

## **The Transcriber's Art – #56**

*Cute an' Catchy and Got a Happy Feelin'* by Frank Lawes  
by Richard Yates

*I want another banjo. Sure, I own two banjos already, but the world is a sad place these days and I think extra precautions are needed.* – John Kavanagh

Music written for plucked string instruments has always been a logical and rewarding source of transcriptions for the classical guitar. The lute, in both its Renaissance and Baroque configurations, has given us a wealth of music that predates the guitar. A couple of issues ago, in this series, I found that harp music may be a needlessly overlooked trove from more recent times. Extending my foray into the plucked strings I stumbled across the banjo. Reams of bluegrass music from the last few decades had almost obscured a golden age of the banjo—the “classical banjo”—a century ago.

The banjo has a large repertoire, most of which is highly accessible to the guitar. It has more than just nostalgic chestnuts; there is genuine compositional artistry and an immediate and compelling appeal in this music. You *will* smile when you begin playing the two pieces that accompany this article.

### **History**

In the 17th century, West African slaves in the New World brought with them a gut-stringed instrument with a skin-covered, gourd body. Writing about slaves on his own plantation, Thomas Jefferson said, “The instrument proper to them is the Banjar, which they brought hither from Africa.” Modifications stemming from a growing acquaintance with European instruments—such as a flat fingerboard and frets—continued until the final form was reached near the beginning of the 20th century. Playing technique originally consisted of various types of strumming, but a second type evolved, one that included “finger-picking” in a manner similar to the classical guitar’s. Beginning about 1890, there was a rapid expansion in the popularity of the banjo as a parlor instrument. Many manufacturers appeared, along with a large repertoire of music composed specifically for the banjo, first to accompany songs and later for solo performance. The solo music was often composed by virtuoso players, who toured the country and were celebrated by members of banjo clubs and orchestras that had sprung up. The banjo was prominent in the rise of ragtime music, vaudeville and the early recording industry. Its popularity overflowed this continent and was picked up in England. The title of a widely read publication, *BMG Magazine*, gave first billing to the banjo and second to the mandolin. (You can deduce the placement of the guitar in that list.) *BMG Magazine* continues to be published today, just about 100 years later, by The Clifford Essex Music Company Limited of Norwich, England.

### **People**

The list of skilled composers of solo banjo music is quite long. Most notable and prolific were: Alfred D. Cammeyer (1862–1949), Joe Morley (1867–1937), Sylvester "Vess" L. Ossman (1868–1923), A.J. Weidt (1866–1945), Parke Hunter (1876–1912), Fred Van Eps (1878–1960), Emile Grimshaw (1880–1943) and Frank Lawes (1894–1970).

The Englishman Frank Lawes began learning the banjo at age 16, inspired by the recordings of Ossman and Van Eps. By the early 1930s he had acquired a refined playing technique and compositional facility, as shown by the publication by Clifford Essex of his earliest pieces, including the two that accompany this article, *Cute an' Catchy* and *Got a Happy Feelin'*. By this period in its evolution, the banjo had become primarily a rhythm instrument with just four strings played with a plectrum, but Lawes' compositions helped keep the solo tradition alive.

## Transcription

The solo banjo repertoire shows a remarkable degree of inventiveness and variety within the instrument's limited resources. It has idiosyncrasies that affect its music and playing technique and so, inevitably, any transcriptions for guitar. The four strings that follow the entire length of the fingerboard are tuned to an open G major chord: dgbd'. The guitar can match these exactly by lowering the first string one full tone. A frequent alternate is to lower the fourth string to c, similar to the guitar's common 'drop D' tuning. The most unusual feature is the reentrant tuning of the fifth string, that is, the one farthest toward the bass side. It extends from the bridge to only the fifth fret and is tuned to the note g' a perfect fourth *higher* than the first string. As we saw with other reentrant tunings, for instance, the theorbo (see *Soundboard*, Vol. XXXI, No. 1), there inevitably are characteristic fingerings and chords that are more difficult with the guitar's configuration. Sometimes this precludes a reasonable transcription altogether, but more often, the needed adjustments are feasible.

The closer tuning and smaller number of strings does mean that the pitch span of simultaneous notes is more limited. Somewhat compensating for this is the length of the fretboard. Standard size banjos have 22 frets that are easily accessible on the neck compared to the guitar's 12. This enlarges the range but leaves vacant space in the bass tessitura. However, much of the music of this period includes optional parts to fill out the lack of lower pitches. It was common for a banjo "solo" to be published with a second banjo part that used the lowest notes in a chordal accompaniment, and a piano part that included a true bass line.

The excellent banjo player, Mike Moss, comments on this: "It was a very common practice back then for all banjo solos to be published with the second banjo (accompaniment) and piano parts available for an additional fee, as can be seen in the old catalogues. Some pieces even had banjeaurine, mandolin or guitar parts available for ensemble playing. The composer either provided his own second banjo and piano parts, or, if he didn't, the editor would provide them ... In most cases, the first banjo part is a true solo and the second banjo or piano parts are optional—though a good second banjo part will greatly enrich any performance. But some were clearly written as duets in which the first and second banjo parts are equally important and sometimes printed on parallel staves. Furthermore, some pieces require the piano part and are incomplete without it, though it is possible to work around these passages if the piano is not available." Mr. Moss has recorded many banjo solos from this period as videos that are readily available on the Internet. They provide excellent and accomplished references for the technique, style and spirit of this music.

