required will differ according to the wear on the frets and strings, the gauge of the strings and the action, which in turn depends on the angle of the neck, the height of the bridge and nut, and the depth of the string slots in the bridge and nut.

To find the best bridge angle, make sure the open strings are in tune by the harmonic method described above. The worst intonation problems involve the A string at the fifth fret, where the D note will often be out of tune with the adjacent open D string. So play D at the fifth fret on the A string and compare it to the open D string. If this octave is not true, adjust the angle of the bridge until it is. If the fingered D on the A

string sounds too high, angle the bridge to lengthen the scale length on the A string. If it is too low, angle the bridge the other way to shorten the A string.

If the bridge must be sharply angled, it may be necessary to widen the grooves in which the strings sit in order to allow them to vibrate freely. If angling the bridge alone doesn't do the trick, try using a heavier-gauge *wound* A string rather than a plain steel one. The thinnest wound strings (.018") break very easily but an .020" string works very well. If you cannot play in tune without setting the bridge at an extreme angle, it's time to put on new strings, lower the action or replace worn frets.

The force with which you press down the strings with your fingers affects intonation, particularly on the G (fourth) string. If you press too hard, you'll stretch the string over the frets, increase the tension and force the note sharp. Don't press harder than is necessary to produce a clean tone.

Old banjos with gearless tuning pegs are hard to tune, especially at the lower string tension of the GDAE tuning. You can replace old friction tuners with modern, geared pegs. You can also get a tailpiece like the Oettinger patent model once used on high-end Bacon & Day and Vega banjos. These four-finger "bearclaw" tailpieces have tension adjustment screws for each string that can be used as fine tuners. New tailpieces in this style are available from fretted instrument supply companies.

Fingering Tips

There are two basic approaches to left-hand fingering on the tenor banjo (this assumes you're right-handed). Many players use the same system they would on the mandolin. In this scheme you use your first finger to play notes at the first and second frets, your second finger for notes at the third and fourth frets, your third finger for notes at the fifth fret, and your pinkie for notes at the sixth and seventh frets. The alternative scheme, sometimes referred to a "cello fingering," is to use your pinkie to reach notes at the fifth fret, reserving the second and

ring finger for notes at the third and fourth frets. This system involves less awkward stretching and may be the only possible approach for players with very small hands.

It is not possible with either fingering system to reach the seventh fret without moving your hand. If you use the mandolin fingering scheme, there are times when you must make a long-distance stab at the seventh fret with your pinkie to play a high B on the E string. Or you can plant your third finger at the fifth fret and pivot off it, changing the angle of your hand to allow the pinkie to reach the seventh fret.

A more ergonomic approach (and one required for players who use their pinkie at the fifth fret) is to slide your whole hand up the neck to a new position whenever you need to get up to the seventh fret. If you slide your hand up so that your first finger is at the third fret, you are in what a violinist would call “second position.” In this position you use your second finger for notes at the fourth fret, your third finger for notes at the fifth fret and your pinkie for the sixth and seventh frets. Doing a second-position shift every time you play a passage with a high B means moving your hand more often than you would with the mandolin scheme. But it also lets you keep your hand in a constant angle toward the neck, your fingertips closer to the fingerboard and reduces the distance your pinkie must travel to hit those high B’s.

One of the most difficult sequences to finger in first position are E-string passages that require you to play F# at the second fret and B at the seventh fret. A typical example would be the sequence E-F#-G-B-A-F#-G, starting with the open E string (see the attached banjo neck chart). To play this passage, your first finger must be at the second fret for the F#’s and your pinkie at the seventh fret for the high B. Getting back and forth quickly and cleanly is the challenge. Many players would avoid the problem by skipping the high B and playing a G triplet (E-F#-GGG-A-F#-G). With practice, however, this tricky passage and others like it are playable.

The mandolin scheme for this sequence would be to play F# with your first finger and G with your second before lunging for the B with your pinkie. On the way back down, you’d play A with your third finger, F# with your first finger and the final G with your second finger. A smoother way to negotiate this passage is to play the F# with your first finger, then slide up to play G with the first finger as well. This shift to “second position” makes the jump up to the high B far easier to negotiate. For passages with a high B that don’t include a dip back down to F#, the shift to second position makes even more sense.

Some uilleann piping tunes go up to a high C at the eighth fret and there are fancy fiddler’s showpieces (e.g., “The Contradiction Reel”) that go even higher. Only an orangutan could reach beyond the seventh fret without shifting to a higher position, and even the most fanatic devotee of the mandolin fingering scheme will have to do some shifting on these tunes. Some very high passages are playable only if you shift up to “third position,” placing your first finger at the fifth fret.

