



5 STRINGER

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Get Yo' Ticket: The Life and Legacy of Harry C. Browne (Part IV)

By Henry Sapoznik

III. Stagecraft

As the Spanish-American war began to lose box office draw, Browne capitalized instead on the growing currency of his name. *Six Months With Uncle Sam* morphed into *Two Hours With Harry C. Browne*, a multimedia offering in which he played banjo and treated the audience to the auditory phenomenon of onstage “played gramophone selections,” the height of hip back in the day.

In addition to Browne’s usual repertoire of prompting dances, giving concerts, and publicizing politics—he went so far as to stump for William Jennings Bryan’s 1900 presidential run—the musician’s inner thespian came increasingly to the fore. Having trod the boards at seventeen in a hometown production called *Girl Spy*, Browne went pro at twenty-one in a traveling production shepherded by the Hibernian actor Myles McCarthy.

Before hitting North Adams in March 1899, McCarthy’s *Dear Hearts of Ireland* had played the likes of the McKeanon Opera House in Guthrie, Oklahoma, where according to Daily Reader it avoided “burlesque, grotesque or buffoon ideas” while containing “many dramatic and comedy features but no inconsistencies or claptrap devices”—high praise for any theatrical offering. When Browne joined the troupe for its North Adams debut, the *Transcript* trumpeted its favored son’s role. “He has a large number of friends,” the paper noted, “and they will be present in force to witness his first appearance as a professional actor.”

This widely admired if largely unschooled addition was excellent casting on several levels, given the troupe’s need for geniality in a subsequent engagement. “One Trunk Still Here, All Others Have Been Returned: Echo of Myles McCarthy Company’s troubles heard in City Court today,” read a notice in the June 14 *Geneva Daily Times*. The show had done “light business” before arriving in the upstate New York town, where a repeat performance garnered an unhappy ending, with Ryan’s baggage and costumes seized in lieu of unearned lodgings. “The theater management hoped to retrieve their fortunes but not a corporal’s guard was present,” the *Times* reported by way of explanation.

McCarthy exited stage left, setting sail for Europe, while Browne returned to North Adams for an engagement culminating in marriage. On November 8, 1900, Browne took British-born Edith Elizabeth Jacklin to be his lawful wedded wife. The union forged little impediment on his touring schedule, however; by August 5, 1902, the *Springfield Daily Republican* reported the local hero en route to New York “to join the Daniel V. Ryan Company, with which he will play this year.” (“This year” turned into five.)

The troupe was typical of the second-tier theatrical companies then crisscrossing the country to play the provincial opera houses built to host just such performances. Rather than calico, pots, and millinery, these peddlers of the arts brought drama to the heartland. Making

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their way among them to upstate New York, Browne received a crash course in stagecraft.

Ryan's thick catalog of plays and cutting-edge stage technology ("2 CARS SPECIAL SCENIC EFFECTS! All Recent Electrical Devices and Elaborate Costumes!" a display ad in the *Utica Journal* proclaimed) fueled a penchant for the roar of the crowd cultivated before ever he whiffed greasepaint. "Cyclone" Ryan's early fame was as a pitcher and first baseman for the New York Metropolitans in 1887 and for the Boston Beaneaters in 1891. By 1898 New England newspapers like Vermont's *St. Albans Daily Messenger* were running ads for "the romantic actor Daniel R. Ryan and his unrivalled company," well established by the time Browne joined forces.

Theater being the only show in town, troupes like Ryan's kept busy, and stock actors like Browne were in high demand. Throughout the five years he was with Ryan, Browne pinch-hit for other companies, as in his 1903 appearance with the Eugenie Blair Stock Company, playing opposite its star in a New Year's Eve performance of Hermann Sudermann's *Magda*, in Philadelphia. Browne won accolades.

"On a par with Miss Blair's portrayal of Magda was that of Harry C. Browne as Colonel Leopold Schwartz, her father," said the *Sandusky Star*. "No more artistic conception of this difficult and intensely dramatic role could have been devised."

