

LET'S ROLL: *Ask Dr. Banjo*

The Groove, & Warming Up for Fast Ones

Pete Wernick



Bill writes:
I've looked all over your site to find information about developing a groove or flow but I can't find it. I play with a group here and sometimes we have it, sometimes we don't. What are some pointers when playing with others to develop this feeling? What are the roles of the different instruments such as banjo, mandolin, guitar, and bass that create this?

Bill,

This is a wonderful question. Not easy to discuss, but mighty important to both musicians and audiences. We're talking an elemental human pleasure: creating a rhythmic sound together.

Everyone has to feel the beat, and feel it the same way, so that when everyone hits it, there is a real feeling of pulse. Needn't be hard hitting, but well-linked, comfortable and confident.

Some pointers:

- Hitting the beats and/or offbeats squarely helps reinforce the pulse, but reggae shows us that a groove can be very much present even when the downbeat isn't heard.

- Every song has its own groove, and part of a band's job is to find it. Often, the rhythmic phrasing of a song's words helps dictate the groove.

- If anyone is struggling, it might likely violate the beat and the feel enough to be disruptive.

Now, about your band:

As hardly needs saying, listening hard to each other is important. But sometimes performing or even rehearsing conditions can make it harder to hear what you need to hear. Try to make sure you hear each other well.

If anyone has a tendency to rush or drag, they are well advised to use a metronome or drum machine when they practice at home, and note the places where they tend to rush or drag, and fix them.

Bands can get into arguments about things like this, as of course anyone might be touchy on the subject. So work on just a troublesome part of an arrangement, and tactful and specific communication is likely to have better results than saying "You always drag."

If the band can record itself, various disruptive tendencies can be detected, blame assigned, and culprit corrected.

If you record with a full multitrack computer program such as ProTools or GarageBand, it's possible to analyze, visually even, who's ahead or behind at any point.

Most of all, everyone needs to be concerned about group timing, and listening to each other.

Hope that helps! Pete

Pat in Alabama writes:

I was wondering if you wouldn't mind sharing some advice. It's about warming up. I'm playing with a church bluegrass band in a "Bluegrass and Stained Glass" concert here in a few weeks. Most of the songs we'll do are of a reasonable pace and fairly easy to play. But, we kick it off with *All Prayed Up*, which is a Vince Gill song and I start it going as fast as I can.

My question is: what do you do to warm up so that you're ready to nail that first intro or break?

Pat,

If I have any influence on the set list, I *never* start with a fast song, as it's harder to do those smoothly when the band is "all keyed up" after walking on stage. I recommend starting with one of your easier, catchier songs, and the whole band should work on finding the groove.

Some bands like to cluster together before going on and just play a 1 chord together in the rhythm of the first song of the set. They keep it going till it locks in and almost feels like a glide. A little while later they go on and play, and everything falls right together.

Many times before a show, I get off someplace by myself and work up speed, till it feels comfy to go at least as fast as I need to on stage. If I do that earlier in the day to loosen up, then redo it some more just before playing, it works.

The biggest performance of my life was playing *Foggy Mt. Breakdown* on the David Letterman show with Earl Scruggs in Steve Martin's "Men With Banjos" group. That's a fast tune and of course the job was to nail the thing on the first try. The goal was not merely to keep up the speed, but to sound good and smooth, and even look happy and relaxed as we did it.

Of course that's a bit of a daunting situation. My approach was to make sure I was as warmed up as possible. After traveling a full day from Colorado to our hotel in midtown Manhattan, it was late at night, and I hadn't played my banjo the whole day. I asked at the front desk where in the hotel I could play at this late hour. I was directed to an isolated spot, a small bar that wasn't being used. I took my rhythm machine and headphones and got busy.

I made quite a racket that night, but no one heard it ("If a banjo makes a racket in a midtown Manhattan hotel, and no one hears it..."??). After about an hour of right hand wind sprints, it was feeling pretty easy to maintain 160 beats a minute, and I packed up and went up to bed. The effort was worth it. The next day I felt more and more confident as we rehearsed, and then headed to the theater.

Tonight Show Band leader Paul Shaffer was invited by Earl to play with us... on piano. In sound check, he did a great job keeping the beat clear, as we had no bass in our group. The groove got a boost thanks to Paul. Groove means confidence, yes!

Because the Letterman show set is kept at about 50 degrees (sweating on TV is not allowed), we had to leave the banjos just offstage for the whole show, to keep them at a consistent temperature (to avoid tuning issues). When it was time to play, there was no warming up. Letterman introduced us, Earl hit the first pinch and we were off. 160 beats/minute is right around 11 notes a second. But...hey, we were Men With Banjos (Who Know How to Use Them), and it all went well. Another victory for the undersung Banjo! —Pete

Read Pete's blogs about playing banjo on the Letterman Show, on www.DrBanjo.com