



I would love to play the banjo because of my imagined lifestyle of banjo players and its bright, rhythmic energy which instantly brings people together and adds a uniquely joyful spark to any style of music, be it soul, country, jazz or folk, all arising from it's history.

The banjo is a stringed musical instrument that combines a long fretted neck with a circular drum like body. With its bright percussive sound it is a staple mostly of country or folk music. The strings vibrate across a wooden bridge into a stretched synthetic or animal skin over the drum like body. There are three 'common' types of banjo:

The 5 string most iconic type featuring a distinct shorter fifth string peg halfway up the neck – standard for 'bluegrass' style.

The 4 string type which is commonly used in jazz and traditional Irish folk music and

The 6 string type which is also called the banjo guitar which is tuned exactly like a standard guitar but retains the unique banjo sound.

It originated in West and Central Africa evolving from traditional folk lutes which featured an animal skin stretched over a hollowed out gourd body with a short drone string which remains a feature of the modern instrument. Enslaved Africans brought them to the Caribbean and North America. They evolved in America in the 18th & 19th centuries when performers adapted the instrument, eventually replacing the gourd with the circular wooden sound box, adding the fifth string and incorporating frets.



While deeply tied to African-American music and culture it was popularized in the 1800's through Minstral shows before becoming a staple of country and folk music. It was popularized in Europe by mid 19th Century American touring Minstrel troupes and later in the 1920's when the 4 string tenor banjo crossed the Atlantic with American dance bands, evolving ultimately into a staple instrument of Celtic music carried to Ireland by returning Irish emigrants, as a popular rhythm and accompaniment instrument.

Describing the sound of any musical instrument is challenging as its mostly an emotional reaction to the sound, as transmitted via the inner ear to the brain, but for the banjo it comes down to capturing its unique blend of crisp "twang" and drum-like resonance – it pairs drum strings with a vibrating membrane. Descriptors would include:

Twangy / Snappy – a bright piercing and percussive attack.

Plunky – a warmer, more muffled and earthy tone.

Dry – a sharp clean foundational note that fades away quickly without lingering overtones. Bright / Ringing – notes that pop loudly and project clearly with a high frequency sparkle.

The way it sounds depends on how it is set up with head tension. Tighter heads produce a crisper, more treble-heavy sound while looser heads produce a softer mellow tone. But also the playing technique, the driving three-finger 'bluegrass' picking style produced an upbeat rolling sound while the 'clawhammer' or 'frailing' techniques provide a rhythmic, tapping, old time feel.

The most famous and influential banjo player was Earl Scruggs (1924 – 2012) who pioneered the three-finger picking technique but also seek out Don Reno (1926 – 1984) seen as an influential, pioneering banjo and guitar player. Pete Seeger (1919 – 2014) was a folk music icon who introduced millions to the 5 string banjo through his music, his left wing social activism and book "How to play the 5 string banjo". Noam Pikeiny (b 1981) is the preeminent banjo player of the current generation but the surprise may be Steve Martin (b.1945), the famous Actor / Comedian who is an elite highly respected banjo player, winner of a Grammy for his music ad establishing a prestigious annual banjo prize.

Barney McKenna (1939 – 2012) as a founding member of the Irish folk music band, The Dubliners, is credited with single-handedly popularising the banjo within Irish traditional music, before his rise in the 1960's it was a rarity in Irish sessions. The tuning he created remains as the standard today. Gerry O'Conner (b.1960) who is considered to be the single greatest 4-string tenor banjo player in the history of Irish music was chosen to step in for The Dubliners when McKenna passed away. Luke Kelly, best known as the lead singer of the Dubliners, frequently backs his powerful vocals with a driving 'clawhammer' style on a 5-string banjo, differentiating him from the more usual 4-string banjo players in Irish music.

A 'Magic moment' for banjo enthusiasts is the so called 'duelling banjo's' scene in the 1972 movie "Deliverance" directed by John Boorman – actually banjo vs guitar (playing banjo style) – the whole scene is available on YouTube is a pleasure. I'm more of a percussionist but that's why I'm attracted to the banjo – a percussion instrument with added strings !

