

Step-by-Step to Pro Banjo Set-Up

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With Tom Nechville

The following procedures can make a world of difference in how your banjo sounds. Following these steps will help revive your old banjo, and is a concise guide for achieving optimum sound on any traditional banjo.

1. **Neck Joint.** Take off the resonator, and look inside. If you have a Mastertone style banjo (including most Bluegrass Banjos), there will be one or usually two coordinator rods inside. While holding the bottom rod itself from turning (by using a nail or small screw-driver stuck through the small hole in the coordinator rod), loosen the nuts on each side of the wooden rim opposite of where the neck attaches. Then make certain the neck is securely fastened to the rim via the coordinator rods, without shims or other obstacles in the way of a solid neck to rim fit. (If you have a visibly bad neck joint, you may want to scrape or sand down any high spots to get a better fit, but beware that this step is best left to a professional repair person.)

2. **Secure coordinator rods.** You should finger-tighten the loose nuts on the inside and outside of the rim. Give them a slight tightening with a wrench without stressing the rim and tone ring assembly. Hopefully you have improved the neck attachment and removed any stresses put into the rim and tone ring from improperly adjusted coordinator rods. It's a mistake to use the rods for more than a minute action adjustment. Any major change in playing action should be accomplished by changing bridges or re-cutting the heel to the appropriate angle.

3. **Check Head Tension.** If the head looks totally stretched out, or if there are any soft spots around the perimeter indicating that it's broken, it's time to change it. I recommend Remo Frosted heads. Even head tension is perhaps the most important step to professional sound. During re-assembly you may lubricate sticky or rusty nuts. If you have an ear for it, tune your head to a G# or 90 on a drum dial. Otherwise, just gradually tighten it a bit at a time until the head is VERY EVENLY tensioned and the tension hoop is level all the way around.

4. **Adjust Tailpiece.** Check that the tailpiece nut is not rattling. Start with the tailpiece straight (not pointed down). I like to tighten Presto style tailpieces until it touches the tension hoop and actually begins to teeter upwards slightly. Other set up pros tend to leave a presto quite high off the tension hoop. Tailpieces are often a cause of buzzing, and inefficiencies of sound transfer. You might consider replacing old tailpieces with an in-line tailpiece like a Price or Nechville. (available from Nechville)

5. **Truss Rod.** Place the bridge in position (Fine tuning the bridge is explained in step 6) and determine if you need neck bow adjustment. Check the straightness of the neck by holding down a string at the first and last frets simultaneously. Then you can inspect the distance between the tops of the middle frets and the taught string. There should be a

distance of only a millimeter or less, (.015 “) But make sure your neck is not too straight either. Normally a clockwise twist of the truss rod (accessible from the peghead of most banjos) will reduce the bow and straighten out a neck.

6. Intonate Bridge. Relocate the bridge for correct intonation. This is done by checking the harmonic at the 19th fret and comparing the note to the fretted note at the same fret. If the fretted note is sharp, move the bridge toward tailpiece; if the fretted note is flat, move the bridge forward. Check the banjos tuning and evaluate its playability.

7. Check Action. If your string height is around 1/8” away from the 12th fret, you are in luck! Try the banjo and see how it sounds. It’s possible, however, that you have changed the neck angle and the resulting string action, so your banjo either has the strings laying on the frets or more likely, the action is way too high.

8. Install the correct bridge. It is best to have a little more height on the 3rd and 4th bridge slots for the best playability and the least string noise. Nechville makes the Enterprise Bridge in all sizes between 9/16 and 7/8”. The Enterprise is the only bridge I know that is weighed, radiused and compensated for optimal playability. If you still can’t achieve low enough action with a low bridge, you may want to visit a luthier for increasing the neck’s angle to accommodate a tall bridge, or consider a new neck with a Flux capacitor adjustable connection. It is best to use the tallest bridge possible for your banjo, but keep your bridge under 3 grams for normal sound.

9. Final adjustments. If your bow is correct, but still need to tweak the action, very slight coordinator rod adjustment can be made by first loosening the inner and outer nuts under the tailpiece. If the action needs raising, loosen the outside nut and tighten the inside nut. If the action needs to be lowered (which is usually the case), make sure the top nut by the head is tight, loosen the lower inside nut and tighten the outside nut under the tailpiece. Going too far with these nuts will warp the rim and cause damage - so be careful.

10. The last step is evaluating and plotting your next plan of attack. You may find that improvements were made but overshadowed by newfound fret buzzes after getting the action down. In this case, leveling the frets is in order. (a subject for another seminar) Frequently it happens that clearing one problem exposes another. Listen carefully to each string both fretted and open. If you get fuzzy or dull sound on the open string, but not on the fretted string, your nut slots need attention, They may be too low, or simply worn out. You can revive the nut with a careful layer of super glue and bone dust in the slot and re-shaping the slot. If you are happy, quit and enjoy playing the banjo. If you are a typical player, You’ll continue the quest for the perfect sound. I hope someday soon I’ll be building you a Nechville Helimount banjo.

Last Note: Let us know at Nechville if you have any desire to upgrade your banjo for you. We have the ability to custom build, and rebuild almost any instrument. We now install sleek Nechville necks on traditional banjo pots, and offer a wide range of banjos, parts and services for banjoists.

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