



LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

Let's Get This Straight: Controversial Topics: Two-finger Plant? Metronome? 2-4 Slide? Syncopation?

Pete Wernick

"How is syncopation acquired? Watching a fellow banjo player play made me realize that I have a ways to go. Playing various rolls is okay, but it's far from complete. Any input is appreciated."

—Richard

Richard,

Syncopation is an often-used and less often-understood word. I've heard people use it to indicate a certain rhythmic feel, or strong accenting. The definition of syncopation is nothing more or less than: *Playing a melody note at an unexpected time.* An extension of this could be to call a syncopated phrase one that hits not just on the beats or offbeats, but anticipates or falls between main beats.

I think it's ideal to "hear" music in your head and body as you're making it. That would mean *thinking* syncopated to play syncopated. There are surely ways to notate a phrase with syncopation on a page for someone to play from. But the most likeable music is felt as it's played, which takes more than reciting from a page.

How to hear/think/feel syncopation? I would say to check out musicians you like who are noted for that. Earl Scruggs has a way of playing tricks on listeners by syncopating melodies, almost as if he's playing a game. Reggae music has a lot of syncopation, and quite a few forms of black music use looser, more complex rhythms than most white forms. Syncopation was also a trademark of Frank Sinatra. As you absorb the music of such musicians, your imagination expands.

Have just..... a heck of....a *time.* (syncopated writing??)

—Pete

Should I use a metronome?

There are two kinds of timing problems, and most beginners have the kind that is *not* helped by a metronome. (A metronome can help the other type of timing problem,

This month's column jumps headlong into some issues where I will rail against "common wisdom."

How important is it to plant two fingers on the head?

My advice is that *it's not important to plant two fingers versus one finger*, because not everyone is comfortable doing that, and stability, the important factor, can be had with just one finger planted.

I debated this subject in *BNL* over 15 years ago with Jack Hatfield, and have discussed it at length with Bill Evans, with whom I differ as well. And my advice is counter to that of the most highly esteemed Earl Scruggs. Whew!

I base my conclusion on the fact that such great banjo players as Sammy Shelor, Alison Brown, Little Roy Lewis, Blake Williams, Alan O'Bryant, Doug Dillard, Pat Cloud, Vic Jordan, Don Wayne Reno, etc. etc. plant only one (some the ring, some the pinky). There is documentation in the second edition of "*Masters of the Five String Banjo.*" About a third of the 50 or so players surveyed in 1986 planted just one finger.

This being so, I don't see how it is a problem to plant one finger. This issue can be likened to the old attitude that "everyone" should be a righty, with left-handed kids forced to write righty. Even if most people (including many excellent writers) prefer the right hand, that doesn't make it "right" and lefty "wrong." I think the analogy holds re the finger plant.

Why do I make a point to repeatedly offer this advice? Because *it's hard enough to learn Scruggs style anyway, and learners are advised to avoid unnecessary distractions and challenges, and keep it fun. Why make it harder than it already is?*

From the mailbag:

"What is syncopation and how do you get it?"

that of inconsistent speed.) In the spirit of the above-quoted advice (*It's hard enough to learn Scruggs style anyway, and learners are advised to avoid unnecessary distractions and challenges, and keep it fun*), I recommend that beginners not bother with a metronome.

Learning to use a metronome is a skill in itself, and a player with a tendency to "lose the rhythm" does not need to master an iffy new skill to overcome the problem. Instead, he or she should practice playing along with *real music*, at comfortable speeds. Most beginners can roll easily at about 70 or 80 beats a minute. To play along with music at that speed, take a favorite recorded song and slow it down with a variable speed player or program, or find some music that is already at a comfortable speed (such as my "*Slow Jam*" DVD, see *DrBanjo.com*). A last choice is to make your own simple play-along rhythm track. A guide for that is on my web site under The Doc's Prescriptions.

If a student keeps playing with a correct recording, he'll have to fall in with the timing after a while. If he is playing along but still having trouble staying with the recording, I'd turn the recording up louder. And louder if necessary. At some point, he'll have to fall in!

The 2-4 slide?? No, it's 2-3

The story here centers on the fact that our banjo "bible", the Earl Scruggs book, frequently shows a 2-4 slide on the third string.

Though Earl's and others' teaching materials show many 2-4 slides, that is rarely what happens. Observe almost any pro or experienced picker. What really happens is that the slide (or a hammer-on) goes from the 2nd to the 3rd fret (A to A#) whereupon the string is muted by the fretting finger lifting (as when chopping chords). Just as that happens, the open 2nd string B is picked, taking over for the sound of the 2-3 note. The effect is a sequence of an A to A#, to a B, with no unison notes. It works the same whether it's a 2-3 slide or hammer-on.

Does it matter whether it's a slide or hammer-on? No. The sounds of a 2-3 slide and a 2-3 hammer-on are identical. Both moves suddenly change the active fret from 2 to 3. I think most players use them interchangeably without even noticing.

Why do so many tablatures say 2-4? Earl's book set the precedent. Why are

there all those 2-4s in the book? I asked Bill Keith himself, whose groundbreaking tabs were the centerpiece of the book.

He explained that his method was to first identify the notes he heard, and then to figure out how they could be played. He heard the slide start with an A (2nd fret) and the sound move up to a B. He deduced that the slide went to the 4th fret. I would say that he was hearing the open 2nd string "take over" for the muted 3rd string.

Why is this an issue? Well, if a banjo doesn't have a compensated bridge, that 4th fret note that's supposedly a B generally will be sharp. The unison is not really a

unison, but two notes not in tune with each other. An obscure fact: Scruggs briefly experimented in the 50s with a relocated *portion* of the 4th fret so that the 3rd string would note correctly. Photos from that time show a section of the fret was moved a bit closer to the nut. Clearly Earl was not entirely happy with the "unison" of the B string with the G string fretted at the 4th fret.

And now the big question: How could "common wisdom" be wrong? And the answer, "It happens."

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