



## LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

### *Some Favorite Advice*

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their second break.

Don't think playing the melody is so easy. I didn't say: play "sort of the melody". Go for the exact melody, just how the singer sings it. Check out Earl's two breaks on *Blue Ridge Cabin Home*. His phrasing exactly matches Lester's well-sung: "There's a well-beaten path"... not "sort of". Almost nobody plays it that way, they genericize it. But listen closely: He hammers from the open 2nd string to the 3rd fret, moving the second syllable earlier to make "beaten" match the real pronunciation: Not "bea-Ten" but "Beat-n". That's attention to detail. That's Earl for you.

Now... Why would playing the melody actually help you improvise?? Well, we're talking "enough control to play an exact sound you hear in your head". So if you can quickly find melody notes, that skill transfers to finding non-melody notes you might suddenly want sometimes. So... if you get a cool idea while playing, your fingers just may play it for you.

#### **For players who can jam:**

Are all the jams you go to large jams? Wouldn't it be great to play with just a handful of players well-matched to you?

Here's a pretty doable scenario that's a win/win/win, for you and other players -- and for some folks who could use some extra attention and music in their lives.

So many jams are oversized. I liken them to "family picnic baseball games" where 40 people take the field, and what is played can't really be called baseball. Or what if 20 people got on the court to play

basketball? It just wouldn't work like real basketball.

Bluegrass, like many sports, has an optimum team size, where subtle interplay can create a wonderful web of interaction. Teamwork is a big part of the joy of playing bluegrass. But at a 25-person jam, how can there be any subtlety? What happens when 5 or more banjos are all trying to be heard? Do the singers and lead guitar players have a chance?

Wouldn't it be great to be able to hand-pick just four other pickers (a guitar, bass, fiddle, mandolin) that you'd like to play with, and play with just them? You can!

1. Call up a local nursing home/senior center, ask to speak with the activities director. Ask if you could come in with a bluegrass band and play for the folks. About 45 minutes is typical.

2. The answer will be "Sure!" and maybe they even can pay a little (not important). Find out their typical time slots, say a Wednesday evening or Sunday afternoon. "OK, I'll get back to you."

3. Now... at the jam, approach a person you'd like to play more with, and say you're getting some good pickers together to play at the nursing home/senior center, and if you were to round up (indicate a few other good musicians there), would they be interested?

4. Once you've got interest from one, go to each of the others, saying which people you're asking, and would they come along? Pretty easy for them to say yes, especially if your choice of pickers is good.

5. Get everyone's email and check when they're available. Figure out a workable date and set up the gig. No sound system needed, or they may have one microphone. Whatever!

6. Now you'll need a little practice session, to run down about 10 songs. Include Red River Valley, You Are My Sunshine, plus some bluegrass favorites.

7. The practice will actually be the breakthrough event where everyone gets to enjoy playing together. It may be more fun than the actual gig, picking in a small circle without the distractions of a performance

8. The gig itself may be a bit of a mixed bag. It's harder to hear when all are facing the same direction in a larger room. The folks may not be as responsive as you'd like... though the staff at the place will almost surely report that the reaction was especially good.

I've been teaching banjo almost 50 years now. Though most banjo teaching addresses typical technical challenges, I have some pet non-technical topics, to steer a player toward better music and more fun on the instrument.

First, for "serious, ambitious players" (intermediate to advanced):

#### **To get good on the banjo, get with the best singer you can find.**

That's where the action is, whether to jam with or if you want to perform more, or if you just want to play with better musicians— a really good singer is your ticket. Good musicians tend to cluster around good singers. Bands with good singers get the most gigs and the best gigs. The center of bluegrass is the singing, and though audiences love good picking, singers are the people who draw the audience.

If you get more gigs, and especially good gigs, you'll practice more than you would otherwise. Practicing is what gets you good -- so when you notice someone is a really good singer, get in a band with him/her and you'll see.

#### **Play the melody... It helps you improvise... Huh?**

As a teenager, I found the melody "boring" because I was into sensational banjo playing. I hadn't quite yet realized that singing is the focal point of bluegrass music. I wondered why bandleaders seemed so insistent that the kickoff break had to state the melody clearly, or why a great player would waste an opportunity to hot-dog by playing the melody again on

9. Some beaten-down, worn-out people who don't respond to much else, respond to music -- so it's special for both them and the staff who see that happen. You can all feel good that you really added something good to the lives of folks who don't have too much to brighten their days.

10. Probably both the gig and the rehearsal were fun, but especially the rehearsal. The group may be willing to get together some more, just you five or so, not the "jamob". Maybe you'll go back to the nursing home/senior center again. Or maybe somebody's company picnic or open mic. See what happens!

#### **How to make your banjo sound better**

Many pickers are always on the lookout for the banjo that will bring them alive as a player... often a pretty expensive new one, or a special "vintage" one. But almost any decent banjo can be brought alive with a few little luthier tricks. Years ago I would take my banjo to a wonderful luthier, Monty Novotny, and when I'd come for it he'd present it back with this beaming smile -- and it would sound great. Over the years I would notice people coming back from a luthier saying their banjo had never sounded better.

Over time I gleaned some non-rocket-science practices I'll share here:

\* If you've not tightened the head in a while, get out that bracket wrench and give those nuts a little tweak till you feel about even resistance.

\* Now... change the strings. If you

can't remember when you last changed them, you're definitely due.

\* Here's the topper: Take the time to place the bridge exactly right. How? Trial and error. Don't use pencil marks from last time. The right place changes. Keep after the perfect result: The harmonic "chime" on the first string over the 12th fret should exactly match the fretted note of the string on that fret.

\* Tune the string until the tuner says it's an exact D. The chime should then be an exact D too. If it's not, tune the 4th string D, which may be confusing the tuner with its vibrations.

\* Now... if the high D on the 12th fret is sharp to the chime, slide the bridge ever so slightly toward the tailpiece, to lower the pitch of the fretted note. If the fretted note is flat to the chime, slide the bridge toward the nut, to shorten it and thus raise the fretted note.

\* Do that until the chimed and fretted D notes really match. Then you'll notice something... your banjo sounds more "alive" than it has in a long time. The high 2-finger G at the 20th and 21st fret really rings, doesn't it? That's because it's in tonal alignment with the open strings, and all the overtones are reinforcing each other. It's almost like magic. That banjo is really sounding good now!

More favorite advice in columns to come!

*Pete's extensive website: [www.DrBanjo.com](http://www.DrBanjo.com)*