



LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

Steve Martin and Ambassadors of the Banjo: "I've always loved the sound of a banjo."

Pete Wernick

Chances are, everyone reading this column has done some work as an Ambassador of the Banjo. We of "Banjoland" are occasionally in the position to represent our favorite instrument to "the rest of the world". If you've ever played banjo in public, or at a party that wasn't a music party, or any other "banjo-unlikely" setting, you've seen people perk up and open their ears to the magic of a banjo played live.

Banjoland's most prominent ambassador lately is Steve Martin, legend of American entertainment, whose lifelong passion for the instrument has culminated in the release of his first all-banjo album, *"The Crow,"* featuring his compositions in both 3-finger and clawhammer styles. In early February, Steve's latest movie also came out, and he hit the interview circuit

and airwaves as hard as only a major media hero can. Unlike previous media campaigns, though, this one featured a lot of Steve playing banjo. On Saturday Night Live and the Letterman show he played with a 5-piece band, and on Good Morning America, the Colbert Report and others, he played unaccompanied at the end of interviews, picking or frailing for about 15-20 seconds.

In recent years I've been privileged to work with Steve on various projects: this CD, a banjo concert, a Letterman appearance, providing music at his wedding, and even a banjo instruction/jamming "camp" over a few days at his home. The week before the TV blitz, I asked if I could be useful, and wound up in midtown Manhattan for several days of "banjo-led band meets TV".

Having never been to SNL, I knew it would be fun and educational. The show has spanned four decades, with a reputation for "controlled chaos." Seeing it up close was impressive. Flexibility and alertness count big, with a lot happening in a small space. Props go in and out, costumes are changed, cameras and crew are in motion, and the entertainers need to be always ready, and to remember what they rehearsed.

I was amazed that a full two-hour dress rehearsal is performed just prior to "air time" for a different live audience. It has more material than fits in the 90-minute TV show. A great deal is then cut, skits axed, trimmed and scripts revised before and even during the live show.

Steve was in rehearsals all week, and Friday and Saturday were long days. Saturday was rehearsal all afternoon, the two-hour pre-show show at night, then the actual show, starting 11:30 pm! Several of his sketches were cut, which he took in stride, his main focus being *Late To School*, his 3 1/2-minute clawhammer romp with almost non-stop fast-sung lyrics.

His band had two fiddlers (Craig Eastman, from L.A., and Brittany Haas, now a senior at Princeton), Skip Ward

on bass, Michael Daves on guitar (both based in NY City), and Matt Cartsonis from L.A., on mandola. There was a lot of waiting, some practicing with Steve (once in a genie outfit complete with turban, once in a tuxedo), and jamming in the band's "green room." Every so often, Steve would show up just to practice getting his picks on quickly to pick 3-finger right after his clawhammer tune. He'd say, "Time me," and quickly reach into separate pockets for his thumb pick and finger picks. He got it down to five seconds, and pulled it off smoothly on the show.

During down time, I got out the old five and picked some bluegrass with Michael and Brittany, probably the first time *Big Sciota* and *True Life Blues* had been heard in the TV hub of Rockefeller Center. I liked when crew and cast members poked their heads in to listen. Bluegrass makes people grin, and it was fun to be its ambassador in this setting.

After a sumptuous buffet for all in the NBC commissary (think: cramped cafeteria), the two shows went on, three-and-a-half hours of comedy and music. I was in the control room for Steve's banjo segment, and fortunately the sound mixers and director's rep were responsive to my requests. The mix was good and viewers saw full-screen shots of Steve's beautiful 1927 Gibson Florentine.

Two days later, it was the Letterman show, with the same band plus Tony Trischka on 2nd banjo for the fast-picked *Wally on the Run*. The audience clapped along loudly, making it harder to play (same thing happened when Steve and I did *Foggy Mt. Breakdown* with Earl Scruggs on the show a few years back). Some small goofs happened, so right after the show we conferred with Harvey, the sound mixer, in the control room. Steve re-recorded two brief segments, and with a touch of mix magic the goofs disappeared.

Steve's TV and radio appearances are cutting new ground. Performing music in a formalized setting is one thing, but there's quite a different effect when music is made informally, offstage. I've pondered this "context" factor, and in this age of advanced gadgetry overload, I'm convinced that people still experience magic when someone right in their midst picks up an object and with expert hands makes it talk and sing. Musicians may think of it as routine, but for people who don't play, who aren't around musicians

much, it can be almost miraculous.

I've presented banjo in informal offstage settings since I was young, starting in living rooms, at parties, in the student union at college, even busking on city streets here and abroad, and on occasion on TV shows where banjos are rarely heard.

A common first reaction: Someone will say this exact phrase: "*I have always loved the sound of a banjo.*" (Something about that sound moves people.) Then, if they happen to pick it up: "*God, this thing weighs a ton!*" Other typical comments: "Is it hard to play?" and "How long does it take to get good?" You veteran ambassadors out there, do these sound familiar?

At my camps I offer ambassadorial tips. Listeners' reactions can be disarming, but over time I've learned how to cruise through these situations. So here's a little guide for you ambassadors:

1. First off, don't waffle. If asked to play banjo "out of context", be a good sport and don't make people feel bad for asking. "Just say... OK." Think of it as an opportunity to help the banjo, your duty as a citizen of Banjoland.

Early on, I wasn't eager to play for my parents' friends, relatives, etc. But once when my mom heard me decline a request to play, she made a good case: "Rose is always doing nice things for you and think of how she put herself out for this party. She's not asking much." From then on I didn't turn Rose down, leading to tip #2:

2. Understand that once you've done it once, you'll be asked repeatedly. Accept this ambassadorship as part of your lot in life and make the best of it.

3. I always start with *Cripple Creek*. Easy to play even when cold or out of practice. Catchy, easy for listeners to follow.

4. After the first admiring applause, be ready:

A. "My college roommate played really good banjo." ("How cool! Was he in a band?")

B. "My uncle/grandfather has/had a really great old banjo." ("Is it a Gibson?"—I don't know—"Is it a 4- or a 5-string?—Don't know—"Well, if it's a Gibson, please get in touch with me.")

C. "Is it hard to learn?" ("It's super easy to start, but the fast picking takes a while to master, like a foreign language.")

D. "Do you know that one from the movie, you know, with the kid in the tree?" ("No, but here's one I think you'll like.")

5. Now play your second song. Pick one that's easy to play and easy to follow. If you're willing to sing, *This Land Is Your Land* or *Mountain Dew* work well, or anything familiar that others may like to sing. Important: Think through your most likely choices beforehand. If you do it now, you'll be prepared when the time comes.

6. If interest is now waning, following the song, reach for your case. If someone asks for another tune, do it if you think it would keep people's interest.

7. Don't be amazed/annoyed if most folks have already lost interest, even Mr. "I've Always Loved the Sound of a Banjo."

8. One more? OK, *Foggy Mt. Breakdown*. Hit it! As the applause subsides and someone asks, "How hard is it to play that?" you can answer *while* putting the banjo in its case. No doubt some people are thinking "Good!" but the folks who loved it will remember fondly the bit of magic you've shared... And maybe buy a banjo!

Another day in the life of an Ambassador of the Banjo!

Visit Pete on www.DrBanjo.com.