The common practice of playing at positions far above those that are convenient on the guitar means that transcriptions must nearly always involve transposition to a lower key. After experimenting with many of these pieces, I have found that the best choice is often the key a third lower than the original. One consequence of this is that notes on the

top two banjo strings, which are a third apart, find comfortable positions on the guitar's second and third strings—also a third apart. Both of the transcriptions with this article used this method.

The guitar's extended lower range relative to the banjo suggests providing the solo part with additional support. The bass line in the left-hand piano part, when one is available, can be commandeered for this purpose. The result is music that has a more full-bodied texture that is well-suited to the guitar. *Cute an' Catchy* was transcribed in this way, with only a very few octave transpositions of the bass line to make it playable.

The second piece, *Got a Happy Feelin'*, consists of the solo banjo part with no additional bass. While it can give you a feel for what the solo banjo music was like, I also think it stands pretty well by itself, despite never needing to touch the sixth string. I suppose you could even program it between pieces that use standard and "drop D" tuning to allow the sixth string time to settle into the pitch you need next.

### Notation and performance

The banjo's popularity spread at the same time as ragtime music and the two are intimately entwined. "Rag" is short for "ragged," a description of the characteristic syncopation that you will find throughout banjo music of this era. While the scores are filled with figures notated as dotted-eighth plus sixteenth notes, in practice there is a wide range to the duration of the dotted note. Based on contemporary and current recordings these are often performed as a triplet rhythm, especially in rapid tempos or where full, written-out triplet figures are interspersed. See Figure 1 from Joe Morley's *Shuffle Along*, to which I have added a banjo tablature staff that uses g'cgbd' tuning.

The image shows a musical score for a banjo piece. The top staff is a treble clef with a key signature of one flat and a 2/4 time signature. It contains a melody of eighth and sixteenth notes with various articulations like '+' and '3'. Below the staff is a five-line tablature staff with numbers 0-6 and symbols like '5PB' and 'P.' indicating fingerings and positions.

Figure 1

Figure 1 shows several common features of published banjo music from the early 20th century. Even when two voices are implied, or a bass note should be allowed to ring through, the notes are often combined on one set of beams without attempting to separate voices, although there are exceptions, such as when a melody is placed in the bass. This is consistent with much of the guitar music published in this period. For the transcriptions on the following pages, I have separated the implied voices to clarify the texture.

Left- and right-hand fingering symbols are both used. The left-hand symbols are 0 (open string), 1, 2, 3 and 4, the same as they are in guitar music. For the right-hand, a plus sign (+), dot (•) and double dot (••) are used for the thumb, index and middle fingers, respectively. Except in rare, four-note chords, the ring finger was not used in this technique. Barrés are shown by "PB" and positions by "P."

The g notes with an upstem and sixteenth note flag indicate that the note is to be played on the open fifth string. Frank Lawes' music contains very few of these as he wrote primarily for the four-string banjo—hence his nickname, “Fifthless Frank.”

In this style the notation can take you only so far in producing a convincing and authentic performance. There is jauntiness, punchy articulation, cunning accenting and perhaps even an attitude that can be acquired only by listening to good players who are well-versed in the classical banjo tradition. See the internet resources section below for places to start.

I have posted mp3 recordings of *Cute an' Catchy* and *Got a Happy Feelin'* on my website to give you some idea of how these transcriptions sound. Go to [www.yatesguitar.com/Soundboard/banjo.html](http://www.yatesguitar.com/Soundboard/banjo.html).

### **Internet resources**

I highly recommend the Classic Banjo website at <http://classic-banjo.ning.com>. There you will find a large library of free, downloadable, public domain banjo music. The site, run by an individual known only by his online persona, Ian “thereallyniceman,” also has photos, instruction, and discussion forums inhabited by friendly and helpful aficionados. You will also find videos and sound recordings by Mike Moss and others with far more skill than I have picked up in my brief ramble through the world of the classical banjo.

The Clifford Essex Company, publisher of *BMG Magazine* can be found at [www.cliffordessex.net](http://www.cliffordessex.net).

The Banjo Hangout, at [www.banjohangout.org](http://www.banjohangout.org), has instruments, music, discussions and more.

