



## LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

### *Jam Etiquette re Breaks, and Choices in a Recording Banjo*

*Pete Wernick*

The mailbag produced a couple of good questions that might speak to some of your concerns. I invite your inquiries at [pete@DrBanjo.com](mailto:pete@DrBanjo.com). Or visit [www.DrBanjo.com](http://www.DrBanjo.com) and participate in the Forum. Questions of general interest may be answered in this column.

*Patrick writes:*

I picked up a copy of your jam etiquette flyer. Enjoy your tips a lot. Something is really bugging me, though. I've been playing about four years, and I am fairly serious about it—I'm probably somewhere around advanced—not sure.

Anyway, the monthly jam I really enjoy is the jam I started with. My wife and I go, and we feel we're pretty well accepted—except I don't feel I get enough breaks. I'm too shy really to complain. I flip a lot between “man I must still suck pretty bad,” to “they can't hear me and so they forget about me,” or “he just wants to hot dog.” Anyway the dynamics are a big question mark to me, I really don't have a clue—I only get three or four breaks on a three hour session (except my songs of course). I am reluctant to just force a turn and feel that's bad karma.

What do you think???

—Patrick

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Patrick,

I don't have a simple fix for this, but I have a few ideas for you to consider.

Maybe you don't play loud enough. In open jams, it often takes some volume to be heard, and until players earn the respect of having other people pay attention to their solos (and quiet down a little out of respect), sometimes volume helps get attention.

The usual strategy for “getting breaks” is to play some good stuff on backup (doing tasty fills, not too much, but just in the right places—this appropriately displays your musical competence), and when a solo opportunity is coming up—that is, in the last half of the chorus—look up at the lead singer as if to say “call on me”.

If you've already been doing the above, there could be various other reasons for the snub. Anything from personality problems to “never liked guys with beards” to ... you name it.

Another tack to take would be to talk with one or more of the people who usually lead songs, and in a private moment let the discussion range to “I wonder why I'm not called on more for solos”—without making it sound like a challenge where that person is put on the spot. That takes a bit more social nerve to do, but you may be able to fish out whatever the reason(s) might be for your not getting asked. That kind of discussion can be ticklish, so try to keep your defenses down, and don't leave the person you talked to feel the conversation went poorly if they tried to give you some pointers. Mostly just say “thanks” and then chew on what you may have learned.

Best of luck. Let me know how it goes. I'm sure you can solve the problem somehow. —*Pete*

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*David writes:*

I've started using the banjo in my recordings. I'm a multi-instrumentalist and know many of the "sweet spots" in those instruments in regards to EQ and allowing them to lay in the mix rather than squash it. The banjo has been one of the hardest for me to get a handle on.

I know for instance the acoustic guitar can often benefit from a good boost or cut in certain frequencies in the aural spectrum when laying in a mix. Often times I can remove the "cheap" sound of a lower quality guitar by cutting around -3db at 800 mhz for instance. Or a boost of around +3-6 db around the 200 mhz range can add some fullness to the bottom, etc.

What about the banjo? Any sweet spots or trouble spots when mixing? I want the instrument to lay in the mix more than stand out like a sore thumb. Any help would be greatly appreciated.

—*David*

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David,

This is a reasonable enough question, but I don't know of any across-the-board EQ tricks for banjo. When I record my own banjo (1988 Gibson Granada, using AKG 414 large diaphragm condenser mic), a small cut between 200-400 mhz helps make things sound a bit clearer. But this is specific to my banjo and that mic, when I'm playing in a full band context.

Choice of mic is quite important. The banjo's quick response and strong high end, plus definite voice in the low-mids, is a combination not all mics handle well. For stage, the SM-57 Shure, an inexpensive dynamic mic, seems to do about as well as any. In the studio, a lot of people recommend large diaphragm condensers, to make sure to get a sweet low end, while still getting a good clear high end.

I recommend experimenting with mics: Record several tracks simultaneously on different mics, and compare the tracks on playback. Once you know what mic you like, mic placement is another factor. I place the 414 about 8 inches from the center of the banjo head. Other people prefer other placements. As with mic selection, the way to arrive at the best placement is to position identical mics in different places, record some playing on separate tracks simultaneously, and decide which track sounds best (make sure you keep track of which recorded track is which placement!).

As with a lot of music, art, or cooking, "season to taste." The key word here is *taste*, which of course may vary from person to person. In this case, it's *your* taste which should dictate. That underscores why I wouldn't offer a suggestion as though "this is what works" but more: "Here's what I like, with my banjo and my particular taste."

As with many questions of "how to sound good," it's important to be aware that each person has their own taste, and you can arrive at your favorite choice by experimentation.

—*Pete*

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