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## Janet Burton – A Banjo Flower Propagates the Art [page 2 BanjoCrazy.com Exclusive](#)



[Young Janet Burton in a banjo contest](#)

### **Paul Roberts:** **How do you use music in the classroom and why do you think it's a vital part of education?**

Music is a special form of communication and expression. Its unique expression of pitch, timing, meter, lyrics, and emotion can only be experienced to truly understand. Its universal appeal reaches every individual in myriad ways. Music can change attitudes and foster beliefs. To not use it would be a travesty. To use music effectively in the classroom is to enhance learning, personal growth and creativity. Its vitality makes a teacher's job easier and more exciting for the student. First grade is a wonderful age to put music to good educational use. It makes good scientific sense, too, when you realize that music crosses both

hemispheres of the brain and integrates the holistic side with the linear side. It uses more than one sensory mode—auditory and kinesthetic, if you're singing, playing an instrument or dancing. The big instructional goal in first grade is to teach reading and that's where music is my friendly and capable assistant.

Music appears in the classroom through singing, chanting, reading books, watching videos, working on computers, using listening centers, seatwork time for creative writing or math, performances, incentives and dancing. Its biggest achievement is to make learning effective and enjoyable.

### **Example 1: Singing**

There's literally a million songs for children. Some are pure fun, some educational, some therapeutic, some celebrational. We sing songs about America, animals, months of the year, days of the week, letters and sounds of the alphabet, parts of speech, holidays, history, science, and literature. Sometimes I play banjo or guitar—always within arms' reach hanging on the wall-- and sometimes they play a rhythm instrument. I like to write songs, then make songbooks with the students, and practice reading while we sing.

One of my original songs is called The Ecosystem Song:

[I know a way to say things](#)  
[That's nice and simple and clear](#)  
[But when you say fancy words](#)  
[I don't understand](#)  
[They go in and out my ear](#)  
[Like food chain, what's that?](#)  
[Food chain, what's that?](#)  
[It's a fancy word that starts with the sun](#)  
[Growing the plants to eat](#)  
[Herbivores eat the plants](#)  
[Carnivores eat meat](#)

When students sing and read the book we created from the song, they actually learn new science terms. They've had the fun of illustrating the book and the satisfaction of learning to read/sing it. Sometimes we collaborate on writing original songs and I focus on helping them rhyme words in the verses. I pass out songbooks for various occasions and they're kept in the desks for easy access. These are powerful learn-to-read opportunities and are placed in the classroom library.

### **Example 2: Chanting**

Chanting is a special form of music which is more rhythmic than melodic. We chant the alphabet and its sounds



Janet Burton playing banjo with her students

and spellings, the days of the week, months of the year, value of coins, numbers, and even our character building concepts (e.g. "Commitments are important steps to guard us from disaster And just to show we know them well Let's say them even faster"). Rapping is a form of chanting and I have two favorite raps—one on eating good food and one telling the story of The Three Billy Goats Gruff. Chanting gets and maintains their attention.

### Example 3: Reading books

On the first day of school every year I sing a book with them called "Sing a Song Together." They learn it after only a couple of readings. We keep practicing it and make masks to act it out, saving them for a special event called Grandparents Day, which I've done every year since 1989. It is the finale in our performance for our guests, which includes the singing of three Big Books, one of which is student-made. The students wear their masks, perform as if on stage, and the audience is amused and impressed. Other books can be sung during the year. Generally they rhyme and students will enjoy re-visiting them over and over.

### Example 4: Watching videos

Every class utilizes movies and every single one has music. For instance, a science series I use is called First Nature Watch. It begins with exciting music as a montage of animal photography is shown. Next comes an animated story, which I also show them as a wordless book, and it's told with music in the background. Then the movie shows a child re-telling the story in his or her own words while holding the wordless book. Last a volunteer from class gets up and again re-tells the story using the actual book. Music led them into the first lesson of the movie and accompanied the animated second part. Ultimately students become focused on using language to tell the story in their own words. This activity leads to reading comprehension and creative writing.

