



# Banjo Newsletter

THE 5-STRING BANJO MAGAZINE

## Folk Songs for Banjo

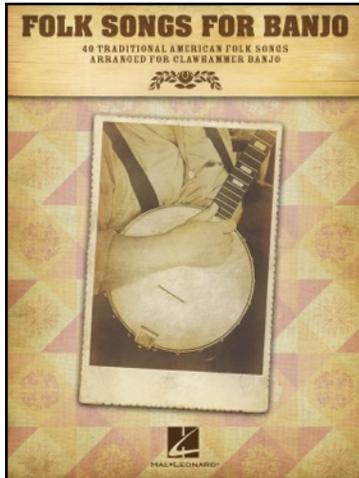
40 Traditional American Folksongs  
Arranged for Clawhammer Banjo  
by Michael J. Miles

Published by Hal Leonard  
Reviewed by Tim Jumper  
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Clawhammer virtuoso Michael J. Miles is renowned -- and often covered in these pages -- as a performer, composer, and arranger in every musical genre -- classical, jazz, popular, folk, and blues. In this, his latest book, he applies his considerable skills to a selection of songs and tunes out of the Great American Songbag, from "Amazing Grace," to "The Yellow Rose of Texas."

**This is an excellent source of familiar material on which intermediate-level pickers can hone their technique** -- banjo instructors, take note. It provides straightforward settings that, for the most part, can serve as song accompaniments in the old-time style of doubling the vocal line on the banjo, as opposed to just strumming the chord changes. There are a few syncopations, some drop-thumbs on the same m-picked string, and occasional alternate-string pull-offs, but otherwise these arrangements require nothing more than the fundamentals of clawhammer.

**What sets this book apart from others like it are the "Banjo Breaks," Michael's variations that make forays up the neck** where many hammerers fear to claw. These are technically more challenging, especially for the left hand, but are ideal for gaining knowledge of the higher positions and for understanding how an up-the-neck rendition is crafted. It helps that the tabs are well laid out and clearly printed, making them easy to read, and that there is plenty of space between the staves for personal annotations.



For more experienced pickers "of a certain age" (i.e. us old fogies) these songs are well-known old chestnuts that many of us have known forever, it seems, but nonetheless **it is enlightening and instructive to see how an expert musician's take on them compares to one's own. Michael's arrangements are fun to play, and they often surprise with little melodic or harmonic ideas that bespeak an inventive musical mind.** It is especially in the instrumental breaks that these licks and catchy phrases pop up and make you grin as you pick 'em.

Folks of more recent vintage (them young sprats) may well be unfamiliar with many of these songs. Over the years I have observed that among the younger set the old standards are not as recognized as they used to be. Not so long ago almost everyone learned them at home, school, camp, or club, off sing-along records, or even from "Follow the Bouncing Ball" at the local cinema or Shakey's pizza parlor. (Ask your grandpappy, kids.)

But the soundtrack of American popular culture has shifted and left a lot of these songs and their wonderful melodies behind. It is to be hoped that books like this will help save them from oblivion by enabling at least us banjo pickers to carry them forward.

The tunings used are the "big three:" Open-G (23 songs), Double-C (10 songs), and G-modal (2 songs), as well as the lesser-known Open-C (5 songs). The latter was a favorite of Uncle Dave Macon, as it is, more recently, of Taj Mahal. It is an easy-to-play-in, bright-sounding, and all-around useful tuning, and Michael's arrangements are a fine introduction to it.

That these songs have endured for so long is testament to their quality. **They are quintessential American folk songs arranged for the quintessential American folk instrument by a five-string master. This collection belongs on your banjo bookshelf.**

