

Ask Dr. B January 08 BNL column by Pete Wernick

Breaking out of the Intermediate rut, and Learning to play in D

Gary from British Columbia asks some great and typical questions:

Hi Pete,

First, I would like to thank you for all the encouragement you give new and developing pickers on your videos and website.

I have been picking for 6 years, in an active bluegrass band for 2 years, and practicing daily for the last 14 months. I have saturated myself with recordings from the likes Fleck, Osborne, Scruggs, Shelor, Pandolfi, Pikelny, and beyond. My head is full of creative ideas and emulations of what I hear... But when I pick up my banjo, the same old stuff comes out. You know, habits like always resolving a chord progression with one of three predictable licks. Playing live, I play the same old forward-roll driven backup with insanely boring licks and bland breaks where I work the melody into a forward roll. I am just not satisfied with that anymore.

The bottom line is: How can I break into playing the banjo more dynamically and creatively? Specifically, what are the stepping stones to integrating melodic and single-string components into tunes? Or comfortably improvising (on the fly) a break for a tune at a jam? I want to trade in the whole catalog titled: "historic banjo licks", and learn to use more melodic breaks and play fluidly between the 5th and 12th Fret.

It's a big step from "intermediate" to "advanced"! I need help in figuring out how to chop that step up into manageable chunks!

2. Am I the only one who finds that, at a jam session, every other banjo player's licks are sweeter than my own? Perhaps it's the thrill of hearing something new...

3. I am experiencing extreme difficulty in playing in the key of D. The chords are no problem, and the scales straightforward. I just can't seem to wire up ANY drive, melodic quality, or general ability in that key...I feel like I may as well be playing hanging upside down or with frozen hands. I'd be thrilled just to be able to pick out a melody within a roll in D.

Thus, the question is: What approach should I take to developing fluency in this Key? Should I memorize all scales in all positions by rote, memorize tabbed tunes to learn standard "D" Licks, play only in D for a month?

Gary,

Excellent questions, some not easy to answer in written form! But I'll try.

#2 first, because it's short:

2. Yes, hearing others play stuff you don't know makes a player envious. Typically two players know different stuff and envy each other.

Now, let me say that at my Intermediate and Advanced banjo camps, we deal with all of the subjects you raise, as they are indeed a big part of what makes a person a more advanced-sounding player. The six days won't seem like enough, given the breadth of your desire and interests, but they do give clear direction, which if you then do the work, will have big results.

For the first question, the general "upgrade" you seek, take it a step at a time. Since improvising leads you to same-old same-old, then first try patiently working things out, trial and error, when you practice. The more stuff you come up with through study, and trial and error, in working on individual songs, the larger your "banjo vocabulary" becomes, and in time you'll have a larger accessible vocabulary-- which will help your improvisations. So ... pick one song you wish you had "some good ideas for", and make a project out of it.

The most common deficiency I see in advanced players is an unwillingness to really deal with the melody of a song. They hint at it, and substitute licks that have some of the melody notes, and move on.

So, first important step: Really learn *all* the notes and the *exact* phrasing of a melody, and then experiment with your right hand to make sure the melody is phrased truly accurately within smooth flowing rolls. That will force your right hand into some new areas. Not only will that particular song sound better, you're building right hand variety and fluency which will pay off down the line.

As for embellishments, I don't recommend practicing scales, **but I do recommend learning chord variations**. When you learn where the 6ths, 7ths, 9ths, etc. are in relation to common chord positions, and learn to use the different chord forms, you can chordally embellish your melodies, and add all sorts of flavors in lead and backup that enhance the song itself and even the mood that the song's lyrics are trying to create. This approach is treated pretty thoroughly in my Branching Out on the Banjo two-DVD set. LOTS of ideas there!

After some time learning, say, various ways of adding a 7th into a chord, **try using those ideas in existing arrangements you have for familiar songs**. Start by seeing how many places you can use the ideas, and whenever one of them seems to work nicely, practice the passage it's in, to internalize it. Now **shoot for a retooled version of one familiar break, with new, exacting attention to the melody and also more use of subtle embellishments**. Once you're actually *using* an idea in a song, it will register more deeply in your brain, and it will become part of your accessible vocabulary.

You can do the same with "canned" melodic or single-string licks. If you've learned some of those fluently, see if you can find a realistic, musical place to incorporate each one into an actual break on a song your band plays. Again, that will help you "own" that lick for use in other contexts.

3. Now, regarding the key of D -- as above, take on some song melodies in D, and work on them as described above. Here's another hint: Imagine you can "hear" the way a high-skill player might play a passage. See if you can "hear" their cool way of playing it, in your head first, and then take the time to find the notes you're hearing.

I'd also suggest tabs of songs in the key of D, that sound the way you'd like to sound. Learning some good breaks by experienced players should open some doors to the possibilities in D.

Pete

Gary writes back:

A Search of iTunes reveals that you are well represented there.

What tunes from which albums would you recommend I purchase to learn in D?

Gary,

Glad you did some homework, and the following songs are choice examples. The two tab books mentioned below can both be ordered from DrBanjo.com, and some of the tabs are free downloads from the site.

The ones from the album Hot Rize would be best to tackle first, as they offer a variety of typical melodies in D format, and for each one I get the melody and do some embellishing besides. But all of the examples below would be useful in learning your way around D format.

Hot Rize

All of these use "D" format and are tabbed in Dr Banjo Plays Hot Rize tab book:

Midnight on the Highway (F)

Nellie Kane (E) (backup for this is in Branching Out DVDs)

Ain't I Been Good to You (F)

This Here Bottle (D)

Old Dan Tucker (inst.) (E)

So Long of A Journey -- Good examples; three are tabbed:

Life's Too Short (E)

Walk the Way the Wind Blows (F no capo) analyzed in Branching Out DVDs

Frank's Blues (D) instrumental Similar version tabbed in AcuTab Transcriptions book

Colleen Malone (E) Similar version tabbed in AcuTab book

Won't You Come and Sing For Me (F)

Dr. Banjo Steps Out

Tab for these is in free Tablature section under Instructional on DrBanjo.com:

Sally Ann (D) moody instrumental

Lost in the Woods (D) moody instrumental

Cross Eyed Fiddler (E) instrumental