Another good series of movies is the old Reading Rainbow PBS program with a different children's book as its theme. It begins with the Reading Rainbow theme song, which we sing. "Take a look, it's in a book, a reading rainbow. I can be anything—things to know, ways to grow, a reading rainbow..." Music is used again and again during the 30 minute program. A favorite episode of mine is Pete Seeger telling the story of Abiyoyo, based on an African tale of a giant. Students sing along with him, "Abiyoyo, Abiyoyo, Abiyoyo-biyoyo-biyoyo." Later they have the book and CD in their Listening Center. My goal in using this resource has again been to lead them to love reading and become proficient in it.

### Example 5: Working on computers

Part of my teacher job is to keep our computer lab running. It presents a reading and writing curriculum to the students in kindergarten through 2nd grade. The music on it is ubiquitous. There are songs for learning the alphabet, vowel sounds, contractions, parts of speech, and on and on. Students get to know them so well through our 25-minute computer session that if I later put on a CD with just the songs I'll hear them happily singing along. Imagine teaching read skills so easily: "A-E-I-O-U, A-E-I-O-U, A-E-I-O-U, The rest of the letters are consonants..." Music accompanies the computerized games and read-alouds. I'm astounded at the variety of lessons offered on our school computers which also progress at each student's individual pace. Amazing, enjoyable learning!

Clowning it up for Halloween at the Rough and Ready Fruit Jar Pickers

### Example 6: Listening center

A listening center is a station area in a classroom providing books, headsets, and an audio source for one or more students. Over the years I've built up a big collection of cassettes that go along with good literature for first grade. Then CDs came along and in the future the iPad may be in the next wave of reading collections. Words are read for the child as he or she turns the pages. The better the reader, the easier it is to pay attention to the words instead of the pictures. During the course of a school year this ability is ever-increasing. The variety of books has never failed to entice students to want to choose one.



Listening Center for use during Workshop or free choice time. The stuffed animal Leo becomes a class mascot all year. He's a tiger, not a lion (Leon is the lion's name).

### Example 7: Seatwork time

Music is used in to provide a pleasant background ambience during creative writing time. It may be played softly with classical music during students' individual seatwork time for writing or illustrating. My gentle recordings of O'Carolan's music work with this lesson. Sometimes we've written a song or story together and are illustrating a class book to sing or read and perhaps record.

Parallel to this is the more rhythmic music that accompanies certain activities. I call this "math music." It's livelier and works for activities such as pattern block exploration or hands-on sorting and counting of manipulative items. Some of my own banjo recordings of fiddle tunes works as background music here because they're linear tunes with a regular beat and the parts repeat.



A school Jug Band performance in 1987

### Example 8: Performances

Students and their families love a performance. Grandparents Day, Christmas, and Spring performances provide opportunities. We can also sing and act out songs such as The Keeper, Puff the Magic Dragon, and Froggie Went A-Courtin'. What fun for students to make costumes and gigantic props! For a while we did a weekly performance for each other, called The Gathering. It took much effort on the teacher's part, but students liked both getting on "stage" and watching each group. The performances with music, as opposed to spoken lines, seemed to be more audible and lively, perhaps easier for students to learn (ah-ha!).

I've often taught songs to the first grade--to as many as 120 first graders--and lead with guitar or banjo. Banjo is louder and easier for them to hear. This ability of mine goes back to choir in grammar school and to my summer camp song leading days. Every Friday I've been honored by my principal to lead the entire school of over 500 with a patriotic song after the flag salute. My favorite song is "A Grand Old Flag," but I'll change the song each month. This is a performance of sorts and often has come in handy when there are dignitaries at school. Performing well with students gives me, the kids, and the audience the satisfaction of a job well done.

### Example 9: Music lessons as a reward

Teachers often use incentives after allowing a student to track their progress while working on a specific goal. When I student has met their goal I offer rewards, such as computer game time, a book, or a music lesson. When they choose the lesson they choose either banjo or guitar. I give them the experience of strumming as I chord and sing along. Usually it's the only time I have them holding my instruments in class, which adds to the specialness of this reward. Some of these students grow up to learn a musical instrument later and remember the music we did together.



