

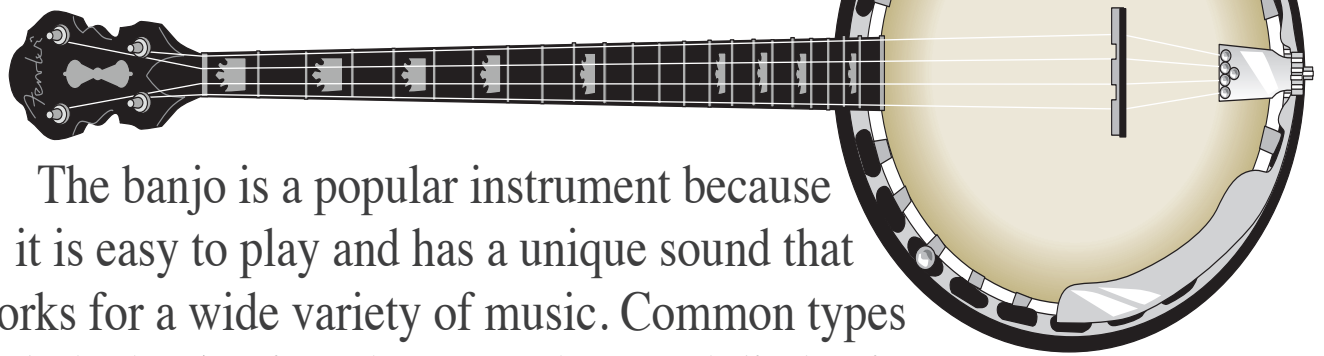
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BANJOS

The **tenor banjo** is used extensively in both Irish traditional music and traditional jazz.



The banjo is a popular instrument because it is easy to play and has a unique sound that works for a wide variety of music. Common types include the 5-string, the tenor, the mandolin banjo (or banjolin) and the uke banjo.

Slavery

Early banjos were made by African slaves and were based on instruments they knew in their homes in Africa. Scholars have found that many of these instruments have names that are related to the modern word banjo, such as the *banja*, the *banjil*, the *banza*, the *bangoe*, the *bangie* and the *banshaw*.

In the Caribbean islands, the banjo began to be influenced by European instruments like the lute and Spanish guitar, which led to a fretboard being added to the neck of the banjo. The banjo and its music were taken from slave culture and adopted into American popular culture through minstrel shows and blackface performances.

Joel Sweeney

Joel Walker Sweeney (1810-1860) was a musician and early blackface minstrel performer who has sometimes been credited with the invention of the banjo's short fifth string. This has been proved incorrect, as a painting titled "The Old Plantation," painted between 1777 and 1800, shows a slave holding a gourd banjo with a fifth-string peg half-way up the neck.

Sweeney did help popularize the banjo through his minstrel shows and by contracting with a drum maker in Baltimore to make banjos for public sale. These banjos were basically drums with necks attached.

The Civil War

During the Civil War (1861-1865), soldiers formed minstrel groups and bands to entertain themselves. One of the most famous of the Civil War banjoists was Samuel Sweeney, the younger brother of Joel Sweeney. After the war, soldiers brought the banjo home to almost every region in the United States.

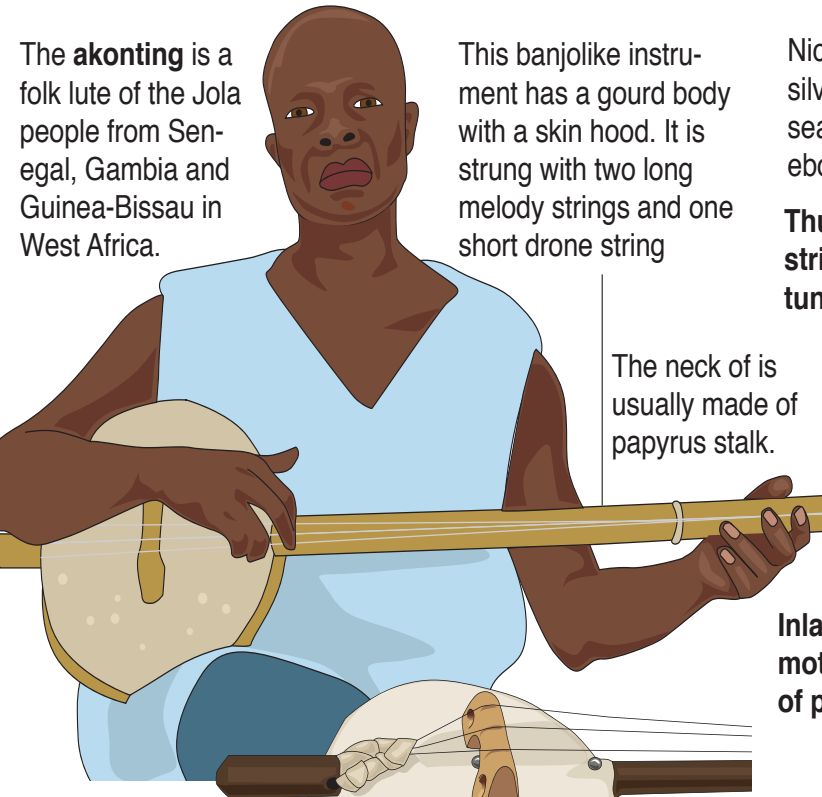


"The Old Plantation" is an anonymous folk painting from the 1700s depicting slaves dancing to banjo music.



