

Banjo Newsletter column June 2010

Pete Wernick

Secrets – (Shhh , don't tell!) Hearing the tune in a tab, and the "Secret Sauce" of the Pro Sound

Two pickers writing last week to the Forum on DrBanjo.com asked me to share "secrets". Well OK, but then they won't be secrets any more!

"Donnieboy" writes:

Generally I can learn notation from tab, hitting correct notes, etc. Trouble is that the results do not sound like the songs I am trying to play. Is there a real secret behind hearing the tune in bluegrass or does it "just happen" eventually? On some songs I just cannot identify the melody anyway. HELP!

Donnie, Er, sorry, no real secret. But it could be the tab. Ask a teacher to play a tab you're working on, and emphasize the melody, or point out the places where the tab isn't closely based on the your understanding of the melody, such as where a lick is used... or when different versions exist.

It's now easy to find tabs for which there is a sound reference, so I suggest you don't use a tab unless you also can listen to that exact version, played well.

Some tabs highlight melody notes-- handy but not really necessary. You can usually tell which notes are melody notes. Eliminate 5th string notes, and usually any 1st string notes *Notes played by the thumb on the 2nd, 3rd, or 4th are usually melody notes. Most notes played on the 3rd or 4th are melody notes.* Thumb notes that start a measure are almost always melody notes. That narrows it down.

I am guessing you are trying to learn banjo by playing a series of songs verbatim from tablature. I recommend no more than a few songs learned by rote at first. Once you can do that, I recommend you now find the melody notes to a song by ear, and then make it a project to weave those melody notes into rolls, creating a melody-based arrangement. Making up your own solos is a challenge, but go for it -- it's the one way to get past the dead end of only being able to play from tab/rote teaching.

My most recent video is called Make Up Your Own Solos. It shows the steps to ramp up into soloing, so check it out.

Knut writes to Donnieboy:

I feel your pain! Far too often, I have compared the melody from a recording and tried to pick the melody out of a tab, just to find out that they're not the same! What I often have done is to find the melody notes in the tab (they are in there somewhere) and highlight them. Play just these notes a few rounds so you get familiar with the tune. If it doesn't sound the same as a recording: Either don't listen to that recording, find a more close recording, find a closer matching tab, or change the tab to fit your recording. If you change the tab, don't make the roll unplayable. I have used all of these tricks at times.

Once I'm comfortable with the melody I start rolling. Very slowly! The trick is here to keep rolling without losing the melody. I exaggerate the melody notes when I start out. As you start playing quicker, the melody will meld in better. Try to play the melody notes with the right finger as you would when you put the rolls in.

Please be aware that I'm no banjo instructor, quite the opposite! I'm a complete rookie that has struggled very hard with the same problem you have and had to try to find ways to work around it.

Good luck!

Knut

Pete writes:

Thanks for chiming in, Knut. These are all good well-stated suggestions. (They're going right in my Let's Roll column).

Here's another: the "divide and conquer" principle. Too often with tab, a player plays the full piece through and is in *reading* mode -- another pitfall of tablature. REAL PLAYERS DO NOT RELY ON OR EVEN THINK IN TABLATURE. So if you want to be like them, try *doing what they do*: They think of the melody, and *their right hand keeps putting out notes in rhythm 'cause it knows how to*. Their right hand knows how to keep the flow going in rhythm *just like your legs know what to do when you think: "walk"*. If you spend a lot of brain power telling your right hand when to hit every string, that's a lot of brain power, and it locks into the *execution-by-reading syndrome*, which is not bluegrass.

If this isn't happening for you yet, just keep rolling! Practice rolling smoothly over chord changes. Put on a good record and roll! Fun and fundamental. And sounds good, and also helps establish the life's work of your right hand: keep a rhythmic flow of clear notes and don't let up, even as you reach for different melody notes with your thumb and other fingers.

Work on the song a line at a time instead of plowing through all 16 measures, Divide and conquer.

My guess is that you don't play with other musicians, and so rarely have to keep a roll going for any length of time. I'm guessing that's what you need most. My strongest advice: Don't sit there trying to play a tablature. Play along in real time with real music, and let the melody emerge naturally. Play songs, not banjo instrumentals, as their melodies are easier to follow and easier to play. You'll get it.

Pete

Knut titled another message:

The Secret Sauce

I'm a beginner on the banjo but I've been at that stage for some time. I live in a bluegrass deprived area of the country so I've been trying to learn by books and online.

Here's what I have figured out. When you get a study tablature, and you learn to play it better and faster, it still never sounds like the guys on the CD or on youtube. That's because they never play it the way you find it in the tabs. Of course there is a reason that student tabs are simplified to make it easier to learn. At the same point, it's discouraging, because no matter what I do I can never sound like the pros. And they aint telling me what they're doing.

If I take my student tabs of "Shuckin' the corn" and learn to play it perfectly at a blazing speed, it will still sound terrible. I have no idea what the professional pickers are doing differently. I've even tried to use software that can slow down a solo but I still can't figure it out.

Knut,

Before I tell all about the Secret Sauce, why should it “sound terrible” when you play a student tab? If it really sounds terrible, there’s more to blame than a tab (could be tuning... see the last 2 months’ columns). If you’re talking about not getting “the pro sound”, read on.

I have a cheap banjo but I've heard it being played by an experienced picker at a festival. Nope, it's not the banjo's fault...

No, “the pro sound” does not depend on the banjo, other than it must be set up to note accurately and not buzz.

I'm just hoping that someone would let me in on how you broke through the barrier and got that nice mountain twang out of your banjos.

Knut,

Adam Granger has a cool song about the guy who wants to pay extra at a lesson for “you know, the secret thing that all you guys do,” and it turns out to be: *Go home and PRACTICE.*

After hearing someone play, I can recommend what kinds of practicing will help the player get what I call the “pro sound”. Many factors could be at work, especially accuracy (clarity of tone) and smoothness, plus enough volume to hear the full tone of the instrument.

Many things can get in the way, so here’s an exercise to get to the heart of the matter. Hit the 1st string as loud and clear as you can. How good does it sound? How would J.D. Crowe hit that string? Be sure it’s big and nice and not buzzing. OK then, from now on *every time you hit that 1st string, **always** make sure it sounds that good.* Now do the same with the 3rd string.... Take your time, get it right. Now the 5th... Et cetera. Try a pinch. Does it ring loud and clear? Now try a simple TITM roll very *slowly* and keep that primo sound on *every* string. Slowly!

It takes extra intent to get a defined clear tone on every note in a roll. But if you make every note stand out as an attractive, appealing sound, and play a string of those big clear notes, nice and smoothly, it will sound great. In my experience, I note that most players don't do that, and it’s the biggest “secret” of “the pro sound”.

On DrBanjo.com at the center of the home page is a link to a video of me helping a student. It shows the steps of the Loop Exercise Method: listening for flaws and looping small problem sections to slowly iron out. This method gets results! Make sure to play the phrase really well *slowly*. Too many players get impatient, lose focus, and gloss over important detail. The expression (it's a wall hanging at banjo camps) "*Have a clear idea of what you won't settle for,*" comes into play here. If a pro player wouldn't play some mistake, or muffled or un-squarely hit note... don't settle for that!

That's about as much as I can say when I'm not able to actually hear your playing. But try it and I bet you'll like the results. Only caution: this is only a method, not a "secret". It's still you that has to *do the work* (*that's the secret*) *using the method*. But it's the fastest way I know to get results.

Pick on!

Pete

Visit Pete at www.DrBanjo.com and ask a question on the Forum.