

Attaching a Shoulder Strap



Required items:

- Commercially made mandolin strap, or
- Leather strip long enough for strap, or
- Length of rawhide lacing

As long as mandolin players have been standing to play they have been devising various ways to hang the instrument from the body. All straps are meant to help hold the instrument in a stable position so that you are free to play with your two hands and not concern yourself with holding onto the instrument.

Before we go any further I should issue this warning. **NEVER** trust your strap completely. They break, they can pop off the endpin, rot, crack, soften, or fail in some other way which can cause your mandolin to come crashing down in the grips of gravity.

If you stroll around a bluegrass festival parking lot and study the various instrument straps you will find a huge variety of clever and not-so-clever straps in use. I have seen fancy tooled leather creations, nylon webbing with holes burned through with a hot nail, rawhide lacing tied around the endpin and scroll, string, shoelaces... you name it! You will see mandolin players with the instrument "hiked up" nearly to their chin with a single rawhide lace over the right shoulder. You will see day-glo yellow nylon straps imprinted with the words "Crime Scene" with the mandolin hanging nearly to the player's knees in true heavy-metal guitarist fashion. You'll see just about everything eventually.

I am a "practical conservative" when it comes to mandolin straps. I want the strap to function well and hardly be noticed visually and I want the instrument stable. I want the strap to easily fit in the case alongside my mandolin without removing it every time I pack up. I want the strap to be comfortable. My choice, after trying a variety of straps over the years, is about the most simple thing you could imagine. The strap is a 5/8" wide strip of brown, chrome-tanned leather that is pretty soft, yet not stretchy. I punched a hole in one end, enlarge the hole by adding a slit with a razor blade, then passed the strap back through the hole forming a loop which goes around the scroll of my F-5. The end which attaches to the endpin has three 1/4" diameter holes, each lengthened with a razor blade slit, and this gives me a couple of choices as to overall length. That's it. No sewing, no tying, nothing fancy at all.

Holes for endpin



Loop for scroll

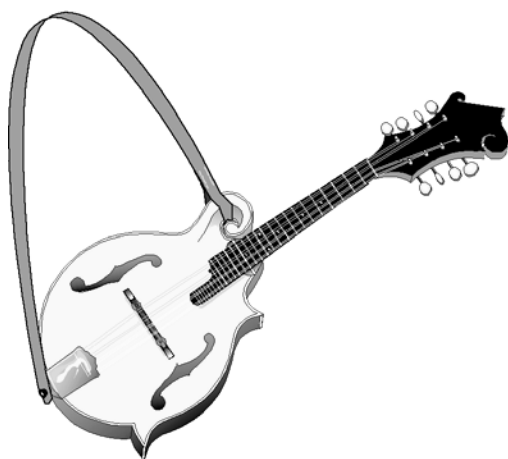


If you are the "arts and crafts" type person you can pretty easily make a strap like that. Attaching it to an F-style mandolin is always easier because the scroll is a good, well-balanced location for carrying the weight of the instrument. An A-style mandolin requires a bit more ingenuity. You will have to either tie the strap somewhere at the peghead or have a "strap button" installed at the neck heel. Strap buttons are little "knobs" that look a lot like your endpin. They are held in place with a screw. Strap buttons are very common on guitars of all kinds, but are frowned upon in the mandolin world.

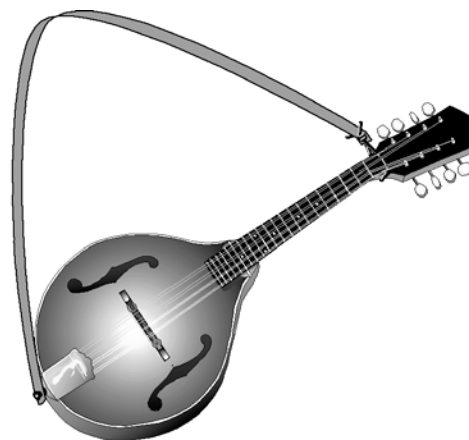
I dislike using a strap button for a couple of reasons. I put one on the heel (in the same way as they are usually installed on an acoustic guitar) of an A-style mandolin I built. I found that my hand hit the button whenever I played up the neck and that was annoying. It also seemed like the instrument wanted to tip and lean forward because the strap comes up around the back of the heel. Some folks dislike the idea of running a screw into the neck heel and, for mandolins, I think I am in that camp. My suggestion is, if you decide upon the installation of a strap button, have it installed by a competent luthier unless you have some experience and know-how about doing it or you might crack the heel.



