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21st Century Bluegrass...There's Ladies Here! Plus, Fight Key Tyranny, Play in D

I've noted that some of my fellow BNL columnists run amok at times, discussing non-banjo things. I rarely run amok, ahem, but for my first column of 2014, I'd like to probe the wisdom of the ages—to make a point about 21st century banjo of course.

Let's look back to a conversation from about 50 years ago between Carl Reiner and Mel Brooks, exploring the world of the Two Thousand Year-Old Man...

***Mel:** You want to know something? We were so dumb that we didn't even know who were the ladies. They was with us, but we didn't know who they were. We didn't know who was the ladies and who was fellas.*

***Carl:** You thought they were just a different type of fellas?*

***Mel:** Well, yes, just stronger or smaller or softer. The softer ones, I think, were ladies all the time.*

***Carl:** Who was the person who discovered the female?*

***Mel:** Bernie, one of the first leaders of our groups.*

***Carl:** How did it happen?*

***Mel:** He says, "Hey, there's ladies here!"*

***Carl:** I'm very interested to find out how Bernie discovered the woman. How did it come to pass?*

Mel: Well, one morning he got up smiling. He said, "I think there's ladies here." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Cause in the night I was thrilled and delighted." See? So then he went into such a story—sit's hundreds of years later, I still blush.

What's the moral of the story? Well, obviously: There's ladies here!

What does that mean for banjo players?

Simple enough...Learn to play in D.

Yes, now that marijuana is legal in two states, and the health care web site is starting to work, what injustices are left to conquer? I nominate: Key tyranny...

Women have reason to be sensitive about choice of keys. As Hazel Dickens once recounted, "Alice and I used to work around the musicians, and if they couldn't play in a certain key, we'd adjust. Bill Monroe would say, 'Don't do that!' Many's the time I would hear him say, 'You do it where you do it and let them adjust to you.' He said if they can't do it, don't let them play it."

Strict! Even Bill realized there were ladies here, and that meant singing and playing in D. He realized that the singer is the focal point of the music, and to "sell" his singing, he needed each song to be pitched in its optimum key for his voice. He'd choose G for some songs like John Henry or Mule Skinner Blues, but more often went to Bb or B-natural, or C for a song like Molly and Tenbrooks or Blue Moon of Kentucky. Bill's voice could cut like a knife when he was near the top of his range. The fiddle players didn't like B too well, but they had no choice.

The banjo crutch has always been the capo (or "cheater"). Like Earl we all use them to play in G-format: second fret for A, fourth for B. Capoing 5 for C or even 7 for D can give a brilliant, sparky tone, but no depth. Any higher is out of the question. Nowadays, some of the best lead singing bandleaders have names like Claire and Alison and Kathy and Laurie, and let's not forget Rhonda! I bet their banjo players know their way around the keys of D, E, and F.

Vocal Ranges and the Banjo

I think I know why tuning tradition developed as it did. I suspect the banjo was invented by guys, and the tuning they came up with matched well to the adult male voice. Could be a coincidence.

Our middle 3rd string G is right in the middle of the male vocal range. Some guys can sing all the way up to the next highest G, but those would be tenor singers, and there aren't many. Guys can usually handle the notes from the 4th string D up to about the 1st string D. A nice fit for voice and the banjo tuning.

When a woman sings? Typically her middle note is about a C or D (1st or 3rd fret of the 2nd string). Her comfort zone is probably from about the 3rd string G to the 5th string G or maybe the A just above that (1st string, 7th fret), or higher, like even the 12th fret D.

That means most songs that guys sing in G (bluegrass hits like: Roll in My Sweet Baby's Arms, Blue Ridge Cabin Home, Worried Man Blues, Will the Circle Be Unbroken, etc. etc.) would work better in the key of C or D or E if sung by a female.

So what are we to do?

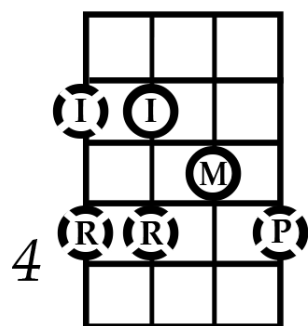
Whether you're guy or gal, if you're going to play banjo when a gal is singing— be ready to play in D. And if you can play in D, you'll know how to play in E & F too.

For E, capo2. To play in F, capo 3. Be sure to raise the 5th string two frets higher.

I recall the very first bluegrass record featuring a female lead singer: "Rose Maddox Sings Bluegrass," a 1962 release on Capitol Records. Rose tackled Roll in My Sweet Baby's Arms in ... of all keys: E! So what did Don Reno do? He just nailed his break in E, no capo. If anyone said it couldn't be done, Don wasn't listening.

Many pickers shy away. The top banjo tunes are in G...maybe a few in C tuning, and some like Reuben in open D tuning. But playing in D while in G tuning?

The left-hand fingering for this tab works around the D chord. Fretting the 1st string is optional, for either a stark sound



(leave string open, a D note) or for a fuller chordal sound (complete the chord with an F# at the 4th fret). Soundfile at www.banjonews.com

That format has a lot going for it. With the 5th string tuned to A, the 3-finger D chord is really pretty and full. The root D notes on the open 4th and 1st—and the 3rd string 2nd fret D is quite handy. Nice hammer-on effects possible there.