



LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

Beginner Banjo Advice and Good Tone

Pete Wernick

First, big congratulations to Steve Martin for winning the Bluegrass Grammy! From my research, this is the first time that the Bluegrass Grammy has gone to a banjo instrumental album. I'm proud to have helped with the project, and especially proud of Steve to have created all this cool music, and of John McEuen for his first-rate work as producer, and of Tony Trischka for his role, like mine, as both picker and co-assistant producer. Yes, banjo players!

Now to the mailbag for some questions about getting started, and getting good tone:

Hi from the UK, Pete. I'm hoping you can give me a few pointers. I've just purchased my first musical instrument, that being a 5-string banjo no less!! I've no musical experience whatsoever. I can't read sheet music though I'm starting to get my head around Earl Scruggs tablature. Do you do a course for guys such as me?

Kind regards, Dave (aged 56)

Dave,

Yes I do have a course for guys such as you, and it's the same as I recommend for everyone, ages 8 to 88.

I'm glad you've gotten started. 56 is by no means too late. I just had a 61-year old guy at my Intermediate banjo camp, one of the better pickers there. He started at 56 with a good head of steam and he's doing quite well now.

Please go to the page on my web site that's especially for banjo beginners. On the home page you'll see a link to it under Visitor Favorites. That will get you started. Read the article that says, "Read this first," as it explains the whole sequence that I recommend. The video for which there's a preview clip on the page is what I recommend first (it's mostly playing along with simple chord changes and then adding rolls) and the other video you can see clips of, *Beginning Bluegrass Banjo*, is a more complete course that will keep you busy

for quite a while.

I do *not* recommend Scruggs tabs for you yet as he is an advanced professional player and it's too ambitious at this stage for you to try to duplicate all the moves he makes. Save that for later. And in general, be aware that learning to play banjo is not just a matter of learning to play from tablature, but more like learning a language: You start with easy words to make short sentences, and work your way up to paragraphs. You don't just learn to memorize what other people say, but learn to manipulate what you know, in different ways, and learn to interact with others.

Remember, music came before written music, just as language came before written language. Learn music as *sound* first, matching your playing with sounds and rhythms you hear, and in time learn how it can be represented by written music.

You now have your instrument and my best advice. Best of luck! —Pete

Hi Pete. Thanks for your reply. I knew my wife was right about the Scruggs book, but I'm a bit ignorant as to what's out there for the complete beginner. I will follow your advice. I am very inspired by watching you make it look so easy, which I know it ain't!!

My sons know I have bought the banjo, and they want me to be able to play Foggy Mountain Breakdown by September.

Tell them you want them to be millionaires by August and buy you a big house.

What's my chances of not disappointing them both?

Same as the chances of their not disappointing you. They have set the bar too high.

If you think that's a bit of a long shot then I'm open to your advice.

At the beginning, your sights should not be set on "learning pieces," especially

difficult ones by pro players. It should be to make enjoyable music on the banjo, accompanying singing, and learning to play rolls while changing chords. That will keep you busy for a while.

Your first complete pieces can probably be learned in the first few months, depending on how much you practice, and how easily trainable your fingers are. If you use my "*Beginning Bluegrass Banjo*" DVD, you might have the best luck with *Worried Man Blues*, which is not too hard to play, and is a nice song besides, that's easy to sing. I'd say that's a goal worth setting, and depending on the factors I mentioned, you should be able to get it done well within the September deadline.

Now get busy! And have fun of course. —Pete

From "Banjokid" on the Forum on DrBanjo.com:

Can you explain how to get a better tone? Whenever I play, I don't get the right tone. Could you help me on this subject?

Well, Banjokid, you've opened up quite a large topic this time!

Since this forum is not suited to voluminous answers, I'll stick to a few main points.

The major part of what people call "good tone" is based in the hands and mind of the player. Playing with clarity by hitting only the strings and frets you mean to, with just the right amount of force, is usually considered a necessity for "good tone."

When I say "mind of the player," it's because I think people who play with good tone have a clear idea of how they want their instrument to sound. If you listen to players with tone you really like, the sound of that great tone will etch itself in your mind—as it's etched in theirs. The more devoted you are to that sound, the more you'll tend to be able to make it on your instrument. I know that may sound inexact and mysterious, but I find it's generally true, and rather than trying to explain, I suggest you think about why it is.

One other important factor is the instrument itself. Of course a fine instrument can sound better than a less fine one, but in general I think that's outweighed by the skill and devotion to tone of the player. The way the instrument is adjusted ("set up") can sometimes be an important factor. For example, a banjo with its bridge

in the wrong place, or with a tendency for strings to buzz, or the head quite loose, or the strings quite old, might be hard to get a good sound out of. So proper adjustment by a skilled luthier can remove obstacles to the instrument's ability to sound its best.

Then it's up to the hands and the mind of the player.

In your case, I can only give these principles. If I could hear and watch you play, I might be able to make suggestions.

If you can make it to one of my camps, or a workshop at a festival that I'm at, I would be glad to watch, listen, and make suggestions. But if you read what I've written and think about it carefully, it might be enough to lead you to getting a tone you like better. Good luck! —*Pete*

Visit Pete online at www.DrBanjo.com for his schedule of camps and appearances with Hot Rize, Flexigrass, Long Road Home, and Pete & Joan Wernick.