



LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

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The Year of Good Tone

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Lenny asks on the Forum at www.DrBanjo.com:

How do you define good tone? What are some things to look out for that detract from good tone and what are some specifics that promote good tone?

Dear Lenny, You have asked important questions, a lot to answer, but worth sharing in the most venerable banjo forum of all, Banjo Newsletter.

Paraphrasing a handout from my banjo camps: *Let 2009 be The Year of Good Tone*. May we all strive (see below) for that tone that made us want to play banjo in the first place! Now, "good tone" may mean different things to different people so I'll just assume that each person knows what he/she likes. 'Nuff said on that one! Now...

Good tone begins in your mind.

(Pause for effect, and puzzlement...) That is, have a vivid mental "picture", or the *sound of great banjo tone in your head*. For me, having heard the likes of Scruggs, Emerson, Crowe, and Hensley since my teens, I can mentally "dial in" my ideal banjo tone with or without a banjo actually audible. So many great players now to hear and instill that sound!

That gives me a standard to try to live up to, and then it's up to my desire and ultimately, my hands to actually make the tone.

Note I haven't yet mentioned the banjo itself. Naturally you need a banjo! But the way I see it, the tonal result depends less on the make, pedigree, and setup of the banjo itself than the hands and mind of the player, and a few simple setup factors: whether it's in tune and intonates properly, and notes clearly and free of buzzes.

Wait—did I say the hands and mind of the player and whether the banjo is in tune and buzz-free are more important than the type of banjo being played?? That would mean that a great player on a cheap banjo sounds better than an average player on Earl Scruggs' or Jim Mills' banjo? Yes, I do mean that. Or if a great banjo is out of tune or buzzing, I'd rather listen to full-bodied playing on a clear, in-tune cheapie.

Since this is a forum, I can imagine some debates about this, and that's okay. Just my opinion. I'm trying to address the true priorities of music. Trumping everything else are the aesthetics of the player. The player who cares enough about good tone to carefully tune and set up his/her banjo, and carry the standard of good tone whenever a five-string is in his/her hands, will consistently produce good tone, whatever the banjo. I've heard many examples of this and maybe you have too. Three stick out in my mind:

1. Back in New York in the 60s, Bill Keith was at my apartment. He suggested we pick. He didn't have his banjo or even finger picks, and I had just my '30s Gibson and a really cheap "wall" banjo with terribly high action. I assumed that meant we couldn't both play, but he was undaunted. Damned if he didn't make that

no-name sound fine, and even loud enough to blend with me on my Gibson. That made an impression.

2. Asheville, NC, 1984. During down time at a TV taping, a great, famous, knowledgeable player (name withheld) ran over to the Hot Rize bus and said, "Come on, you've got to listen to Raymond Fairchild. He sounds incredible. I think he must be playing an original 3." We went to listen, and he did sound fabulous. We went closer and checked out what he was playing... an Alvarez.

3. Cut to Tennessee Banjo Institute, 1990. Rogerio de Santos from Brazil enthralled everyone with his exquisite renditions of Bach pieces on...an open backed **Kent** banjo, the kind that a beginner might buy second hand for maybe \$50. Why was Rogerio playing a Kent? Well, that's what he could afford. But in his hands, it sang!

The Gibson company was so impressed and sympathetic that they presented him a beautiful high-end banjo right then and there. And when he played it... it didn't sound as good as the Kent! Now, this was surely temporary, but it strikingly highlighted a key element of good tone: **A player's touch must be attuned to the instrument being played.** Rogerio's inexperience on a highly responsive banjo caused him to overplay, and it took him a while to adjust.

More specifically: Hand position, finger pressure, type of picks, and all other details of tone production are governed by the caring player's impression of the sounds produced. Simple examples: If your sound is too harsh, move away from the bridge. Not crisp and clear enough, move closer to the bridge, and perhaps increase finger strength and pick speed. **Listen and adjust to taste.** *Find the sweet spot.* Tone suffers when aesthetics go untended because the player is so busy making all the moves that he/she has no attention left to evaluate the prettiness of the tone, and to notice small flaws.

Any player can do this: Pick something you like to play, something easy enough to allow ample attention to listen to yourself. Listen as you play and ask: Why doesn't this sound like Tom Adams or Bill Emerson or Ben Eldridge? What do they do that would make these same notes sound like a pro player?

Quite possibly, some of your notes could be clearer and more distinct. Listen

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hard to the first two measures. Is each and every note as clear and full as Tom, Bill, or Ben would pick it? Please don't blame the gap between you and them on your instrument. You know, if one of them picked up your banjo and played the same notes you're playing, it would sound better. The key question: Why?

I ask this relentlessly at my Intermediate and Advanced Banjo Camps (shameless plug: Still room in both; go to my web site.). I have players do exactly what I'm suggesting here, and I listen carefully, along with the onlooking class. Some typical suggestions:

- Move your hand closer to the bridge and pick a bit harder.
- Notice you're touching but barely sounding the strings played by (your index finger/ your middle finger/ thumb on the 5th). Every note should be clear and distinct. Stop playing the piece, and just **play that weak note**. Make it sound as good as you can, again... again, with nice full tone. Now re-play just that section of the tune, making sure that note still sounds *that good within* the flow.

By this time, the onlookers are usually nodding their heads, registering the significant improvement.

- Your pull-offs are indistinct; we hardly hear the second note.
- Your slide and release is a jab, and mutes the string as you reach the second location.
- You spaz-out on that section. Work on just that, till it smooths out.

And so on and so on. Two additional helps:

1. The loop exercise method (on *DrBanjo.com* home page, link from Visitor Favorites).

2. Record yourself and listen back in headphones. Wow, you can hear the details better when you're not so busy doing the playing!

Still haven't mentioned banjo brands or set-up—except the points about buzz-free and intonation (intonation requires accurate bridge placement, and maybe having frets replaced or recrowned). Of course those are important, but my aim here is to stress the dominance of the aesthetics of the player, which is ultimately, *caring* about good tone. Players who care about tone get buzzes fixed, take time to check and correct bridge placement, change old strings, and get the best sound out of whatever banjo they play.

If you care a lot about good tone, it will come. I assure you of that, whether you're rich, poor, young or old, have a great pre-war or a cheap Kent. Since 2009 is The Year of Good Tone, let's all put first things first and make that banjo sing as beautifully as it can! And by the way, if a year from now we *still* don't sound like our favorite player, 2010 will also be **The Year of Good Tone**.

Visit Pete at www.DrBanjo.com for info on January Banjo Camps, free instruction and tabs, learning DVDs and books.