

Hearing History: The American Banjo Instructor Guide

The students will focus on learning about the American banjo in this activity. The students will learn about the banjo's history while learning about string instruments and vibration. The instructor will explain the history of the American banjo before beginning the activity. Once the history of the banjo is read, the instructor will ask the students about string instruments, vibration, and sound.

This activity aims to share the history of the American banjo and show students how the instrument works. Students will create their tin-can banjo while learning about strings and vibrations.

*Note that there is some preparation for this activity to help students and keep them on schedule during the tour.

Instructions for the instructor:

First, give the students background information about the history of the American Banjo and its creation. The American banjo's creation traces back to the Caribbean and North America during the 17th century. The technology behind the instrument came from enslaved Africans and their descendants. One of the oldest depictions of a banjo is in a painting titled *The Old Plantation* by painter John Rose around 1785 - 1790. The docent will have a copy of that painting to share with the students. It is almost exclusively connected to West African heritage but blends West African and European forms. Its relative with similar features is the guitar, but the difference is in the body shape.

Next, you will need 5 small rubber bands (the tighter they are around the lid, the better the sound), 1 piece of 8x1in wood (popsicle sticks will work, but they are not as long), 1 tin lid (a pasta jar lid or mason jar lid are good options), and double-sided duct tape.

*To add a personal touch to their banjos, use markers or colorful tape to add to their design.

Prep-Stage:

If you use Mason Jar lids, you must take an extra step to glue the center part of the lid to the outside rim. The instructor will add frets to the neck by drawing them with a pencil or pen. Each lid needs small pieces of double-sided tape in the middle, and a square piece should be

added to the bottom of the neck with no frets. Keep the outer layer of the tape on, and the students will remove that once they get to step two.

Questions to ask the students before building:

- Do they know what a banjo is/ looks like?
 - A banjo is like a guitar, but it has a circular body. They both are string instruments.
- How do they make sound?
 - Once the string moves, it vibrates, moving the air and our eardrums.
- Do they think this small banjo will produce a sound?
- What are some other examples of a stringed instrument?
 - For example, a piano has strings on the inside.

The instructor will give the students each step by demonstrating how to complete each step. Each student will have a bag with all the parts to make their banjo. Ask the students to remove one item from their bag at a time. As you describe each item, ask the students for the name of each part (you will have a poster of the parts on a banjo).

Parts of the Banjo:

- Neck (wood stick)
- Body (tin lid)
- Strings (rubber bands)
- Bridge (Wooden square)
- Frets (lines on the front of the neck).

Step 1: Place the tin lid on the opposite end of the neck so the frets are not covered.

Step 2: Secure the lid in place by removing the protective layer of the double sided tape and press the lid down.

Step 3: Add the bridge to the middle of the tin lid underneath the rubber bands.

Step 4: Pull the rubber bands to the end of the neck, going over the tin lid (body). The rubber bands should be spaced apart.

To end the activity, allow the students to play with their mini banjos and create music. Ask the

students again what instrument a banjo is and if they can tell you how it makes a sound.