



**Banjo**  
NewsLetter  
THE 5-STRING BANJO MAGAZINE

## Let's Roll: Ask Dr. Banjo

by Pete Wernick



This article originally appeared in the December 2007 issue of Banjo Newsletter.

---

## Jamming Fundamentals: Chord Changing Made Easy

People sometimes wonder why a well-known banjo player/teacher like me has switched from teaching banjo to teaching mostly “bluegrass jamming”.

In keeping with my overall philosophy of “doing whatever gets you the most fulfillment the soonest”, I’ve sorted out that: People who want to play banjo will be better served by learning — as soon as possible — how to play with other musicians, rather than by first learning the complicated and elusive mechanics of Scruggs style banjo.

Even as early as my 1973 *Bluegrass Banjo* book, I have focused on the minimal skills needed to play simple and enjoyable music with others. Not only is the payoff much quicker, with fun and fulfillment flowing abundantly, easy jamming is also a logical preliminary step toward approaching the mysteries of Scruggs style.

When I first experimented, about ten years ago, with bluegrass jamming classes, I found that it wasn’t just banjo players who needed help. A variety of folks showed up with guitars, mandolins, etc., all wondering how a bluegrass jam session “works”. These folks had attended jams but were intimidated by the speed, and know-how of the participants, and would end up never uncasing their instruments, and leaving discouraged, frustrated, and envious.

Having learned basic jam skills as a fledgling folkie back in the 60s before I even discovered bluegrass, I realized I could recreate a similar environment and get people playing easily together on good songs without a lot of angst or sustained effort. And once the music began to flow, it could keep flowing and become more and more fun as it went. As a teacher, watching this unfold was truly uplifting. The thanks I’d get from the participants was deep and heartfelt, often touching on the theme of “I never knew if this would ever happen, and I had been getting so discouraged, I was about to quit.”

The main hurdle that stops a lot of people from jamming is developing the skills to follow, and “hear”, chord changes. Players learning from tab are used to tackling groups of 128 memorized notes (16 measures of Scruggs style picking), taking maybe 15 or 20 seconds if played without stopping.

But when people jam, each song goes on for a few **minutes**, and every few seconds, there’s another chord change! People’s first experience playing through a full-length song in real time can be a tough challenge, mentally exhausting. The chords **keep** changing!

To ease their outlook, I inform people early on that many songs have verses and choruses that use the same melody and chords, so doing a song means they need to learn just one four-line chord pattern, which gets repeated as many as eight or more times. So the main challenge is finite: learn that four-line chord pattern.

They are relieved to hear that the patterns have rather predictable aspects, song to song: They **always** end on the 1 chord (G if you’re in G). They almost always start on the 1 chord. And the next-to-last chord is almost always the 5 (D or D7 if you’re in G). The by-far most typical way chords change in the last line of most songs is: 1/5/1. So some of the puzzle is “filled in”, or is at least pretty predictable, at the outset.

How does a new jammer learn the chords for a song he/she hasn’t played before? Simple: learn how to *read the left hand chording of a guitar*, and be sure to have a view of a guitar player who knows the chords (this is exactly what I and all experienced players do in jams, even **onstage** jams).

I urge people to start working on internalizing the chord progression as soon as they hear it. In other words, do **two** things as the song starts:

1. Make a point of **following** the changes as they happen, and

(this is the one people often forget:)

2. Make a point of **memorizing** the changes. Think: I’m going to be tested, but they’re giving me the answers.

What would you do if you were going to be tested, but were first given the answers? You would take notes on the points you’ll be tested on. But in jams, you’re also busy playing the chords, so you take *mental* notes.

Example of the “note-taking” for the song “Think of What You’ve Done”:

1. First line of song: all 1
2. Second line, right to 5, and back to 1 at the end
3. Third line starts on 4, back to 1
4. Right to 5, finishes on 1

That distills down to “151 4151”, not too unlike a phone number, and with three of the numbers completely predictable (the first and last 1 chords and the next-to-last 5).

Now for the chorus:

1. Starts on 4, back to 1
2. Right to 5, back to 1
3. Sounds just like first line, and same chords, 4 to 1
4. Just like line 2: 5 to 1.

So the chorus distills to “4151 TWICE”. And note the repetition: 4151 is the 2nd half of every verse AND both halves of every chorus.

The chord pattern repeats throughout the song, verse and chorus. So this famous, typical song with about FIFTY chord changes is actually distillable to:

“Verse is 151 4151 and chorus is 4151 twice.”

Sounds less daunting, and in fact IS easier than thinking “three minutes of music with 50 chord changes”.

The next step up from learning to follow, then learning to memorize chord changes is learning to HEAR chord changes. This is ability to tell **when** a chord change happens, and then, **what** the change is. This skill takes longer to learn, but it comes along inevitably as any player gets exposed to a variety of new songs in jams, and learns to follow in real time.

More on this skill in a future column! Meanwhile, get yourself to a jam and have fun. If you can't find a good slow jam, go my *Can't find people to jam?* article on DrBanjo.com. Or get one of my play-along jam DVDs and play with a band on your TV screen at home. No tab, just real-time fun.

I can't stress enough: If you aren't able to do this yet, it should be the next goal in your musical progress!

---

For more banjo, bluegrass, and jamming resources, visit [drbanjo.com](http://drbanjo.com).