



LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

Banjo Claus Spotted in Kentucky

Pete Wernick

For the past several years Joan and I have been invited to perform and teach in Morehead, Kentucky by one of our favorite musicians and people, Don Rigsby. Don heads the Kentucky Center for Traditional Music, bringing attention and learning to music there in the eastern part of the state, between Lexington and West Virginia.

Last fall Don called with a special invitation: Deering Banjos had provided five Goodtime banjos to be given to elementary school kids in the area, and Don wanted me to make the presentations. The banjos were prizes for winners of school-wide essay contests on the theme “Why I should win a banjo,” organized and judged by the KCTM.

We went to five in schools days, and daresay we rekindled some banjo interest in eastern Kentucky!

Small towns in Kentucky probably don't look much different from how they might have looked when Don or Ricky Skaggs or even Bill Monroe was growing up. But kids now are exposed to much more than the local culture, and the traditional music that flourished there needs some shoring up. Don Rigsby's incredible tenor and mandolin, and his dignified but approachable manner help him be the right guy to represent bluegrass to its rightful heirs, even if they may know more about Guitar Hero and Dancing With the Stars than they do about the world-famous music that originated in their region.

Our program starts on the most common ground bluegrass banjo has with everyone: *The Ballad of Jed Clampett*. Scruggs style is in the forefront, people know and like the song. They all know to go: “Oil, that is”, and “Swimming pools...”

I tell the kids that growing up in New York City, I was amazed to discover this special kind of music known as bluegrass, with exciting instrumentation and great singing, named after the band named for the state of Kentucky. I learned a few chords from friends and listened to records and studied it with a passion until I learned how to make some of the music I was hearing on records.

I recap some of my early discoveries. It's fun to show how easy it is to start playing bluegrass. Just two chords on the banjo, G and D7, a simple strum on a Goodtime banjo, and before they know it, we are all singing *My Home's Across the Blue Ridge Mountains*. Next is my first tune, *John Henry*, frailed on the first string.

I show how a simple TITM roll with simple chords brings us into what starts sounding like “real banjo picking”. I pick just the melody of “When the Saints Go Marching In”, and then add rolls to it and they hear how the melody stands out in the flow of notes.

A highlight of the program for me is *Molly and Tenbrooks*. I tell how Bill Monroe, one of the most famous Kentuckians ever, made a popular record about a famous race in Kentucky over 100 years ago, between the Kentucky horse (Tenbrooks) and Molly, from California. I tell them to listen to the words, where you hear the horses talking to each other during the race, and the final outcome with one of the horses winning with all ease, and the other one dying. And what a thrill it is for me to pick behind Don's great tenor, and intersperse the banjo breaks in B, all the way through the race!

After more music, some banjo history and question/answer (see below) it's time to give away the banjo. I had read some of the submitted essays. Some clearly had been coached by parents, and some were charmingly frank (“... so I can sell it...”), but every school had at least one kid with what sounded like true banjo fever.

The presentations were touching and fun. You can imagine how the kids felt to receive the banjos! I would love to come back in a year or two to see how they're doing. Some of the winners, like Logan in the article below, have a “papaw” that plays, and the banjo is likely to bridge some generations.

Much credit goes to Deering Banjos, Don Rigsby, and the Kentucky Center for Traditional Music, planting the seeds for the harvest to come!

Here's a feature article from the newspaper in Cannonsburg (population 750), which covered the event:

By Mike James, The Independent, reproduced by permission

Cannonsburg, KY—Getting started on the banjo is easy, said Pete Wernick, who has played with Earl Scruggs and other greats. “The first rung on the ladder is very low to the ground and the next one is not that far up,” he said.

It's just that there are a lot of rungs to climb before one can blister through *Foggy Mountain Breakdown* the way Wernick did Friday morning at Cannonsburg Elementary School, fingers flying over the five strings of his instrument.

Wernick lives in Colorado but plays banjo all around the world. Friday he was playing with Don Rigsby, who also has played all around the world but lives in Rowan County, where he is director of Morehead State University's Kentucky Center for Traditional Music.

The two master musicians played for an audience of fourth- and fifth-graders, whose studies are heavy on history, music and humanities—all of which will be on their state accountability tests this year, according to their teacher Teresa Cassity. Their appearance was arranged through the center's educational outreach program, which seeks to promote traditional music to a new generation while meeting core content instructional areas.

So after warming up his crowd with a rendition of *The Beverly Hillbillies*, Wernick walked them through a brief history of the banjo and demonstrated some basic chords and picking styles.

When he was finished the children wanted to know a few things:

Is the banjo easy to learn?

(Easy to learn but hard to master.)

Do you need lessons?

(No, but it helps.)

How much do you have to practice?

(If you like to play, you'll want to practice.)

Do your fingers get sore?

(Yes, until you develop callouses.)

Then came what they'd been waiting for—the center had asked that all the students write essays and promised that they'd reward the writer of the best one a banjo. And that was 9-year-old Logan Meade, who wrote about his grandfather, and musical role model, R.C. Meade.

“My papaw plays and I just want to be like him,” Logan said later. Logan already plays some guitar but wants to follow in his grandfather’s footsteps. “I’d rather play the banjo because it’s louder and it has a higher sound,” he said.

You might not expect players as accomplished as Rigsby and Wernick to play in an elementary school gym at a time in the morning when most musicians are still snoring. There are compelling reasons, however. “I have to do this, because it’s a passion for me,” Rigsby said. “When I was their age, it made me want to get up every day.”

Pop culture’s cacaphony of musical styles sometimes leaves Rigsby feeling that traditional music is shoved into a drawer labeled “backwoods,” he said. “The kind of music I do doesn’t always get a fair shake.” He figures if he plays in enough elementary schools, maybe the children who hear the music will embrace it and be proud of their heritage. “That’s our mission,” he said.

Pete Wernick can be reached through www.DrBanjo.com, his extensive web site, including free instruction material, videos and music downloads.