



LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

Productive Practicing

Pete Wernick

Bill writes, Hey! I'm 53 with a family and work 6 days a week. I've been playing for 2 years but gotten to the point where I don't feel like I'm using the little time I have for productive practicing. Any suggestions? Thanks, Bill

Bill, I can offer a few practicing principles. How you apply them will depend on where you are in your development, and how much time you put in.

It's a good idea to play banjo at least 10 or 15 minutes a day, just to keep your hands in shape, and to have a little fun of course! On days you can spare a half hour or more, you might want to just goof off part of the time, to enjoy your playing, but if you want to make true progress, spend at least 20 minutes on whatever you consider "meaningful goals".

I suggest creating a list of specific goals for your playing in the coming year. This might include: a certain number of songs to learn fluently, certain techniques to progress on, particular repertoire to master, or a level of speed you want to attain on a piece. Now list several specific "bite-size" projects, each relating to these goals, that you can work on regularly in small time intervals -- such as mastering a particular lick at a certain speed, or committing to memory a small section of a song.

Your short-term goals should be small enough steps forward as to be accomplished in as little as a few days, or no more than a few weeks. The idea is to develop a sense of momentum, by starting and completing a series of projects. It feels good to cross items off the list, and lets you know you're progressing! Then it's time to add new short-term goals and start in on them.

Choosing your goals, both long term and short term, should be done thoughtfully. What accomplishments or breakthroughs are both within your reach and would give you a feeling of satisfaction to achieve?

What small steps toward those goals could you take in the coming week?

Examples: mastering 4 or 8 measures of a new tune, or noticeably upgrading the clarity or speed of a lick or tune or section

of a tune.

In the time you have on any given day, pick a few small projects to tackle, taking several minutes with each, perhaps rotating between them. Chipping away daily on your projects will yield noticeable results. If frustration sets in and your efforts are making you tense, give yourself a break and spend some time playing something just for fun. Remember, this is a hobby and it's supposed to be fun, not an odious chore! After some goof-off time you'll probably feel refreshed enough to resume your goal-oriented practice. However much time you can put into your small projects is up to you and how much time you have, and naturally your progress will reflect how much focused time you spend.

Most players at your stage could stand to expand and refine their repertoire. One question is, what repertoire? I would say: The songs you're most likely to play with other players.

If you've been playing two years, I hope that you're playing regularly with other musicians. Even if your jam skills are at a relatively novice level, playing with music "in real time" (that is, staying in time with music that plays continuously, and coordinating with it—rather than playing by yourself, when there's no requirement of exactly when to play what) will challenge you in the most typical ways players need to be challenged.

If you don't have others to play with, I strongly suggest prioritizing making that part of your musical life. I recently wrote in this column about finding others at your own level to jam with (you can also find that info on www.DrBanjo.com ("Can't Find People to Jam?" under Visitor Favorites on the home page).

As a stand-in for picking with others, you can play along with recordings, such as my moderate-speed jam-along videos or CDs, or slowed-down CDs. Pick a few songs you like well enough to spend some time working on.

Working out simple solos to these songs would be well worth your time. Note, I mean working out (creating) the solos on your own, not just finding a tab to

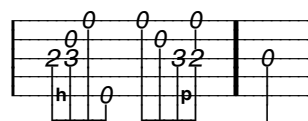
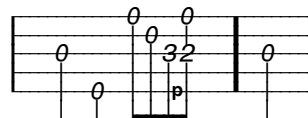
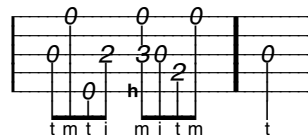
memorize. By this point in your playing, learning new material just from tab is not as useful as learning melodies by ear and working out your own breaks. If you have a "tab habit", it's time to break it. I don't mean "swear off tab forever", but break your dependence on it.

So first, find the melody by ear, trial-and-error style, and then work on combining it with rolls. The process is inexact and can be quite time-consuming and frustrating at first. As a preliminary step, try just playing rolls along with the song while changing chords at the right time. That step will also help you find some of the melody.

Once the arrangement comes together and you can play it correctly in time, try reviewing it and looking for places to refine. Are there places where you stumble a bit, not sure of what you're trying to do? Or do you have to stop your roll to include melody notes? Work on those spots, experimenting until you hit something that flows better, and review it until it's smooth and clear. For guidelines on troubleshooting and fixing problems, see my article "The Loop Exercise Method" (BNL column of January, 2007; find it on <http://www.drbanjo.com/2007-banjo-newsletter.php>).

Working out one new solo every week is a good goal to shoot for. If you focus on expanding your repertoire this way, using songs most likely to come up in jams you're in, your practicing will yield very satisfying results.

Another worthwhile goal is to make sure you've mastered some of the most typical, "necessary" licks that come up in your playing. Some oft-used ones from Scruggs are:



These licks involve slides, hammer-ons and pull-offs. I've found that most relatively new players can improve their delivery of these licks by raising their

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attention to the details, especially focusing on the coordination between the left and right-hand moves. Common problems are the lack of clarity of one or both notes of a slide or pull-off (the note before the move and the note after). Slow or uncoordinated movement by the left hand tends to kill either the first or the second note. The ideal is to hear each note clearly, with a quick transition time between. This requires a crisp, well-executed left hand move.

At my camps, we always work on precise execution of these common licks. The payoff is that even a small upgrade in the sound of a common hammer-on or pull-off means a general upgrade of many licks, and in the person's playing overall, since these moves are heard so often in all of our playing. Good consistent execution of standard licks is a benchmark of playing

that sounds "accomplished"—a great goal for a player with two years experience.

Have at it and enjoy your practice and

progress! Visit Pete at www.DrBanjo.com for free instruction, tabs, info on camps, learning DVDs and books.