Relaxation and economy of motion are the key to efficient playing. It helps to keep your wrist loose and not to seize the neck in a tight grip. Instead of holding your wrist at a 90 angle from the neck, try to adopt a fiddle-like hold in which the neck lies against the palm of your hand. This makes it easier to keep your finger tips as close to the neck as possible so that they don’t have far to travel to reach their destination. Don’t lift fingers you don’t have to! If you are playing F#-A-F# on the E string, for example, there is no good reason to lift your first finger after you play the first F# note – just leave it down while you finger A so that it remains in place for the second F#.

Your fingers should come down on the strings from above, not from the side. Otherwise you are likely to kill the sound of an adjacent string by touching it with the side of a finger. The exception to this rule comes when you must quickly alternate between two notes on different

strings at the same fret, e.g., between E on the D string and B on the A string, both of which are at the second fret. A fiddler can play two such adjacent notes with one finger placed midway between the strings. Banjo strings are set farther apart, however, and you probably won't be able to sound both notes cleanly this way. The solution is to flatten out the tip of your finger so that it forms a bar across the two strings. With practice, you'll be able to lift the bar quickly and return to the normal fingering position.

Picking Tips

Except for those few players who favor the "thimble" technique, tenor banjoists use a pick, or plectrum as it's usually called in Ireland. The most common way to hold the pick is between the thumb and index finger. I hold it with the thumb on top and the first and second fingers below, which gives the pick three points of support and keeps it from slipping around..

Hold the pick just tightly enough so that it stays in place. If you grip it so that it is completely rigid between your thumb and forefinger, you will suffer from muscle strain and will have a hard time playing quick triplets. A thin pick has more flexibility than a heavy pick, which must be allowed more up-and-down play in your grip. On the other hand, a thin pick makes more noise as it strikes the strings. The tone of the banjo is affected not only by the thickness of the pick but by the shape of the edge striking the strings. A pointy tip gives a thinner sound than a more rounded edge. Jazz banjo strummers favored thick tortoise shell picks with rounded edges. Modern Irish banjo players use a wide variety of plastic or nylon picks in various shapes and gauges. You will have to experiment to find a pick with which you are comfortable.

Where you pick has a big effect on tone as well.

Positioning the pick close to the bridge produces a hard-edged, metallic sound, while picking closer to the neck yields a light and airy tone of the kind favored by five-string "clawhammer" players. For the fullest sound, however, you should position the pick above the middle of the banjo head.

Some players waggle their thumb and forefinger up and down when playing. The real secret to playing fast single-note passages and triplets, however, is to control the pick movement with your forearm and wrist, both of which should be as relaxed as possible. Many players rest their right pinkie or the side of their right hand on the banjo head, but too firm an anchor restricts the range of motion allowed the forearm and wrist. I don't touch the banjo head at all, but rest my lower arm on the side of the banjo, which usually has an armrest for this purpose. My wrist is placed behind the bridge. In this position, it is possible to mute the banjo slightly. As you usually don't want to do this, you must be careful not to rest your wrist on the bridge or the strings between the tailpiece and bridge.

You must use both sides of the pick. Reels and hornpipes have two beats to a measure and typically four notes to each beat. My basic pattern is to down-pick the first and third notes of each group of four and up-pick the second and fourth. Each measure is thus picked down-up-down-up, down-up-down-up. Rhythmic emphasis falls naturally on down-picks. If you want to add a bit of swing, give extra emphasis to the *third* note of every group, i.e., down-up-DOWN-up. Too exaggerated an emphasis on the "back beat," however, is not in keeping with traditional Irish style.

Some Irish banjo players do not strictly follow the down-up-down-up pattern and will play two or more down picks in succession, especially if the pick must move downward from a lower- to a higher-pitched string. You can decide for yourself what works the best, but my experience is that it is easier to apply the correct rhythmic emphasis if you down-pick the downbeats.

Jigs have two beats to a measure but three notes to each beat. Start each three-note beat with a down pick and emphasize the first note by holding it a bit longer than the others. The jig rhythm is DOWN-up-down, DOWN-up-down. Note that this requires two down picks in a row – the last note of the first group of three and the first note of the second group. If you strictly

alternate down and up picks, every other group of three notes will start with an up pick (down-up-down, up-down-up). This evens out the rhythm and lessens the emphasis you should be giving to the downbeat. There are no unbreakable rules, however, and some players who use up-picks on downbeats still manage to play with good rhythm

When you first start picking tunes, play slowly. As you gain confidence and command of the pick, you will want to speed up. A consistent tempo is more important than speed, however. Good rhythm is the most important element in what is, after all, dance music. If you find that you must slow down to play a difficult passage, that means you're playing the whole tune too fast. Be patient – speed comes with practice.