The show was performed in rotation with an English translation of the French turn-of-the-century play *Zaza*, by David "Bishop of Broadway" Belasco. A decade later this connection with Belasco would pay tremendous dividends for Browne; but in the meantime, while on tour in Salt Lake City as part of his ongoing work in the stocks, Browne was tapped by the theatrical syndicate Klaw and Erlanger to appear in a road production of a new play, *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, in advance of its Broadway opening.

Following its November 16, 1909, preview in Springfield, Mass., *Rebecca* traveled New England and played four months in Boston. But instead of accompanying the show to what would become a seven-month Broadway run, Browne went back on the road—this time with a legend of the American stage: Lillian Russell.

Acclaimed for her buxom beauty and extravagant costumes, Russell was by far the most famous personage with whom Browne had appeared. By this time in her career, though, the voice known for Gilbert and Sullivan interpretations was showing signs of wear. So Russell gravitated to such nonmusical offerings as *In Search of a Sinner*, the play Browne joined her in.

On September 4, 1910, in Lexington, Kentucky, they began rehearsing the suffrage-flecked comedy-drama about a woman who, wanting a change from her late, staid husband, sought a bit of the devil in Browne's character. (By Act Three she regrets her decision.) After opening in South Bend, Indiana, the show kept up a swift schedule, moving from Chicago to Cleveland to San Jose, California, to Salt Lake City to Macon, Georgia, and everywhere in between. Critics were largely positive. The *Waterloo Evening Courier* labeled the Russell vehicle "as modern as the latest biplane," calling her leading man "excellent" as "a fellow of cherry corpuscles."

Not all members of the press were similarly enthused. Sinner's March 3 debut in the Northeast elicited a *Trenton Evening Times* review titled "Fair Lillian Fought Bravely: 'In Search of a Sinner,' Charged With Being a Comedy, Found Not Guilty." Seventeen paragraphs of thespian dyspepsia detail how "the ever young and fair Lillian struggled nobly" as the play "dragged out its weary existence." In anticipation of a New York opening that was not to be, the reviewer opined that its Gotham audience "will be filled with an unquenchable desire to spank the bad boy." (They never got the chance.) Still, in the final paragraph, Browne earns a positive nod for "play[ing] well under depressing conditions."

Browne had signed on to the stock company world in its twilight, soon made irrelevant by larger big-city road companies, vaudeville, and finally the new phenomena of "photoplays." Now that he had proved his mettle—and earned a barrel of printer's ink—Browne was ready for the Great White Way. And it was ready for him.

IV. Boards to Reels: Broadway to the Silver Screen

About the best curtain call Harry C. Browne ever received was from the theater impresario David Belasco, who, pleased with the young actor's performance of his play *Zaza*, cast him in the 1912 Broadway production *The Case of Becky*. This "Jekyll and Hyde with skirts," as *Variety* described it, allowed its leading lady, Frances Starr, to portray both the shy, retiring Dorothy and the "hoyden" Becky, "lacking poise, reverence and all regard for truth." Browne, meanwhile, played her protector against her evil father and his spurious hypnotist henchman at the asylum in which she was confined.

Browne was "a healthy part of the action, in his build and his infectious laugh," read *Variety's* opening night review, which also lauded the play's two-performances-in-one device and timely topic of psychotherapy. But the *New York Tribune's* Vanderheyden Fyles faulted the show for a "jerky plot" based on ideas that "had their novelty rubbed off years ago in far better plays." Still, Fyles concluded, "The

drama is appropriate to the times in its appeal to amateur thinkers, and will attract and delight the mob.” So it continued to do, when Belasco sent the production on a nationwide tour in December. And within a year of its June 1913 conclusion, Browne found himself on the ground floor of a dynamic new artistic outlet that would forever alter the nation’s psyche: photoplays, a.k.a. the movies.

