



## LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

### *Can't Find People To Jam With?*

*Pete Wernick*

Think no one where you live is into bluegrass? Maybe you're wrong and don't know it. There may be someone like you, just as interested, just as skilled, but like you, a closet player. How would you know about each other—even you sat next to each other at a sports event, or lived two houses from each other? People need to be a bit forward, and do some scouting, even advertise the fact that they want to jam. I used to do that, and it worked!

In almost any part of the United States, a bit of scouting will probably pay off. Here are some time-tested ways of finding picking partners you're compatible with.

1. *Attend jams.* Many music stores, bluegrass clubs, restaurants, etc. sponsor bluegrass jams each month. Show up with an instrument, if only to watch.

What if jam is too advanced?? Look around to see who else has an instrument but isn't playing. Get up your nerve and strike up a conversation around the subject, "Is that a guitar in that case? How come you're not playing? They're too fast/advanced for me too. I'm new to this. Do you know *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*, or *Worried Man Blues*?" Suggest going elsewhere to start a slower jam. Have some easy well-known songs picked out, in case the other person doesn't want to sing. Invite other wallflowers along.

What if I can't find a jam? Finding local jams means "networking". There are bound to be bluegrass organizations and bluegrass radio shows, possibly some festivals within easy reach of the area you live. If you find one of them, you can usually find the others pretty quickly, especially if the organization has a newsletter. Online

help: [www.bluegrassmusicjams.com](http://www.bluegrassmusicjams.com); [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com) (enter *Bluegrass* under interest). Write the International Bluegrass Music Association ([info@IBMA.org](mailto:info@IBMA.org)), say where you live, and ask for an organization/festival/radio station's web site. Or search on Google: "bluegrass jam [your state]", or "bluegrass music [your state]".

2. My pet suggestion: *Enlist a teacher of bluegrass.* Find out who teaches bluegrass guitar, fiddle, banjo, etc. (whichever instrument/s you don't play). Offer to pay that teacher the going lesson rate, to host some sessions where a few relatively matched students are guided in playing together. This can be a profitable proposition for the teacher(s), and bring in new students.

3. *Wear bluegrass clothing*—a festival hat or instrument brand or festival shirt—or my "Let's Pick!" t-shirt (check the Store on [www.DrBanjo.com](http://www.DrBanjo.com)). At the supermarket, at the mall, school, sports events, someone is bound to strike up a conversation. (Wouldn't you, if you saw someone wearing a shirt like that?) The month our t-shirt first appeared, a jam camper wrote:

"I was in Maine last week. We pulled into a beach parking lot to take a walk and when I got back, a couple of guys were checking out my RV. I have a Bluegrass sticker on the back. I had my shirt on and that took care of intros immediately."

4. *Scout at bluegrass festivals.* Stroll the campground, especially when the stage shows aren't on. If you notice a group playing at about your level, check your instrument's tuning and join in from a bit outside the circle. Chances are, if you sized

it up right, you'll be welcomed in.

Maybe you'll see a jam you don't feel quite ready to join. Some of these are surrounded by an outer circle of tentative play-along-ers. After a while in the outer circle, you might chat a little with someone nearby, and suggest an easy song you could play, away from the main group. If that goes well, others might gravitate over to you.

If you don't see a group to fit in with, you and one other person, or even you alone, can start playing in a fairly visible spot. If someone with an instrument stops to listen, you might invite them to play a tune, or they might invite themselves.

After some picking, find out where they're from and are there any good jams there? If not, consider starting one.

5. *Start one.* It helps to know how to jam, but even that isn't necessary if you can get a few more experienced people to come, or even pay for a teacher's presence. Only requirements are: invite some pickers (or potential pickers), give directions to your house (or a public park, or wherever) maybe some refreshments, definitely a tuner and a songbook or two and music stand. Then, as soon as someone starts singing and playing some rhythm, someone can join in, and the jamming begins! To be really sure the jam "works", come prepared to actually play and sing a few easy songs—*Mountain Dew*, *Worried Man*, etc. Or at least be sure to enlist someone who can and will sing some good old favorites.

6. *Index cards on bulletin boards* at music stores, college student unions, community centers, etc. might make some connections. Include your instrument, if you sing, where you live, jamming experience, and maybe age if relevant. You might advertise for "bluegrass" jamming, or possibly "bluegrass/folk/country".

*One last unusual suggestion*, and how it worked. For U.S. folks who think "no one near me is into bluegrass", my guess is you're mistaken. In the following case, he is quite likely correct. U.S. bluegrassers, consider yourselves fortunate!

Gary from Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia wrote:

"Living in Darwin I am starved of pickers and bluegrass. Any help or info you can give me is very much appreciated."

Dear Gary,

(After referencing the usual suggestions,

I acknowledged:) In your case, there really might be no pickers and bluegrass within 500 miles!

This calls for drastic measures, which is that you have to get people interested. If you can get a friend interested in playing bluegrass (or any type) of guitar, you can soon be playing music with that person. Their main job is to learn a few chords and simply chord behind songs. With a flat pick, a person can go boom (bass note) / strum in a matter of days. You take it from there. Try introducing bluegrass recordings to various friends. You never know who might get interested! If they are interested enough to take up guitar, you could have a picking partner later that week.

*Bingo!* Here's Gary's update from several months later.

G'day Pete,

Thanks for the words of encouragement. I must apologize, but I have been so swept up in this jam thing and practicing that I neglected to thank you Pete.

How did I get this jam happening. I found another bloke who had a Gibson banjo but it was practically unplayable. All it needed was tightening of the truss rod nut. It turns out his wife could play guitar. We imposed on her and she agreed to play some bluegrass songs.

She works with a youth band. It turns out that one of the kids' parents plays mandolin. They wanted to join us. The kid's violin teacher heard and wanted in as well. Now a fella who plays drums comes along. I realise that it's not strictly bluegrass but he does help keep time and he has fun.

Now we are getting a song list together, I'm practicing these songs and taking your advice and singing a bit too. We are having a great time and try to meet up once a fortnight.

We have been asked to play at a local event and although we declined on this occasion ( we are too out of time yet ) I have no doubt we will play at others in the future. I'm quite happy to just jam along. I'm getting used to "Wow, that sounds so cool" and "Crikey, that sounds really fast. How do you do it."

Once again Pete, thanks for the encouragement and advice.

Cheers for now mate.

Visit Pete on [www.DrBanjo.com](http://www.DrBanjo.com)