You should also keep in mind that even if you *can* play fast, that doesn't mean you have to do so all the time. It wouldn't occur to anyone to sing every song as fast as they possibly can, but too many instrumentalists take that approach to Irish dance tunes. Sometimes, as when playing for dancers, you must pick up the pace. In general, however, try to stick to a speed that allows you to put some expression into the music. Some tunes just sound better slower and varying the tempo makes for more interesting listening.

You can emphasize key notes and add rhythmic punch to your tunes by playing two-string partial chords on down-picks. If you're playing a B on the A string, for example, you can bar both the A and D strings at the second fret and play an E along with the B to produce a partial E minor chord. Alternatively, you could combine the B with a G at the third fret of the E string to produce a partial G major chord.

Another good effect is to play a drone on an open string. In tunes in the key of A, for example, you can accompany notes played on the A string by simultaneously striking the open E string. When playing note on the E string, you can simultaneously hit the open A string. When playing a B on the A string, you can play a

partial B minor chord by simultaneously sounding the open D string.

A similar technique is to play octave notes on open strings. If you finger a D on the A string, you can simultaneously sound the open D string. If you play a G on the D string, you can drone on the low open G string. When playing high A on the E string, you can play an A string drone.

Picked Triplets

The banjo has very little sustain, i.e., notes die quickly after the string is plucked. To simulate a sustained note, multiple pick strokes must be used. An extreme version of this is mandolin-style tremolo picking. Some banjo players do this with slow airs and song tunes, but almost all Irish banjoists make great use of picked triplets (or “trebles” as they are called in Ireland).

Triplets – three quick notes played in the same amount of time as two notes of normal duration – are indispensable to making your banjo playing sound authentically Irish. As a melodic figure, triplets are very common in hornpipes and they are also the basic form of tenor banjo ornamentation for all dance rhythms.

A triplet is played with a down-up-down flick of the pick. The motion is mostly in the wrist, though some players also wiggle the pick-holding thumb and forefinger a bit. The motion, and the rhythmic effect, is much like that of a bowed triplet on the fiddle. It will take considerable practice to produce triplets quickly, consistently and cleanly. Don't despair if it doesn't come easily. There is no secret to the technique – it just requires a lot of repetition to train your wrist. Try not to tense up to play triplets – they're easier if you're relaxed.

The first note of a triplet should be given the most emphasis. As with the slower three-note groups in jigs, the general rule is to start each triplet with a down-pick. This is undeniably true for triplets played purely to ornament a long-held note. Some tunes, mostly hornpipes, include melodic passages with two or more consecutive triplets. It is hard to play these

smoothly if you start each triplet with a down-pick. If you do so, you will have to leave a bit of a rest in between each triplet in order to allow time to change pick direction. Such passages can be played more smoothly if you break the usual rule and start the first triplet with a down-pick, the second with an up-pick, etc.

Triplets in Place of Rolls

Irish dance tunes are ornamented in ways that differ according to the instrument being played. Fiddlers, especially in the north of Ireland, have always played bowed triplets. Some modern whistle players make use of tongued single-pitch triplets, while accordionists like Sharon Shannon and concertina players like Niall Vallely have popularized briskly executed single-note triplets on their instruments. Almost all traditional players make use of more elaborate embellishments known as rolls (these have nothing to do with the picking patterns referred to as “rolls” by five-string banjo players).

A full roll is a five-note sequence that starts with the note being ornamented, followed by a higher note, the original note, a lower note, and finally the original note again. The higher note is usually a step higher, but may be a third higher. The lower note is usually half a step lower. Not all the notes in the roll receive equal rhythmic emphasis. The first note (the one being ornamented) is held the longest while the fourth (the one below the note being ornamented) is played extremely quickly.

The full roll takes up a whole beat. For those who read music, this means that in a jig (which is written in 6/8 time) the roll takes up the rhythmic space occupied by three eighth notes, a dotted quarter note or a quarter note/eighth note pair. A similar roll in a reel or hornpipe (sometimes called a “long” roll) takes the place of four quarter notes or a dotted-quarter/eighth note pair.