The banjo can trace its roots to a simple instrument made from a hollowed-out gourd, a few horsehair strings, an animal skin and a planed stick. It was commonly called a *banjar*.

The **akonting** is a folk lute of the Jola people from Senegal, Gambia and Guinea-Bissau in West Africa.



This banjolike instrument has a gourd body with a skin hood. It is strung with two long melody strings and one short drone string.

The neck of is usually made of papyrus stalk.

Of the many varieties of West African lutes, the Jola akonting is most similar to early North American gourd banjos.

The traditional technique used to play the akonting, called **o'teck**, is very similar to the traditional stroke for the banjo.

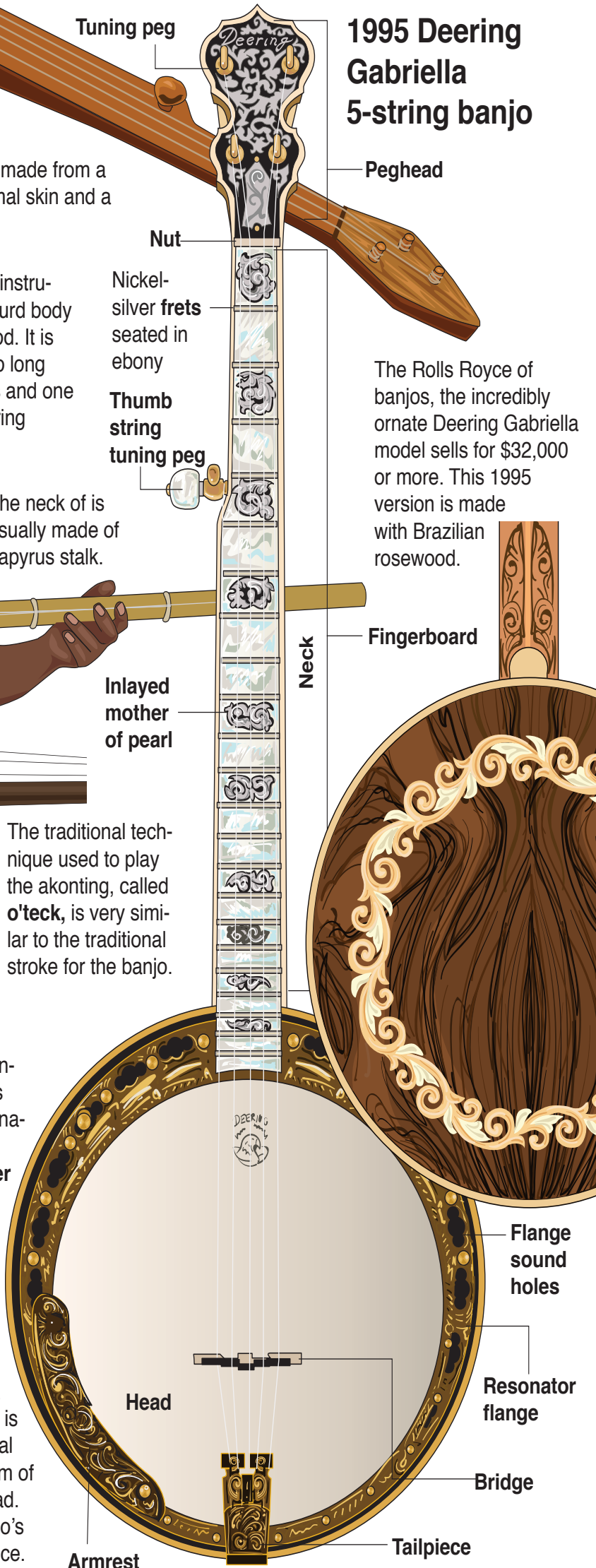
Bacon Orchestra tenor banjo (1921)



Bluegrass banjos

Old-time, or **bluegrass**, banjos usually have five strings and an open back (no resonator). They are usually played **frail** or **clawhammer** style, using the thumb and forefinger or middle finger in a down-picking motion.

Old-time open-back banjos can come either with or without a tone ring. A tone ring is a round piece of metal found between the rim of the body and the head. It helps define a banjo's tone, volume and voice.



1995 Deering Gabriella 5-string banjo

The Rolls Royce of banjos, the incredibly ornate Deering Gabriella model sells for \$32,000 or more. This 1995 version is made with Brazilian rosewood.

SOURCES: World Book Encyclopedia, World Book Inc.; <http://bluegrassbanjo.org>; <https://www.npr.org>; americanbanjomuseum.com; <https://www.deeringbanjos.com>; <https://www.hobgoblin-usa.com>

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