



LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

The “Pro Sound”—What Is It, and How Do You Get it?

Pete Wernick

Zeek writes to the Forum on DrBanjo.com:

In ads for your camps I've seen mention of segments of your teaching dealing with the “pro sound.” I'm very interested in this.

I guess what I hear in a pro player that I lack are 1) no mistakes, and 2) consistency. It just seems like it is impossible for me to play mistake-free. No matter how many times I play or practice a tune...at any given moment during a performance I'm fully capable of blowing it. Sometimes the mistakes are minor, but still noticeable enough that you'd never hear such gaffs on stage from a Pete Wernick or a Rob McCoury. I don't have a problem so much with note choice or timing issues or even rolls per se... It's more an issue of being able to play error-free and consistently.

I know both these qualities are only going to come with time. I understand there are no shortcuts. Also, just to clarify, I am not equating “pro sound” with flash or pyrotechnics. I'm talking the good old “3 Ts” of Timing, Tone and Taste. I could list many players in this category, yourself included...along with JD Crowe, Jim Mills, Terry Baucom, etc. Just rock solid and consistent.

What I'm after is specific help with how to get that pro sound. What attitudes do I need to foster as I practice? What kinds of practice techniques will help focus my time and energy into achieving this pro sound? It seems to me that it's so much a purely mental issue... like a concentration thing or a confidence thing, etc. Any help would be greatly appreciated and used. You're the only person I've ever heard even mention anything about a “pro sound” and that really hit home with me. —Zeek

Zeek,

That is a rather large question, and takes a while to cover at the banjo camp. To summarize:

The “Pro Sound” includes:

*** Consistency of tone and timing, in other words:*

** Error-free; all notes in place*

** Clear (no rough sounds, muffled notes, overplayed notes, buzzes)*

*** Making each note count, with a clear attack, though not necessarily all the same volume*

*** Making every note sound good and robust, that is, with projection and fullness, and sounding attractive*

You speak of your own playing as “impossible to make mistake-free.” That is a defeatist attitude which there's no place for here. Start with something *really* easy, like a 4-note phrase, like TITM on open strings. Repeat it and see if you can play it perfectly, over and over. Probably you can. OK, *you just played something error-free.* Onward! Time to raise the bar. Pick something else, a one-measure fragment of something that you typically play, that's pretty easy, and go for 10 times in a row perfectly. If you can do that, good, now work on something else and see if you can play it perfectly. If you notice a place where you tend to stumble, that's something you need to practice.

What I'm describing is the first step of a process I've used in my own practice over the years. What's important in achieving the Pro Sound is to take note of flaws in your playing and making a point of eradicating them...one by one...using focused practice.

By “focused practice” I'm referring to what I call the Loop Exercise Method. I've spelled that out in this column before and I can't recommend it highly enough. You can find my article about it on *DrBanjo.com* under Instructional or in the section of my past *BNL* columns.

The Loop Exercise Method takes you through the steps of:

1. Finding a flaw to work on.
2. Making a short exercise including

that flaw, that can be repeated without stopping, and getting that “loop” going at a slow speed (it’s highly recommended to use a metronome for precise timing and consistency).

3. Ironing out the flaw by playing the loop continuously, as slowly as necessary to get it perfect.

4. Once it’s coming out correct, repeatedly, be sure to bring out the best sound on every note, still not speeding up the loop. Lock it in.

5. Now, if all still sounds good, gradually bring the speed up until the repeating loop flows perfectly almost “all by itself,” still sounding big and great.

6. Now play the whole section of the tune that includes the “flaw” and see if it’s cured.

For more detail, find the Loop Exercise Method article on *DrBanjo.com*. Check out the video clip there of me using the method to help a student. You can hear him improve, and then click to what he sounded like after working on the piece for a while (major improvement).

So this painstaking method is a way of getting serious about going for the Pro Sound. If you or anyone really wants to get there, you can do it. It takes sustained dedicated work, but the trick is to focus, keep your standard high, and be patient. If it were easy, everyone could do it.

At my Intermediate and Advanced camps, I try to see that everyone gets a taste of hearing themselves sound like a pro (even if just on one simple common

lick). It usually amazes the player and the others in the room. Unfortunately, while the player surely gets an epiphany, there’s no instant full transformation once that happens. It’s meant to inspire a player, by giving a concrete example of what happens when you focus. So...work on a little at a time, ground up, and stay patient and optimistic. A big key to successful use of this method is a phrase I often quote from my friend, guitar wizard Russ Barenberg: “Have a clear idea of what you won’t settle for.”

At a certain point, the good news is that if you work through, say, a whole solo transforming it a piece at a time into the Pro Sound, you will in the process develop “finger muscle power,” a sense of sureness about timing, and refined sensibilities and expectations about your playing that will put you on a different plane than you were before. The happy result is that your Pro Sound can then transfer right to other things you play, with much less effort. Your new good habits will take it from there!

Having interviewed many pro players, I’ve often heard them say, “I just play what I hear.” I understand that to mean, “I hear great-sounding banjo playing in my head, and I try to make that happen.” Combine that intention with an absolute insistence on not settling for less, and I’d say that tells us how these guys got to be pros! —Pete

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