It is theoretically possible, using a combination of picked and fingered notes, to play rolls on the banjo. The technique for doing this will be described below. In practice, however, it is

generally impossible for a banjo player to play all the notes in a true roll as quickly as a piper or fiddler. In most situations, a banjo player must substitute triplet ornaments for rolls.

When playing jigs, the banjo player will substitute an eighth-note triplet preceded or followed by a single eighth note for the five notes of a full roll. If the triplet is played first, the picking pattern is down-up-down for the triplet followed by an up-picked eighth note. The other approach is a down-picked eighth note followed by a down-up-down triplet, which is a bit trickier as it requires two quick down-picks in succession. In either case, you're substituting four picked notes for the five notes in the roll.

The “long roll” in reels and hornpipes is like a jig roll – it takes up a whole beat, has five notes and starts and ends with the note being “rolled.” Some musicians draw out such a roll over the entire duration of the beat. Others hold the note being ornamented as long as possible before snapping off the rest of the roll. In place of a long roll, you can play a down-up-down triplet followed by two down-up eighth notes. Alternatively, you could play the two eighth notes first, followed by the triplet, or a single down-picked quarter note followed by a triplet.

There is another type of “short” roll played in reels and hornpipes. Unlike the long roll, the short roll is only half a beat in duration and has only four notes. The note being “rolled” is preceded by a higher note and then followed by a lower note before being sounded again. Such a roll is frequently played on the “up” or “back” beat and preceded on the downbeat by a note of the same pitch as the one being ornamented. In this version, the fingering (if not the timing) is very similar to a long roll. In the “cut time” signature used for reels and hornpipes, the short roll takes the place of a single quarter note or two eighth notes.

The banjo equivalent of a short roll is a down-up-down triplet, which means you substitute three picked notes for the four notes of the roll. If, after the short roll, you return to the regular

reel/hornpipe picking pattern, the next note is going to be down-picked. The last note of the triplet was also a down-pick, so this means playing two down picks in a row. A sheet is attached showing the pattern of up and down picks and the timing of short and long rolls.

Triplet Variations

The commonest form of triplet is three notes of the same pitch, i.e., one produced without moving the fingers of your left hand. These are fine ornaments, but too many banjo players use only single-note triplets. Once you feel comfortable with this basic version, you should practice variations that more closely suggest the sound of true rolls on the fiddle or pipes. Do this by using the fingers of your left hand to put two or three different notes into a triplet. Suppose, for example, that you want to ornament an F# played with the first finger at the second fret of the E string. The easiest thing to do is to whack out three quick F#'s. That gets boring. Try these alternatives:

F#-G-F#: Use your second finger to insert a G at the third fret.

F#-A-F#: Use your third or fourth finger to insert an A at the fifth fret.

F#-E-F#: Lift your first finger and play the open string as the middle note.

F#-G-A: Play an upward triplet with your first, second and third or fourth fingers at the second, third and fifth frets.

E-F#-F# or E-E-F#: Start on the open string and then hammer on with your first finger at the second fret to sound the F#.

F#-E-E or F#-F#-E: Start with your first finger down and then lift it up to play the open E string.

G-F#-F# or G-G-F#: Start with your first finger at the second fret and your second finger on G at the third fret. Pick the G, then lift your second finger to sound the F#.

You should also vary the spots in a tune in which you insert triplets and vary the rhythm of your triplets. A jig roll can be replaced either by a triplet followed by a single note or by a single note followed by a triplet. Some players use only one or the other, but practice will allow you to play both for variation's sake. The attached chart of rolls and possible triplet substitutions may help make these various alternatives clearer.

Another typical banjo trick is to substitute picked triplets for any two ascending or descending notes, e.g., playing E-F#-G instead of E-G or C#-B-A instead of C#-A. Try to avoid monotony by changing the places in a tune where you insert such triplets.

Fingered Ornamentation

To a limited extent, banjo players can borrow techniques from fiddle and guitar players by using left-hand fingers to create ornaments. This method involves “pull-offs” and “hammer-ons.” A pull-off is exactly what it sounds like. For example: place your first finger on F# at the second fret of the E string and your second finger on G at the third fret. Keep the first finger down as you play the G with your pick. Then sharply pull your second finger off the string, plucking it with that finger as you do so. The left-hand pluck will sound the F#.

To make the pulled-off G a true “grace note,” it should be picked just *before* the down beat and sound the F# on the beat itself. If you pick the G on the down beat, however, it will get as much rhythmic emphasis as the F# and detract from the emphasis on the F#.