This celebrates Dr Seuss 7(Theodore Giesel's) birthday. We're singing Old River Man by John Hartford from a Plinky and Plunky songbook the kids can also color.

### Example 10: Dancing

Sometimes we'll dance to music. There are dances for fitness, folk dances, and good ole classroom special day partying!

### How does using music in the classroom effect your personal involvement with music, your own musical journey?

Here are my priorities in life: God, family, work, music. And I wish to be a friend to everyone. So when you ask me about my musical journey, I can say it's important and fulfilling, but my intrinsic feelings were never to put it first. The calling to serve my family and the students in my class comes before music. When I got my first job teaching children in a public school I was elated and knew inside that this was what I was meant to do. The classroom allows me to unite those two priorities of work and music, making my

work fun. (Ever wonder why we "play" music, but "work" at our jobs?)

There are two parts of my personal goals for music, specifically involving banjo picking. One is to be able to play well by myself. The other is to share the music with others as they either join in or listen. These two parts make what I can call my "own musical journey."

I play every day for myself—some would call it practicing—and when I play well I've reached my first goal. I like to play a tune, especially one which I've arranged for banjo, over and over until it's easy and I don't have to think about how to play it any more. It becomes like a mantra that allows my mind to wander, relax, rejuvenate. The musical piece is as pleasant as a good painting, good food, or a beautiful outdoor scene. This wouldn't happen in the school setting. School does, however, relate to the second part of my musical goals.

Playing for and with others, sharing music—what we call "performing"—is equally important. Then the classroom setting joins with my musical journey. If I lead the class or first grade in singing as I play banjo I've accomplished this goal--I've performed well and shared my music. Perhaps when I was a little girl in Yosemite National Park and the park ranger would lead us in songs with guitar accompaniment, I found this to be the most fun and meaningful activity in the world. Now as an adult I can be like that park ranger. The songs I share in school are appropriate for kids, though they aren't the songs I'd sing at a jam or other performance. Songs such as "Abraham, Martin, and John," "The Circle Game," "Down by the Bay," "Up on the Husetop," and "The Chipmunk's Christmas" for me belong just in school.

The music I'm enjoying most now is outside of the school setting, except for a few songs. It's in the genre of music called "old-time." It includes American southern mountain music and Celtic music. Some have lyrics which makes them good sharing songs for jams or performances. But mostly, it's instrumental music which I get so excited about and often post on Banjo Hangout. This has got to be the most fun part of my musical journey in life thus far. I envision a far-off day when I'll still be able to rock in my chair on the porch and pick some of these good old-time tunes.

### What do you think of Banjo Hangout?

Banjo Hangout is a marvelously fun website. It's easy to think of many reasons why. BHO strengthens your link to the musical genres you enjoy most. My first venture into banjo-picking in the 1970's steered me toward old-time music—folk, square dance reels and waltzes, Celtic tunes. Time went by, I moved, raised a family, and worked at my elementary school vocation. Before discovering BHO I was no longer closely connected with the old-time community, but now because of it I'm once again connected. My Hangout friends are

from the USA, Canada, Argentina, the British Isles, France, Denmark, Norway, Holland, Uzbekistan, China, Italy, Spain and Africa. And all from a laptop computer!

There are many forums for participation and study on BHO—something for everyone (the reader should check it out for yourself if you haven't: [www.banjohangout.org](http://www.banjohangout.org)). My favorite forums are Sound Off!; Playing Advice—Clawhammer and Old-time; Other Banjo-Related Topics—Clawhammer and Old-Time; and Media Archive. The Jukebox is full of members' music and is classified by genres—again, something for everyone's taste—from classical to Celtic, from bluegrass to old-time, even one called "Other."