In the early 1900s the nascent film business, based in New York, existed cheek-to-jowl with the theater, providing moviemakers with a stocked pond of seasoned actors and scenarists that let them make up in output what they lacked in history. Browne was on the farm team. So was his first director.

A street-corner evangelist when she landed a bit part in a photoplay in 1905, by 1911 Lois Weber was making movies herself at the busy little Rex Motion Picture Company, for which she wrote, produced, directed, and performed in some five hundred movies. Its envelopment by Universal Films in 1917 allowed for the establishment of Lois Weber Productions, making her one of Hollywood’s highest paid and most powerful directors.

While still a movie muckraker in New York, in 1914 Weber hired Harry C. Browne for three films, launching his celluloid career. None of the films survived, but his moviemaking career did, thanks backhandedly and yet again to the Bishop of Broadway.

In 1907 David Belasco cast one Gladys Louise Smith in a play, changing her name to Mary Pickford. By 1914 “America’s Sweetheart” was the star at Famous Players Film Company, where she tapped James Kirkwood—another Belasco alumnus—to direct and co-star in *The Eagle’s Mate*, awarding Browne fifth billing.

Kissing cousins to the Hatfields and the McCoys, *The Eagle’s Mate’s* Breckenridges and Mornes embodied all the characteristics of quintessential backwoods throwbacks and cardboard mythic “hillbillies”: moonshining, feuding, gun shooting, and soft-core incest. Browne, lurking behind a walrus mustache, is cast against type as an evil cousin who abducts Pickford, forcing Kirkwood’s character to win her back with what the industry quarterly *Moving Picture World* praised as “unusual realism in the stand-up knock-down fight.”

The film did so well at the box office it was re-released four years later, to equally enthusiastic reviews. It alone of the baker’s dozen films Browne made remains to us today. Its inclusion here is the happy result of a two-year odyssey from discovering a print existed—at the British Film Institute—to finding a copy for use at the George Eastman House in Rochester, NY. The original old-time music soundtrack, created without benefit of the “scoring

card” shipped with every silent film, references subject and context more accurately than the piano-based live music that would have accompanied *Eagle’s Mate* back in the day—especially given the eventual confluence of Browne’s repertoire with hillbilly.

Browne’s film and theatrical successes, which catapulted throughout his musical career (his next movie, *The Heart of Jennifer*, hit theaters during his eight-month run in on Broadway in *House of Glass*) had been launched by appearances on the stock stage and, before that, the Odd Fellows Halls and smokers of North Adams. In the same way, as 1915 drew to a close, Browne was yet again on the cusp of another important new entertainment medium, at just the right moment.

V. At the Horn

When the Broadway show *House of Glass* closed and hit the road in April 1916, Harry C. Browne bowed out, abandoning theater entirely for two years. Maybe no suitable scripts came his way, or he had grown weary of drama—or perhaps he just wanted to get back to the banjo. If so, fate obliged on February 4, in the form of a full-page back-cover ad in *Variety*:

The Columbia Graphophone Company invites communications from recognized artists of the vaudeville and legitimate stage, also from entertainers of merit ... any act that would make an interesting talking machine record.

Applicants were invited to call, write, or visit Columbia’s new uptown office at 102 West Thirty-Eighth Street, just footfalls from where Browne was giving eight shows weekly. In short order Browne was there, banjo in hand, set to mine the seventy-five-year strata of American blackface music, and in doing so to solidify his role as a transitional figure in American popular culture.

With a brass orchestra fanned out behind him and his chair facing the recording horn (imagine a giant dunce cap on its side with the wide end toward the performers), Browne began his legacy of popularizing the past while presaging the what’s-next, laying tracks for a new generation of artists and audiences of the “hillbilly” recording tradition via songs ranging from minstrelsy to jubilee and coon to country. In those pre-microphone days, a recording’s success depended largely on artists’ moving as much air as possible, and doing it lyrically. Browne could.

