



LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

The Groove, Jam Classes, Skin

Bill writes:
I've looked all over your site to find information about developing a groove or flow but I can't find it. I play with a group here and sometimes we have it, sometimes we don't. What are some pointers when playing with others to develop this feeling? What are the roles of the different instruments such as banjo, mandolin, guitar, and bass that create this?

Bill,

This is a wonderful question, though tricky to put an answer into words.

Everyone has to feel the beat, and feel it the same way, so that when everyone hits it, there is a feeling of *pulse*. Needn't be hard hitting, but well-linked, comfortable and confident. "Pulse" is a good word to think of. It's not just about accuracy, but a *confidence* in expectation, and a *vitality* where things feel alive.

- Listening intently to each other is always good.

- If anyone is struggling, it can violate the groove enough to be disruptive. If you're struggling, it's hard to listen, and it doesn't sound good.

- If anyone tends to rush or drag, they are well-advised to practice with a metronome or drum machine, and note at which spots they tend to rush or drag, and fix them.

- If your band records itself, sometimes problem spots can be reviewed, culprit(s) corrected, possibly decapitated. Diplomacy is recommended here.

- With Pro Tools or comparable software, individual tracks can be compared visually, to see who's ahead, behind, or erratic.

- Focus on how the guitar is played. Punching root notes right on the beat helps! Whereas strumming up/down constantly can take up a lot of sonic space with little pulse. A good "thwock" from the mandolin offbeat chop can glue things

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together. The bass anchors the groove and might energize it with accents and well-timed extra notes.

Most of all, everyone needs to be concerned about group timing and the groove, listen to each other, and stay relaxed! Remember, part of "the groove" is a sense of fun and confidence.

Hope that helps, Pete

Jam Classes Taking Off

I'm happy to report that the first five bluegrass jamming classes by teachers of the Wernick Method have gone very well. The classes (in NJ, VA, SC, WY, and PA) were well-attended, and the students quite enthusiastic. Our teachers are smiling too... they've all set up additional classes for later this year, while a dozen more teachers are coming on board. Wernick Method classes are now scheduled in the metro areas of Washington D.C., Boston, Dallas, Phoenix, and of all places... Shelby, NC, near where Earl Scruggs grew up, and of all other places, Golden Beach in Queensland, Australia.

I had taught for many years before I realized the size of the gap in bluegrass teaching about the "interactive" aspects. Teaching bluegrass jamming was an experiment at first, but the methods work and are constantly tweaked, with very satisfying results. I've kept expanding, now having hosted more than 50 3- and 4-day jam camps nationwide.

The new weekly classes in many locations are the next step because jam skills, like any skills, take time to sink in. Our teachers see week-to-week changes in their students' abilities and confidence. And the pickers who meet in the classes become ongoing jam partners. To date I've certified 16 teachers and we just passed the milestone of 100 student signups. We in Wernick Method-Land are happy and hopeful about all this!

What does it mean for banjo players?

Besides being easier than ever to learn to jam, now ever-more people are out there, who can jam and are looking to play with you. Be ready!

Skin Heads

Monty asks:

I know you use skin heads for the banjo. What kind of skin do you use and where do you get them from? Do you have any way of moisture proofing the skins? Any advice you have about skinheads will be greatly appreciated.

Monty,

I've been using Gold Tone goatskin heads for six years now. They come mounted on an aluminum hoop, and they vary in thickness. Note that the old skin heads were generally calf. My guess is that goat is tougher, just a guess. Once I chose one goatskin head over another, because one had hair on it!

The heads are sized a bit small, so they need a little moistening to flex as they go on, just enough for the bracket hooks to grab the tension hoop. Then they need regular tightening, in stages as they stretch, maybe eight or ten times over about a two week period. Then they sit pretty stable and only need tightening every few months.

When I first tried a skin head (well, I did have one on my starter banjo), I was wary of their reputation for breaking frequently. Right away I had a chance for an experiment with big humidity changes, and the head passed with flying colors: I went from Colorado (maybe 10% humidity) to Austin, TX (about 90%), tightened the head while in Austin for a few days, closed the case, flew to CO and opened the case—an excellent head-breaking opportunity. But it was fine... though given it was new (at its most flexible) at the time.

I have never tried a moisture-proofing treatment. I guess you'd apply it after putting the head on, since you need to moisten the head to put it on. A sealer might help with another issue:

Skin heads pick up dirt pretty easily, and unlike plastic heads, can't be cleaned with simple soap and water. A rubber eraser gets some grime off, but not all. That first head started looking pretty funky after two years, with a coffee stain, sweat, etc. and the repeated tightening was warping the tension hoop, so I changed heads.

After several months, that head broke

without warning after a band practice, just sitting on the couch. I looked and there was a big rip across the head. The next head started to tear near the mounting hoop after about a year. A last-minute replacement with a plastic head actually went worse... it broke immediately, as did the next plastic head! (Call me lucky.)

The current head has lasted the better part of a year, and needs some tightening, which I'll do after I finish writing this column!

Monty didn't ask, but people often do: "What made you try the skin head?" Two reasons:

Back in 2005 I was thinking, my '88 Granada is now 17 years old... the same age Earl's Granada was in 1951, when he recorded *Earl's Breakdown* and *Dear Old Dixie*. I thought, my banjo is a copy of that banjo, I wonder what it would sound like with a skin head on it.

The other thing that perked my interest was T-Bone Burnett being quoted to the effect that the banjo went downhill with the switch to plastic heads. I don't really subscribe to that, but that opinion did make

me think, he's talking about that down-to-earth sound, not the glossy, boomy "contemporary" sound. I thought, I can relate to that. And besides, then T-Bone might think I'm cool. Haven't met him yet, but I'm patient.

So... With some effort (by my luthier friend Jon Eaton), that first goatskin head went on and ... yes, I could tell the difference. The more it stretched and I tightened it, the more the banjo "woke up" and had a delightful "tangy" brightness, as well as plenty of depth. How obvious is it to a listener? I don't know... and not sure it really matters, since I know I like it.

I listened to the 1951 cut of *Earl's Breakdown*. As expected, they're tuned sharp. But listen to that banjo tone—that is a very well-cranked skin head all right, and the banjo's tuned sharp to boot. A penetrating tone, yet smooth, clear, and plunky...kind of like good old bourbon and a fine race horse rolled into one. Skin heads...maybe it's partly the way you feel about them that makes you *play* a little different.

Visit Pete online at DrBanjo.com