The same maneuver in reverse is a hammer-on. Pick F# and then bang your second finger down hard on the G while the string is still ringing. The quicker and harder you smack down the second finger, the better the hammer-on works. If you play the F# before the down beat, it will be a grace note ornamenting the hammered G. If you pick the F# on the beat, the hammered G is simply an alternative to a picked G.

You can also play ascending or descending

triplets with pull-offs and hammer-ons. Triplets played this way will not be as loud and distinct as if they had been picked, but it is sometimes an interesting variation. To use hammer-ons to play an ascending E-F#-G triplet, for example, pick the open E string with your right hand and then smack down your first finger at the second fret to play F#, followed immediately by your second finger at the third fret to sound G.

To use pull-offs to play a descending G-F#-E triplet on the E string, place your first finger at the second fret and your second finger at the third fret. Use the pick to sound G, then sharply pull off your second finger, plucking the string with that finger as you do so. This will sound F#. Then immediately pull off with your first finger, plucking with that finger as you do so, which will sound the open E string.

It is even possible to play fiddle-like rolls by combining hammer-ons and pull-offs. To play a long roll on F# at the second fret on the E string, down-pick the F# and then hammer on hard with your second finger to sound G (keeping the first finger on the F#). Immediately pull off with your second finger, plucking the string with that finger as you do so to sound F# again. Then pull off in the same fashion with your first finger to sound open E and finish the roll by hammering on F# with your first finger. Listen to fiddlers to catch the rhythm. This sort of roll can only really be played in jigs or, in reels and hornpipes, in place of a long roll. For quickly played short rolls, a triplet will have to do.

There are other fiddler's tricks that you can adapt to the banjo. Try sliding up to notes by from below. Pick an F# at the fourth fret on the D string, for example, and then slide your finger up to the fifth fret to sound the G. Another effective gimmick is to double up a note on an open string by simultaneously fingering the same note at the seventh fret of the string below it.

Banjos and Session Courtesy

An Irish music session can almost always accommodate another fiddle, flute or tin whistle. This is not the case with louder instruments such

as the tenor banjo or accordion or accompanying instruments such as the guitar and bodhrán. There are definitely times when less is more.

It has been said that a gentleman is someone who can play the bagpipes, but doesn't. This applies just as well to the banjo. If you encounter a quiet session of fiddlers and flute players, you may not win any new friends by pulling out a banjo and sitting in. If there is already another banjo in a session, you should definitely think about waiting your turn. No two banjo players pick exactly alike and usually clash with rather than complement each other.

Tenor banjos were originally designed as accompanying instruments for brass bands in the days before amplification, so they can be EXTREMELY LOUD. With a resonator banjo, which directs the sound forward, the player may not realize just how loud he or she is. The volume appropriate for playing Irish traditional music on the banjo is considerably lower than that required by the Dixieland jazz strummers for whom this instrument was made. While it is useful to be able to compete on equal terms with accordion players, it is bad form to drown out fiddlers and flute players in friendly sessions.

If you have a loud banjo, try to play with a gentle touch. You can also soften the sound by stuffing a towel beneath the head or removing the resonator. A skin head sounds mellower than plastic, though it does require adjustments to compensate for changes in humidity.

Appendix 1: Mandolins, Bouzoukis, etc.

The Irish approach to tenor banjo playing can be applied equally well to other fretted instruments. Many tenor banjo players start on the mandolin, which is generally considered easier to play because of its smaller size. Another advantage of the mandolin is that there is no need to get special strings or adjust the normal set-up to play in the GDAE tuning, as this is the normal tuning for the mandolin, as it is for the violin. Some people also prefer the tone of the mandolin to that of the banjo. Its main disadvantage is that it is virtually inaudible in a

noisy session. The lack of volume doesn't matter for solo or amplified playing, however, and the mandolin blends well with whistles, flutes and fiddles.

Many Irish banjo players have recorded using the mandolin and the instrument is also popular with ballad groups and singers. Paul Brady and Andy Irvine are among the notable performers who have recorded mandolin tracks. Tunes from the old harp tradition are particularly suited to the mandolin, as can be heard on Mick Moloney's tour-de-force rendition of O'Carolan's "Loftus Jones" on his solo recording *Strings Attached*.

The banjo-mandolin was once popular among Irish musicians, as it combined the ease of play of the mandolin with the volume of the tenor banjo. Wexford man William Power, who recorded with Seán McGuire's "Four Star Quartet" in the 1960s, was one of the best known Irish banjo-mandolin players. Some players made a mini-tenor banjo of the instrument by mounting only four strings. The instrument cuts through the din of a loud session or band, but its harsh, piercing tone has put it quite out of favor.

