



## LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

### *Tough Banjo Love Result: "My breaks are mine"*

**D**uane writes: "In *BNL* this month you mention seeing you run a jam hosted by Steve Martin on your website. Can't find it anywhere... Would you mind sending me the link?" —Duane

That would be: [www.drbanjo.com/photoalbums/recent\\_photos/photos2006.htm](http://www.drbanjo.com/photoalbums/recent_photos/photos2006.htm)

Some other photos of that session, including one of two of Steve's nice banjos, are in the current March/April issue of *Making Music Magazine* ([www.makingmusicmag.com](http://www.makingmusicmag.com)) in an article about my jam camps called "*The Grass Is Always Bluer.*"

And Duane (incidentally, an assistant prof at Auburn U.) adds:

"Also, I e-mailed you a while back and asked for a tab for a tune on one of your jamming CDs. Your response was to work something up on my own. I didn't like your answer at first. Since then, I've worked up a handful of breaks for tunes and some strange things have started happening. First, I really like my breaks. I feel like they are mine and not borrowed from someone's tab. Also, I suddenly find myself playing "old" breaks in new ways. My fingers just do it. I find that when I come up with my own break, I learn the tune much faster than with tab. I'm forced to start with chords and find the melody. There is more brain power involved but the payoff has been enormous. Thanks."

That's what I call "tough banjo love", Duane! Glad it worked!

This leads into one of my favorite subjects of late, a very important distinction between the way Scruggs style is played compared to the way most other instruments are played and taught.

**Learning Scruggs style banjo is different from the way music is generally taught!**

Most instruments are taught with the student learning a succession of individual

*pieces*, that is, following exact written instructions, executing them correctly and smoothly. "Correct" is a clear concept: If you play what the printed page says, you're "correct", and if you don't, you're "wrong." The student accumulates a set of pieces they can play through, solo. And then they accumulate some more. Any time they play, they play exactly as instructed, either reading, or as memorized. That is how orchestra playing works. No improv whatever! Most people learning piano, violin, saxophone, etc., are taught this way. If they ever get good enough to play with a group, that is how they will play, following exact instructions.

It just isn't that way in the world of bluegrass banjo! If you're a tab-only player, as so many are, then it might *seem* that way. But if you watch a bluegrass group, whether on stage or jamming, you will notice (possibly immediately) that the banjo player is not always "going from a script". He/she is actively making choices about what to do in playing backup, and many players don't know as they play, exactly what will come out.

Well, they know they'll get their solo played well enough, but it could come out in a variety of ways. The analogy I make is, "they're saying a paragraph" on a familiar subject (say, what's their job and why they like it, or where they've lived in their life), but as with language, it doesn't have to come out verbatim, a certain way, to get the message across. What in the mind of a Scruggs-style player? They're thinking about the melody, and certain moves, *but the hand may deliver the exact moves a little differently each time.*

Following the analogy, how easy would it be for you to say about 25 words about your occupation and why you chose it? Easy. But if you did it again, what's the chance you'd say exactly the same words in the same order? I hope this analogy makes the point clear: Scruggs-style banjo players don't usually memorize things note

for note, but use their ability to keep their hand "rolling" smoothly without needing to think of each note.

As with speech, fluency means the ability to have the apparatus (in speech the lips and tongue, with banjo the hands) to "do their thing" with attention needed only for overall direction, not each individual move. As with walking or writing, many complex motions are controlled by unconscious parts of the brain, while the conscious part may exert influence (take bigger steps, or follow a line). The brain is an amazing thing, how it enables us to talk, walk, or play Scruggs style (though harder to do all at once)!

What does this mean for the learning player, or the banjo teacher? Mainly, understand that memorizing pieces is of limited value toward the overall task of "learning to play bluegrass banjo". The main job is to cultivate those unconscious patterns. How is that done? *By playing as much as possible with other people, and by practicing playing spontaneously in real time.* Continuing the language analogy: "By having conversations." Conversations can't be exactly planned. No sense memorizing a part as though in a play.

Learning to converse is not based on the ability to recite. When a person is taught just to play "pieces," or to recite anything verbatim, the part of the brain used is not the same part used to form thoughts into language.

Most people learn to speak before they're expected to recite something. Once they learn to read, they might recite something learned from a printed page. Compare this with the way most people try to learn bluegrass banjo, and the way most banjo teachers teach it. How sensible in learning a language would it be to learn to first learn to read it, and to reproduce correctly spelled sentences? Answer: (from my own experience in taking seven years of French, and then being almost helpless in France) Not much!

So that's why my teaching, going all the way back to my 1973 book *Bluegrass Banjo*, emphasizes learning to make your own musical choices, practicing finding melodies by ear, making up your own solos, and being able to access a variety of moves spontaneously, for faking solos

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when jamming, or making in-the-moment musical backup choices.

All you tabaholics, please think hard about this: If you are ever going to learn to really play bluegrass banjo, you'll have to stop thinking "tab", sooner or later. Do it sooner, and let the "in the moment musician" part of your mind start working. To do that, try **\*putting away your tab\*** and just trying to play along with something.

*Shameless plug:* That is why I have created three jam-along DVDs to date, the easiest of which uses just four chords and goes at super-slow speed (info at *DrBanjo.com*). If you've not tried to play along with something in real time, get busy!