



LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

Back to Basics: Are You a Successful Musician? And, Pick Noise

Pete Wernick

The recent financial meltdown is doing a number on all of us. Everyone's financial outlook is worse than it was. We all know that life is not about money, and yet shortages of money create changes and can put a damper on plans and expectations. Pro musicians wonder if our careers are threatened or just maybe, we're *better-positioned* because "people will always need music." Probably some of both. Time will tell.

For most of you *BNL* readers, who aren't pro musicians, what does financial tightening have to do with playing the banjo? Let's strip away as many layers as we can: At its most basic level, a banjo is an object of limitless possibilities to create joy. Many of us often forget that essential truth as we strive to master this or that technique or tune, or compare ourselves with other players, always looking for the way up the banjo ladder.

As I regularly remind myself, music has one main purpose: to be enjoyed. Sometimes the simplest music in the right setting is truly a balm for the soul—of the player, and of anyone listening. As my students know, I'm fond of saying **my definition of a successful musician: "Someone who enjoys playing music."**

Here we are in holiday season, a time intended for joy, but joy for some is harder to find. Here's a reminder that you and your banjo can produce joy... A note just received from Jan, a banjo player who attended a recent jam camp:

I play in a group that plays at a retirement center on Sunday afternoons and practices one night a week. There's also an open jam on Mondays that is always fun.

The group had a gig at a large senior complex last month. Two guys had to work, our mando was on a week long bender because his girlfriend broke up with him, our singer quit two days before because we weren't playing fast enough,

anyway, we ended playing with three banjos and a fiddle. Not the ideal mix, but we and they had a ball and we got invited back for another (paying) gig. Way toooo much fun.

As I told her in my answer, Jan is a successful musician. Did you note the part near the end about how they got invited back for a **paying** gig? Happy musicians tend to get more gigs, because people expect and like musicians (especially banjo players) to be happy.

If you and/or your banjo have been having a hard go lately, maybe it's time to give it a nice massage and get it to sing sweetly to you.

So the question of the month: Are you a successful musician? And if you are, consider yourself lucky to have a path to joy and pleasure that doesn't cost you a penny!

Now, what about the scourge of **Pick Noise**?

Simon from the U.K. writes:

The contact noises between the metal fingerpicks and strings seemed to stand out in my recording—along with the notes, there's a pronounced "clickety-clickety-click" going on which doesn't seem noticeable when I listen to commercial recordings—even when really scrutinizing them with a pair of headphones. Is this because they mix them out in the studio, or should I be actually looking to correct something in my own playing? If this is a normal occurrence and nothing to worry about then I guess it must be a preference thing—what's your own view?

Dear Simon,

The sounds you refer to are called, imaginatively enough, "pick noise", something most people don't like to hear.

Often players are not aware of making it (busy doing the playing, and not listening very carefully), and it's generally considered something like static, as it interferes with clear and clean playing. Records rarely have much or any of it, normally thanks to good playing technique, but if it does get recorded it can indeed be reduced with careful equalization in the mixing process.

There are various theories of how to eliminate it in playing. They involve hand position, pick stroke, how the pick is worn, the pick material, etc.

My own theory is that when the pick moves quickly enough through the string, pick noise tends to go away. I associate this quickness with the right hand being warmed up. Slower pick motion perhaps allows the vibrating string in effect to clatter against the pick momentarily just before the string is picked.

What to do specifically? I advise players that when they notice pick noise, they should mainly think about *disliking* it and "making it go away." If you dislike it enough, it will actually tend to go away as you do this! I know this sounds inexact and even mystical, but it does work. I think it's because consciousness of bad sound and wanting to get rid of it cause the hand to make small changes which do result in better sound. If a player stays focused on not wanting it to occur, those changes tend to get locked in.

Some years ago, Béla Fleck and I did a workshop together at a festival. Someone asked about how to deal with pick noise. Shy about my odd theory, I asked Béla to answer first. He began, "Well, first of all, you have to hate it," and then in his own way described what I said above. I felt vindicated, because Béla is a very diligent student of all things banjo.

Simon writes back:

I also seem to scrape the head with the thumbpick on occasion, which I assume is something to be avoided.

Pete: Yes again, and the cure is similar. Focus on it while playing something pretty easy. Tell yourself it's a terrible thing to hear that sound—even once. Act as though it's somehow **very important** to not do it *even once*. You can train yourself this way to never hit the head, by staying focusing on it. A new habit will form in the path the thumb travels to and through the string, never touching the head. If you care

enough, you will be able to solidify this habit, starting slowly on simple rolls and gradually working up the speed and adding more content (distractions). Keep listening and if the dreaded sound recurs, feel the pain! In time, test yourself: play faster and more difficult material, and record yourself or just listen for a while, focusing specifically on whether you're hitting the head. If you are, go back to the easy and slower stuff and make sure you *never* hit the head, *even once*. You can form a new habit, but it takes time and diligence.

A simple checkup: Scrub the banjo head with a little soap and water, to remove any dirt or marks where the thumb pick would hit. After a few hours of playing, check to see if the marks have returned.

Correcting flaws at slow speeds can try your patience, but it's worth it to develop good playing habits. It's about making nothing but good sounds!

Visit Pete at www.DrBanjo.com for info on January Banjo Camps, free instruction, tabs, learning DVDs and books.