

Bluegrass Pickers Can Learn Clawhammer

By Bob Flesher

It is amazing how many bluegrass banjo pickers have told me, “I wish I could play that clawhammer style but I just can’t seem to make it work.” Many of them who have said this have been professional banjo players with big-name bands.

When I first took banjo lessons about 50 years ago, back in the days of white toothpaste, my teacher, Bill Cunningham of Asheville, NC, asked me if I wanted to learn bluegrass or clawhammer. With a dumb-struck look on my face, he said, “I’ll teach you clawhammer first because it is easier to learn. While you are practicing that I will teach you bluegrass.” He already knew it’s more difficult to transition from clawhammer to bluegrass style, rather than the other way around. Therein lies the problem of bluegrass banjo pickers learning clawhammer. It’s a harder transition but I’ll show you how it can be easily accomplished with time in practice.

Of course, in finger-picking, the fingers pick *up* towards the palm of the hand. This is the European style of playing a stringed instrument. In clawhammer, the first or second finger knocks down on the string using the back of the fingernail. You can use either your first or second finger as it makes no difference. During the times of the minstrels it was called the “Stroke Style” because you “strike” the string, not pick it.

Now that we’ve established the fingers strike down on the string using the back of the fingernail (note, you need a fingernail), let’s see how the thumb works. Here’s the first major problem for the bluegrass or fingerpicker when learning clawhammer. In finger picking, the thumb and fingers work independently of each other and there are multiple patterns in which the thumb does its own thing. In clawhammer, the finger and the thumb work as *one*, meaning the thumb must submit to what the finger does. When the finger goes down to strike the string, the thumb goes down at the same time in the same motion, hits the head and slides into the 5th string like sliding into second base as shown in Figure 1 above. Please notice at this point that the thumb should naturally exert just a little pressure on the fifth string. You can see that in the figure 1.

As you try this technique you’ll notice that when your finger knocks down on the first string, your thumb will want to hold back and pick the fifth string later when it

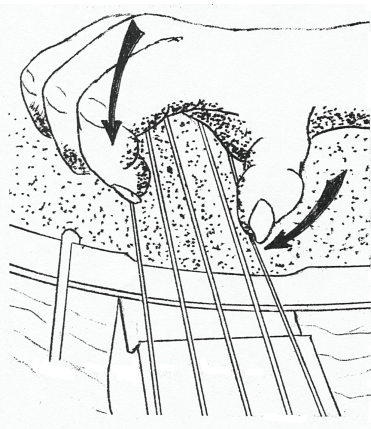


Figure 1

feels it is the right time, separately from the finger. That is not the way it works. But, this is what you’ve trained it to do when finger picking. In clawhammer they both have to work as a team—go down together in one single action. Just practice this action only, knocking down on the head with the back of your finger nail, missing the string making a thump on the head with your fingernail while your thumb hits the head and slides into the fifth string right below where the fifth string crosses the tension hoop as shown in Figure 2. This should be one single action.

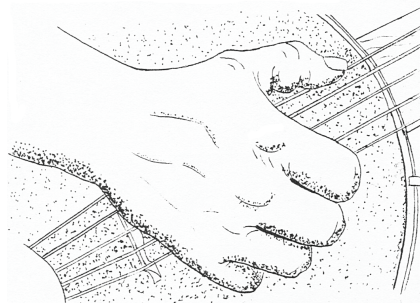


Figure 2

Don’t let the thumb make any sound on the fifth string. Your hand should be relaxed, not tense. After you have done this routine 50 times or so then do the same action while striking the first string. Another 50 times then sound the fifth string. This is done when you lift your finger up for another strike. As the finger goes back up, the thumb just falls off the fifth string with the slight pressure it was holding. At this point, while you are learning this lick, the thumb does not pick the fifth string. It just falls off the string making it sound. This is because we are breaking the thumb of the

habit of doing anything but following the finger. Later you will start to naturally pick the fifth string. I suggest you practice these these techniques at least 50 times each day for a week.

Now after playing bluegrass so long your thumb is used to being independent and will not submit to the finger and always follow it. This is called an “Arrogant Thumb” and it will eventually have to be punished for insubordination, and made humble and submissive to the finger. This can be done by slamming it in a drawer several times. In extreme cases you might even have to slam your “Arrogant Thumb” in the car door to get its attention. This is usually very effective for making arrogant thumbs humble.

