

BNL column March 07

I just turned 61 at the end of February, and find myself reflecting on getting older and “taking stock”. I count myself lucky to have a career in music. The chance both to perform, in many places, with many fine musicians, and to teach people how to play music keeps my life interesting and fulfilling.

Some of the best advice I ever give is a direction I took myself when I suggested to Tim O’Brien that we start a band. The advice I give to any up-and-coming banjo player is: “**Get with the best lead singer you possibly can, and learn to work together.**” This month, Tim turns 53. At that time, he was 23 and I was 31. I’d say it worked out well for both of us.

The “get with the best lead singer you can” principle came clear when I realized that almost all the banjo players I’d heard of had come to my attention as part of a bluegrass band: Flatt & Scruggs, Reno & Smiley, the Stanley Bros., the Osborne Bros., the Country Gentlemen, Jimmy Martin, Jim & Jesse, etc. In each case, the lead singer in the band was a big part of the reason the banjo player could have a career and be heard. The banjo player might contribute original material, help arrange the band’s music, be part of the harmony singing, and often as not, also be part of the “business machine” that helped the band stay in business.

This is exactly what I undertook in starting Hot Rize, 30 years ago this year. It worked for me as it had for the others. I’m still tickled to be in the band, for even our very limited schedule. In fact, we have gigs this month, at the Argyle (TX) Bluegrass Festival and one of our oldest haunts, the Birchmere in Alexandria, VA. We’ll revisit our unique repertoire, and I’ll have to brush up on my breaks on “Colleen Malone” (tough 3 fret stretch on 2/5 change in the key of E) and “Frank’s Blues”, the hardest tune I’ve ever written. The high expectations that go with a Hot Rize gig provide a great incentive to fine-tune my practicing, yet another benefit of being in a good band.

Remember, you up-and-coming pickers, your band is pretty much as good as your lead singer, at least in the world of gigging bands. Maybe not “fair” exactly, but just the way things are. If you can team up with a good one, you’ll get more gigs and have more reason to hone your talents for the long haul. Good luck!

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Re the other part of my career, teaching, I am proud to have a new DVD out this month, called *Bluegrass Banjo Backup, Basic Level*. It’s another 2-hour visit with the doctor, and my first specific teaching *ever* about “banjo backup”.

I used to not want to teach “backup” because I figured that when a person is in an ensemble situation, ***their job is just to do whatever they know how to do, in a tasteful and appropriate way, to help the music sound good.*** So I would just offer that principle, and figured that then *it depends on the music situation to know what to play*, with the player’s own judgement dictating the choices.

I’d often hear players say they want to “learn backup” but then do nothing to find people to play with. My response would be to mentor them on finding people to play with (on DrBanjo.com, under Instructional, click Can’t Find People to Play With?). I see this as the main way to learn backup: Find people to play with, and start playing. In my first book *Bluegrass Banjo*, though

aiming to be comprehensive, I didn't show any "backup licks". I figured, whatever licks played might also be used in lead playing, so it's just: use whatever you know, appropriate to the situation.

That principle is no less true, but having now taught about 30 jam camps, I've seen banjo players struggle with how to fit in, and I've come up with some ways to help. I've now helped quite a few into the world of bluegrass jamming (on DrBanjo.com see me guiding a recent jam hosted by Steve Martin). Along with giving the principles, I show specific techniques and when they work best.

The video features quite a few clips from two of my bluegrass jamming DVDs, where with a full band I play standard songs at slow speeds. First we show a clip where I use a particular technique, pattern, roll, or lick, and then I show the move, up close and slowly. My son Will shot and directed the video, and I think he did a great job. I hope you like it!

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Tom from upstate New York, writes:

*Only someone like yourself with loads of experience and knowledge can answer this question for an upstate New Yorker like myself who seldom gets to see many banjos. Everyone who is selling something has a claim. I simply want to know if there is one tone ring better than the rest? Of course I realize many factors go into the sound of a banjo.*

*With everything being the same, would one ring stand out as producing that sought after ideal prewar sound? I was told today that Frank Neat's banjos with Baylock rings were best.*

Tom,

Not only does every manufacturer have a claim, every banjo owner has an opinion. Hey everyone, what's the best hair color? What's the best religion?

Don't expect a consensus. And in the case of evaluating sound, how do we even know we're actually hearing the same way? Everyone has different taste, which is why all these different makers can stay in business. I know Frank Neat is a very trusted banjo man, and his work and his attitude seem quite good to me. Baylock rings, I'm not sure I've heard. Also, almost no one gets to compare a certain instrument with different tone rings in it, and nothing else different.

*Tom: If this isn't the case, what brand or make of banjo does have a prewar sound?*

Someone define "prewar sound". Let's remember, Earl Scruggs, playing a prewar (1934) flathead Gibson Granada, recorded almost all his hugely influential sound with a skin head, and the banjo generally tuned sharp, sometime almost a full fret. That's part of the "pre-war" sound, sure enough! Then there are all the different mics and different reverbs. Back into Ambiguityland!

And if you listen to Earl's recordings starting with the Mercury stuff around 1949, the early Columbia stuff (50s), the "Foggy Mt. Banjo" album sound (circa 1960), later Columbia stuff (60s with Flatt and Scruggs) up to what Earl sounds like today -- ALL on the same banjo -- which of those sounds is "the prewar sound"? They're really pretty different, depending especially on how tight he has the head cranked, and also especially, on the touch he applies to the strings.

*Tom: I wonder if such an animal exists?*

Exactly. This question just can't be answered precisely. I could talk for a long time on the subject, and others could rebut what I said, and nothing would ever be proven.

Practical advice: Try to hear in person as many specimens as you can. You might even take a banjo-buying trip to where you can check out a variety, compare prices, etc. Mandolin Brothers, in your neck of the woods, typically has a good selection of banjos. Try Nashville. Go to IBMA Fan Fest (usually in October), and do some shopping there, where most of the best banjo makers will have their stuff on display. Between Curtis McPeake's in Mt. Juliet, near Nashville, George Gruhn's, Gibson Showcase, and other places around town, you could probably find a banjo that said "Daddy" to you, and then if you play it with care for good tone, and treat it right, it will make good music for you.

Just about any good player can make just about any decent banjo sound really good, and when you compare the sounds, the bigger determinant is who's doing the playing and how.

*Tom: Thank you.*

You're welcome, and best of luck with your new banjo, whatever it is!

Pete