



LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

Jam Skills Checklist; Flag Day Banjo Op; Remembering Carlton Haney

Jam Skills

Here we are again, beginning of summer. Are you ready to hit the festivals, do some fun listening, visiting, and jamming?

If you're one of those still stymied by the mysteries of jamming, no matter how well you can play lead arrangements by yourself, the checklist below might just cut through the confusing landscape.

Closet playing can certainly be fun, but it's in a group where the amazing teamwork of bluegrass creates a whole bigger than the parts. So I and my Wernick Method teachers have stepped up to present bluegrass jamming instruction in communities around the country.

The Jam Skills Checklist is one of our most useful teaching tools. It's all about practicalities: Go down the list from the top. As soon as you hit something you're not good at, get to work on that skill. Once you have the first few skills, you're good enough to fit in with a Wernick Method class or camp. As you work down the list, the skills are what turns you into a competent and confident jammer.

Please note that in bluegrass, reading skills have little importance. It's *ear* skills that are fundamental for bluegrass.

The Wernick Method Jam Skills Checklist:

- ___ Tune your instrument (using a tuner), quicker the better. Remember to do it often.
- ___ Make chords, fingering each string accurately, for clear sound (check by sounding each string individually, making sure it's clear and not muted)
- ___ Switch quickly between chord changes, with accurate fingering (with each switch, sound each string individually, making sure it's clear, not muted)
- G-D-G ___ (most important)
- G-C-G ___
- C-D-C ___

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- D-A-D ___
- G-A-G ___
- ___ Switch chords cleanly and quickly without looking
- ___ Follow chord changes watching another player
- ___ Remember chord changes – which chords happen and when
- ___ *Anticipate* chord changes, to make them right at the correct time
- ___ Sing a song and play chords accurately at the same time
- ___ Play and sing a song straight through with no pauses or hesitations
- ___ Play and sing a song fluently without needing to look at a written version
- ___ Lead a song. Skills include knowing how to introduce a song to the group (give key and a heads-up about the chords, designate solos, when to end, etc.)
- ___ Fake an instrumental solo on the fly, melody not necessary, but based on the chord changes.
- ___ Sing harmony
- ___ Know how to find jams and/or how to start one

A Call to Song

My old New York City friend Ron Dressler just got in touch with a lunatic idea that sounds really neat to me:

Annual Great NYC Metro Call To Song™

On June 14, BWC (Better World Chorus) is calling 1 million New Yorkers to **gather on their neighborhood sidewalks** at 7:00 pm every year with friends, family and neighbors to sing *This Land Is Your Land* to a WSNR 620 AM radio broadcast. People in cars and homes who can't get to sidewalks are urged to tune into WSNR, open their windows and sing out with everyone else.

Who knows, the idea might fly. I can think of a lot of reasons why this is a good thing, and probably so can you. The web site is www.calltosong.org. If you click the video link you'll see and hear Ron tell about

the idea and sing the song with his banjo. Important hint: Looks like it's gonna be in D, so practice up in that key. Words are on the web site.

I would like to see this happen in more places than NY City, and on more days than Flag Day, but you know, I'm an extremist when it comes to music making.

Goodbye and Thank You, Carlton Haney

Speaking of lunatic musical ideas, here is my respectful remembrance of a man who left us in April, who changed all of our lives... The inventor and first champion of the weekend bluegrass festival, Carlton Haney. In his wake there are hundreds of bluegrass festivals worldwide, the functional "home towns" of the bluegrass music community.

I attended that first Fincastle festival in 1965. Some of us New York guys just had to go that 700 miles to where everyone would be as bluegrass-crazy as us. And it was everything we'd hoped. The music was overwhelming, transforming the atmosphere on that lonesome horse farm



Don Reno, Fred Bartenstein, Carlton Haney. Photo by Ron Petronko

with its makeshift stage and benches. I even got Carter and Ralph Stanley to tape an interview and do station I.D.s for my radio program. And Don Reno and Mac Wiseman. And Jimmy Martin! We hardly noticed the crowd was in the low hundreds. You can view the humble but seminal scene on YouTube, just search Fincastle.

The truly pivotal event was *after* the festival when, as Carlton later recounted,

the participating musicians agreed, “Well, that was a flop,” and Carlton shocked one and all by saying “We’re doing it again next year.”

Which he did, and created another magical experience. The 1966 crowd was definitely bigger. It was at that festival I picked up my first copy of the new mimeographed-and-stapled publication *Bluegrass Unlimited*. Yes, something was happening, the excitement was palpable, but it took visionary thinkers and hard workers to turn it into a reality. Within five years, 1971 saw new festivals in Hugo, OK, the first annual Rocky Mt. Bluegrass Festival (now RockyGrass), and Beanblossom. Four groups that made their first recordings in 1971: J.D. Crowe and the New South (formerly the Kentucky Mt. Boys), the Seldom Scene, the Newgrass Revival, and Country Cooking (note how all the band names had left the established So and So and the Something Boys mode). Rounder Records was just getting started that year. That was 40 years ago and look at us now! It’s hard to imagine any of it happening without Carlton Haney.

Carlton loved to hang out by the stage late after the show, holding forth with reminiscences and observations that I felt privileged to hear. He was welcoming to us northern boys, respecting our deep interest in the music, and would go on for hours with his insider’s look at bluegrass. A sample observation: the radio mics of the late 40s helped the banjo sound its best thanks to their extra-strong low end. This counter-intuitive concept stuck with me and I soon purchased a RCA-44 ribbon microphone, which I’ve used to good effect in recording and performing to this day.

Carlton’s main business then was country package shows, working with George Jones, Conway Twitty, Loretta Lynn, and the like, and referred to by *Billboard* as “one of country music’s most successful promoters,” having rented “130 coliseums in 27 cities for the current year” (1968). The *Billboard* article quoted his praise for the great songwriters of the time who were making it possible. “Songwriters took country music out of a slump and have created a chemistry between singers and listeners.” Pause for emphasis... Is there a lesson here for bluegrass? That word “chemistry” is powerful...

Another tidbit: In the early years, Conway Twitty would save his big hit,

It’s Only Make Believe, for last in his set. Carlton told Conway to do the song *first*, to put the pressure on to get that good a reaction to all the other songs. As Carlton told it, after that, Conway’s career took off.

Carlton also was the first to present a Newgrass Festival, in 1973 and ’74, featuring young, creative musicians and their new stylistic ideas. That idea didn’t fly at the time, but some of today’s festival lineups are remarkably reminiscent of what Carlton tried nearly 40 years ago.

His passion for music led him to take extraordinary steps and sometimes risks he could ill afford. He lived to share what he cherished so much. What a great example for the rest of us. Thank you old friend.

Visit Pete on DrBanjo.com