

# Playing Irish Banjo in Standard Tuning

By Michael Keyes

*And now for something completely different.*

Since I started this column I have advocated using the familiar GDAE tuning, one octave below a mandolin. In the early 1960s Barney McKenna introduced this tuning (it had been used in the past but not for a long time) to play Irish tunes. His influence has assured that most banjo players use this tuning, but there is a growing interest in the standard cgda tuning. Gerry O'Connor plays this tuning almost exclusively as part of his style and all Irish tenor banjo players should have some passing familiarity if they want to fully explore the limits of the instrument.

At first it may seem that cdae tuning is not suited for most Irish music. The majority of tunes are in either D or G tuning (and their modal variants) with a few in F/Dm and C. In addition the low G string is a signature sound for many Irish banjo players and it clearly adds a lot to the music. But there are some features of the higher pitched cgda tuning that you can use to your advantage.

If you listen to some of the more modern style Irish banjo players such as Gerry O'Connor or Enda Scahill you will notice that they have an almost supernatural ability to play quick triplets while being precise and musical. One of their secrets is in the setup of the banjo. Enda uses a lighter than usual G string (.036 inches) which is easier to play at speed while Gerry uses the .030 C string in his tuning. While these lighter strings rob the banjo of some of the bass tones, this is made up by having a great right hand and impeccable technique. Smaller strings are just easier to play for most people.

Another advantage of the cgda tuning is that when capoed up two frets to daeb the usual gymnastics needed to reach the high B note are no longer necessary. In the process you lose the low G note, but most tunes don't go below the D note and if they do, you can compensate the way whistle players (who have no G note either) do. In addition the shorter scale makes finding all the notes easier.

The trick to playing in standard tuning is understanding that the instrument is still tuned in fifths. All you have to do is to play the notes in a different pattern than you are used to. For example, when playing a G tune in cgda tuning, it feels like a D tune instead. As a result you can use techniques familiar to you and you will find that the tune will sound a little different, not worse, just different - and it may even sound better. When you capo up two, you will be playing all four strings more than you do in GDAE tuning and you will find the high B note a lot easier to find.

Another advantage is that most of us will have to listen more to tunes and not rely on tab or notation because we are not familiar with the fretboard in that tuning. Listening is good and as you switch back and forth between the two tunings, you will learn to listen even more. This, in turn, will help you develop your own style as you will be playing the tunes in your head independent of both the tunings and the instrument. After a while you will find that you can play what you are imagining a lot better and you will be able to start being more interesting to yourself and others.

Here are two tunes, Bag of Spuds and Maid behind the Bar played in cgda tuning. Chris Black will play Bag of Spuds in GDAE tuning to show you what it sounds like in the familiar tuning and then I'll show Gerry O'Connor's cgda version and you can compare and contrast the two and see how they differ. I am including the ABCs for you to use with the Concertina.net Convert-a-tron ([http://www.concertina.net/tunes\\_convert.html](http://www.concertina.net/tunes_convert.html))

## The Bag of Spuds



Rhythm: reel

X:1

T:Bag of Spuds, The

R:reel

M:C|

K:Ador

A2eA cAeAIABcd edBAIG2dG BGdGIGABc dcBGI

A2eA cAeAIABcd edcBIABcd efgeldBGA BAA2:|

l:a2ea ageglagbg ageflgedB GABdlgfga bgegl

a2ea ageglagbg agegl2de g2geldBGA BAA2:|

Here is Chris Black playing Bag of Spuds in GDAE tuning.

<http://www.youtube.com/v/05V4k5VrkVg&hl=en&fs>

And here is Gerry O'Connor playing the same tune in cgda tuning.

[http://www.youtube.com/v/3Tf7A13\\_Ex8&hl=en&fs=1](http://www.youtube.com/v/3Tf7A13_Ex8&hl=en&fs=1)

I have capoed my banjo up two frets for the Maid Behind the Bar. Notice how much easier it is to play the high B note.

## The Maid Behind the Bar



X: 1

T:The Maid Behind the Bar

M:C

K:D

L:1/8

FAAB AFEDIFAAB ABdelfBBA Bcdelf2 af efdBl

A3 B AFEDIFAAB ABdelfBBA BcdBIAFEF D2 z2:l

l:fa a2 fddelfdad fd d2lgfga beeflgebe ge e2l

faaf bfafldefd efdelfBBA BcdBIAFEF D2 z2:

**YouTube Video of Maid Behind the Bar** <http://www.youtube.com/v/kz09Y7ToGVA&hl=en&fs=1>

### References

Enda Scahill (<http://www.endascahill.com>) has a number of videos on Youtube including those made by Tom Cussen (<http://www.banjo.ie/home.php>) at his shop in Galway (<http://www.youtube.com/ShaskeenReel>). Rummage through these videos, they are a treasure trove of tunes and techniques.

Gerry O'Connor (<http://www.gerryoconnor.com>) plays the Bag of Spuds and The Copperplate at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Tf7A13\\_Ex8&feature=fvw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Tf7A13_Ex8&feature=fvw) . He is using cgda tuning. Check out this short video of Bela Fleck and Gerry (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kskElzqP7eM>) . Gerry is capoed up two for that one. Gerry graciously allowed me to use this video.

Chris Black is a contributor to the Mandolincafe Song of the Week Social group. Chris is an avid tenor banjo player and was nice enough to let me use his youtube addition.

## About the Author



Mike Keyes, a native of Franklin, Tennessee, has played tenor banjo since 1957 and over the years has learned to play five string banjo, mandolin, and guitar. He earned his way through college and medical school playing in bluegrass and dixieland bands and currently plays in the Irish band "Drowsy Maggie." He is an expert in sports performance and has written a book and over 200 articles on the subject.

His interest in Irish music started a number of years ago when effort to learn more about his musical roots led him to the discovery of session playing. Since then he has been to Ireland to learn more about the music and has taken classes and interviewed such banjo greats as John Carty, Angelina Carberry, Charlie Piggot, and Gerry O'Connor.

His medical practice is in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. You can email him at [mikeyes@charter.net](mailto:mikeyes@charter.net) if you wish to discuss some aspect of the Irish tenor banjo or go to his web site at [www.mikekeyes.com](http://www.mikekeyes.com).