Now, the second problem in learning clawhammer is very simple. After you have practiced these techniques for a while, it becomes boring. Therefore, the second problem is that you have a tendency to put on your picks and rip off one of your favorite bluegrass instrumentals and you never get your clawhammer, thumb humbling practice done—your thumb stays independent, not submissive to the finger, which results in wrong timing and not being able to play. Then you go tell some “clawhammer nerd”, “barely able to play” and who has about one twentieth the banjo knowledge you have that you just can’t seem to get that clawhammer lick down. It is certainly good for his ego to know you, an accomplished bluegrass picker can’t do what he can. Practice! Practice! Practice! This will solve the second problem, which in turn will solve the first problem.

I have made a video just for this article on Youtube.com. Look up Bob Flesher or “Bluegrass Pickers Learn Clawhammer, Part 1” and learn the basics of the clawhammer lick and what I have just described above.

In addition, to this new technique we must also mention hand and arm position. Some clawhammer players insist on keeping the arm and wrist stiff. I’m not saying this is wrong, but it sure doesn’t work for me. That means you are playing with your arm instead of your hand. Fifty years ago I sort of naturally learned to keep my wrist arched up off the head and flex my hand down still using the arm slightly when I was going to strike the strings. Maybe I was influenced by playing bluegrass where I had to arch my wrist to pull my finger up when picking the strings.

This flexible arched wrist has served me well. First, my arm does not get tired

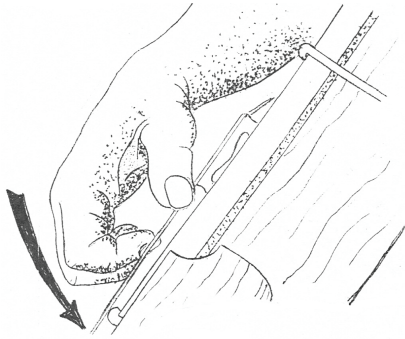


Figure 3

in a fast song, I have more control over my fingers, my thumb is slightly more vertical to the head allowing me to play with my thumb nail instead of the side of my thumb (which makes a more clean, distinct sound) and lastly, it is much easier and even essential when I drop my thumb down to the lower strings. This is a lick called “drop thumb” and will be taught next month in Part 2 of this article. You will notice this arch of the wrist in *Figure 3*. This can also be demonstrated by going to Youtube, searching for “Bob Flesher.” I have 5 or 6 videos which demonstrate this arched wrist, drop thumb and the sound you can get.

Sometimes it is difficult to learn all this and keep your wrist arched at the same time. I suggest you get a small piece of sponge about 1 1/2 inch tall and tape it temporarily to your banjo head under where your wrist is located. As you practice and your wrist starts to sag toward the head, it will touch the sponge and you remember to arch again. I play with my wrist probably two inches off the head. Some clawhammerists who play with the stiff arm and wrist will probably writhe in anguish at such a thought.

In the tab below I have included two lines of exercise for your right hand. This

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will help you establish the timing of your hand. Notice that without the hammers-ons and pull-offs with your left hand your right hand is doing the same thing throughout the whole exercise except for the last four measures of the second line. Those measures are unique to clawhammer style including pulling off or hammering on open strings that have not yet been struck.

In my next article, Part 2, I will describe some details of clawhammer which will make you an even more proficient player as well as learning the Drop Thumb technique, how Ralph Stanley plays, some unique licks, different tunings unique to clawhammer, fingernails and different clawhammer styles including the “Round Peak” and pre-Civil War Minstrel style, which is a very fancy form of today’s clawhammer style. I’ll have a video to go along with the article. In the meantime, come by and visit my Dr. Horsehair Music Co. website, www.DrHorsehair.com for songs, CDs, Tabs, and some interesting banjo history, stories and tall tales. You even can learn how to convert your pre-war Mastertone, that will peel bark off a tree, into a mellow, thumpy clawhammer banjo. Since clawhammer banjos are different from bluegrass banjos, visit Bob Flesher’s Custom Banjos website, www.FlesherBanjos.com for some examples of today’s open-back clawhammer and

minstrel banjos.

Clawhammer exercises

G Tuning, gGBDD. Arr. by Bob Flesher

A Part