Please send comments, suggestions or your transcriptions to:

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# Cute an' Catchy

Transcribed for guitar  
by Richard Yates

Frank Lawes  
(1894–1970)

**Fox trot tempo**

⑥ =D

5

10

14

18

22

26

30  $VII_3$   $VII_3$  *i m i*

34 *a m i m* ②

37 1

41 2 III ② III ②

46 ③

50

54 1 III

58 2 VII3 V3 III ② VI V III

# Got a Happy Feelin'

Transcribed for guitar  
by Richard Yates

Frank Lawes  
(1894-1970)

The sheet music is written for guitar in 8/8 time and A major. It consists of seven staves of music. The first staff includes chord diagrams for  $II_3$  and  $IV_3$ , and circled numbers 2 and 4. The second staff starts with a circled number 5. The third staff has a first ending bracket labeled 1. The fourth staff has a second ending bracket labeled 2. The fifth staff includes a chord diagram for  $IV_3$ . The sixth staff has a circled number 5 and chord diagrams for  $I_3$  and  $IV_3$ . The seventh staff has a first ending bracket labeled 1. The music features various guitar techniques such as triplets, slurs, and specific fingering patterns.

33 Fine

37

42

47

51

55

60

65 D.S al Fine  
VII<sub>3</sub>



# Got a Happy Feelin'

Frank Lawes

First system of guitar tablature with three staves. The notes are: 0-0-2-2 | 4-4-5-5 | 7-7-7-7 | 7-0 | 9-7-9-7 | 9-5-7-5 | 0-2 | 0-0.

Second system of guitar tablature with three staves. It includes first and second endings. The notes are: 0-0-2-5 | 7-7-7-9-7 | 7-0 | 9-9-7-5-4 | 5-5 | 5-5 | 5-5 | 10-10 | 10-10.

Third system of guitar tablature with three staves. It includes first and second endings. The notes are: 10-10 | 9-9 | 7-7 | 7-5-4 | 2-4 | 0-2 | 0-2 | 0-2 | 0-6 | 0-2 | 0-2 | 0-3 | 0-6 | 0-2 | 0-2 | 0-3 | 0-5 | 0-5.



Fourth system of guitar tablature with three staves. It includes first and second endings and ends with 'Fine'. The notes are: 9-7-9-7 | 9-5-7-5 | 0-2 | 0-0-2-5 | 7-7-7-9-7 | 7-0 | 9-9-7-5-5 | 8-8 | 8-8 | 5-5 | 5-5 | 0-0 | 1-1 | 0-2-2 | 0-6-6 | 5-2 | 6-6-5-4 | 3-4.

Fifth system of guitar tablature with three staves. It includes first and second endings. The notes are: 3-3-5-5 | 2-2-5-5 | 5-5-5-5 | 5-5 | 5-5 | 5-5 | 5-5 | 5-5 | 5-5 | 5-5 | 0-2-0-2 | 4-0-6-6 | 6-0-2-2 | 0-2-0-2 | 5-0 | 0-0-2-4.

Sixth system of guitar tablature with three staves. The notes are: 7-6 | 5-5 | 0-5 | 0-4-3-2 | 0-1-1 | 2-2-4-4 | 5-5-5-5 | 5-5 | 5-5 | 5-5 | 1-1 | 1-1 | 2-3 | 3-2 | 3-3 | 4-0-2-0-2.

Seventh system of guitar tablature with three staves. The notes are: 5-5 | 5-5 | 5-5 | 5-5 | 5-5 | 5-5 | 9-9 | 9-9 | 9-9 | 5-5 | 2-2 | 2-2 | 0-2-2-0-2 | 5-0 | 0-2-0-2 | 4-0 | 0-2-0-2 | 9-11 | 9-5-4 | 2-2 | 2-2.

D.S. al Fine

Eighth system of guitar tablature with three staves. The notes are: 5-3 | 2-0 | 5-6-6-6 | 7-7-9-9 | 10-10-10-10 | 10-10 | 12-10 | 2-2 | 1-1 | 1-1 | 1-0 | 2-2 | 0-4-4 | 6-6 | 6-6 | 7-8 | 10-8 | 10-7 | 8-10 | 2-2 | 2-2 | 2-2 | 2-2 | 1-0 | 2-0 | 4-4 | 6-5-10 | 9-8 | 9-11 | 11-11.

# Shuffle Along

Joe Morley

Banjo

6

11

16

22

26

31

36

41

2

Musical notation for measures 1-4. Measure 1 has a repeat sign. Fingering numbers are shown below the notes.

51

Musical notation for measures 5-8. Measure 5 has a repeat sign. Fingering numbers are shown below the notes.

56

Musical notation for measures 9-12. Measure 9 has a repeat sign. Fingering numbers are shown below the notes.

61

Musical notation for measures 13-16. Measure 13 has a repeat sign. Fingering numbers are shown below the notes.

66

Musical notation for measures 17-20. Measure 17 has a repeat sign. Fingering numbers are shown below the notes.

71

Musical notation for measures 21-24. Measure 21 has a repeat sign. Fingering numbers are shown below the notes.

76

Musical notation for measures 25-28. Measure 25 has a repeat sign. Fingering numbers are shown below the notes.

81

Musical notation for measures 29-32. Measure 29 has a repeat sign. Fingering numbers are shown below the notes.

85

Musical notation for measures 33-36. Measure 33 has a repeat sign. Fingering numbers are shown below the notes.