A student of mine has an A-style with an elevated fingerboard and managed to tie the end of his strap around the body/heel and under the fingerboard. It seems well balanced and works good for him. The other option, of course, is to tie the strap to the peghead somehow with lacing or cord. This works fine if you can get used to the cramped feeling of your left hand sometimes touching the strap as you play. When attached at the peghead (either somewhere among the tuners or down near the nut) the instrument has a tendency to move towards your right side as you play it.



Attached at the scroll of an F-style



Tied to the peghead on an A-style

Some people wear the strap over the right shoulder only. Some wear it across the back and hanging from the left shoulder. That is the way I do it because it just feels better to me. Do what suits you.

Legend has it that many old-time performers (in the days of live radio shows and playing around a single microphone) would hang the instrument really high so that it was nearer the microphone during solos. The legend also claims that hanging the strap over the right shoulder was preferred so that the

instrument could be taken on and off without having to remove their Stetson hats. I think there is some truth to that idea because I wore a ten-gallon hat to a gig once and had a devil of a time getting my strap over my hat without knocking it off. I eventually figured out that I could take the hat off and hang it on my peghead, strap up, and replace it on my noggin. But, it would have been easier to just hang the strap over my right shoulder. I guess if you wear big hats and need to get on and off the stage quickly, in Grand Ol' Opry fashion, the right shoulder would work best.

If you study old photographs of mandolin players from the past, like Bill Monroe, you will see that the legend has some truth to it. Since it is common these days for each instrument and singer to have their own microphones, the instruments have come down from that "playing under the chin" style.

I use my strap even when seated. To me it stabilizes the instrument somewhat and keeps it from jumping all over the place. I play better and enjoy playing more when I am seated while playing. This might be because I do most of my practicing while seated. I suppose it would be a good idea to spend more time on my feet while practicing.

General Comments on Picks

I am reluctant to get into the subject of picks because there are so many different kinds of them and everyone seems to have their own favorites. Before I say anything about my ideas about picks let me state that I think you should use the type of pick that you like. You will anyway. Someone once asked Bill Monroe what kind of pick he used and his not-so-elaborate reply was "This one here."

Picks come in a multitude of shapes, thicknesses and materials. Here is a short rundown of the types of picks which are common:

Celluloid or Plastic Picks - These are made in a dizzying array of colors, shapes, and thicknesses. You can have your picture printed on them. Plastic picks, in general, wear out pretty quick but are cheap to replace. Picks might be made from Delrin, celluloid, nylon, or other mysterious compounds. I generally don't like picks which have a "mold line" or "seam" around the edges like many nylon picks have. I like a really slick smooth edge. For me I use either a Fender brand medium or heavy. I use the rounded corners of the standard teardrop shape for tonal reasons.

The rounded corners of a teardrop shaped pick are slightly stiffer than the point so you get a slightly darker tone and a "heavier feel" which I like. The round corners of a "medium" pick feel like the stiffness of something half-way between a "medium" and a "heavy."

Tortoise Shell Picks - Made from the outer covering of the Hawksbill sea turtle. Incidentally, the Hawksbill is not a "tortoise" but a "turtle". These picks were popular in the early days but now *the importation of tortoise shell is illegal*. Tortoise shell picks are revered for their tonal qualities and long life. They tend to stay smooth longer than plastic and can be reshaped and polished when they become worn or nicked.