



LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

Ten Repertoires

Pete Wernick

This summer presents me some good challenges. Between late April and mid-July, I will have been on stage performing no less than ten different repertoires:

1. Pete & Joan Wernick, Gettysburg Bluegrass Festival.
2. "All star jam"—at Gettysburg with members of Blue Highway, Grasscals, and Nothing Fancy, bluegrass standards from Stanleys to Monroe, including me (!) singing lead on *Rose of Old Kentucky*.
3. Pete & Joan at my Aunt Florrie's senior home, doing *Ballad of Jed Clampett*, *You Are My Sunshine*, *My Buddy*, and others designed to connect with that audience.
4. Flexigrass at Merlefest and a bluegrass festival in Colorado, our bluegrass-meets-Benny Goodman song

list including some of my originals.

5. New material at on-stage jams at Merlefest, one with old-time player David Holt, one with the Waybacks, doing ... Led Zeppelin. Yes, those nutty California guys did the entire "*Led Zeppelin II*," and asked me to play four tunes. (Hear/see on some audience-shot YouTube video of one song, home page of DrBanjo.com.)

6. Long Road Home, a talented young Colorado bluegrass band I've started playing with, doing good old songs like *Blue Eyed Boston Boy*, *Freight Train Boogie*, and *Misery Loves Company*, plus originals.

7. Subbed a gig with High Plains Tradition, a strong Colorado band with an offbeat traditional repertoire and some good originals.

8. Hot Rize, in our 30th anniversary year, has sets at Telluride and Grey Fox festivals, revisiting favorites from 1978 to the present, plus new tunes we're working up.

9. Er, ah, I'll review with Waldo Otto, steel guitar player in Red Knuckles & the Trailblazers, his parts on some "old electric music" standards. After some relief from the Trailblazers, they're back on the Hot Rize show, and Waldo er, ah, depends on me to know his licks.

10. Peter Rowan called me to fill in with his bluegrass band for festivals in Wyoming and Utah. That's *Midnight Moonlight*, *Panama Red*, and *Land of the Navajo*, and learning some of Pete's newer material.

And for good measure...

11. Joan and I practiced with Don Rigsby in Kentucky following a day of our jam camp there. We have a set at the Johnny Keenan Festival in Ireland in September, and this was our one chance pre-Ireland.

Fortunately, a lot of this music is burned into my brain from 30 years of Hot Rize, and 15-plus years with Flexigrass and with Joan. The bluegrass standards and senior-home repertoire have been revisited a lot over the years. Part of my strategy is to confine my practicing mostly to what I need to know for the **next** gig, and keep song lists so I can concentrate on the most challenging material.

What about the new stuff? Here's where I focus, since performing is what I think of as playing hardball. (Well, on-stage jams are different, since the audience knows it's a jam, and give you extra encouragement and tolerate a fluff here or there.) In my book, performing means responsibility. People invested their time and money for the privilege of being entertained. They sit facing you, usually in the dark, while special colored lights are on you. You have their attention, and your job is to reward that trust. You need to act the part, dress the part, and especially **sound** good, worth their time to hear. The key components? Good material—songs with good lyrics and melodies. Singing is front and center, both lead and harmony. Banjo is for most folks a lesser component, but some do focus on the banjo leads and backup. I'll be serving those people, but mostly the music overall, trying to stay in tune, know my parts, keep good time.

Some lead and back-up parts are old

and familiar. Especially with Hot Rize, with about 1500 shows under our belts, songs like *Colleen Malone*, *Shady Grove*, *Hard Pressed*, and *Blue Night* feel like good old boots or gloves, and as Tim sings, I just listen and let my hands run their paths and just revel in the sounds we make together. The grooves, the harmonies, even the way some tunes may speed a bit, are déjà vu made new by the fact that **this moment** is unique, and we want to live up to and build our reputation to new people at every show.

Early in Hot Rize, focused on building that following, I had a pretty rigid attitude toward preparation. I figured we needed to ace every show, or we might not get asked back next year. The first four years I did all our booking and was especially sensitive to rejection! I might be on the same stage as greats like Crowe, Eldridge, Robins (with Bill Mornroe) or the amazing young Béla in Newgrass Revival, and I had to hold my own with the listeners. I decided to leave nothing to chance, and methodically worked out and practiced every break for every number.

I would first locate the exact melody, then find different ways to roll it smoothly

and accurately. I would explore chord variations and licks for special spice and identity. If I found a good idea that I couldn't execute well, I'd apply my "loop exercise method" (explained in a previous column) to work out the bugs until the passage flowed easily and reliably. The gold standard was "reliable", especially mindful of the challenges of the stage -- distractions galore, so anything not "nailed down" can fly away or crumble with a rush of adrenaline, or feedback, or even audience applause. The old standby, "Practice something until you can't play it wrong," made for many intense sessions, but my fear of "not being asked back" pushed me. I figured, when might I get another chance to have all these people's attention? I better get it right every time if I can.

Well, no one is perfect. Even the top guys miss or drift now or then (you have to listen hard to catch it). But I found that playing the same break every time gave me the advantage of muscle memory, so that even when I was nervous or distracted, the hands would go to the right places.

Later on in Hot Rize, I began to consider the audience's taste for spontaneity. Charles Sawtelle would get fond appreciation for

his daring guitar improvisations despite some awkward moments. By now, people had come to accept, even love our band, and unique happenings were valued. Our job was not to prove proficiency, but to be **interesting**, which might involve unpredictability. I made up different breaks, still based on the melody, but with different tonal ornaments. I would switch spontaneously between different familiar parts, putting my playing more in-the-moment. Tried and true solos to fall back on under pressure still helped, and I played each situation by ear, according to my comfort level and how I was playing.

I turn now to all my experience in this time of ten different repertoires. Some situations call for more perfection than others, but folks always like good clear, rhythmic banjo playing featuring the melody. I'll also offer some sounds that distinguish me from "Generic Banjo Player #49". My desire to please those listeners sends me back to my practice cabin time and again.

To read more from Pete, see stage performance clips, and hear recordings, visit www.DrBanjo.com.