



with the theme of these High Five columns). Listen to Ricky's lead vocal and then play your banjo to match the feeling of that original recording. Make your playing fit with the mandolin and guitar rhythm and the soulful duet singing of this cut.

Build your speed by laying a strong foundation made up of solid and tasteful playing on the slower chapters of the bluegrass songbook.



## LET'S ROLL: *Ask Dr. Banjo*

### ***How To Not Freak Out at the Jam; Clear Pull-offs***

*Pete Wernick*

*Michael from Minnesota writes:*

I just read your article about stage fright. It describes me so well, I feel you were sitting in the same room. While I play guitar and not banjo, my experience was the same.

I joined a jam a year ago and totally freaked out. I'd learned about a dozen tunes, practiced them until I knew them, then went to the jam. To my surprise the other players were playing arrangements that were either slightly different from what I'd learned, to very different. My confidence went right out the door. By the time it was my turn to play I thought my fingers had turned to thumbs. I stayed for about an hour then made a lame excuse and left.

I practiced alone for over a year, putting in two to three hours a day adding new songs, going over old ones until I knew them cold. Then last month I threw caution to the wind and went back to that jam. (I play at the Homestead Pickin Parlor in Richfield, Minnesota). Once again, I was all thumbs, however, I stuck with it. I went back each week, sometimes twice a week. I'm getting better. When I'm home, alone, I can zip through those tunes with confidence. In the jams I'm still uneven with moments of clear playing, and moments of god-knows-what I'm doing. The adrenalin still kicks in, but with the suggestions of breathing, preparation, and concentration, I think I'm making progress.

So thanks. I'm not there yet, but I'm on the way. —*Michael*

Michael,

I'm glad you found the article helpful.

To help you with the pressures of jamming, I should also mention the idea of playing along with recorded music. Practicing music "in real time" is some of the best prep for jamming. It provides important realistic factors—a definite starting time for your break, the need to stay right with the timing or suffer the consequences, the chance to get back on track when you stumble, the need to go smoothly from backup to lead and back at the right times, etc. When you practice without the "accountability" of a group that you have to keep up with, it's easy to get a late start, or have something go wrong that can throw you just a bit off. Add adrenaline to that situation, and general lack of confidence, and you can be in trouble, no matter how hard you practiced.

Part of the real life of a musician is to be able to recover smoothly when a mistake happens. Just as in language, there's flexibility. If you fall behind, you can shorten the next part to catch

up, or if you're ahead, listen for the part that's coming and realign to fit into that.

When you've done a lot of jamming, that skill just sort of comes along; you can find your way to safe ground just by keeping your roll going and listening to where the song is, and catching it at a spot coming up. But if there's a "script" you're trying to follow, you need top concentration, and the distraction of blowing Plan A is enough to create panic—and then it can get ugly. So... practicing along with recorded music is very helpful that way—no going back. You just have to make it work.

I have put out three jam-along DVDs and a Music Minus One set. Each of these gives a picker a chance to stay in time with a full band, and come in for a solo at the right time. The band on the recording goes into backup mode for your solo, which won't happen on a regular record!

I wish you the best of luck in working through this problem. You'll be so glad when it starts clicking! With all the work you've done so far, it will be quite a sweet pay-off. —Pete

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*Betsey from North Carolina requested:*

I would be really interested in hearing you talk about your pull-offs. I just love the clear triplet sound you get.

Betsey,

For clarity, the pulling-off finger (left hand) needs some good strength and agility to get *definition* in the sound as it makes the move. That's essentially a muscle-building job, since the relevant muscles are not normally used in that way. *So I recommend practicing only the pull-off (no other notes) and when it starts sounding right, keep doing it and go for a consistent result.* Pretty likely, the relevant left hand muscles will start complaining... that's actually good because it shows you're making them work. When it gets consistent, start trying to do the move in the context of the full lick. Always start super-slow to make sure every note sounds just right. In time, you'll be able to execute a quick, brisk move consistently.

Depending on the lick and how you

play it, different fingers will need training. For me, pulling-off *down* with the ring finger while the middle and index are anchored on the first two strings is now a common move (licks on the first string), and pushing *up* with middle while the index is anchored for the common 3-2 on the 3rd string. Depending on how you work those or other licks, there's a set of muscles that need training.

Here's an exercise I made up years ago, with a little commentary on the goals of the exercise: (See *Exercise*)

The same formation (and muscles) are used to:

1. Locate a position on a fret, land it securely with clean fingering (*Old Joe Clark* position: ring and index on 1st string, 2 adjacent frets, middle on 2nd string).

2. Pull down with the ring finger for a clear pull-off as part of a short lick, with a right hand roll that works with the move, starting on the first string.

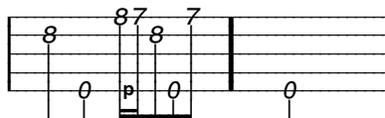
3. Starting a lick on the 1st string means hitting it harder for emphasis, a good exercise.

4. Move to the next location with the same position (1st four times) while staying in time.

5. Switch from ring pull-off to a pinky pull-off for the 5th lick, just to break the sameness of using the ring all the time, and re-establish a different grip on the neck to make the pinky move work clearly. The switch from and back to the ring pull-off is good for both ring and pinky coordination.

Here's a lick I use a lot as a tag or filler lick. The 8th fret on the 1st string is a flatted third in G, so it makes for a bluesy sound, see *G Lick* below:

### G Lick



Happy picking this summer!

Visit Pete online at [DrBanjo.com](http://DrBanjo.com)

### Exercise