Some of the qualities that made him perfect for the stage—his calibrated elocution and leather-lunged delivery—suited him for acoustic recording, giving new dimension to his theatrical press in that regard. From his first outing in this untested context Browne sounds and feels very much at ease

His banjo was also up to snuff. The Fairbanks Whyte Laydie No. 2—with which we seem him posing in the August 1916 Columbia supplement—was, and still is, one of the finest banjos ever built. As banjo building matured in lockstep with record technology, instruments coming out of the great New England workshops were geared to sounding within the narrow dynamic range of horn recording.

If the idea behind the Columbia sessions was to most broadly evoke Old Plantation, the assembled got right to it with the first cut, waxed March 14: Stephen Foster's classic "Camptown Races," which Browne retitled "Gwine to Run All Night: The Doo-dah Song" and re-recorded that July (likely to replace the worn stamper used to make the 78, his best-selling record in the year of his greatest output).

Prior to its release, Columbia began peppering entertainment trade magazines with little pieces about their artist's new calling. (The film magazine *Motography* pointed out that Browne, star of Metro Pictures' new western *The Flower of No Man's Land*, "is singing old plantation melodies for the Columbia Graphophone company.") But it was in the label's monthly supplemental record catalogs that the most intensive and focused marketing took place.

Given the sheer number of records being issued regularly and the fulsome copy that needed to be produced, Columbia copywriters had a free hand in how to characterize their star product and the music he recorded. And they used it, freely.

"Turn back a leaf of your life ... and let H.C. Browne, baritone and banjo expert, take you back to the good old days," the catalogs offered. "Here is a treat that will tickle the musical palates of all lovers of the old slave-day river songs and bring to the younger generation some rattling, jiggling melodies that will open their eyes to what real ragtime is."

They credited Browne's repertoire to dear old Dad, "a well known composer" of blackface songs:

"These negro character songs by Harry C. Browne prove conclusively that someone has made a close study of the darky, his habits and his characteristics. That someone is Isaac C. Browne, the father of the singer, who writes practically all of the record material his son uses."

If it was occasionally advantageous to promote Browne as an intrepid ethnomusicologist instead—"We have told before of how H.C. Browne has spent years in collecting his negro songs from ... the haunts and retreats where the real negro lovers of singing get together and keep alive the old time half-religious half-comic melodies of the

days on the levees before the war"—it sometimes paid to stress his interpretive powers: "Up and down out-of-the-way alleys and in and out of old barber shops, Browne always emerges with a more unique melody."

Yet despite bits of actual biography—"His instrument has accompanied him from the days he played and sang to his brother volunteers in Cuba to his playing to all lovers of banjo music throughout the entire country on his Columbia records"—the catalogs, with their confusion of descriptions, reflect the national obfuscation about what black music was and what music said about blacks. The more serrated songs of the coon catalog, coming as they did in a period of negative pushback against post-Reconstruction era advances by African-Americans, are a grim soundtrack to Jim Crow America.

Clearly the label sensed this music was not long for the popular market and used Browne as a rear-guard action to delay—and capitalize on—a once-thriving music form. A triptych in a November 1916 catalog illuminates the dynamic transition. A picture of Browne, looking more bank president than banjo player, is flanked by the black comedian Bert Williams and the Jewish actor Al Jolson, both in blackface. And there you have it: the blue blood Northerner who played antebellum, foundational minstrelsy; overlapped by Williams, who is black and has to appear in blackface in order to deliver coon repertoire; and a Jewish Tin Pan Alley performer donning blackface devoid of minstrelsy's tradition and getting down on one knee to offer up its swan song: essentially an Irish mother tune. (For Jolson, as for Eddie Cantor, another Jewish immigrant, burnt cork equaled sure-footed passage up the ladder of American popular culture.)

A new arrangement introduced for Browne's 1917 Columbia session included the Peerless Quartette, which in one form or another had been issuing bestselling records since the 1890s. That the Quartette was coming to the end of its popularity when these recordings were made illustrates the label's "get the wagons in a circle" gathering of high-visibility names—including what the catalog ballyhooed as "grand past master of the banjo" Fred Van Eps—to sell blackface records once again.

