

Banjo Newsletter column August, 2008 Pete Wernick
A jam skill you can use: Hearing chord changes

We're in peak jamming season now, and I hope those of you who bring your banjos to festivals actually take them out and get into some real live jams. More players than most would imagine rarely if ever get to play music with other people. You know who you are!

I've addressed some of the most important jamming challenges in previous columns (you can find those on DrBanjo.com, such as Dec. 07: "Jamming fundamentals: Following, memorizing, and hearing chord changes". In that column I promised more about hearing changes, in a later column. This is it!). To recap the most important points:

1. Jamming is not about knowing a lot of memorized breaks, it's about *faking* it, based on following chord changes, while keeping time. Melody is certainly good, but not necessary when playing rhythm, or even playing a break (*Don't tell Bill Monroe or Jimmy Martin I said that! We're talking jamming here, not top-shelf bluegrass.*). Keeping time and following changes is *always* necessary.

2. You can be on the right chords just by following a trustworthy guitar player's left hand. But learning to *recognize* and quickly *remember* chord progressions in real time is the key skill, which develops naturally in time.

Now, what's this about "recognizing" chord changes? Here is a fertile area of study for any player who's hooked on playing-from-paper. You *can* develop ear skills. Every player who tries will have some success. Don't be discouraged if this seems like a total mystery. Here is a place to start:

Take a song that you can hum, that you know is just a two-chord song. Some very well known songs that just use 1 and 5 (for the key of G, that would be G and D): Tom Dooley, Clementine, Buffalo Gals, Skip to My Lou, Little Birdie, Jambalaya.

Start playing the 1 chord (G). Just a strum will do while you hum. Listen hard for when it sounds "right" and when it's "not right". When it stops sounding right, change to the 5 (D or D7). Is that better? This is trial-and-error, no guarantees, but the more you try, the more you allow your *ears* as opposed to your *eyes* to take command. Let's remember, music is *sound*, not black marks

on a page. Learning to recognize sounds *must* be more fundamental to learning bluegrass than recognizing printed symbols representing sounds.

With the above in mind, I've compiled a list of 73 Two-Chord Songs. You can find it on DrBanjo.com, and as it says at the top of the list, "See if you can hear where the chords change." Go through the familiar songs on the list and give it a try. If you try and get nowhere, please don't be shy about getting help from a more experienced musician. With a little help, you will start recognizing at least some chord changes.

There's a new "feel" to the tune with each chord change. Learn the 1, 4 & 5 chords for each key you're likely to play in. Chord along with familiar songs in a songbook, and listen for the feel of the changes. If a melody were a car, the 1 might be cruising, the 4 would be a pleasant surge or turn, and the 5 would be the brakes.

Some of the more helpful clues I've noticed over the years:

1. Songs virtually always start on a 1 and end on a 1.
2. Chords almost always change right on the first beat of a measure. Otherwise, on the second beat.
3. The 5 chord is almost ALWAYS the next to last chord, and most last lines of verses and choruses go 1/5/1, with the return to 1 being on the **last syllable**. That is "default", with (long) 5/1 and 4/5/1 being other common choices, though 1/5/1 is by far the most typical.
4. This is a biggie: Chord changes are not just arbitrary, or "voodoo", or just based on "feel". The simple truth is that when a chord changes it's because:

An important melody note (started at the top of a measure, and often held) is **not compatible with** the sound of the previous chord. Why is it incompatible? Because it is not **a member** of the previous chord. Chords consist of 3 notes, and most important notes of most melodies are actually **members** of the active chord at any given time.

Examples:

When you sing "This land is YOUR land" in the key of G, try to keep chording a G on YOUR. You really don't want to stay on G, as the C note of the melody violates the G chord. However, it does fit right in with a C chord.

Or try singing Happy Birthday in G. When you get to the first YOU, try to keep playing the G. It just sounds wrong. C doesn't sound better but D sounds fine. Why? Because the melody (F# on the word YOU) is a *member* of the D chord. When you play the chord, that note, the melody, is one of the component sounds.

These are not isolated cases. They are examples of an unwritten rule: Almost every important melody note is a member of the chord that's active at that time. Note, I'm not talking about the quick notes for words like "is" or "the" that happen between beats. I'm referring to the important notes, that typically fall on the beats.

Try it, you'll see it works. This knowledge makes two important things easier:

1. When you know the chords, it's easier to find many melody notes, as it narrows the choices.
2. If you can find the melody notes on your instrument, it helps you find the correct chords.

A very useful and telling exercise:

Sing Happy Birthday to You in G. This is a 3 chord song, 1, 4, 5 (G, C and D). Figure out the chords yourself, trial and error. You'll note an exception to the above rule (the first syllable of the birthday person's name lands on a note outside the active chord, though the next syllable lands on a member of the chord). But you'll see, hearing the chord changes is quite possible. Just put up with a bit of trial and error.

After a while, when you can guess where a melody is going, note-wise, you'll have an instinct for which chord matches up to that next note, and find yourself making "lucky" correct guesses. That is your ear and mind digesting the method described above, on the unconscious level. Way to go, you're developing ear skills!

Hearing chord changes is a really useful jam skill, though until it develops, make sure you have a good view of the guitar player's left hand!

Now, get yourself to a jam and have fun. If you can't find a good slow jam, go to DrBanjo.com and click [Can't find people to jam?](#) under Visitor Favorites on the home page. Or get one of my play-along jam DVDs and play with a band on your TV screen at home. No tab, just real-time fun.

I can't stress enough: If you aren't able to do this yet, it should be the next goal in your musical progress!

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

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