



LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

Getting Away from Strict Memorizing, and Creating Your Own Solos

Pete Wernick

Will J. writes:

I have been taking banjo lesson for about a year and a half now. My instructor is a great banjo player, winning competitions at major events. My problem seems to be that he wants me to learn songs by ear. I currently have about 30 songs in my repertoire, mostly traditional Scruggs tunes. These songs have given me a somewhat solid foundation of the Scruggs style licks, but that is about it. I want to further my instruction that will teach me more about the banjo, instead of plain rote memorization of songs. What I am really trying to say is that I am not getting much from memorizing the songs note for note. I am open to any suggestions at this point. If you have any advice as to any programs, institutions, or anything else that you might think could help, I would be most grateful. —Will J.

Dear Will,

I appreciate your dilemma. I'd say your teacher could be helping you with ear training, and should have started you on it much earlier, instead of sticking so long with strictly rote memorization. Memorizing tabs has its satisfactions, but it is NOT the way to learn Scruggs style, any more than memorizing paragraphs in a foreign language is the way to learn to speak that language.

I recommend you spend some time with a basic step: Finding melodies by ear on the banjo neck, note by note, one finger on each hand (no rolls or even chords at first). This ability comes more easily to some than others. To see how good you are at it, pick a song you can hum but don't yet know on the banjo. If you don't know the chords or can't guess them yourself, refer to a songbook. Hum along while you chord for a while, and then see if you can find on the neck of the banjo the very first note of the tune. Then the next, then the next. Be patient, as this process is something all players have to learn. It's what even the

pros do when working out a new song. They are quicker at it, of course, but you have to start somewhere, finding melodies by ear. The more you do it, the quicker it goes.

Important hints: the longer-held important melody notes are almost always found among the notes in the chord being played. For example, since songs in G use a lot of G chords, and generally start on a G chord, your open strings are bound to yield many melody notes.

Considering all the tunes you've learned so far, you'll find you use quite a few notes and phrases you've already been using. That's handy. Use them again!

Once you have located the melody notes and the chords, hit the first melody note and see if you can use it as the first note of a roll. Try a forward roll or *Foggy Mt. Breakdown* roll. How to describe the process of combining rolls with melody notes? Think of it as either: "While rolling through the chord changes, try to keep including in the roll the strings the melody notes are on." or else: "Play the melody, and where there's filler space, put in some rolling notes."

This process is trial and error. Lots of chances to be confused. It's OK to leave out any short melody notes that are hard to fit in, but try to include all the important ones (that happen on beats or important words, or are held for a while). It's a challenge to keep accurate rhythm, avoiding putting too many or few notes in the spaces. On my web site (under The Doc's Prescriptions), see the article about making a play-along rhythm track tape. Playing to a correct rhythm track is a very useful way of guiding the timing of your arrangement as you build it. (Playing to a metronome is actually not as effective, since it only tells you when each beat is, not your exact location in the song).

It's quite normal to have an arrangement come out a bit differently at different times. Lots of ways can be considered correct.

Eyewitness quote from Earl Scruggs: “I have no idea how someone could play something exactly the same way twice in a row.” That’s something to think about. (As with speaking a language, something besides simple memorization is at work. Fluency in the “language” means you can say the same thing different ways.)

At my Basic Skills Banjo Camp every January, I teach the skill of “creating solos” to as many of the campers as are ready to take it on (usually more than half the group). With 30 songs memorized, you would probably get the hang of this relatively soon, pulling phrases from arrangements you already know, and applying them to a new arrangement. Once a person figures out their first arrangement, the next one tends to come more quickly. The process continues to get easier, especially when you learn to transplant and incorporate licks and phrases from arrangements you’ve already learned.

Please read the article on my web site called *Teaching Beginning Banjo Players*. It emphasizes the need to play in slow jams with other novice musicians as soon as possible. It also suggests how to find and even organize slow jams that have teachers for supervision. Playing in jams will give you a chance to learn accompanying skills (not just soloing). I also recommend my three bluegrass jamming DVDs, giving 56 favorite songs at gentle tempos, with opportunities to solo within each song.

Any of this “jam” type experience will broaden your playing. You will be exposed to repertoire that’s new to you, and each new song you’re expected to play will challenge you to come up with something workable—maybe even in real time while just looking at the left hand of a guitar player for the chords. No, this is not as simple as following a memorized script, home alone, at your own pace! But this *is* the way real bluegrass banjo players function in real jams. The arrangements are not exact, and your solos needn’t be refined and feature exact melodies, but mainly need to flow smoothly while fitting with the chords and rhythm. As you get familiar with new repertoire, take time when practicing on your own to hunt down the real melody notes and work out and master “better than passable” solos that you can uncork at the next jam.

Best of luck with your picking. I think if you just jump in, this part of the process won’t truly stymie you, just frustrate you for a while! Comfort yourself with the notion that *every* good banjo player has to go through this step. It’s kind of when your right hand learns to “think” Scruggs style, instead of just “reciting” from memory.

—Pete Wernick

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