In Browne's first three years at Columbia, his recordings were issued fast and regular—three to six months after being waxed. By 1920, release lagged recording by as much as a year (and in one case more than two). Although on two occasions Browne re-recorded Stephen Foster titles that had sold well and still did, Columbia was finding that in the Jazz Age, a little minstrelsy went a long way.

Oddly, despite being aggressively marketed as an extraordinary banjo soloist, Browne released not a one. Three documented but unissued takes on December 30, 1920, of an instrumental called "Catnip," are all that exist to show an attempt was made.

It is not that Columbia didn't think finger-style banjo solos were marketable. The flip side of Browne's

jubilee song "Balm of Gilead" is Fred Van Eps's "Medley of Southern Melodies," a five-tune instrumental mash-up of songs Browne himself recorded as vocals. Yet Harry C. Browne would remain the greatest recording banjoist of the twentieth century never recorded alone.

To be continued...

Medley Of Southern Melodies

BANJO SOLO

Arr. by
Fred Van Eps

Andante

tremolo
10B

ESSENCE

Allegretto

Allegro Moderato

19

7B.....

7B..... 10B.....

3B..... 9B..... 5B..... 3Pos..... 7B.....

7B..... 3Pos..... 9B..... 5B.....

3Pos..... 7B.....

7B..... 3B..... 7B..... 3B.....

3B..... 10B..... 7B..... 3B.....

3B..... 10B..... 7B..... 3B.....

3B..... accel. gra 15B

2025 Fall Rally Recap

ROUND-ROBIN FRIDAY AFTERNOON

Drew Frech with Becky Schneider: *Rondo* (Stuber)
 Stephen Brodine with Becky Schneider: *Queen of the Burlesque* (Tilley), *The Washington Post* (Sousa)
 Tim Spacek: *Banjoleers* (Grimshaw), *Mind the Paint* (Tarrant Bailey Jr.)
 Frank Vitale with Ruth Vitale: *Carolina Hop* (Ellis)
 Ruth Vitale with Frank Vitale: *The Gold Diggers* (Morley), *In the Garden* (C. Austin Miles)
 Paul Draper with Joel Hooks: *Shaeffer's Jig* (Shaeffer), *Boil That Cabbage* (Turner)
 Joel Hooks with Paul Draper: *The Demon Jig* (Tilley), *Somewhere in Dixie* (Lansing)
 Doug Kiessling: *Alpine Waltz* (Morley), *Clarence Polka March* (Ellis)

Sam Harris: *Dill Pickles* (Johnson), *St. Louis Rag* (Turpin, arr. Van Eps)
 John Cohen: *Twilight Reverie* (Eno), *Horace Weston's Celebrated Minor Jig* (Weston)
 Jerron Paxton: *Ragtime Oriole* (Scott), *Keep of the Grass* (Von Tilzer)

ROUND-ROBIN SATURDAY AFTERNOON

Jerron Paxton: *Pierrette* (Chaminade), *Sunflower Breakdown* (Morley)
 Tim Spacek: *Sweet Jasmine* (Oakley), *Galloping Gallopades* (Bradbury)
 Sam Harris: *The Entertainer* (Joplin, arr. H. Weilmunster), *St. Louis Tickle* (Barney & Seymour, arr. H. Weilmunster)



Top Row: Doug Kiessling, Stephen Brodine, Jerron Paxton, Paul Draper, Norm Azinger, Norma Shearer, Sam Harris, Tim Spacek, Drew Frech.
Middle Row: JoAnn Azinger, Madeleine Kaufman.
Front Row: John Cohen, Joel Hooks, Becky Schneider, Ruth Vitale, Frank Vitale.

