

# The Long Neck Banjo

**gen'tle'man** (jen-tl-mōn) *noun*:

1. A man of noble birth or superior social position.
2. A well-mannered and considerate man with high standards of proper behavior.
3. A man who knows how to play the banjo . . .  
. . . but doesn't

I want to write a bit about the 5 string, open back, long neck banjo and the sound, songs and music styles you can play with it.

There was a time in the early sixties when Pete was considered by most musicians of the day to be the best banjo player in the world. Of course since then, Pete's talents have certainly been outdistanced by players like Bela Fleck to Raymond McLain. But Pete did something that very few musicians, banjo or otherwise, have ever done:

He made thousands of people WANT to learn how to play.

He influenced a generation of young kids to actually go to a store and buy a musical tool to create with. During his days with the Weavers, Pete stood on stages around the world, from Carnegie Hall in New York to the Royal Albert Hall in London, singing in his tux with his long neck, open back banjo strapped across his shoulders.

Pete designed the long neck in 1944 and had it built by a craftsman named John D'Angelico in New York City. He created it because his voice couldn't handle songs sung in certain standard tunings. He reasoned, "*If only I could keep moving down the neck, I could still play in chords I know and my voice wouldn't strain and crack so much.*"

So, by taking a standard open back banjo, sawing the end of the neck off, and then affixing some extra frets, Pete had a banjo he could capo to standard G three frets up or drop on down to handle the "harder to sing" songs. He could do this without having to retune the entire instrument or play in tunings too cumbersome and unfamiliar.

In other words, Pete gave the world the long neck banjo because...well...he was *lazy*.

Around 1947, Pete was on tour with some politician running for President. During long days hanging around hotel rooms, Pete began writing a simple manual about the banjo. He wrote about the history of the instrument and how to play it. He highlighted some of the great players that made the banjo popular and about the songs you can play with it. Most importantly, Pete published a homemade manual that made

playing the banjo sound EASY.

Easy enough for you and me to try it.

That manual is hard to find today but is still out there in some music stores and book shops (*it's distributed by Music Sales, Inc.*). It impacted me and inspired musicians like Leo Kottke and literally thousands of novice musicians. Pete Seeger, his banjo, and that little manual traveled the globe and created a whole movement that brought America back to acoustic music during the days when Elvis was making the world scream and the Beatles were invading American airwaves.

Before long, a thing called the “Folk Boom” happened, and a group called the Kingston Trio sold millions of albums. And, on the cover of every Kingston Trio jacket, was a long neck banjo.

So, that's the basic history.

Now, let me explain a little about my music and why I can even speak with any confidence on the subject:

I've been playing the long neck for about 10 years; played it in over 2,000 concerts, and used it on my seven album recordings.

Today, there are very few people who own a long neck banjo. There are very few people who have even *seen*, heard or played one. Actually, I'm the ONLY one I know of who has one, no less records with it. Lately, I've used it more than ever, and each new CD I put out has more tunes with it as my base instrument.

In 1993, I released an album called *Dreams of Fire*. There's a song on the CD called *Techno-Folk*. The tune was recorded with just me, my banjo, a rock band of Grammy winners and a 61-piece symphony, if you can imagine that. *Techno-Folk* was described in an Associated Press review of *Dreams of Fire* as sounding like “...Pete Seeger with a Pink Floyd attitude...”.

But don't let that scare you off.

It's still a good song.

The point is, the tune is played all the way down the open neck. Unfortunately, the scope of that particular recording doesn't really allow for an up-close analysis of the banjo...there's a lot going on during the course of that record.

However, in April of 1995, I recorded and released another album called *Assassins In The Kingdom*. On that album, I used the sound of the long neck to record an unusual version of Bob Dylan's *Masters of War*, and on an instrumental tune recorded with a French horn quartet, called *Cosmic*



*Banjo*, also played down the neck.

Now, *Cosmic Banjo* is worth looking into.

This tune is also performed on the CD all the way down the neck. The string tunings are eGEAB. *Cosmic Banjo* was written originally as the instrumental prelude to *Techno-Folk*. If you have both CDs, make a cassette tape of *Cosmic Banjo* followed immediately by *Techno-Folk*.

You will notice two things immediately:

a) Both songs are in the exact same tuning and performance positions, and

b) *Techno-Folk* only has two chords in it, Am and G (*Techno-Folk* is melodically based on the old Irish traditional song *Paddy Works Upon the Railroad*).

Playing both of these songs back-to-back works GREAT in concert, especially since audiences are not accustomed to the unusual sound and sight of the long neck, in a band setting no less. Both songs also lean heavily toward a rock sound, versus a country sound, which serves as another audience surprise.

Last year, I performed *Techno-Folk* live on TNN's prime time program *Music City Tonight*, and the house band went ape over the long neck. Those seasoned Nashville players had actually never seen one before. I also remember the producers kindly flashed the 1-800 mailorder number on screen and the record company got over 700 orders for the CD in just 48 hours after the show. So, I KNOW there's a healthy market for this instrument.

I also remember getting hammered with a common problem of the long neck during that live performance on TNN. By the end of *Techno-Folk*, where I finish the song as a solo banjo piece, the darn thing fell out of tune because I was playing it too hard. No big deal, but it will happen now and then.

Of course, I should have been prepared for something to go wrong that night. It was a pretty odd show to begin with. I don't mean that *Music City Tonight* was weird. It was a great show and I miss it. But on that particular night, they booked me, Mr. Long-Neck-Banjo-Folksinger, along with a huge, bearded flag-waving red-neck country singer named Charlie Daniels, who was doing a song called "*You're Worshiping the Wrong God*" (let me add that Charlie is also a brilliant guitarist, great singer and a real nice guy, too).

