



LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

How to Spend the Least Amount of Time Tuning (and be in tune)

Pete Wernick

When I left off last month, I'd run out of space—so many fine points to cover about tuning a banjo!

I gave the main reasons banjos are uniquely hard to tune (long thin flexible neck, bridge sits on thin flexible material, sensitivity to temperature, etc.) and ways to work around these challenges... Including the related challenge of hearing sadistic musical misfits make banjo jokes while you tune.

Is there some solution? Just stay after it, you know, "Tune It or Die!" like the title of last month's column. If it's harder for us, that's tough... let's take care of business.

- Keep your strings changed with some frequency, wipe them with a rag sometimes. Note at what point changing

your strings makes a real difference, and next time change them before that point!

- Make sure the bridge is placed right ("chime" over the 12th fret of the 1st string must exactly match the fretted note at that fret).

- Use a capo whose tension can quickly and easily be controlled, adjusting for the neck's taper. You want just enough squeeze to hold the strings snugly to the fret, *and no harder* (which pulls the strings sharp)

- A less common but important point: *Whatever the tuner says about the open B string is not as important as the sound of the unisons between open strings and the B string fretted at the 3rd and at the 8th. Once the B is in the ballpark—listen carefully—does the 3rd fret really match the 1st open? Does the 8th fret bring the ring out of the open 5th?* Sound one and then the other, not simultaneously. These unisons on consecutive notes are a big part of what we do in G, so check to make sure they sound just right before you play. This is part of what people call "good tone".

- The 5th fret of the 4th string should match the open 3rd, another common match in standard Scruggs playing. Double-check the unison, but this one is not squirrely. If the open 4th and 3rd are right, the 4th fretted at the 5th fret *will* match the 3rd open.

- When checking anything by ear on the banjo, on stage or off, it's a huge help to turn the banjo into "dobro" position, the head pointing straight up at you. You'll hear detail you don't normally hear, loud and clear, which helps fixes go quickly. That little dobro-type rotation will save time, can be done and undone in a flash, looking cooler than sticking your head forward turtle-like to try to hear the front of the instrument.

To banjo players who perform: Strategize to minimize your tuning time on stage:

- The band's set list should take advantage of consecutive songs using the

same capo position. But two in a row in the same key is a negative if the tempos or melodies or chords or arrangements are similar. But if there's contrast, you can go right from applause for one into the second one—slick!

Have any songs in different keys but using the same capo position? For example, a song in G, followed by one in C with no capo, then one in Em, then one in G. You can include one in D with no capo (you need to raise the 5th to A, but that can be quick). Or a Hot Rize favorite: First, one in A, then E (capo at 2nd fret, 5th string raised to B, and chording as though in D), and back to A.

- Here are the most dangerous (time-consuming, hard to get right, sound bad when out) tuning situations to expect, in order of danger:

- Going into a different tuning, especially C tuning, where it's easy to think you can just lower the 4th and you're there. (Other strings might go sharp!) And then going back to G.

- After not using a capo, capo up 4 for the key of B. Both root notes (the 3rd and 5th strings) may go sharp. If the 5th goes under a hook/"spike" (though not with a Shubb 5th string capo, or various newfangled devices I've seen) it will be pulled sharp and needs adjusting. Also, you almost surely need to slightly lower the 3rd which goes sharp unless you have a (correctly) compensated bridge. And later these tweaks get undone if going back to open after being in B.

- Any change of capo, though going from 2nd to 4th fret and back is usually pretty less risky...as long as you use a variable pressure capo, as opposed to the one-squeeze-fits-all.

- Any song that has lots of chokes, like at the 2nd string 10th fret, double check after the song to see if the 2nd string still notes right.

- *Be sure to have a tuner with you on stage.* This ought to be a no-brainer in the days of \$25 clip-on tuners. Standing at the side of the stage tuning by ear (even if you can do it fast *in a quiet room*) while the show's on hold is asking for it! While pointless and unprofessional, making fun of the person tuning is an all-too-frequent last resort for a befuddled emcee. Your job is to be fast, so there's little or no waiting time. And to be in tune!

- Start tuning for the next song as soon as the applause starts for the one before.

- If you know which places in the set the banjo is likely to need extra time to tune, plan for that in the show. The emcee can save his/her longer spiels for those times, and when possible, the show can feature quick segues between songs to keep things moving. (Starting “out of applause” sounds spiffy.) Or save a “tuning danger” transition for the last song in the set (so there’s one less “tuning back” delay), or for a song that’s followed by a non-banjo number.

- In the peak years of Hot Rize touring, we traveled with three Conn strobe tuners.



Hot Rize in Louisville, 1981, Conn tuner strobe tuner; Pete, Nick, Tim, Charles.

Why Conn strobe tuners? They were and still are simply the best, super-accurate with instantaneous reaction time. That’s why I still use my 1979 Conn. Drawbacks: It needs AC power, needs to perch on a stool for easy use, and you have to set the dial for each note to check. Even with this delay, the fast and correct reading means no waiting, so Conn (or Peterson) strobe tuners save valuable seconds and produce better tuning with less stress.

- Out of tune *during* a song, and know which string is the problem? Here’s a slightly renegade and risky method that you’ll see people use: String sharp? Push it down hard with right hand. String flat? Push down on string on the non-playing side of the nut at beginning of the peghead. The string may be just hung up in the nut slot. Pulling on it can get things back where they should be. Twisting the tuning peg may be necessary, but maybe not.

Watch your favorite musicians closely. They check tuning frequently, even tune while they play sometimes. Example, on “*Flatt & Scruggs Vol. 7*” (Shanachie DVD), on *Little Darlin’ Pal of Mine*. During Jake’s 2nd solo, you see Earl tuning his 4th.

It’s inspiring to watch a great fiddle player like Bobby Hicks tune. They are dialing into overtones they can hear.

There’s more to good music than being in tune, but good tuning makes it easier to sound good. And everyone likes it when

tuning is accurate and quick.

Post-column Optional jam etiquette trick:

How to tell the fellow next to you he’s out of tune? Do like breath mint etiquette:

1. Making sure he sees you tuning your own instrument with your tuner (taking a breath mint).

2. Then, casually offer him the tuner (a breath mint).

Hope that helps. Have fun and be as in tune as you can!

See DrBanjo.com for large library of banjo teaching, including all of Pete’s BNL columns from 2007, 2008 and 2009.