



LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

What Makes A Banjo Camper "Advanced?" More NY Notables, and Tab Policy

Pete Wernick

Ted in Arizona writes:

Am I ready for Advanced Class???

Concern: Get there and slow your class down because I'm not up to speed.

I don't consider myself Advanced.

WHY?? I don't play melodic licks, I don't do runs up or down to change chords.

My rolls sound repetitious at times.

Like going into 4 measures of "D" and sounding like a broken record.

I can give you 1-4-5-2-7-6 and a 3 if I have to any place on the neck with or without the capo. "F & D" shape. Minors if I think about it but no 6th or 7th. I can even play in "D" without the capo (thank you very much!!). I can make a recording for you but I'd give you my best stuff.

What would you want to hear to place me in the correct class that would challenge me and give you a better indication where I am. — Ted

[Incidentally, Ted, who's over 70, will be the first person to take all three of my camps, Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced. Bravo, Ted!]

Ted,

Good questions and concerns. Usually, what qualifies a person for Advanced vs. Intermediate is only that *they're in a band*—and I know you're in one! Your band rehearses, has a definite repertoire, the interactive elements are all there, including dealing with performing, not just picking. The Advanced camp addresses all that, *along with* banjo mechanics and knowledge. A project might be: work up good backup for a song in the band's repertoire. Practice not only the backup, but the transitions into breaks and back. At the Advanced camp we arrange, rehearse and put on an actual performance. I instruct on how to deliver gracefully under pressure, quite a useful skill.

Working on mechanics and expanding knowledge are good for everybody, but the requirements of band playing are higher, as they include the interactive part and arranging and preparing.

If you know and can do what you mention above, then even if your speed is slow, you'll not be in over your head in "Advanced". If you are one of the slower pickers in the group, I'll show you how to ramp up your speed, and that will be a good advance for you.

Of everyone who plays banjo, probably fewer than 10% would I call "advanced". Maybe 30% I'd call "intermediate" (able to jam and make up their own solos, including faking solos in a jam). The other ~60% are closet players of varying skill levels, and more than anything, they'd benefit from playing with other people. That's why I mainly offer jam camps!—Pete

More New York Banjo History

I recently shared with you all the history of New York banjo, based on an article I wrote for the NYbanjo.org website for the New York Banjo Summit tour now in progress. (I will soon follow up with some more "history", assuming we make some on the tour itself!) As often happens when compiling the history of a wide and deep subject, names continue to emerge—starting with a significant banjo pioneer:

Vess Ossman, born in Hudson, New York in 1868, made his first recordings in 1893 and was a well-known performer until his death in 1923. Finger picking on gut strings, he was one of the most recorded musicians of his day, playing marches, cakewalks, rags, and other instrumentals in what is now called "classic" banjo style.

Mark Johnson's clawhammer style he calls "Clawgrass" has wowed audiences nationwide in performances and recordings. In September, 2012 he received the third annual Steve Martin Prize for Excellence in Banjo and Bluegrass. He grew up and started playing music in Yorktown Heights, New York and now lives in Florida.

George Stavis of New York City recorded for Vanguard in the late 1960s featuring unique explorations in banjo textures and patterns that reflected the

"psychedelic" approaches of the period. He now lives in California.

Mike Kropp, longtime banjoist for the respected New England bluegrass band Northern Lights, honed his skills as a studio session player and A&R man in and around New York City during the 60's and 70's.

Chris Leske's impressive melodic style has been heard with Summit, The McKrells and Adrenaline Hayride. Originally from Pawling, he now lives in Saratoga Springs. In 1984 he took first at the national Walnut Valley competition in Winfield, Kansas.

Peter Schwimmer, a highly respected master of styles from straight bluegrass to jazz, grew up in the New York City area in the 1960s before moving west. His recordings and performances have been limited mostly to bands with whom he's played in the northwest U.S.

Sandy Bull (now deceased), from New York City, was a multi-instrumentalist acoustic string player most active in the 1960s, whose stylings would now classify him as a "world" musician. His recordings included banjo improvisations and a banjo version of Carl Orff's Carmina Burana.

Tab Policy

On Banjo Hangout, someone recently asked about getting a tab to one of my tunes. Before I heard about it, responses included:

"... knowing how adamant Pete Wernick is about learning by ear and not using tab, I doubt you'd find any 'official' tab to any song done by Pete."

A few such statements prompt me to clarify! Ahem... my official statement on the value of tab:

At the beginning of learning banjo, tab has just a few good uses... an easy tool to learn the basic rolls and licks that Scruggs style is built from. But tab is not a good tool to learn soloing. Learn maybe one or two easy tabs ("get a fish"), then "learn to fish"—how to render a melody Scruggs style, which is harder but far more productive than learning tabs (which I liken to painting by the numbers). A Scruggs style player must learn to find a melody (an ear skill) and, through patient trial and error, learn to bring out the melody while rolling.

Tab can give a quick result (more often a flawed one if not memorized perfectly) but it's more important to be able to put

the ideas together yourself and while keeping the timing right. Peeking at tabs now and again is no sin, but *to actually speak the language of bluegrass banjo, it's all about ear skills and trial and error*. Playing with others creates the right situation for this to happen. Strictly copying verbatim what someone else figured out has value, but is not how to learn bluegrass—any more than learning to speak Chinese is done by memorizing paragraphs in Chinese.

Now, *it's only natural for a picker to want to learn someone else's ideas, maybe even an entire solo, and tab certainly makes that easier*. We all want to and should learn chunks of Earl's material—and its subtleties, especially in the right hand, are hard to pick out just from listening. So the tabs in his book are great to have. For general everyday playing, though, the name of the game is to “learn to speak the language fluently and spontaneously”.

No doubt I'm flattered when people want to learn my solos, and I'm inclined to help them. I've published tabs books (all currently out of print) for my breaks on two solo albums and two by Hot Rize... And now for a little surprise: Thanks to the diligence of Brian Ford in Minnesota, I'll soon be able to offer tabs to *every solo I've ever recorded*. That's a lot! We have some free tabs now on DrBanjo.com, and hope to have at least some of the whole archive up by the end of this year.

For now, my suggestion for learning anything from a record is: Get the chords first and then start experimenting, hunting down the melody. Go for only small pieces at a time, listening hard, humming notes, and hitting the replay button a lot! When I learned (pre-tab, y'all) I spent many hours doing that.

Pete's tabs and learning advice can be found on DrBanjo.com