



## LET'S ROLL

### *Holiday Thoughts and Kids and Instruments and Singing in Tune*

*Pete Wernick*

**H**olidays can be the best of times, often with families close at hand. Gift-giving is on our minds, with the challenge: “enjoyable and useful” to the recipient.

Kids in the 8-18 zone but also adults of any age are prime candidates to receive a musical instrument. Notice I didn't just say “banjo”...sometimes the best thing a banjo player (you, I presume) can give a relative is an instrument that *goes well with* a banjo!

As I've often tried to stress in these columns, learning Scruggs-style banjo means more than learning just techniques in the closet...it means learning to play *\*bluegrass music\**...and it takes more than banjos to play bluegrass.

Maybe that kid on your list should get a mandolin, or a small guitar, or even a

small electric bass. The “U-bass” (ukulele-size electric bass that sounds great) is coming on strong these days, with new portability for this important and easy-to-learn bluegrass instrument. Your friend/sibling/cousin who loves bluegrass but doesn't play...could play G, C, and D on a mandolin or bass with two fingers. That's a lot for a little!

Let's talk “youth activity” just a minute here. If you give a kid an instrument and it becomes part of his or her life, you've changed their life...*probably* for the better!

Musical instruments lead to social opportunities, and a very good set of social activities. Not necessarily formalized as in: “now you have to take them to their lesson and their jam group”. Mostly activities that are just a good part of their life that bring together all sorts of people, both peers and

elders. Music is social by nature, though good solitary too.

### **The Big Face-Off: Sports vs. Music as Lifelong Learning**

It's a fact that in the entertainment industry, sports beats music hands down. And sports programs do far better in schools than music programs. But... Which has the edge as "a lifelong skill worth learning (at any age)"?

If The World P.T.A. were to ask my advice on this (ha!), I'd offer a quick comparison of bluegrass jamming to sports as a "good youth activity".

1. Both sports and bluegrass are good for learning teamwork, so very valuable.

2. Both attract enthused watchers/listeners, and can be a hub of good social events.

3. In bluegrass jamming, no one loses.

4. In bluegrass, no injuries.

5. Bluegrass can be played for life. You don't have to give it up when you graduate school (same goes for "band" or "orchestra" instruments when kids graduate, and there's no social context for playing, except for a lucky few).

6. Bluegrass easily blends generations, even crosses national and language barriers.

7. You can play bluegrass any time of year, don't need any field or special equipment besides a quite-portable instrument. Any room is fine.

8. Bluegrass can be played enjoyably and meaningfully by anywhere from 2 to 20 people, for the enjoyment of whoever's there.

9. Bluegrass has expression in it, and a tie to earlier times and ways. It can add depth to a kid's understanding of life.

10. Current stars of bluegrass are generally much more accessible than sports heroes, and make a point of regularly interacting with fans in person.

11. You don't need any special physical attributes to excel at bluegrass, as is necessary in some sports. It's for anybody who works for the skills.

12. A low level of skill can still yield a high level of fun and benefit.

13. It's a self-led activity, doesn't need a conductor or leader or much organizing.

14. It can go for any length of time, starting and ending on little notice, almost anywhere.

15. OK, music loses to sports insofar as physical fitness. Darn! (But what about

toting an instrument all over a festival campground at all hours?)

A good way to get kids into music is when they see other kids their age or a little older having fun playing, and sounding good. It can get contagious, and getting started is not hard. It mostly takes access to an instrument and a 4-chord method (like the Wernick Method).

IBMA created a very nice hour-long DVD called "*Discover Bluegrass*," and sells them for \$3 plus postage. The emphasis is on "what is bluegrass," with a bit of history, some how-it's-done stuff, and a *lot* of kid players, some quite young, some in their early and later teens. Some future stars like Sierra Hull at age 12 are featured. The DVDs are easily worth 3 dollars! Buy 10 or 20 to give people. They're a turn-on to show friends and students and inspire them. 888-GET-IBMA (888-438-4262).

### **The Gift of Showing Someone how to Sing in Tune**

One of the most popular pages on my web site shows a simple method to disprove a common myth: Some people "can't sing".

The method:

*Try a simple familiar song with the key in the singer's vocal comfort zone. A helper is needed to determine what key, and to sing together in that key. Once the singer hears the connection to a chording instrument, the singer's pitch is guided by the chords as he/she sings the song, first in their easiest key, and then in nearby keys.*

*For the method to work, the helper has to be knowledgeable enough to follow the instructions in the article, and be gentle and patient. Usually the singer starts with some negative self-judgement over being told he/she "can't sing".*

This is the first I've shared this method in over 5 years of banjo columns, but in this holiday season, it's relevant to banjo players of two types: 1) those who can't sing in tune and 2) those who can.

1. Is this you? A "non-singer" banjo player? I hope you get someone to help you, using the method. Not only can you be one of the folks who sings at holiday time, it will help your banjo playing, I promise! (Finding a melody with your voice helps your fingers find the notes on the banjo..)

2. If you can carry a tune, then you might try helping a "non-singer" start singing, using the method. It can be quite a nice gift for someone. Remember... gentle and patient.

This method came about in the 1960s, in helping guitar students, and I've used it ever since—always able to get someone singing in tune within a few minutes. Because ear skills are so vital to bluegrass, anyone on a bluegrass quest needs to develop them. A good place to start is with your inborn instrument: learn to guide your voice's pitch according to what you hear.

Carrying a tune with one's voice is a fundamental ear skill anyone can have, either "naturally" or sometimes needing a bit of training—expanding on the same auditory discernment that gave them their way of speaking.

To start a person singing, I sometimes need to get them to disregard the ignorant diagnosis someone has foisted on them, that they "can't sing", as though it's some sort of uncorrectable physical disability. Once they get their first breakthrough, the myth is deflated, but to improve the skill it's still up to them to continue the method on their own, selecting appropriate keys for songs they sing.

*Just a word about anyone who says: "You can't sing," or "You're tone deaf," or "You have a tin ear": These people are not to be trusted. It's accurate and far nicer for them to say, "You're not carrying the tune." But they have literally millions of folks convinced they will never experience the joy of singing—and many of these people are music teachers!*

I say this knowing it might be provocative. If you disagree, try the method and please let me know if it *didn't* succeed.

Quite a few folks have come to my camps in their 50s or 60s, where they sing in tune for the first time. We finish the typical 3-4 minute session with them recording themselves singing a song, to play for the person who told them they couldn't and shouldn't sing.

I hope this method travels far and wide, so that someday no one would ever say "You can't sing" or "You're tone deaf."

*And I hope you have a great holiday season at this otherwise-chilly time of year.*

*To read the whole article, visit [BGjam.com](http://BGjam.com) and click the "Can't sing?" button at the bottom left.*