If you want to learn a tune you can usually find it on BHO. If you learn a tune nobody else has presented, you can do so on Sound Off! and it will become part of the archives. There are tabs available plus you can post your own tabs.

In the Classifieds I found my two newest banjos—a gourd banjo and a Mac Traynham Whyte Laydie. I'd wanted a cello banjo since I saw them advertised in catalogues, and BHO was my link to hearing it on Sound Off! and on your Gold Tone website, Paul. I found my Skype teacher, Adam Hurt, through the Tune of the Week discussion thread.

The variety of ways to participate on BHO is astounding, and I haven't mentioned even half of what's available—there are also links to sites for fiddle, dobro, guitar, and mandolin from the same webmaster.

BHO is like the modern day Library of Congress, but nobody has to travel far for song-collecting. Before I became a member (which is free), I'd be searching on-line for a certain tune and would often find it on this site. There are also links to youtube videos of both famous and unknown musicians—a literal treasury of music.

BHO has a storehouse of information. By posing a question you're sure to get answers, which is why I first became a member. I'd gotten a bridge in 2009 made of bone and wanted to know more about it. I couldn't post a question for discussion unless I became a member. Several knowledgeable people helped me with my query and I became more aware of the other tools on the website to help guide my banjo journey.

If you're fond of reading or watching movies, you can get excellent book and DVD recommendations on BHO. The last good book I read associated with BHO was *The Last Cavalier, The Life and Times of John A Lomax*. I learned about the Library of Congress as an immense resource, strongly influenced by John Lomax and containing many tunes often heard on BHO, as well as at jams and performances worldwide. Stephen Wade's new book *The Beautiful Music All Around Us* was recommended and discussed. Some members became interested in learning the songs from the Library of Congress mentioned in the book, including me. The last good DVD I've watched was recommended by Hangout member Craig Evan, called "The Librarian and the Banjo." This is Jim Carrier's documentary of how Dena Epstein came to write her book *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals* (referred to in an earlier interview question). If you're seeking new information or entertainment, BHO may be your link to high quality discoveries.

I'm impressed with the warm and caring community of Banjo Hangout. I discovered in 2011 for the first time that I could record and upload an MP3. On my first Sound Off! MP3 post of the tune "Big Sciota" I asked for confirmation that everything was correctly uploaded. Several members were encouraging and supportive. Now when my computer inevitably crashes (two days ago was the last time this happened), I know my MP3s and videos are safe on my BHO Homepage repository. This has happened only because of the friendly BHO community. If you travel to festivals where banjo pickers gather, you're certain to meet a Hangout member and there's the feeling that you're meeting an old friend.

Banjo Hangout has a webmaster, Eric Schlange, who is involved, innovative, and enthusiastic about his venture. Recently he held the first video contest with over 60 entries. Currently there's a second video contest which has motivated me to record and share the contest tune, *Boatman*. Eric's intent is to involve even more banjo players on his site and he's successful.

Improving my playing and increasing my repertoire is a huge bonus of BHO membership. Who would have thought a few years ago that I'd post over 250 MP3s and over 30 videos on-line? I think BHO is a marvel of the modern world.

**As a person who has taken an in-depth, scholarly approach to banjo and old-time music, what are some of your takeaways from your research that are most meaningful to you?**



Janet Burton portraying Lotta Crabtree (on right)

Three results of my studies that stand out are increased knowledge about old-time musicians, new skills to improve my banjo playing, and familiarity with the regions where the music has flourished.

I have a hunger to learn through reading, watching, listening, and applying. Old-time music written history and recordings abound. Books and articles reveal the experiences and personalities of musicians, bands, and song-collectors, such as the Carter family, Bill Monroe, Melvin Wine, Doc Watson, Turlough O'Carolan, Francis O'Neill, The Chieftains, John and Alan Lomax, Mike Seeger, and Stephen Wade. Through reading about their lives I relate to their passion to learn and share the music.