John Cohen: *Leaning on the Garden Gate* (Converse),
Scotch Air (Converse)
 Joel Hooks with Paul Draper: *Dance of the Spooks* (Ellis)
 Joel Hooks: *Drowsy Dempsey* (Lansing)
 Paul Draper: *Rochester Schottische* (Baur), *Cape Carnie*
Waltz (Buckley)
 Doug Kiessling: *Blue Eyes* (Cammeyer), *My Old*
Kentucky Home (Foster)
 Ruth Vitale with Becky Schneider: *His Eye is on the*
Sparrow (Martin, arr. R. Vitale)
 Ruth Vitale: *Excerpt from Banjo Frolic* (Morley)
 Frank Vitale with Ruth Vitale: *Farmer's Dance*
 (Traditional)



Rally Snaps – October 2025

Above: Norma Shearer watches Jerron Paxton perform in a Round Robin.

Left: Stephen Brodine, Becky Schneider, & Drew Frech.
Below: The ABF Orchestra.





Rally Snaps – October 2025

Above: Drew Frech addresses the Round Robin.

Right: Tim Spacek, Becky Schneider, & Drew Frech in festive attire with Stewart banjos.

Below: A spread of S.S. Stewart banjos of various sizes, from the Novelty Banjorett to the Orchestra.



2026 Spring Rally Recap

ROUND-ROBIN FRIDAY AFTERNOON

Tim Spacek: *Piece Caractéristique* (Morley), *Presto* (Bach)
 Paul Draper: *Dell Schottische* (Converse), *Pea Nut Gal & Charlie is my Darling* (Converse)
 Joel Hooks: *Funeral March* (Converse), *The Fawn Mazurka* (Converse)
 Trevor Holder: *Smiler Rag* (Wenrich), *Whispering* (Bowen)
 Spencer Chang: *Sunflower Breakdown* (Morley), *Eli Green's Cakewalk* (Koninsky)
 Doug Kiessling: *My Old Kentucky Home* (Foster)
 Ruth Vitale with Becky Schneider: *Sweet Hour of Prayer* (Bradbury, arr. R. Vitale), *Precious Lord Take My Hand* (Dorsey, arr. R. Vitale)
 Drew Frech with Becky Schneider: *Cupid's Promenade* (Gearhart)
 Trevor Holder with Drew Frech: *Nola* (Arndt)

ROUND-ROBIN SATURDAY AFTERNOON

Ruth Vitale with Becky Schneider: *The Gold Diggers* (Morley), *Precious Lord Take my Hand* (Dorsey, arr. R. Vitale)
 Doug Kiessling: *Alpine Waltz* (Morley)
 Spencer Chang: *Nola* (Arndt, arr. Sands), *The Money Never Ends* (Cannon)
 Joel Hooks: *Flower Song* (Lange, arr. Hooks), *Minuet* (Cammeyer, arr. Hooks)
 Paul Draper with Joel Hooks: *Champion Jig* (Partee)
 Paul Draper: *Weston's Minor Jig* (Stewart)
 Tim Spacek: *Pussyfoot Parade* (Morley), *Gauchos Gallopade* (Bradbury)



Top Row: Becky Schneider, Ruth Vitale, Drew Frech, Doug Kiessling, Joel Hooks, Spencer Chang.
Middle Row: Madeleine Kaufman, Paul Draper.
Front Row: Norma Shearer, Tim Spacek.



Rally Snaps – May 2026



Top Left: Trevor Holder performs in a Round Robin.
Top Right: Tim Spacek with his Presentation S. S. Stewart.
Bottom Left: Doug Kiessling.
Bottom Right: Paul Draper.



Rally Snaps – May 2026

Right: Spencer Chang performs in a Round Robin.

Left (and Center): Ruth Vitale & Tim Spacek show off the fronts and backs of their fancy S.S. Stewart banjos.

Bottom: Ruth Vitale, Becky Schneider, & Drew Frech.



Looking Back

ABF Five Stringer #80, published November 1961, featured a delightful toast by ABF President Burt Gedney. That same issue featured a series of resolutions for banjoists, which we have dutifully reproduced below with only one minor correction. Lastly, we have reproduced the *The Banjo Choirs*, an article written by Gordon McCormick and published in ABF Five Stringer #106.