Then, to top it all off, they also booked Elvis Presley's daughter's ex-sister-in-law, LaToya.

...good grief!

As for *Cosmic Banjo*, the performance lines of that tune make for a good study of the long neck and its potential for alternative settings. Tuned all the way down the neck, again in eGEAB, it allows for a rich, resonant sound. The open back of my Vega PS-5 retains a classic,

traditional sound. This traditional sound is enhanced by the French horn quartet we used on the record. It turns “high octane” when the band kicks in. But you never lose the flavor or location of the banjo in the mix because of its highly definable sound. *Cosmic Banjo* also depends heavily on the performance pattern played on the open bass string, as you can see in the enclosed TAB arrangement of the song.

When figuring out the TAB, here’s a playing hint:

I play the song with a thumb pick and two finger picks. I personally use Dunlop .013 finger picks. I find they are the most controllable and least likely to cause that “scraping” sound. The index finger pick is played with the curve of the pick fitted on the “meat” of the finger. The second pick on the second finger is fitted in reverse. The pick is upside down against my fingernail. This is my playing style for most songs. I will pick melody-lines and rolls with the thumb and first finger, and frail with the second finger.

At the same time.

That picking style, coupled with the unique sound of the long neck, gives *Cosmic Banjo* its odd flavor. When performing solo, it also helps fill the concert hall with sound...it almost comes across as TWO banjos being played at once.

In January of 1997, I was able to release yet another CD called *WoodSongs*, which takes the instrument back to its traditional root. This same picking pattern is used on banjo renditions of Woody Guthrie’s *Pastures of Plenty* and Uncle Dave Macon’s *Over the Mountain*. Both of these songs make for EXCELLENT solo concert pieces, and I encourage you to try them. The picking pattern on *Pastures of Plenty* is one I originally heard on an old Dave Evans Lp. I really liked his rendition of the song and I re-customized the pattern with some suggestions from Bela Fleck. It’s a real cool piece and audiences totally get into it when performing solo. Even so, the picks are placed on the hand exactly as in *Cosmic Banjo* and *Techno-Folk*.

As for banjo strings, I prefer using John Pierce 80/20 light gauge, extra long (set #1700L). However, you might want to use a medium gauge string of the same brand. They are bright, stay clean-sounding a long time and are affordable. I change my strings about as often as a drummer changes underwear...every fourth concert, so I go through quite a few sets in a year.

As I once said during a magazine interview, if strings could be a beautiful buxom blonde, then these are it. Heck, I even use the same brand on my Martin



Photo by James Crisp

Guitar and I'm not even sponsored by them. They offered, but I said "no thanks". A good string is a good string. Period. So, take my recommendation as an honest preference based on experience. If you are not good at tuning or you have a banjo that tends to fall out of tune, medium gauge might be a safer way to go.

### Straps and capos:

The best place to secure a strap on the long neck is NOT both ends on the pot. Secure one side on the bottom of the pot behind the saddle. Secure the second end on the NECK, on or about the 15th fret from the tuning pegs. This will help you balance the instrument when playing. I screwed an eye hook into the neck and clipped the strap onto it.

It works great!

I've tried many capos and I finally settled on a brand that doesn't pull the strings when you set the capo on a fret. I was using the Shubb capo for a long time, but every time I clamped it down on a new fret, it would slightly pull the strings off tune a bit. This is because the angle of the Shubb clamp is off center to the neck, literally pulling the strings to the side a bit. I know a lot of players who clamp these suckers down tighter than a gnat's ass on an ice cube. Too much pressure on a capo will absolutely cause tuning problems, folks! The best one I've found is a Paige banjo capo. It clamps up from the bottom center, not off center like the Shubb, therefore guaranteeing equal pressure on all strings. Hey, J.D. Crowe uses it, and that's good enough for me... (Let me mention, though, I found the Shubb capo to work best on my Martin D-35s and D-28s, and I use Shubb exclusively on my guitars).

My Vega PS-5 long neck is a rare classic. They are not made anymore and hard to find. As I mentioned earlier in this book, I found mine from a classified ad in the back of a three-year-old issue of FRETTS Magazine, two years after they ceased publication. When the instrument arrived via UPS a few days later, I opened the package to find this beautiful banjo in perfect condition. So, I know they are still out there. As I said, the Vega PS-5 is patterned exactly after the model that Pete Seeger invented, and I absolutely LOVE it's unique sound.



Photo by James Crisp

Keep your eye on classified sections of magazines like *5-String Quarterly*. Pass the word around music festivals that you're looking for one. Contact your local luthier. Instrument makers like Homer Ledford in Winchester, Kentucky are great resources in locating old instruments.

Homer found me an extra Vega long neck “NECK” for only \$50!

However, some companies continue to make a pretty fair sounding long neck. The Deering Company comes to mind. They have two models that are actually excellent, and fairly affordable. They are worth the purchase price, for sure. When compared to the old Vega, the Deering banjo is a bit more brittle sounding, but you might prefer that kind of sound to the warmer, more muted tones of the Vega.

I encourage you to at least try this unique instrument. Its versatility and sound are unmatched. It stands out in a crowded field of Gibson Mastertones, at the very least. By simply putting a capo on the third fret, you have a banjo you can play in all the standard tunings and positions.

But those extra three frets...man, those three frets offer a whole new musical world for this instrument that needs to be explored by players much better than myself.

If you have any thoughts, experiences, or songs, get in touch with me. I'd love to hear your ideas.