Lotta Crabtree

A highlight in my studies of musicians is my annual portrayal of Lotta Crabtree (1847 – 1924) during our Pioneer Day festival in Smartsville, California. As a child she toured the mining camps of the California gold rush (including my neighborhood), entertaining the miners with her dancing, singing, and banjo picking. Lotta was popular and successful on stage all the way from Broadway in New York, where she was born, to the Palace Theatre in San Francisco. I've read every book I could find written about her in order to most accurately portray Lotta Crabtree as a living history character. She was vivacious, funny, talented, and generous, leaving millions to charity upon her death.

A growing CD collection and on-line sources allow me to listen to old-time music from various regions. Without seeking and immersing myself through my CDs with their good liner notes, I would miss a lot. A few of my favorite CDs are by Adam Hurt, Bruce Molsky, John Herrmann, Brad Leftwich, Bob Carlin, and Abigail Washburn. They keep the music alive at festivals, workshops, concerts, jams and coffee house performances. I know them through their music.

A scholarly approach is normal for me, rewarded by new knowledge and skills. Tab and instructional books, workshops, music camps, and lessons have allowed me to become familiar with two different styles. Both 3-finger picking and clawhammer banjo express old-time music effectively. 3-finger picking goes well with just about any song, but more exhilarating to me is clawhammer's ability to play both rhythm and melody when it suits the tune. Study and comparison have allowed me choices. Next comes the wood-shedding and practice musicians must do. Being a native California who hasn't traveled a whole lot, knowledge of the southern mountain regions of the U.S. comes slowly. Yet through studying I get an inherent sense of belonging there. A highlight of my life came through reading a book called A Guide to The Crooked Road, Virginia's Heritage Music Trail. I visited Virginia afterwards and

was able to participate in the music I'd read about. My current favorite banjo came from a luthier I met and played with in Floyd, Virginia—Mac Traynham.

Many of the banjo/fiddle tunes I learn have place names as the title. I'll take out my map and look for information about locations such as Big Sciota, Chatanooga, Little Olentangy, Walnut Gap, Shelvin Rock, Snake River, and Catlettsburg. I'll associate the titles with certain musicians as well, usually fiddlers.

I've taken from my scholarly approach to music a richer identity as an individual within an immense community. Though we trace much of American old-time music from the British Isles and though the banjo is associated with African origins, the musical range is worldwide. One can find similar native music in China or Uzbekistan or Norway or Ghana. My conclusion: studying about music and sharing it are special gifts of life.

### **Aspirations**

No enormous aspirations, Paul, except to play banjo greatly, have fun, and be a good supporter. I want to continue making good music with my husband and share it when requested. I hope to keep on arranging American fiddle tunes with the clawhammer style. I'd like to remember my arrangements as I age and am saving my tabs in a rinky-dink notebook called "Granny's Tabs A-Z". I want to share my arrangements if it helps another player. It will be wonderful if Banjo Hangout continues through the years as a source of communing with other pickers. I hope to stay in contact with my Banjo Hangout buddies. My greatest desire is to do God's will for me with my musical gift.

**Paul:** Janet, I get the feeling we could pull two or three books of old-time knowledge out of you if we kept going. It's really a pleasure to learn more about you and from you. Thank you for allowing me to interview you.

**Janet:** Paul, you are an amazing and artistically sensitive soul who is uplifting the banjo and its music ever higher. Thanks. That's all folks!!

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Boatman medley



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<b>Shady Grove</b> With Plinky and Plunky	
<b>Bridget Cruise</b> A Turlough O'Carolan song I'd not heard before	<b>View Banjo Hangout Page</b> (must sign in to the Banjo Hangout to view)
<b>Old Aunt Adkins</b> From Owen "Snake" Chapman's Walnut Gap CD	
<b>Dead Man's Piece</b> The best tone I've gotten from my cello banjo	<b>Sample Janet's VIDEOS below</b>
<b>Koramanti</b> A piece I figured out from the 1668 notation by Sir Hans Sloane after he visited Jamaica	<b>June Apple 3-finger style</b>
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Janet Burton , Clawhammer and Picking Banjo