A TOAST

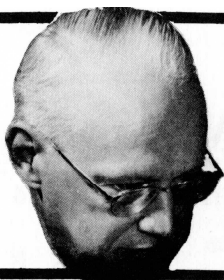
TO THE AMERICAN BANJO FRATERNITY

by Burton D Gedney, President.

It's not a common slice of bread,
That we'd be after toasting.
But a sizeable group of musical mokes,
Of whom we're always boasting;
So here's to our ABF by heck,
Of which we're justly proud,
Get out the old five-stringer,
And ply it long and loud.
Be sure ye use the finger style,
As our forebears would we do,
Banjo history tells the story,
From Sweeny down to you,
How guys who use the fingers,
On nylons sweet and true,
Blessing their long and useful life,
As the ladies are wont to do;
So once again to ABF
And those who guide our fate,
Here's that we may have naught but progress
In future to relate;
And when the good Lord calls us,
May we join His Heavenly Band,
Seeking greater fame and honor,
In a new and Sacred Land!

1962 RESOLUTIONS

1. To practice new music on the five-string banjo.
2. To practice the playing of the five-string banjo daily.
3. To attend the ~~May Rally in Lewistown, Pennsylvania.~~
Fall Rally in Palmyra, New York.



THE BANJO CHOIRS
by Gordon McCormick
Technical Editor
and now
Banjocologist

THE BANJO: A miniature orchestra, having available a wide spectrum of "tone qualities" or "choirs". The extent to which this tonal palette is used often distinguishes the "musician" from the "banjo picker".

Digital dexterity, speed and complexity, although a familiar part of banjo music, are no more than part of the "tool kit". Tone quality is of equal importance. Bill Bowen frequently referred to Alfred Farland's beautiful tone. In recent times we have heard the same attention to tone in the playing of Alex Magee, Elmer Dawson, and Mary Koons, to mention a few.

THE VOLUME PROBLEM: The modern banjo is an instrument of great sensitivity often obscured in the effort to produce a great volume of sound. Many of the most beautiful effects are only available when played softly. The banjo is a small instrument with a simple, primitive resonating system, hence the tonal spectrum is changed as the volume is increased or decreased.

THE SPEED EFFECT: Tone quality as effected by speed of playing differs from the sound volume effect. With sufficient technical ability, the full range of tone quality is at the player's command at any speed. Records and tapes of great players illustrate this point. Examples are "Omena Intermezzo" by Fred Van Eps, "La Favorita" by Bill Bowen and "Moonlight O'er the Heather" by Alex Magee. In these performances there is no compromise with musicianship because of technical restrictions. Their performances are all beautiful, but unlike each other to the point of revealing the players identity.

THAT RIGHT HAND: "Tonal Quality" is technically very complex. In its simplest explanation the musical sounds we hear are a combination of the fundamental or basic pitch tone "flavored" by various amounts of other pitch tones or overtones. On the banjo it is the production of these supplementary tones that controls the tone quality heard by the listener. Each instrument has its own unique values. However, the right or plucking hand is a major influence on tone quality.

The string being plucked is suspended between the bridge and the fret. It is sounded or put into vibration by being slightly stretched by the finger or thumb and then released. Two of the most influential factors in tone quality production are:

- a. The position of the finger on the string where the release occurs,
 - b. The velocity or sharpness of release.
- These factors are easily illustrated. The difference between the sharp ringing tone when playing near the bridge and the "flute like" tone when playing near the neck is evident. Likewise the difference between plucking with the soft ball of the finger or with the nail is easily recognized. A third apparent effect is involved in the striking speed of the finger or thumb.

To examine the string position: when the string is plucked near the bridge it is essentially free to generate its catalog of overtones, not being influenced by factors other than those within itself. However, when plucked near the neck, the string is divided into two sections at the instant of release, one between the plucking finger and the bridge, and one between the finger and the nut. Although the fundamental pitch is the same for a given string length, the difference in plucking position has a profound effect on the overtones controlling tone quality.

