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LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

Sound Bites from Hollywood and West Virginia

Pete Wernick

The word has gotten around that Hot Rize played at Steve Martin's wedding, and as with about anything involving Steve, there's a fair amount of curiosity. For the sake of brevity, here are some sound bites:

* Steve first asked me back in March to provide background music for the occasion, and something for part of the ceremony. When I suggested Hot Rize, he said "I'd kill for Hot Rize." Nick and Tim were available, and since Bryan Sutton wasn't, we got David Grier.

* The father of the bride is from North Carolina, and is a Hot Rize fan.

* For the ceremony itself, Steve and Anne chose Tim's great song, *Romance Is a Slow Dance*. After the vows, we broke into Cripple Creek.

* Steve had said, if Hot Rize is there, it would be a sin not to have the group play a short set, "as in, I would go to hell." We did *Blue Night*, *Nellie Kane*, *High on a Mountain*, *Shadows in My Room*, as well as a wedding song I wrote for Steve and Anne. Steve joined us for *The Crow* and *Foggy Mt. Breakdown*.

* Guests included Tom Hanks, Carl

Reiner, Diane Keaton, Lorne Michaels, and Martin Mull. Martin and Steve jammed with the band toward the end of the evening. They are good pickers!

* My connection with Steve began with an interview he did in *Banjo Newsletter* about 2003 with Ira Gitlin, in which he spoke appreciatively of my playing. I figured he might be interested in making my acquaintance, and asked John McEuen to put us in touch.

* Steve is of course an excellent banjo player. He's good at both clawhammer and Scruggs style, and has made up some nifty tunes. Most of his experience is playing solo, and jamming is actually somewhat new to him. He's got a nice Florentine and 20s Granada, both archtops, and some other nice banjos, all archtops. He sings right in tune, and he does a good job on *Little Maggie*.

Signing off from the Hills of Beverly, July 28.

The very next night, I arrive in the somewhat different hills of West Virginia, just in time to start my first Augusta Heritage Bluegrass Week. The venerable

program, headed by my buddy Paul Kovac and staffed by some of bluegrass' finest (Brian Wicklund, Chris Jones, Roland White, etc. etc.) featured a session with me as "Guest Master". For this very special opportunity, I prepared a number of my favorite bits of advice to bluegrass musicians. Here are some more sound bites, starting with some general principles:

* Music is about having a good time. Go for the skills that will get you the most fun the soonest.

* If I have a chance to be your teacher, I'm about getting *results, lasting, meaningful results*. Use your time well, don't get sidetracked in time-wasters, though any time spent enjoying your playing is not a waste of time!

* Jamming or playing in a band is essential to being a bluegrass musician.

* Listen often to great music you'd like to play.

Advice for Novices or those in the early stages:

* Teachers should organize novices into slow jams by the second lesson. See *DrBanjo.com* for:

* List of 54 Two-Chord Songs

* Bluegrass Jamming Pointers (ground rules of jamming)

* List of 106 Top Jam Session Favorites

* How to find people (at your level) to jam with (practical suggestions)

* Play along Jamming DVDs to learn 56 songs, build confidence, practice solos.

* Singing is not peripheral to learning a bluegrass instrument. Singing is central and essential to bluegrass, so learning to sing a few songs allows more and better participation in jamming. And jamming is the lifeblood, the spark of your life as a musician.

* If you have trouble carrying a tune, that is a very learnable skill. See the article on my web site, *Learning to Sing in Tune*, which shows how with the help of a knowledgeable person, you can apply and get major results in just minutes. I have used this method often, and it has never failed. Anyone who has a voice and can hear can learn to carry a tune.

* I downplay learning instrumentals

at first. Work out simple breaks to songs – a much more useful skill.

* Learning harmony singing makes you a better jammer, with more opportunities to play with others. The basics of harmony singing are found in both my *Bluegrass Songbook*, and *Bluegrass Banjo* book.

* Music is not on paper. It is *sound*. Learn ear skills. Music was started by people recognizing good sounds, finding simple melodies. Learn simple music first (*a la* Suzuki). By trial and error, and your own desire, learn how to make it sound good.

* Tab is a great way to learn cool tricks *once you can play* (by ear, and by following chords). Playing from tab is *not* the principal way to learn how to play.

* All questions of technique, instrument and equipment selection, and setup can be resolved by this easy rule of thumb: “What sounds best, and makes it easy to play the music you think sounds best?”

* Know and respect the musicians whose shoulders we are standing on. Learn not just their music, but learn about their lives and what brought this music out of them. You will not only learn about the foundations of bluegrass, but also about how a musician can learn who he or she is, and cultivate their talent so that people can appreciate it. Great things come from great alliances.

* Love tradition, root yourself in it, and then nourish yourself (by listening to and interacting with other musicians, working on the music you like best) and *grow*. That is the job of every musician, including every traditional musician.

To really hone your skills:

• Listen to recordings of yourself. You’ll hear things you don’t notice when you’re busy playing.

• Focus your practicing around developing your sense of:

• Melody—work out each melody note of a song you can hum, on the neck of the banjo. Do a new song every week. Change keys sometimes.

• Pulse—Practice with a metronome, or better yet, a rhythm machine. Learn to emphasize every note that occurs on a beat (1st and 5th notes of the roll)

• Meaning—Cultivate your ability to play differently depending on the mood of the song, the actions and images in the lyrics. Use dynamics, accenting, learn to use the whole neck.

• Clarity of sound and of purpose. Be aware of the effects you’re trying to achieve, and ask yourself if the listener is really hearing good and interesting banjo sounds.

The big picture

* Music is about fun, and some of the best fun is teamwork, creating a whole greater than the sum of the parts. Bluegrass is a great format for a small group of people to make some enjoyable music, with relative ease.

* A good goal: Help create music and experiences *all* can enjoy. It’s not about showing how good you are. That’s not really important. Rather, who elevates *everyone* and makes the music sound better?

OK, that’s a fair dose of sound bites. I hope they digest well. Pick on!

Pete, www.DrBanjo.com