

## Picking Instruments

### Workshop by Sid Hausman

In this workshop we'll explore how to pick an instrument appropriate for a particular type of music. The 6-string guitar, 12-string guitar, 5-string banjo, tenor ukulele, baritone ukulele, bones and harmonicas are some of the instruments we will consider. Several factors to consider when deciding which instrument to accompany a song:

- Rhythm and Tempo  
*Slow, medium or fast, a waltz or a polka; does it swing?*
- Style  
*Influences the choice of instrument most appropriate for the type of song; blues, swing, folk, ballad, bluegrass, country, western, etc.*
- Mood  
*Happy, sad, melancholy, dark, bright, sweet, uplifting or humorous, etc.*
- Melody  
*Simple, complex, minor key, major key, melodious?*

### Instruments to Consider

1. *The six string guitar* is the old stand by, there are very few songs it doesn't accompany well. While a 6-string guitar doesn't have the full sound of the 12-string guitar, it has a cleaner, clearer sound. The six-string can hold its own as either a solo or ensemble instrument.

**Example** "The Train Carrying Jimmy Rogers Home"

2. *The twelve string guitar* is like driving a big rig; it can have a lot of power. As a solo performer, you can feel like you are playing with a band. Slower, bluesy, dark, or rhythmic material can work great on a 12 string. Conversely, fast songs, like fiddle tunes, often become muddy on the 12 string whereas the bright sound of the 6 string guitar makes them shine.

**Example** "All Aboard for the Bright Angel Trail"

3. *The Banjo* has a natural drive that can be more difficult to get with a guitar. The banjo has a naturally happy and upbeat sound. Hence, it works well with bouncy, fast or melodious material. That being said, sometimes when used with melancholy songs, the contrast can be very effective.

**Example** "The Land of the Shalako"

4. *The ukulele* family has a chord clarity and sweetness that naturally excels in swing music. Because the typical tuning of the tenor uke has a high string on the top, (“my dog has fleas”), I can play it in the same manner as the 5 string banjo for certain songs. While the baritone and tenor uke are often tuned identically, I prefer to tune the D string an octave lower on the baritone uke than on my tenor; this allows me to use the low note as a base line, similar to a guitar.

**Example, tenor uke** “I Love Goin’ Dancin’ ”

**Example, baritone uke** “Grand Canyon Trail”

5. *Harmonicas* provide the long notes you don’t get from plucked stringed instruments. Consequently, they can emulate the role of the fiddle or dobro which are also long note instruments.

**Example** “Ashokan Farewell”

6. *Bones* have a long history as a musical instrument and are mentioned in the writings of ancient Egypt and William Shakespeare. They are a great supportive instrument and when used tastefully, can enhance many songs. However, they can become very unpopular if one does not resist the temptation to dominate jam sessions with them.

**Example** “Mr. Bones”

Summary and discussion