

## Introduction

**W**elcome to *Jazzin' On 4 Strings: Hot Jazz in Chicago Tuning for Tenor Banjo, Tenor Guitar, Baritone Ukulele, Banjo Uke, and More*. This book aims to guide guitarists, uke-players, and musical seekers curious about the lively hot jazz of the 1920s-30s in how to apply DGBE Chicago tuning on 4-string and 8-string instruments – for performance versatility and a more varied sonic palette.

**Definitions needed?** This introduction presents the book's rationale, organization, and application. But for newcomers to hot jazz, this welcome begins with some helpful definitions and clarifications. While terms in the book's title will be familiar to the fretted-instrument jazz-o-phile, the terms could be a mystery to newer arrivals to the genre. After all, what is "hot jazz"? How can you play jazz on a guitar or banjo with "only" four strings? What is "Chicago tuning"? And isn't the banjo a "hillbilly" instrument? So ... first things first:

**The term "hot jazz,"** for the purposes of this book, is a term to distinguish exuberant 1920s-30s-style jazz from later permutations of jazz that one might hear today in a supermarket or elevator. The "hot music" term originated among 1920s jazz musicians in Chicago to distinguish their style from the more tepid approach of other dance orchestras. The term is explained further in the *Hot Jazz Defined* chapter. (For instant understanding, check Youtube for the 1935 recording of "Lulu's Back in Town" by Fats Waller and His Rhythm.)

**The 4-string tenor banjo** was a mainstay of 1920s jazz combos and dance bands, and even a century later its propulsive rhythm characterizes the Roaring 20s "Jazz Age." Several virtuoso 4-string banjoists became nationally-known performers and recording artists, with celebrity status not unlike the pop-stars of today. Both the 4-string tenor banjo and the 4-string tenor guitar are relatively modern instruments. The tenor banjo was at first a turn-of-the-20th-century adaptation of the African-derived instrument for players in popular banjo clubs and mandolin orchestras; while the tenor guitar was developed in the mid-1920s for 4-string jazz banjo players seeking to expand their instrumental sound palette ... and their marketability.

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“**Chicago tuning**” is a term to distinguish the guitar-like DGBE tuning of the tenor guitar and tenor banjo from the standard tenor tuning (CGDA). For early jazz bands in New Orleans in the 1910s, the preferred rhythm instrument was the 6-string guitar or guitar-banjo. As the music captured growing popularity a decade later, New Orleans musicians followed opportunity to Chicago and then to New York. Along the way, many New Orleans guitarists and 6-string banjoists were known to play the 4-string tenor banjo by utilizing the familiar DGBE tuning instead of the standard tenor tuning. The practice among versatile players continues, with the common tuning across 4-string instruments still known by many as “Chicago tuning,” even though the etymology of the term is inconclusive.

**The banjo** has a fascinating history that extends back to Africa, and an evolution that includes different styles of music, played in different periods, using different techniques, on different types of banjos. Unfortunately the “hillbilly” banjo stereotype persists, even in our enlightened information age. Readers who have persevered this far are likely to know the difference between the 4-string banjo used in 1920s-30s hot jazz, and the 5-string banjo (with its short drone string) used for old-time string-band music and modern bluegrass.

**What this book is ... and is not.** *Jazzin' On 4 Strings* is an introduction to the 1920s-30s hot jazz genre for the musically curious, and an introduction to playing hot jazz-inflected songs in the guitar-like DGBE Chicago tuning on a range of 4-string and 8-string instruments. The book is especially aimed at the newest wave of jazz-curious uke-players and guitarists who are motivated to step up, or across, to the tenor banjo or tenor guitar, while employing familiar chord-fingerings. This book is not a comprehensive encyclopedia of hot jazz history or a manual of chord theory, nor is it a substitute for a helpful face-to-face in-person instructor or mentor.

**Organization.** The book begins with chapters that build a foundation of knowledge and fundamentals: A chapter on the origins and evolution of hot jazz; a chapter on listening to learn the genre; a chapter on the rationale for Chicago tuning; and a chapter on chord and rhythm basics. Each chapter includes endnotes and sources. The song arrangements central to this book, *The Toe Tappin' Ten* and *The Dancin' Dozen*, are followed by a gallery of instruments, three appendices, and a bibliography. There is enough guidance in *Jazzin' On 4 Strings* for the motivated beginner to make progress, but experienced players may elect to skip the most basic material. (Note, however, that time spent revisiting fundamentals is never wasted.)

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**Hot Jazz Defined:** Origins, Context, & Evolution. Your author is constitutionally incapable of producing a work like this one without fortifying readers with a foundation of historical context. Doorstop-worthy books have been written on the early history of jazz, so this condensed one-chapter overview of hot-jazz should be tolerable for its brevity. Skip it if you must and go straight to the songs. But my bet is that you will eventually return and appreciate this resource.

**Listen to Learn:** *Hear* the Structure ... and *Feel* the Rhythm. At this writing in 2023 we are a century removed from when lively hot jazz was becoming America's popular music. By now jazz has evolved into so many sub-genres that "jazz" means different music to different people. So today, a *book* about a cultural relic like 1920s-30s jazz must begin as if introducing a musical dead language. Your author's view is that to *play* hot jazz, one must not only grasp the structure and rhythm of the songs, but also internalize the exuberance of the music. Simply put, "You gotta 'feel the spirit'!" This chapter encourages the *drive* to *play* the music by sharing the pleasure of 225 suggested recordings in 15 related categories.

**Chicago Tuning:** Rationale & Application. The rationale includes definition, origin, historical precedent, contemporary example, and your author's professional experience. The application of the tuning includes practical issues of string tension, chord theory, and playing on 4-string and 8-string instruments of different size and scale-length.

