



## LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

### *Work Less on Instrumentals, More on Singing? The Year of the Melody*

Pete Wernick

*Jim from Ohio writes:*

“Inspired by my experience at your jam and banjo camps I have focused more on singing, increasing playing speed and clarity and learning better to improvise (“the year of the melody”). I am spending less time on instrumentals.”

Jim is one of those people who has listened closely to my teaching, and he seems to be reaping some benefits.

Less time on instrumentals? Here’s a little story:

When I was just starting to play, like a lot of banjo nuts, I was only interested in banjo instrumentals. On my Flatt & Scruggs LPs you could see the instrumental cuts, by the wear patterns. It was only when I started getting lazy about moving the needle past the vocal tracks that I found myself listening to *Roll In My Sweet Baby’s Arms*, *Someday We’ll Meet Again*, *Sweetheart*, *So Happy I’ll Be*, and other classic cuts.

Fortunately, around that time I had friends who played music, and we would sing folk songs or Beatles or other pop songs at get-togethers. Most had pretty easy chords, and only rhythm playing was needed. To expand my horizons, little by little I found and created opportunities to join forces with other musicians, work on some songs, and do a little performing (*very casual*). I did this first with a couple of high school friends, in a folk trio for a year or two. My next opportunities blended bluegrass and folk repertoire, which mixed pretty well. Finally, I had a chance to join a good bluegrass band (The Orange Mt. Boys), and that gave me the perfect context to work on my playing, develop my repertoire, and be influenced by high level musicians.

Aside from all the social benefits and

friendships that come from being in a group of musicians, the musical benefits are beyond measure. **To improve your playing, there’s nothing to compare with getting in a group of people you like to play with, and who challenge you.** From this stems the motivation and direction for the best kind of practicing. Every improvement in tone, timing, and content is registered in the group’s sound. The other musicians spur you along. You have a whole repertoire’s worth of breaks and backup to practice. And as you keep playing that repertoire, the songs season and develop.

Let’s get back now to Jim. He talks about working on his singing. What’s up with that?

Well, the situations I described above were all centered around ... singing. Please note: **Singing is not peripheral to bluegrass, it’s central and essential.** If you can sing, know some verses, can hit a harmony part, you have more to offer a group. Put another way, a banjo player who sings will get more opportunities to play with good musicians than one who doesn’t sing.

Referencing my story: That group, The Orange Mt. Boys, which was such a help to my development, needed a banjo player *who could sing the baritone part*. Had I not been able to sing baritone, I wouldn’t have been asked to join.

Funny how banjo players are almost presumed to know how to sing baritone. A partial list of banjo players who also sing baritone: Earl Scruggs, J.D. Crowe, Sonny Osborne, Eddie Adcock, Bill Keith, Terry Baucom, Tony Trischka... you get the idea. Baritone is the low part in the trio harmony, tricky to find, and requiring a knowledge of the other two parts. For

instruction on how it’s done, see both my *Bluegrass Songbook* and *Bluegrass Banjo* books (yes, it’s important enough to banjo players, I put baritone singing instruction in a *banjo* book.)

Other banjo players also noted for their singing (and songwriting too): Ralph Stanley, Alan O’Bryant, Don Reno. Yes, singing is central and essential in all these groups that feature the banjo greats. The groups that helped make these guys famous are based around world-class singers, harmony as well as lead singing. Their material, especially the most popular numbers, is mostly songs, and the songs’ different tempos and moods shape the banjo styles used.

Bluegrass is a team sport, where playing lead breaks is only part of the job description. **What do all of the very best banjo players spend most of their stage time doing? Playing backup.**

Listen carefully to your Flatt & Scruggs records. Check it out: What part of the time you can hardly hear the banjo, or not hear it at all? Yep, Earl spent a lot of time off mic, vamping, making sure the band rhythm was tight—a great contribution. No need to hear his roll all the time. Earl is definitive about going easy on the backup, comparing too much backup to two people talking at the same time in a conversation. Lead breaks and instrumentals? Well, of course he gets his turn, and he shines in the spotlight. Those intervals made up about 15% of the music time during any set.

That is the track record of our main banjo music creator and inspiration. “The King of the Banjo” could have chosen to lead an all-instrumental band, and make all-instrumental records. But he chose to, and still chooses to, be part of a group centered around songs and singing. The banjo tunes give him featured spots, but most of the time he’s supporting the others.

**Now what about improvising, and what does that have to do with “the year of the melody”?**

To improvise well means thinking of good things to play, while one is playing. To pull off those musical ideas means transferring what’s in your mind to the neck of the instrument.

A basic version of this same skill is

to see if you can play a melody you can hum. I find that a great many players, even pretty accomplished ones, wash over subtleties in melodies, with phrases that fit the chords, but not the melody line. I recommend that players should learn to walk before they run, and should learn how to accurately transfer simple phrases from their imagination to the fingerboard. May as well start with some common melodies. Can you find the right notes?

You may have heard about how Earl likes to “play the words” of a song, meaning getting the notes of **every syllable**. He can actually work all those notes into his rolls. I recommend not worrying about a roll at first, just see if you can find every single melody note.

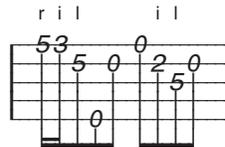
What does it take to do that? Trial and error, the same way melodies are created in the first place. I suggest hunting down and learning the exact melody of one song per week—every last note. It’s a great exercise, and if it takes you a while at first, you can look forward to when the

repeated effort will allow you to do it almost instantaneously.

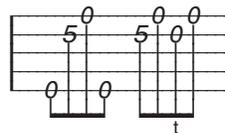
At the end of “the year of the melody”, you will have learned 52 melodies, and the last ones will come almost instantaneously. By now, thinking of an idea while you’re playing just might result in a spontaneous new lick. Here’s hoping you come up with something good!

**Bluesy**

**chromatic lick:**



**Easy melodic lick:**



**Backward/  
Forward cool lick:**