The "octave mandolin" and "Irish bouzouki" provide other alternatives to the tenor banjo. The bouzouki was introduced into Irish music in the 1960s by Johnny Moynihan and was taken up and popularized by many performers, notably Andy Irvine, Dónal Lunny, Alec Finn and Jimmy Crowley. By the late 1970s, no self-respecting "Celtic" music group in Europe would dare appear on stage without one.

Alec Finn plays a true Greek bouzouki with a bowl-shaped back like that of a Neapolitan mandolin and three double strings tuned D-A-D, the two lower pairs tuned in octaves. Most Irish players now prefer flat-backed models with four or five courses of double strings, tuned either in octaves (in which case the instrument is called an Irish bouzouki) or in unison (which makes it an "octave mandolin"). Five-course Irish bouzoukis are often called "citterns" after

similar wire-strung instruments of centuries past. These instruments range from relatively inexpensive models manufactured in the Far East to pricey, hand-crafted instruments by makers such as Joe Foley in Ireland and Stefan Sobel in England.

Today's "octave mandolins" are similar to the mandocellos made by Gibson in the U.S. in the early 20th century, though few modern makers attempt to construct carved-top instruments in the old Gibson style. The mandocello is tuned like a violoncello – CGDA, an octave below standard tenor banjo tuning. With lighter strings, however, it can also be tuned GDAE.

The tenor guitar is a four-string instrument with the neck of a tenor banjo joined to the body of a guitar. These instruments briefly became popular in the 1930s among banjo strummers who wanted to become guitarists without having to learn new chord shapes. Banjo player "Whitey" Andrews backed fiddler Michael Coleman and Paddy Killoran on a tenor guitar, but the instruments haven't been seen much in pop music since the Kingston Trio broke up. Singer Seán Tyrrell is noted for playing tenor guitar and mandocello, while tenor banjo ace John Carty has recorded tunes on a tenor guitar tuned GDAE.

Bouzoukis, octave mandolins, mandocellos, citterns and tenor guitars make excellent instruments for strummed accompaniment. When used for this purpose, four-course instruments are often tuned GDAD or ADAD, and five-course instruments DGDAD or in other semi-open tunings.

Appendix 2: The Five-String Banjo in Irish Music

The five-string banjo came to Ireland with blackface minstrelsy and, as in England, was long popular on the music hall stage. This type of banjo was also taken up by street performers and itinerant entertainers, who liked its volume and cutting power as an accompaniment to singers, pipers or accordion players.

The five-string banjo became more widely popular in the 1960s under the influence of the American commercial “folk music” boom. Pete Seeger played his banjo with the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem on their early Columbia recordings, and Makem himself soon took up the instrument. So did Luke Kelly of the Dubliners, the Clancys’ great rivals and contemporaries. Before long, a legion of ballad group imitators made the five-string banjo a common sight in Irish folk clubs.

Enthusiasts of American bluegrass and old-time country music in Ireland still play the five-string banjo, as do aging “folk groups” spawned by the 1960s ballad boom. But the instrument never made much headway among Irish traditional musicians, who almost universally prefer the four-string tenor version.

The reason for this is fairly straightforward. The four-string banjo, especially when tuned GDAE, is an instrument with an obvious affinity for fiddle tunes. The banjo player uses virtually the same left-hand fingering as the fiddler. Even though you can't copy fiddle phrasing on the banjo (you can't slur notes), a pick can produce a rough approximation of single-note bowing and bowed triplets. The five-string banjo, on the other hand, is usually tuned in an almost open chord and lends itself most easily to chordal picking patterns and accompaniment.

Some bluegrass-style three-finger pickers, including Tom Hanway, a New Yorker now living in Ireland, and Kansan Dave Grotewohl, have played Irish dance tunes in their style. The most distinctive aspect of their playing is the use of triplet ornaments, which they play with their fingers in the manner of classical or flamenco guitarists. Grotewohl, who almost ignores his instrument's characteristic fifth string, has recorded an entire CD in this style.

It is extremely difficult for any kind of finger picker, including finger-style guitarists, to play Irish tunes at a speed and in a rhythm that matches that of Irish fiddlers and pipers, or to produce the kind of ornamentation that gives the

tunes the essential Irish flavor. I have yet to hear any five-string banjo player hold his or her own in a typical Irish session.

