



LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

Finding the Melody Using Chords and Your Voice; Finding Chords Using the Melody; Cleaner Bar Chords

Pete Wernick

Finding the Melody Using Chords

Here's some advice I gave a fellow who sent me a playing sample to qualify for Advanced Banjo Camp. He and a friend were picking Foggy Mt. Top. When it was time for the banjo solo, there was no melody, but a cluster of well-executed licks that fit the chords.

While the playing sounded good, someone walking in the room during the banjo solo would have had no idea what song was being played. But "the bluegrass way" is for solos to be based on the melody, not just on the chords. Most bluegrass bandleaders try to get their musicians to state the melody quite clearly, especially on the first breaks to songs. Even variations are based on the melody. As I've heard it said, "The song already has a melody that people like. Do you suppose you're going to make up one that's better?" Or as Rob McCoury says his dad advises him, "He always wants me to play that pesky little melody!"

In a jam, settling for non-melody playing is not so much an indulgence as a necessity. You're faking it after all, and generic licks that fit the chords are an acceptable fallback mode.

But the better players tend to find at least some of the melody and work it in, even when faking it on the fly -- thanks to a quick connection between thinking of a melody and finding it on the banjo neck. This is a skill you can cultivate. How? Here's a method to practice it and put it to the test: Start hunting melodies, and check their accuracy.

I suggest using my *Bluegrass Songbook* ("the red songbook") which gives each song's melody in a simple form of tablature that works for banjo or guitar. Choose any song in it that you know and like, preferably one of the many presented in our favorite key, G.

Now... close the book and find the

melody yourself, trial and error. *Hunt for the main notes within the chords*, that is, on the strings you're sounding when you're holding the right chords. For G, use the open chord, and don't go up the neck. Many important notes are just open strings in the G chord, and as the chords change, the notes in those chords will often turn out to be melody notes. Try it! And... if you sing out the notes it can help you find them faster.

Be patient and go for every last note. Not easy. When you're done, check with the tab in the book and see how close you came. Now, there may be places in a song where different people "hear" the melody differently, and if it's an old song where there's no one certified melody (as opposed to a song whose writer sang it on a recording), there's room for small variations. But no fair making up a different (wrong) melody because you don't know the real one!

Musicians who lack this skill are often the ones who don't do much singing. Learning to find melodies with your voice is a gateway to finding them on your instrument. After all, your voice is your first musical instrument.

The voice finds melodies by first "hearing" them (imagining them clearly), and the voice muscles control the pitch. Think of how your voice can find the notes in *Happy Birthday to You*. No tab or instructions were ever involved. *How did you learn it?* By imitation and trial and error. You can teach your finger muscles to do the same on the banjo, but the effort begins in the brain, and its lifelong partner is the voice.

This is essentially how everyone learns to sing melodies: by imitating others' singing. After a while, *memory* of a melody is what's being followed. In time, a ready connection builds between the brain "hearing" a note and the voice quickly

producing it. The same connection can be extended to the fingers on the banjo neck.

As you guess through the melodies of different songs in G, you'll see that a lot of the notes fall in the same places, song after song. That makes the hunting easier!

A tough test: Put on a recording and see how accurately you can play the sung melody notes, playing every one right along with the singer. Yes, a tough test, and if you can't do it, it shows a gap in your musicianship. (Your voice can do it!)

Once you develop that skill, it's a whole 'nother challenge to put those notes into just the right places within your Scruggs style breaks. Earl calls it "playing the words." That will keep you busy, and will build your musicianship.

Finding Chords Using the Melody

For an interesting different angle on this same principle, Tom writes:

Can I tell what chord I'm in by just looking at the melody notes I'm playing? I'm trying to figure out the correct fill-notes for the rolls as per the chord.

Tom, The answer is, sometimes yes. For instance, the way *This Land is Your Land* (in G) walks up to a C note, it's kind of obvious it's in a C chord. There are three different notes in any chord, and the melody note is **very likely** to be one of the notes in the "right" chord.

In bluegrass, country, and folk music, you'll notice that most songs use just the 1, 4, and 5 chords, that is, the chords built on the 1st, 4th, and 5th notes of the scale of the key you're in. In G, that translates into G, C, and D chords. Most of the main melody notes of a song in G are probably found in one of those chords, and that narrows your guesswork a lot. It's a trial-and-error method which usually leads to good results with a little help from your musical judgement.

Be aware that a C note can also be in chords other than C, such as F or Ab even. Your ear will help you sort out which choice seem to work best, though good musical minds can and do differ over what chords sound best with a melody.

I suggest you experiment like that, and when you like what you find, practice it!

Happy hunting, Pete

Cleaner Bar Chords

Joe writes an e-mail called *Thud string*.

Do you have any suggestions as to how my bar chords will sound true and clear?

Joe, The problem of course is that four strings are pushing up, and just one finger is pushing down, trying to make good contact with the fret in four different places. That's a lot of gripping power from the "clamping" hand muscle. It strengthens with practice, but its unreliability is one reason why often instead of barring, I use my fingertips to hold two or three strings separately at once, trying not to hit open strings. More dependably clean. Another advantage of using fingertips is not having to rotate the whole hand to get the side of your index finger into place. Economy of motion.

It's that second string when I hold all four strings down. I don't have that problem if I hold three strings down.

The usual method of dealing with unclarities in the sound is to keep shifting things around until something works, and then work on being able to do "that" easily and quickly every time, on your first try. Since everyone's hands are different, there's no set anything about this. Just keep trying for good sound. The fact that you cared enough to write is a good sign. Good tone starts with *caring* about good tone. Which is what led me to the solution above.

Best of luck with your picking! Pete

To find out how to spend a week with Pete this January playing/working on banjo, visit DrBanjo.com and click Camps.