THE FINGER INFLUENCE: (for simplicity, the finger and thumb are the same in this discussion).

The major influences on tone quality appear to be:

- a. Hardness...callouses, nails, and soft ball of the finger.
- b. Velocity of the finger as it strikes and releases.
- c. Angle of string displacement at time of release...that is, was the release parallel to the head, pushed down, or lifted and dropped (hooked).

IN CONCLUSION: Despite its apparent simplicity, the banjo is an exceedingly complex instrument acoustically. Of the fretted instruments, it is the most sensitive to adjustment as the major amplification system, the head, can be readily altered over a wide range. This then becomes evident that player control of tone quality is conditioned by the limitations of the instrument. Therefore a good instrument, finely adjusted, is a necessity if full advantage of the player's ability is to be realized.

A Note on the Music in This Issue

In addition to Fred Van Eps's "Medley of Southern Melodies" (reproduced above), your editors are pleased to publish two contributions by Sam Harris: an original "Van Eps-ish" arrangement of Tom Turpin's "The Buffalo Rag," informed by a Robert Thornburgh transcription of Vess Ossman's 1906 recording, and an alternative ending to Paul Eno's "A Rag-Time Episode," as played and recorded by Paul Cadwell and Van Eps.

The Buffalo Rag

BANJO SOLO

TOM TURPIN
arr. by Sam Harris

The musical score for "The Buffalo Rag" Banjo Solo is presented in a single system with multiple staves. The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 2/4. The score includes various musical notations such as triplets, sixteenth notes, and various string bends and pulls. The piece is divided into two main sections, 1. and 2., with multiple endings and repeat signs. The notation includes many plus signs (+) indicating specific fret positions or string bends. The score is written in a style that is both technical and accessible, with clear markings for each note and technique.

2

9P..... 13P..... 10B 12PB.....

7B+..... 10PB..... 8B..... 11P.....

10PB..... 4P..... 1. 7B..... 2.

8P..... 9PB..... 10B 9B 10B 12PB..... 10B 12P.....

9P..... 2B..... 4P..... 7B.....

12P.....

A Rag-Time Episode

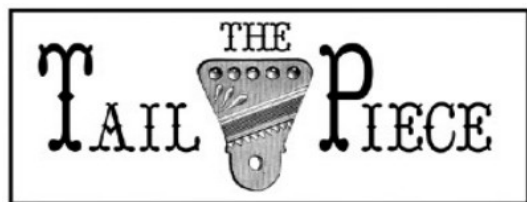
Supplement

Eno
arr. Van Eps/Cadwell

8P..... 10P..... 10B.....

1. 8B..... 7P..... 11P.....

2. 8B..... 7P..... 11P.....



Your Editors are excited to announce that they are expecting their first child, a daughter, in Spring 2027.

Sam Harris has been busy scanning Eli Kaufman's collection of mandolin and guitar music, which he has been uploading to the Internet Archive. He is seeking a five-string Van Eps banjo and can be reached at samadrianharris@gmail.com.

Joel Hooks has been steadily scanning banjo compositions and documents from Eli Kaufman's collection and other sources to the Internet Archive. He reports that he has uploaded more than 3,000 files there.

Gavin Rice will be playing the upcoming Banjo Hall of Fame Celebration, which runs October 8th to 10th in Oklahoma City.

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THE 5-STRINGER

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bwww.banjofraternity.org

JOHN COHEN Editor

MARIAH COHEN Editor

JohnNCohen1992@gmail.com

JOEL HOOKS, Executive Secretary

RUTH VITALE, Treasurer

BECKY SCHNEIDER, Librarian
brschneider1813@gmail.com

HOWARD WEILMUNSTER,
 Honorary President

DREW FRECH, Program Director

DREW FRECH, TIM MAINLAND
 Orchestra Directors

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

This is your newsletter. Tell us what you want to read about. Let us know what you have going on that is classic-banjo related. Articles and letters submitted will be published!