It took a long time for players of the button accordion and tenor banjo to figure out how to get these instruments accepted into the Irish tradition. So perhaps there's hope for Irish five-string advocates. And then again, maybe not. Some instruments just don't easily lend themselves to Irish traditional music. Thousands of musicians have tried over the course of many decades to play Irish dance tunes on the piano accordion and though the standard has greatly improved, the instrument still has a deserved reputation as being far less well adapted to Irish music than the button box.

Appendix 3: Irish Banjo Discography

Good Irish tenor banjo players used to be scarce. There are so many now that it impossible to list them all. Recordings by the following players can, however, be recommended as examples of top-class traditional playing:

John Carty

A melodically inventive banjo, fiddle and flute player, the London-born Carty never plays anything the same way twice. His ornamentation is relatively sparse, but his improvisational variations are marvelous. His first solo banjo album *The Cat That Ate the Candle* (Cló Iar-Chonnachta) is a must-have for banjo fans. The more recent *I Will If I Can* was released in 2005. John can also be heard on a Nimbus sampler of London musicians, *Across the Water*, on recordings with the bands At the Racket and Patrick Street, on three Shanachie solo fiddle discs and in, with the group duet collaborations with flute player Matt Molloy and fiddler Brian Rooney.

Angelina Carberry

Angelina's tastefully understated style beautifully complements the button accordion playing of her father Peter on their CD *Memories of the Holla* and of her partner on *Angelina Carberry & Martin Quinn*. Angela plays an open-backed, 17-fret banjo made by

Oakwood in the UK. Her solo CD *An Traidisiún Beo* was released in 2005.

Christine Considine

Made some great duet 45 rpm discs in England in the 1970s on the Silver Hill label with button accordionist John Whelan.

Éamonn Coyne

A superb Dublin player based in Edinburgh whose recordings include *Through the Round Windows* – a solo disc (with many guest players) on the Compass label, and *Honk Toot Suite*, a recent collaboration with guitarist Kris Drever. Coyne has also recorded with the Scottish bands Russell's House and Salsa Celtica. He fingers difficult tunes with seemingly effortless ease and picks abundant triplets.

Christy Dunne

A member of a prominent Limerick musical family, Christy has made several independently produced recordings, including a banjo solo CD *Pluckin' Good* that includes duets with De Dannan fiddler Frankie Gavin. Dunne was part of the original lineup of Moving Cloud and can be heard on recordings by band members Paul Brock and Carl Hession. He is an excellent player whose picking features varied but not overdone ornamentation.

Seamus Egan (1)

Seamus, who is also a virtuoso flute player, is a very modern stylist whose penchant for improvisation, speedy play and rhythmic backbeat stretches the boundaries of traditional style. Seamus's banjo playing can be heard on his recordings with the group Solas, as well as on several solo recordings, and the Green Linnet disc *Three Way Street* with Mick Moloney and Eugene O'Donnell..

Seamus Egan (2)

The "other" Seamus Egan lives in Portland, Oregon. He has recorded a solo disc called *In Your Ear* and with The Suffering Gaels on their Foxglove CD *The One-Horned Cow*. A very solid player, he has issued a video tutor for the tenor banjo.

Liam Farrell

The Tyrone man performed for years in London with the late button accordionist Raymond Roland, with whom he recorded *Saturday Night at the Ceili* (Ossian). He also made two LP's with the group *Le Cheile* and is on other recordings with London Irish musicians, most recently *They Sailed Away from Dublin Bay* with box player Joe Whelan.

Mike Flanagan

The Flanagan Brothers, an accordion/tenor banjo/harp guitar trio, were big stars in the 1920s and '30s. Some of their discs were reissued on a Topic LP now available as an Ossian cassette. Others are on a Viva Voce CD, *The Tunes We Like to Play on Paddy's Day*. Mike was a major Irish banjo pioneer and the best player of his day.

Kevin Griffin

Griffin, who lives in west Clare, made a very impressive Ossian CD called *Down in Doolin*. He can also be heard on recordings with *The Stonemason* and *The Ceili Bandits*. Griffin plays very tastefully, at a reasonable pace, with bouncy rhythm and abundant ornamentation.

Kieran Hanrahan

Clare native Hanrahan is a veteran of Stockton's Wing and the presenter of the *Ceili House* radio program. He is one of few banjo pickers who regularly incorporate left-hand fingering into triplet ornaments, and makes interesting use of "cross-picking" patterns. His solo CD *Kieran Hanrahan Plays the Irish Tenor Banjo* (Banner Discs) is a masterpiece.

