



LET'S ROLL

Tough Love for a Struggling Picker; Playing the Words of Wichita Lineman

Pete Wernick

Ira writes:
One of my jam students last week had trouble changing chords on time and was right at the limits of his abilities (or maybe beyond them). He's older (70s?), retired, and lives a good ways outside the area. He wants to take a lesson instead of the class. What do you think I should do?

Ira,
Tough love. Have a talk with him about what he wants to accomplish in music. Give a realistic picture of how he can have fun making music even with limited abilities. He still can become a musician, but he's got to do some work. Changing chords between G, C, and D7 is the minimum. He needs to keep practicing with a play-along recording (like my slow jam DVD or Get Rolling) at home. Right now's a great chance for him to get on

board with home practice and the class. A basic jam class isn't a terrible challenge, and anyway, it will never get any easier for him than it is now.

A lesson wouldn't hurt, but mainly he needs to practice. He might want to talk about his frustrations, but you needn't be his therapist. Since there's only one solution and it's not fun, that's the hurdle to face. You might try playing the Slow Jam video and watching how he plays along. That could provide insight on what he does right and wrong in a jam, and what needs help.

Attending the class would be good for him even if he can't quite keep up. He could gain from listening and watching what goes on... which just might be fun too. He can play along from afar if he wants. He can record things to play along with later at home. (You can show him how to do that with your own recorder,

and e-mail him the file.) He can work on a super-easy song like *Little Birdie*, and you can get someone to sing that at the jam, so he has at least one victory.

If there's anyone else like him in the class, see if you can find them a big-print (bigger the better) songbook and the list of 2-chord songs, and have them go off in a separate room and see what they can do with G and D7. That might take the pressure off, and seem well worth their time.

In other words, keep lowering the bar, but the immutable "best place to start" is learning to change chords and keep rhythm on 1-5 songs.

Let me know how it goes! Pete

Tough love has a mixed reputation of course. Considerate people feel bad about dispensing disappointing information. This turns out to be a big part of what I have to do with students. Tough love for novice jammers means "no book." Banjo players at my Basic Camp only get to read small amounts of tab. We work on a lot of "ear" stuff, and learning how to watch and listen, as that is the foundation to put in place before digging into rote note-for-note lead playing. All in due time, but start with the foundation, no matter how impatient the student is to learn a lot of leads. Learn chords and rhythm, and how to find a melody by ear.

Playing note-for-note arrangements—whether from tab or shown to you—is a hard job, like having to recite a script phonetically instead of learning how to say simple things in language. Real language is imitative but not memorized, and uses different brain circuits than learning by rote.

At this month's banjo camps, I anticipate having to remind folks not to open books, because this is bluegrass, not classical music. They might not like it when I close the book while they're playing, but that's tough love for you.

Playing the Words of Wichita Lineman

The melody and words of this haunting song stuck with me years ago and I hunted down the melody as well as I could. At the time I had become interested in seeing if in a three-finger arrangement I could place the words of a song exactly as a singer sings it. Earl Scruggs calls this "playing the words," and with this melody it was

a special challenge, as the chords roam through some unusual changes, sort of in two different keys, Bb and G.

The chord shape used for the opening phrase is a sort of hybrid of Bb and F7, with a little motion by the index finger holding the 1st fret of the 2nd string, and rocking off and on the 1st fret of the 1st string as well. The ring and pinky then come down to get melody notes on the third fret of the first two strings. It's an odd chord shape and couple of moves, but not really difficult.

I'm fond of *Wichita Lineman* on its own merits but also because it led me to

ask Tim O'Brien to sing on a demo back in 1977. I figured he could hit that high G at the end, as the song ends on an ambiguous Eb chord. He did a nice job on my "*Dr. Banjo Steps Out*" album and the next year when we started Hot Rize, the song was in our repertoire. It's stayed there all this time, and last June we finally got around to recording it as a band. My break is about the same as ever (the melody hasn't changed!), and I still use the same phase shifter, a 1974 MXR Phase 90, to get that "up on the wire" warble. You can hear our recently-released version on *DrBanjo.com*, click the link at the left side of the home page.

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Wichita Lineman

ring and pinky on 3rd fret

I am a lineman for the county and I drive the main road searchin' in the sun for another over-load and I hear you on the wire and I hear you in the whine and the Wichita lineman is still on the line.

Key of Bb. G tuning, no capo. By Jimmy Webb.
As played by Pete Wernick with Hot Rize. Tab by Brian Ford