

LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

Why Teachers Should Offer Jam Classes...

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It's Fun & Fundamental (and... Profitable)

This column continues the discussion on teaching from the November Banjo Newsletter. This time it's about why I think jam instruction should be part of learning bluegrass banjo, and my recommendations for teachers.

Almost every aspiring musician dreams of playing music with other people. And any way you slice it, bluegrass banjo is an element of bluegrass music, a group effort, a teaming of instruments and voices. Yet very little bluegrass teaching stresses interactive skills. But it could, and it should!

The most common complaint of new jam students is that their teachers and learning guides have emphasized strictly rote learning of instrumental solos, with no attention to what it really takes to contribute to a functional and enjoyable jam session. This mimics non-bluegrass music teaching overall—it's about playing "pieces." Many teachers think jamming isn't possible until a player can solo well. This is upside down to me.

Jamming is not only fun, it's fundamental. A brand-new banjo player can be jamming within minutes of being shown a D7 chord. Switching between G and D7 while strumming is not only ultra-easy, it's an entry into real music-making. Many great songs, including bluegrass classics, can be played with just two chords

(see *DrBanjo.com's* list of 82 such songs). Keeping rhythm and changing chords at the right places while someone sings is all that's needed—and is the foundation for all that's to come.

I'm aware that strumming and chording while singing is not the goal that entices most prospective banjo players. But it's like learning the alphabet. It sets the foundation upon which the rolls and harder stuff must fit. Too many players skip this important step and struggle with timing problems when playing mechanically from tab or other by-rote methods.

Typical bluegrass skills are interactive:

- Unfamiliar songs are followed and learned by watching others—and jams often include unfamiliar songs! Following/learning new songs can be taught and practiced.

- In jams, factors such as controlling volume, transposing, using a capo, staying in tune, etc., are vital to the musical quality and smooth flow of the jam, yet these are rarely taught.

- Jams depend on people knowing how to lead songs, offer breaks, start and end smoothly, etc. Again, these skills can and should be taught.

Jamming tends to require ear skills—to anticipate chord changes, to find melodies by ear, to put in the right pauses at the right times. Most students recognize if they lack ear skills and understandably wonder how they will ever learn them. A teacher saying, "It comes in time," can actually discourage a person who's not sensing any progress. However—a student who jams regularly gets ample evidence of their developing ear skills at every session.

I've taught jam skills to banjo players for decades, and started offering all-instruments jam classes in the mid-90s. Sixty jam camps later, it's clear that with a combination of classroom instruction and being coached in small jam groups, anyone can get a handle on jamming. When it happens, a lifelong ability to make music with other people is established, a great payoff!

I launched Wernick Method in late 2010 to provide teaching guidance and other help to bluegrass teachers, to make it easy for them to teach jamming. As of January 2012, I've certified almost 30 teachers, and over 500 students have taken our classes. Students and the teachers are giving us excellent reports, so we are excited that it's working!

We encourage teachers to supplement their one-on-one lessons with classes, combining their students with those of other teachers for the powerful motivation that students get from these situations—and the unique benefits of teaching and observing them "in context."

How students benefit by combining a jam class with private instruction

Students who decide to learn a bluegrass instrument are not just aspiring to become a "really good closet player". They generally hope to participate comfortably in bluegrass jams. Learning the ropes of a team type of music means being on a team sometimes.

Let's talk "motivation", the big factor in whether a student practices and progresses. We know: Learning an instrument can be a lonely pursuit. Often a student's musical quest is known only to their teacher and family. But when students in a jam class pursue a common goal, they bond and build the camaraderie that's such an appealing part of bluegrass. They start to carpool and get together between classes for mutual help. If they miss a week, they are missed. Once jammers are "launched" by a set of classes, they often keep meeting to jam and team up to attend festivals and concerts. This involvement translates into motivation... in spades.

Students needing help with jamming can work with a teacher privately on their specific jamming hangups. The teacher gets to observe the student jamming in class, and then they can work on the problems. Having a student play with a (well-amplified) jam-along DVD is a great way to spot problems and make improvements. One important breakthrough is learning to align a banjo roll with a boom-chick beat. That's when the fun level rises sharply and clouds of mystery fall away! The student can now really contribute to a jam. The teacher can keep using play-along recordings with the student, to teach the fine points of backup and staying on track when soloing.

Singing, while on the surface not relevant to instrumental skills, is of course part of jamming. I urge all students to sing, at least enough to help build the general musicianship that instrumental skills depend on. The Wernick Method includes a clear and foolproof technique to help a student to sing in tune. Every student can and should be taught to carry a tune. Once there's a brain/voice connection, finding a melody by ear on the banjo becomes much easier.

Another skill students are eager to learn is "what to do when someone says, *Take it!*"—how to "fake" a rudimentary instrumental solo. The first step is what we call the "placeholder" solo: maintaining a roll while following the chord changes. The next steps can be shown by a teacher and developed in small jams. Faking solos is a critical and fundamental skill of bluegrass musicianship. Here's where I recommend... tablature!

Yes, at this point, learning a few by-

rote solos becomes useful (at last!). Simple canned solos (two or three is plenty) will give a student a bit of know-how and good experience. Then—students should try to make up their own basic solos. They can fit melody notes into rolls and add simple phrases learned from tabs or other sources. Embellishments such as slides, hammers and pull-offs enter the picture as good and "real"-sounding moves they're excited to apply to their simple homemade solos. With a teacher's help to smooth out the rough parts, soloing can be learned and applied in the context of small group jams.

In sum, the skills that help a person jam effectively are what most students are after, so what better way to help a student than to provide a situation where that can happen? If they don't learn jamming from you, how will they learn it?

Watch a video of teachers discussing the Wernick Method, at DrBanjo.com. Click Teachers.