Cathal Hayden

This celebrated Tyrone player's syncopated style was very influential on Ulster players in the 1980s. He made a solo cassette with many banjo tracks but later became better known as a fiddler with the group Four Men and a Dog. He plays both instruments on his independently produced 1999 CD *Cathal Hayden*.

Darren Maloney

Darren is a Cavan player whose solo recording

(*Darren Maloney: Who?*) includes many original compositions played in a highly virtuosic style that shows the influences of a variety of non-Irish acoustic musical genres. Like American five-string wizard Bela Fleck, he is inventing a modern style unconstrained by traditional stereotypes.

Brian McGrath

This Fermanagh native's brilliant banjo playing is heard on *Dreaming Up the Tunes* (Cló Iar-Chonnachta), a duet album with accordionist Johnny Óg Connolly, and on *Four Men and a Dog's Barking Mad* (Green Linnet). He now plays with De Dannan and At the Racket (mostly on piano) and on John Carty's solo recordings. He released a 2009 solo disc titled *Pure Banjo*.

Barney McKenna

A founding member of The Dubliners, Barney is probably the most influential Irish banjo player of all time. He pioneered the GDAE tuning system and inspired many players to take up the banjo. Barney plays in a straight-ahead style with no emphasis on the backbeat. He can be heard on all Dubliners records.

Mick Moloney

Limerick native Mick plays tenor banjo and mandolin with a lively rhythmic swing and a wealth of ornamentation. No other picker so successfully captures the feel of Irish traditional fiddling and piping on plectrum instruments. Mick's many recordings include LPs with the 1960s ballad group The Johnstons, a hard-to-find Transatlantic solo LP and Green Linnet albums made with fiddler Eugene O'Donnell and the Green Fields of America ensemble. His most recent recordings feature revivals of Irish-American variety stage music. Mick's Green Linnet solo disc *Strings Attached* is still required listening for Irish banjo players and is available from via digital download from various sites.

Gerry O'Connor

A Tipperary-born banjo player and fiddler not to be confused with Gerry "Fiddle" O'Connor from Co. Louth, Gerry has several solo records on the

Mulligan and Compass labels, and has also recorded with the groups Four Men and a Dog and Moving Cloud. Undeniably virtuosic, Gerry is regarded by many as the best Irish tenor banjo player. He prefers the CGDA tuning, which gives him a very bright tone, and makes much use of "crosspicking" techniques borrowed from bluegrass mandolinists and guitarists to suggest the sound of the five-string banjo. With Dave McNevin, he put out a cassette tutor for the Irish tenor banjo and has also published an instructional book and videotape.

Mick O'Connor

Mick is a Londoner who played and recorded with tour groups from Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and on flute player Paddy Carty's *Shanachie* disc (on which he used the tenor banjo as an accompanying instrument!). Mick is a tasteful player who makes spare use of ornamentation, doesn't play too fast and is among the banjo players most respected by devotees of old-time traditional music.

Seán O'Driscoll

Seán is a native of County Cork who lived for some time in Minnesota, but has since returned to Ireland. His recordings include *Up the Airy Mountain, Sticking Out a Mile, Hill 16* (with button accordionist Paddy O'Brien) and the recently issued *The Kitchen Recordings*, a Cló Iar-Chonnachta duet disc with button accordionist Larry Egan.

Charlie Piggott

A founding member of De Dannan, Piggott also plays the button accordion, and plays it almost exclusively since an unfortunate injury to his left hand some years ago. He was a very solid picker, not flashy but with great taste. He can be heard on the early De Dannan records.

Enda Scahill

A Galway player with a fast-paced pick whose debut solo recording was called *Pick it Up*. He also played in the Brock McGuire Band together with his fiddling brother Fergal, accordionist Paul Brock and fiddler Manus McGuire. He and Brock recently issued *Humdinger*, which

brilliantly recreates the sound of early 20th-century Irish music as played by John Kimmel and the Flanagan Brothers.

Tony Sullivan

"Sully," from Manchester, England, has written a two-volume banjo tutor and several tune collections. He has a solo cassette and another called *Dublin Banjos* with the late John Keenan. Both he and Keenan play with a small plastic cylinder ("thimble") on the index finger instead of a pick. This may make triplets easier, but by the evidence of Sully's playing, it also seems to make it difficult to add any kind of rhythmic emphasis on the downbeat. Sully has composed some great new tunes, however, and plays interesting settings of old classics.