



## LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

### *Jam Class Teacher Network Starting; My Take on Tab/Rote Learning*

*Pete Wernick*

I am proud to announce this month the launch of my Wernick Method Teacher Certified Jam Classes. As you dear readers may well know, I have for some time been championing **learning to jam first** as a fun and fundamental way to start playing any bluegrass instrument. Great things happen when people learn to jam, because it's fun and so involving that they're motivated—to play more and practice more.

After years of running jam camps (over 50 now), creating instructional jamming videos, and preaching the jamming gospel overall, I've decided to notch it up and deliver this kind of teaching all over the country, and beyond. I am training and certifying teachers to run weekly classes based on my methods. Each class session will have at least an hour playing along with a teacher in one large group, followed by an hour-plus of small group (5-8 person) jamming with a coach present.

Two thoughts make me want to push hard for this kind of teaching:

1. It really bothers me when someone gives up playing a bluegrass instrument because they think it's too hard for them, and they "don't have the talent." Virtually anyone can learn to jam, and people who jam rarely give up playing.

2. It really bothers me to think of all the nice instruments sitting in cases everywhere, never being played, maybe not even seeing daylight for many years. Serious effort was spent to make and to learn those instruments. Each one speaks to me of a failed dream.

Over the years, I've wondered why so many teachers fixate on getting students to learn particular pieces of music, practicing the lead lines on their own—always playing alone. Music is in large part a social thing, and ensemble music making is popular to hear and a great delight to be part of. So why are ensemble skills so rarely taught? Why are soloing skills taught almost to the exclusion of accompanying skills?

I think it's mostly a carry over from the *old school music teaching* (Mrs. Grundy

comes to the house and makes you play through "your pieces," all solo pieces learned by reading and played by rote). You're being groomed for a student band or orchestra. At least, until graduation, after which the instrument gets put away for good. Unless you quit first (usually right around the age of 13-14). Or maybe you're a lifetime solo player?

But let's consider bluegrass music and how it works. Ninety percent of the time, you're playing rhythm, not lead. Hmm. Most of the material is 3-chord songs, not instrumentals. There's no leader, as in a band or orchestra. People lead individual songs. In typical jams, a pre-set repertoire is not used or pre-announced, so it becomes important to be able to play along promptly with lots of songs, even new songs, and hopefully eventually to be able to fake a solo on it if called on.

To teach how to learn a new song quickly, how to lead a song, how to fake a solo, etc., it's best if the students are in jam situations as you teach them. So that's the reason behind jam classes. As the teachers guide and observe the jamming, they see each student's strengths and weaknesses, and give suggestions to build the needed skills. It's a very productive teaching format that receives a lot of grateful comments from the new jammers at our camps.

The 3 or 4-day camps have gone well, but I think the overall easiest and best way to learn to jam is by taking a once-weekly class for a few hours, near where you live. Between class sessions students practice and digest what they've learned, and to work on new material for the next jam. The people in the class are natural jamming partners who live in the area, and just may be jam buddies for the long haul!). Possibly the jam teacher also gives private lessons, where specific challenges can be addressed.

Each class will all be listed and promoted on my web site, and we will provide teachers with promo materials and lesson plans for the classes. The whole process will be guided by anonymous

student evaluations as I've used for 20+ years, for all my teaching.

Students and teachers alike are invited to DrBanjo.com, where students can look up the nearest Wernick Method Jam Class, and teachers can get info on how to be certified.

*Pete,*

*Big Fan. I am a novice banjo player. I've tried many tutorials books, videos and on line tutorials. I always seem to hit a brick wall when it comes to tablatures. I understand the concept and with much practice I can maybe get how to play a song by using the tabs in a book but the process is so difficult and time consuming that I am inclined to drop banjo playing altogether. I want to pick up and learn the banjo as a fun activity not a chore. I am not trying to find the easy way out, just a better way of learning.*

*Is there a way, short of the complicated tabs process, to learn to play banjo so at least I can play with my wife and sons plucking their guitars.*

—Michael Murphy

Michael,

I sympathize with your plight. While tablature definitely has its uses, it is extremely overused in most teaching materials and approaches for beginners. Even a popular "non-tab" method is based on rote learning of banjo solos, which to me has very limited use, especially for beginners. Many beginners get fed up with how time-consuming the process is, and blame themselves for being slow. Those who do succeed are then well on their way to being lifetime "closet pickers," since this approach does not prepare a person to be in even a slow jam session.

I suggest you read the information you'll find at this link:

[www.drbanjo.com/beginning-banjo.php](http://www.drbanjo.com/beginning-banjo.php)

Near the top, click the link where it says *Read this first*, and then go from there. My learning approach is outside the box, in that it's based on jamming, not on learning solos by rote. (Learning to jam instills rhythm skills that are an appropriate foundation, and in my book a pre-requisite for lead playing.) I know for a fact that it works, so I am promoting my method as much as I can. Watch for the launch of a new teaching network based on my methods.

In the meantime, I suggest you pick up one of my jamming videos, probably

the one called "*Bluegrass Jamming*." That gives you a chance to try a solo (of your own making or whatever) in one spot of each song, where we provide the backup. Also, I suggest using the "*Make Up Your Own Solos*" DVD (#1), which shows the principles and different ways to go about soloing. Tab is provided, but more as a reference than the instruction itself. Look those up on my website. I hope the help I've mentioned is useful to you! —Pete

*Pete Wernick's website is [www.DrBanjo.com](http://www.DrBanjo.com)*

## LICKS & LETTERS



*Pete and Joan jamming with the Russian bands Fine Street and Happy Stagecoach, with little Ksyusha singing a great Two Dollar Bill.*



*Pete signing the borrowed banjo of Liza, from Happy Stagecoach. Liza is a good picker, and is 15 and lives in an orphanage. Pete arranged the donation of a Deering Eagle banjo to Liza, thanks to the generosity of the Orin Friesen family in Kansas. The autograph says "Pick it solid!"*

*Pete Wernick writes:* Back from Russian tour in late July! I got to be quite the bluegrass ambassador, making comments at a few official functions, and doing maybe 10 TV and radio interviews. A big language barrier there, so I always had to work with interpreters, and would try to be very clear and succinct in what I said. For

instance, about bluegrass: "Unlike other forms of music, bluegrass has not only a king, but a super-king, both of whom are Jimmy Martin, who recently passed away. We have some hair [*sic?*] apparents, namely Larry Sparks, Ricky Skaggs, and Jesse McReynolds but not Dennis Crouch.

Bluegrass is popular today because it is: *Spontaneous; Honest; Interactive; Leaves no carbon footprint; Contemporary; 3-D*

... And of course we have the banjo."

In truth, the tour was a great opportunity to offer up bluegrass and Scruggs-style banjo to audiences

almost as far away as possible (10 time zones). Our touring group was me and Joan (on guitar and vocals), with Justin Hoffenberg of Long Road Home on fiddle, and Robert Palomo, an American living in St. Petersburg, on bass. We played two concert venues and did workshops in "deep Russia," and played a jazz/folk club, did an hour-long radio show, and accompanied a silent movie(!) in St. Petersburg. More info and photos on [DrBanjo.com](http://DrBanjo.com). —PW