**Chord & Rhythm Basics:** Essentials for Self-Accompaniment. For motivated beginners with little hands-on familiarity with the guitar or uke, this chapter is a "quick start" guide. If you are already comfortable playing the guitar or uke, and already know the song structure and chord progressions of 1920s jazz-inflected songs, this chapter can be a quick review before you move to the song arrangements.

**The Toe-Tappin' Ten.** To begin the Toe Tappin' Ten are two simple two-chord songs chosen especially for motivated beginners, perfect for adding the hot jazz treatment as the chord changes and rhythmic strumming allow. Next are three-chord songs in the simplest spiritual and blues forms, and five 1920s hot jazz standards in the keys of G and C that use the most common chord progressions of the genre.

**The Dancin' Dozen.** Once you are comfortable with the Toe Tappin' Ten – whether old pro or newly-minted hot jazzer – you are ready for the jazz standards of The Dancin' Dozen. The first two songs assert the power of a simple three-chord structure, while the remaining songs further embed the most common multi-chord progressions.

**A Gallery of Instruments** for Chicago Tuning. Instruments suitable for the DGBE Chicago tuning (or the comparable GCEA tuning) include the tenor banjo and tenor guitar; the longer-scale plectrum banjo and plectrum guitar; the shorter-scale mandolin, tiple, and baritone uke; and other banjo and resonator permutations.

**Appendix I:** Let's Go Digital – Put Those Fingers to Work. When playing chords on a 4-string instrument, if you have a spare fretting finger or two, don't let 'em hang around doin' nuthin'. Put 'em to work.

**Appendix II:** Bright Beginnings & Crisp Endings. When it comes to beginnings and endings to songs, banish the blandness.

**Appendix III:** Public Presentation – Singin' & Sellin'. If you intend to share your brand of hot jazz with fellow travelers in life as a singing self-accompanist, your work on the multi-faceted *craft of presentation* calls for just as much devotion as the *craft of music*, if not more.

**Bibliography & Discography:** Suggested Reading ... and Listening. In recognition of the pesky fact that *all* the accumulated knowledge of humankind is not online, the bibliography includes 159 resources in 14 categories. The supplemental discography includes suggested listening for selected 4-string greats, past and present.

**Index:** The six-page general index includes subject categories, musical terms, musicians, singers, composers, and the 22 songs in "The Toe-Tappin' Ten" and "The Dancin' Dozen." Not indexed due to space limitations are most geographical place names, record labels, the 250-plus songs mentioned in the text, and the endnote content.

**Chapter endnotes:** And speaking of endnotes, skip them if you must on your first reading. (But of course you know that within those 100-plus juicy endnotes is the depth of understanding you seek!)

**Point of view:** Full disclosure – Your author enjoyed a long career as a jazz/ragtime musician, comic dancer, and acrobatic juggler, stirring up crowds far-and-wide in nearly every kind of venue for 35 years – into the 21st century. For most of those years, in tandem with novelty percussionist and dazzling juggler L.J. Newton, *The Goodtime Ragtime Vaudeville Revival* regaled audiences with snappy jazz-inflected tunes, comic songs, eccentric dance, and acro-juggling.

So your author admits to having been an *entertainer*, an admission that can sink a jazz musician's credibility. But there are no apologies. In fact, the focus on emoting the spirit of the music to an audience is paramount throughout this book. Musical perfection is the ideal, but it is really secondary to forging a connection with your audience.

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**A note on skills instruction:** Despite your author's admitted connections to vaudeville and circus artistry, be assured that there will be no insistence that you practice your hot jazz chord progressions while teetering atop a six-foot unicycle. But through the prism of my experience, I have always regarded playing music as a brain-and-body motor skills challenge not unlike other hand-eye skills.

If Howard Gardner, the acclaimed developmental psychologist, was theorizing way back when I was a fumbling neophyte guitarist, he might have explained my musical self-teaching as a desperate configuration of humankind's "multiple intelligences."<sup>1</sup> Whatever instrumental proficiency I eventually acquired, it was from listening to music ardently, and then using my brain and my hands to figure out how to play it. Of course I soaked up valuable guidance from generous masters of the musical craft, and learned chords from books, but I never had any formal instruction. I never used tabulature. I still read music no better than I read German. I have coached advanced acrobatic jugglers and athletes, but I hold no degree in music education. Therefore the instructional approach in the Chord & Rhythm Basics chapter might be unconventional to some readers, but perfectly on-point to others. My hope is that you will have fun, and revel in the obsession to learn. Then, after you work through the chord theory and songs in this book, if you need further guidance, seek an experienced *in-person* teacher familiar with hot jazz. You'll learn even more, and have even more fun.

**Go forth and multiply!** Revel in your obsession, and then share the joy. Teach someone else. Amuse your family. Confound your friends. Find a crowd. Get their feet tapping. Maybe you'll make a buck, or half-a-buck. Maybe you'll make a living, or a life. Maybe you'll just keep on having fun. So get on with it!

– **Reginald W. Bacon**  
Newburyport, Mass.  
August 2023

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(1) In 1983, Howard E. Gardner (b. 1943), research professor of cognition and education at Harvard University, published *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York, N.Y.: Basic Books, 1983, 2011). Gardner posits that we humans have eight types of intelligence with which we process information, each type being independent, but with our individual strengths and weaknesses contributing to the whole. The eight "intelligences" Gardner identified are visual-spatial, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, musical-rhythmic, verbal-linguistic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic. Among Gardner's 29 books on the subject are: *Intelligence Reframed* (2000); *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons in Theory and Practice*. (2006); and *The Disciplined Mind* (1999, 2021).