

BNL Column April 2008  
Stepping Into a Group  
By Pete Wernick

Hi Pete... Jim from Colorado Springs here with an update on my progress. I was invited to play in a group called "The Heirlooms". The name fits because we are all over 50 and in my case 62. It is really enjoyable. We play at retirement homes and we have done an art show opening. There is myself on banjo, a fiddle player, dobro player 2 guitars, mandolin and sometime our bass player shows up. I must say, using all of the tools that I have learned from your teaching and playing is finally paying off in big dividends. Although I wish I could still play a little faster (maybe will come with time)...

[Jim -- See the article on Speed in Banjo Techniques section of The Doc's Prescriptions in DrBanjo.com's Instructional section. My best suggestions are there for great results. Using a metronome/drum machine is a must.e

... I am enjoying this immensely. I have even had some of the people come up to me and comment how they enjoy my playing. What I have enjoyed the most is that we established a play list and I had to work up breaks to the songs I didn't know. Using the techniques that I learned from you made it a whole lot easier.

Jim,

Your message a real heart-warmer. Please share your story on the jamcampers discussion list. It gives extra encouragement for others to do as you have done. Even after a positive, even inspirational, camp experience, it's common for people to neglect the all-important follow-up factor and not make the effort to find others to play with after the camp. As you know, that makes all the difference. The camps can only do so much. It's up to each person to seek out the right situation for musical growth, as you have done.

To join the jamcamper discussion group, go here:

<http://www.drbanjo.com/camps/camps04-jamcamps.html>

Scroll to second screen, click "discussion board" button on left. Email Tom as it says.

Jim, I always remember how inept ("hopeless" according to your teacher) you were at the first basic camp you attended, and I'm glad we both

believed in your potential. You are a real success story in music, and I share with you the sweetness of the fruits of your persistence!

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Lt. Dan from Maryland writes,

Hey Pete, just a short note to let you know how my playing has been going. I am now playing every Saturday at a local "Jam Barn" where about 10-15 musicians play Bluegrass for a crowd of about 40-60. It has been a great experience for me as I am playing on stage in front of actual living humans not my computer! I am one of only 2 banjo players so I get a work out. I have to thank you for one of the most important things I learned at your beginners camp back in 2004 and that is "JAM ETIQUETTE!" Pete, I am amazed at how many so called "experienced" players don't seem to know when to shut up when it's not their turn or how to play softer when a singer is singing. I may not be that good, but I know when to be quiet and when to take my break. I have actually been approached by several individuals who said they enjoy my playing and I have to think it's not because I'm that good, but because I play to complement the group not dominate it. And timing... wow, can some people screw up a jam. If I am having too much trouble with a song or the speed, I just sit it out. No fuss no muss!  
Dan

Dan,

Great to hear from you! Indeed, some of what I teach is pretty self-evident, but it is common for us humans to have major blind spots, and I'm glad when I can convey some guidelines that keep people on track for music making.

The fact that people have complimented you opens a door to get yourself in a more musical situation, where there is *just one of every instrument*. That would be a "real" bluegrass band (you know, like Bill Monroe had, or Flatt & Scruggs), and amount to a musical upgrade. Supersize jams are like playing baseball with 30 people on the field. Fun and a workout, but not real baseball. A real bluegrass band permits the cool interactions of the instruments, and yes, the rare and satisfying "open space" between notes instead of a constant wall of sound. Massive sing-alongs are fun, but actual worked-out harmonies are another level, and can be hugely satisfying. We make a point to teach small-group dynamics at our camps.

Here's a strategy to try:

Think of the people at your jam with whom you have a good rapport, and whose skill level is pretty close to yours. What if you could pull out just those people for a good 5- or 6-person session? You'd want to include at least a person or two who can carry the singing and maybe harmony. You could suggest such a separate session privately to them at a jam ("What if just a few of us met someplace for a smaller jam?" -- your house, a park, or wherever) This could feel a trifle awkward, but imagine the possibilities. If you pick a good compatible group, you can get pretty exciting results.

To make it less awkward: Nursing homes and senior centers are hugely welcoming and grateful for short performances by musical groups. A 10-song 40-minute program is not only a wonderful gift for these folks, it provides a not-too-challenging framework for an informal group to get organized. No sound system needed, perfection not an issue, but provides an incentive to organize a repertoire, with easy and familiar songs quite welcome.

You can make contact with such a place and ask the activities director to arrange a performance. Then you can approach your fellow musicians saying, "I'm putting together a group to play at Sunrise Senior Center sometime next month. Would you like to be part of the group? We'll practice up a dozen songs at my house on a couple of Sunday afternoons..."

This is an easy way to launch a small band, even if it's mainly for informal get-togethers. Getting in a band is about the most effective single step you can take toward improving your playing.

Food for thought, readers: Would we have ever heard of Earl Scruggs or Don Reno if they hadn't been in bands?