



## LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

### *End Thwonging Forever; New Flexigrass CD ("we're different")*

Summer's about here, perfect timing for a highly useful trick that solves two annoying picking problems:

1. Sweaty Rotating Pick Syndrome (SRPS) and especially:
2. The dreaded "thwonging" the wrong string (flap that wraps around thumb catches the wrong string and makes nasty, loud, out-of-time "accident note").

Note in the photo that the end of the "flap" or gripper part of the pick is turned just a bit inward. How to do that? Simple:

1. Boil some water in a pan.
2. Submerge the ends of a needle nose pliers for about 10 seconds.
3. Hold the thumb pick in one hand, at the point of its main bend, with the end of the flap accessible to the other hand, holding the pliers.
4. Before the pliers have time to cool off, grip the flap across its end, and gently rotate inward. The plastic will briefly be pliable enough to bend a bit, and only a small bend is needed.

In a few seconds the alteration will harden, and you will find it's now *impossible* to catch the pick's flap on the wrong string. And the little protrusion digging into the side of your thumb will act as a gripper to prevent SRPS, the scourge of many summer banjo pickers. I am glad to have found this surefire way of avoiding both of these problems. I don't remember the last time I "thwonged" the 4th string when trying to pick the 3rd!

Now that I have your attention, here's a plug for my first CD in five years. I am really proud of this new *Flexigrass* album,

our third (previously we were the "Live Five"), and the pinnacle of our 15 years as a band. Four of us have played together ten or more years, and our newest members are master vibraphone "picker" Greg Harris, and my dear wife/singing partner Joan (*aka* Nondi from Country Cooking



days). Joan does some wonderful singing, bridging the large gap between Hazel Dickens and Ella Fitzgerald, depending on what the song requires.

After recording almost only instrumentals, our latest tunes are mostly vocals, but with the same wide swath of styles playable with our instrumentation: Scruggs-style banjo/vibraphone/clarinet/bass/brushed drums. We do Benny Goodman's *Air Mail Special*, *Blackberry Blossom*, a couple of new tunes of mine, and songs ranging from originals to *Bye Bye Blackbird*, *Snowbird*, and *Blue Train*, IBMA Song of the Year 1991 as done by the Nashville Bluegrass Band. Greg on vibes and Bill Pontarelli on clarinet do

some fantastic soloing that I know will tickle the ears of a lot of bluegrass people.

Part of my fun as a musician is trying things that haven't been tried before, to see if they "work". I know my experiments with this particular "flexigrass" combination have not pleased everyone, and actually offended some people ("I'm glad Pete is no longer President of IBMA", enthused one DJ.). But I love playing this music, both for the sound and the adventure, and I love finding the links between bluegrass and music styles that helped shape the early bluegrass. If I had to depend on this band for my living, I'd be broke. But I don't, so I'm not. Thanks to all you folks who support my music and instruction, which makes that possible!

A lot of information and opinion could be offered and exchanged on the issues I've just raised, but as with all music topics, the fundamental truth is: **How good does it sound** to you, and can you connect to it emotionally? I invite you to listen to cuts of the record on *DrBanjo.com*, and see for yourself. While there, feel free to browse my site's storehouse of free banjo instruction!

The following tune is probably the most "bluegrassy" cut on the record, my latest opus, *Traveling Home*. It's "written off" the old folk melody that cheerily sings, "I wish to the Lord I'd never been born, or died when I was a baby..." I intend to write some new words with a happier plot, but for now it's an up-tempo tune in C (G tuning) with two D/G chord changes in the bridge to make a unique hook.

The double hammer-on lick in measures 7 – 8 is for me the most demanding part of the tune. For the melody to sound right, those ring finger hammer-ons need good definition, not so easy when the other fingers are already making an F chord. Easier to play slow than fast! As always, I practice in a loop, starting slowly and **making sure it's right** before trying to speed it up.

Another challenging part is the right hand of the second C chord of the bridge (measure X), a roll that starts I T I M, with a strong accent needed on that first I. But if that's not coming easily, just play it as on the first C chord, and it will sound fine. Enjoy it!

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