



LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

Advice to Non-Singing Banjo player

Pete Wernick

Dax is a very talented player in Kentucky, a high school senior. One of these players about whom people say, "He's got a good roll." Very coordinated and smooth and knows how to get that tone we all love. I've known him several years and kept up with him about his music and asked recently about his latest news and plans, and if he had a bio.

I recently placed 1st in a banjo competition, earning a reward of \$500. I plan to pursue music as a hobby for the rest of my life. Hopefully, though, I can manage to make music a career choice. I feel that I can better myself to the point of holding a steady job with professional bands and I hope to one day see that come through. I would love to do anything related to studio work or live shows.

College is most definitely part of my plan. I'm torn on what classes to take—between a largely music-related curriculum or the medical field. That all remains to be seen. However, I plan on attending either Morehead or The University of Kentucky.

Thanks Dax. Good to hear the latest, and I like how you write about it, both the information and how you feel about it.

Your writing and your music tell me you could be a songwriter. Thanks to the way the music biz has evolved over the years, it's songwriters who tend to make the most money from music, very often considerably more than they do as musicians. That's not exactly "the reason" to write songs... but it makes me encourage any talented musician to see if he or she can get into writing songs. At the very least, it's a fulfilling way to express yourself. Often songs come easier when you're playing guitar.

Writing your own banjo tunes as you do is a good start, but when you can break the ice and put good words to music, it can start you down a good track. I encourage you to do that. Don't worry if the first results don't go anywhere. Keep trying and save your notes. Sometimes little gems fall into your lap when you are not expecting it.

When I was about your age, riding the subway in New York City, I started thinking of a melody that Del McCoury would sound

good singing with Bill Monroe; a traveling kind of song. I wrote some pretty typical bluegrass words, and years later I offered the song to Del McCoury. He recorded it on one of his early albums, my first song ever recorded by someone! (*It's In My Mind to Ramble*). Recently Michael Cleveland also recorded it, and now I've made a few hundred dollars from it, plus the honor and thrill of having great musicians do my song.

The medical field is such an important one, a lot of hard work, but the rewards of that field are major and well worth considering.

A few people manage to do both. My friend Silvio Ferretti is a pediatric surgeon and also an excellent banjo player in Italy's leading bluegrass group Red Wine. He even makes banjo bridges (excellent) and has a family. Probably doesn't sleep much. Then there's John Starling, both a surgeon and the lead singer of the Seldom Scene for quite a few years.

Stay in touch, Pete

Thanks so much, Pete! I've always wanted to try writing a tune or two....but the subject matter is so hard to come up with. And even if you do get some lines down, how do you know what melody to set them to? That stuff just seems so complicated to me. I guess it all just kind of falls out of the air, huh? Another thing, too; I can't really sing. How would I pitch a song to someone if I can't even show them how I would like it sung?

Dax,

If you "don't really sing," here's my advice:

Time to start.

I don't mean "become a lead singer", I mean: Start using your voice as the musical instrument it is. You can make notes with it. Learn how to do that. It's part of basic musicianship, getting music out of anything you can. Your voice is one of your instruments.

In the real world of professional bluegrass musicians, it's routine that everyone can carry a tune. It's sometimes part of conversations, like "Does it go this way (hum it) or that way (hum the other

way). Musicians just expect any musician can do it. Saying "I don't sing" is sort of like saying "I don't drive." Better learn.

Aside from that, another job of any serious career-oriented banjo player is to ****learn how to sing baritone****. This takes some doing. You need to learn how three-part harmony works, with baritone being "the harmonizing chord tone closest below the melody". I won't try to teach it here. It can be learned by studying one of the appendices in my Bluegrass Songbook.

Why should you learn to sing baritone? Because it's just "expected" of banjo players. Why? Probably has something to do with the fact that Earl Scruggs, J.D. Crowe, Sonny Osborne, Eddie Adcock, and many others have done it over the years, and they're the trend-setters. Those guys are all EXCELLENT harmony singers, and they all help their groups not just as banjo players, but as singers, arrangers, and other things as well. Just being a fine banjo player is not your full ticket to a career. You'll need other skills as well. Singing is the fundamental "selling" point of any bluegrass band, so being a good contributor to the singing (and not many pickers know how to sing baritone) makes you more valuable, which is to say **employable**. Think about that!

You don't need to start learning to sing baritone now. First get comfortable at carrying a tune. Start by singing along with the radio or records. Get hold of a guitar and start singing one of your favorite songs. Learn the words and sing in the car when you're alone. That should come easily enough. When you get pretty decent at singing with an instrument, then it's time to notch up and learn some baritone parts.

Down the line, songwriting may come.

If you can make up banjo tunes and you have something worth saying, you can probably find a way to make up a song. I wouldn't suggest this to you if you hadn't already shown me you have a gift for putting words together. A song can be about anything... a story, something that makes you happy, something that makes you mad or sad, something you can't decide about, something from a book. Just try it, see what happens. You don't have to share it with anyone, just try it when you're alone sometime.

If there's a short phrase that sort of sums up what the song is about, that's probably the title. Try different ways of putting a melody to it. Don't worry if it's great or not, just do it to prove to yourself that you

can. Then maybe the next one will be good, or the next one. The song I wrote on the subway when I was 18 was about leaving your woman all the time, when I'd never even had a steady girlfriend. I made it up!

But the main thing to do is start singing. Even if you never sing on stage. That's pretty much standard for a professional musician, able to carry a tune and not shy

about singing in front of others. —*Pete*

Visit Pete on www.DrBanjo.com