



LET'S ROLL

It's About Jamming Pete Wernick

I love to jam. Jamming is truly “bluegrass in its most natural habitat”... more than performing (in a circle you can really see and hear each other). Bluegrass Banjo Heaven-on-Earth is when you're in a good bluegrass jam. The teamwork and spontaneity are fun—bluegrass at its essence.

Almost all fledgling bluegrass musicians have a dream: *Being able to pick with others.*

Why so many closet pickers then? One big reason: Bluegrass teaching is generally geared to grooming folks to be... closet pickers. They assign “pieces”, and some teachers even start with scales. What about *jam skills*—following chord changes, choosing suitable backup, transposing, controlling volume, etc.? These are virtually 100% neglected by bluegrass banjo teachers and instruction methods.

And what about singing? Many banjo players feel exempt, and teachers rarely challenge that. But to carry a melody with your voice is actually part of general musicianship and sometimes a needed ear skill, helps in *finding melodies on the banjo*. And make no mistake, singing and songs are central in bluegrass and jamming. (Short list of banjo pickers known to sing: Scruggs, Crowe, Osborne, Stanley, Reno, Adcock, Emerson, Hartford, Baucom, Fleck, O'Bryant, Trischka...)

So... If virtually every banjo player wants to jam, but doesn't learn jam skills, there's a disconnect. Many quit, unfortunately. My teaching was like that at first, but it progressed.

My banjo camps have always included jamming, and in 1999 I started doing *jam camps*... all instruments welcome. In 2010 the Wernick Method began training and certifying teachers to teach jamming. With 30+ teachers, we're now in 25 states, Canada, Australia, and next year, Europe! Teachers, see www.DrBanjo.com (click Teachers).

What's fundamental to the



On a 12-hour train ride, St. Petersburg to Vologda, to Russia's 1st bluegrass festival (2010). Aleksey, in the reflection in the train window, was the only English speaker in the band Fine Street. We headed to the bar car to pick. The Russians there marveled at how we went 2 hours with no written music or even a common language. Sergey led the jam, completely by body language.



Yes, it's possible to jam with just another banjo player... especially if it's Ireland's leading 4-stringer, the amazing Gerry O'Connor. We've gone 1-on-1 several times at the Johnny Keenan Festival. What to do when he's flatpicking lead? Obey the principal back-up rule: Do whatever possible to make it easy for him to sound his best: Rhythmic support with clean full chops, maybe sustained a bit to imitate a guitar, and mainly stay out of his way!



I get to host the Flexigrass Jam every year at Merlefest. The idea (as with my Flexigrass band) is to base it in bluegrass, but break a few “bluegrass rules” and go for some good new sounds. This year we had Eric & Leigh Gibson, Sierra Hull, Jacob Eller, Samantha & Zeb Snyder. Not pictured, on fiddle, Tara Nevins from Donna the Buffalo.

Wernick Method?

- Two overall goals: First, help people have *fun* playing real bluegrass, *right away*. Yes, at slow speeds, like 75 bpm. As soon as a person can change from G to D7 and back, he/she can start jamming (see the big 2-chord song list on DrBanjo.com)! For our classes, G, C, D, and A are the only requirements. Teachers who think a year of lessons is necessary before starting to jam... well, they just don't know! It just takes a minute or two to get people boom-chicking behind me on G/D7 songs. How hard is that?

- The other goal of the Wernick Method is helping people develop confidence in *real bluegrass jams*—anywhere they go. Slow jams are getting easier to find nowadays, and we teach how to find or even start them. Also, whether and how to participate in a jam, depending on the jam. And we teach the protocols used *worldwide*: the typical ground rules, signals, etc. that work from North Carolina to California, Hawaii, Japan, Russia, France, Australia, Israel, etc. (I'm lucky to know this first-hand).

- Our teachers don't just *lead* jams. They do, but they also make up small

groups that they then help to jam *on their own*. Coaches guide but don't lead. They show how to lead a song, and how to easily follow a new song.

- Bluegrass is *song-centered* music—*distinguished* by its instrumentation, but mostly focused on *singing* and songs—with many instrumental breaks. Instrumentals only work well at jams when a few musicians have the skill to pass solos around smoothly, with at least one guitar player knowing the chords. Only a few tunes are as manageable as a nice simple bluegrass song with the song leader inviting pickers to fake breaks over the chords.

This is key: To play bluegrass you need to stay with the chords at all times. Luckily, if you don't know them, you can watch a guitar player's left hand. DrBanjo.com has a new section of photos (as well as diagrams) of all the typical chords. See "Jamalot" page.

Note reading (tab or playing from exact verbal directions) *has little to do with good jamming*. Ear Skills rule! Ask Doc Watson or Mike Cleveland. If the Devil offers to trade you Ear skills for your Music Reading skills... well, just be patient, you can have both: Keep jamming and the ear skills will come, I promise!

Fortunately, most bluegrass songs use just three chords, with relatively simple patterns. It's amazing how many great melodies and lyrics can fit over three chords.

What about memorization skills? Valuable in some situations (can you render Earl's break to *Blue Ridge Cabin Home*, or J.D.'s to *Old Home Place*?) but the fact is, "real" banjo players rarely depend on exact memory of all 128 notes in a typical break. Breaks come out a little different each time—like words in conversation. Remember Earl's comment: "*I don't know how anyone can play a*

tune exactly the same, twice in a row." Yes, practicing helps it work better, but pure memorization is almost too rigid, not allowing for goofs. Memorizing cool solos is a great way to *expand*, it's not the way to start playing music—and not necessary for jamming.

In jams, first make sure you've got the chord pattern. Stay in rhythm, chopping or maybe rolling quietly. If called on to solo, keep the melody of the song in your head while keeping a roll going and trying to include some melody notes in your rolls. The more you jam, and/or practice this on-the-fly skill at home, the better your spontaneously "faked" solos at jams.

Tab books or music stands at jams? Wernick Method does allow paper and stands... but for only one person—the *lead singer*, who may need help with the verses. Otherwise, it's all by ear, just like in "real bluegrass".

Fortunately for shy and unconfident folks reading this, you can start learning in privacy with play-along jam DVDs. I'm not only a purveyor of such things, but believe it or not, some folks have told me they think mine are the best!

One last point: Is it heresy to be so dismissive of written music, right here in the pages of the world's leading source of written banjo music? I have never said, "Tab is bad" ... *once you know how to play, and to jam*. Tab is a fabulous resource... it's just not where to start, any more than artists should first paint by the numbers, or learning Japanese means first phonetically reciting poems in Japanese. First learn to *play* (2 easy tabs might be good for a taste), then yes, get ideas from great players.

For help with jamming, including how to find jams, see the Jamalot page on DrBanjo.com. Happy Jamming! *Shortcut to the Jamalot page: Go to BGjam.com.*