



## LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

### ***“I Am 54 But...”, Drum Machine Report***

*Pete Wernick*

enjoys making music”. Sure you can learn, and good help is available! Go to my web site and click *Jamalot*.

True story:

An older guy with a hearing aid at a recent camp in Kentucky was sounding pretty good on fiddle. I said something about how he must have been playing a long time. He said, “No, about 8 years.”

“How old are you now?”

“I’m 81. I started when I was 73.”

You take the cake, Phil!

Lots of people 54+ take up an instrument for the first time and do great. It’s mostly a matter of attention. Dabblers don’t usually get too far, as it’s a job to train muscles that have never worked in these ways. Even for those without problems like arthritis or muscle stiffness, it takes sustained focus. But when someone has a passion for it, many things are possible.

J.C. from Nebraska writes:  
*Pete...*

*I am very interested in your jam camps which are geared toward those with no experience with jamming. That is what I would like to learn to do. For about 20 years I knew only 4 songs on the banjo and now, after my daughter graduated I have learned a few more songs and am definitely in a love affair with my banjo. I would classify myself as a beginner-intermediate wanting to be able to play along on jams. I have no solos yet to offer in jams and have never sung in my life except to my mini-donkeys, horses, and along with my favorite CDs. I am 54 but figure no one is ever too old to learn and I love the banjo so much. Can you help me? —J.C.*

J.C., You’re right, jamming has no age limit. The successful musician is “one who

A woman I know who took up banjo at about 50... she overcame stage fright and played in bands, a good picker and composer of nifty banjo tunes, published a couple in *Banjo Newsletter*. She’s now about 80 and still plays. Go Merle!

A guy I know from Utah, now 62, has gotten pretty darned good on the banjo. He told me that when he was 56 he picked up the banjo and decided to set the goal of being very good by the time he’s 65. I’d say he’s about there. Good going Keith!

It happens regularly, I talk to someone who clearly wants to take up banjo, but feels funny about not having starting at a “normal” age, and wavers over how odd it seems to start now. They want to, but they’re stuck. I needle them and say, “What are you waiting for...your next lifetime? Start now and in a year, you’ll be playing for a year. (I took math in college.) Five years from now, you could be saying ‘I’ve been playing for five years.’” —*Pete*

#### ***Drum Machine Report***

Bruce writes:

*I am a long time banjo player and am thinking about getting a drum machine to practice with. Do you have any advice on their use and what kind to get? I know you are busy but I would really*

*appreciate any advice you could give me.*

Bruce, Practicing with any steady rhythm source to “keep you honest” is good. Playing with recordings of good bands, or being in a band that plays for square dancers will regularize your timing. Metronomes are usually too quiet to be heard over a banjo but even when loud enough, they make only “the sound of being policed.” Drum machines sound like a musical instrument...sort of. A simple kick or snare drum/rim shot represents the typical bluegrass rhythm boom/chick. I find it energizing and focusing to play with a drum machine.

Drum machines these days offer a gaggle of possibilities beyond a boom/chick pattern, and playing with different patterns and effects can be fun. But for practicing, a busier pattern fills more sonic space, and covers some of the banjo tone. When practicing, I want to hear my banjo tone clearly. So I stick with the kick/rim shot, and it keeps me honest while being spare enough to let me hear my sound.

Which drum machine to recommend has been a puzzle for me of late. They all make lots of sounds and are programmable. The problem is having to pay over \$300 (list) for any of the many-featured current models, that are also too big for a banjo case! They used to be smaller, simpler, and less pricey. No more!

I’ve used a Dr. Rhythm (by Boss) since the 1980s. My first one was pretty small, and I got a slightly larger one made about 1990, which I still use. Nowadays, those or later models can be found for much less on eBay, though probably minus the user manual. A good breakthrough came in 2009, with the Dr. Beat DB-90, Boss’ most deluxe “metronome,” with mixable—though not programmable—drum sounds. This is one I can recommend: compact, with a handy built-in speaker (though you’ll want to plug in earphones or a real speaker), and finally the price is right... about \$150 list and I got mine new for about \$100. It has all the main necessities:

1. A simple decent sounding boom/chick equivalent (see how to do it, below)\*
2. Easy to use
3. Small enough for a banjo case
4. Loud enough (with external speaker or earphones)

The down side: the drum tone isn’t great, and the patterns not very appealing, but the good ol’ boom/chick is all I’m

after, and it’s got it.

\* For the boom/chick sound, set the DB-90 thusly:

1. Power on.
2. Press Beat/Pattern button at bottom left, till in the window, Style (upper right) has “Pattern” blinking next to it.
3. Rotate circular dial until under Style it says 17.
4. Hit Start button under dial.
5. Quick, adjust faders:
  - a. fader 1 almost to the top
  - b. fader 3 a little under fader 1
  - c. faders 2, 4 and 5 off. This yields a nice simple boom/chick. Hooray!
6. Hit Tempo button at left.
7. Rotate dial to desired speed, 40 to 200 beats/minute, which covers all bluegrass.
8. Adjust volume with Volume fader on the DB-90 and/or on playback device.

Next time you turn on the machine, the settings will be the same, convenient!

It’s well known that playing with a drum machine helps conquer problems of erratic rhythm, speeding or dragging. But it can also be hugely useful in a number of other ways: for developing speed, working

on accenting, and clearing up problem spots. It’s an important tool in the Loop Exercise Method I use for all the above and more (see my very first *BNL* column, Jan. 07, in the archive on *DrBanjo.com*).

But—it’s also sometimes good to not use a drum machine. One reason: You can over-depend on it, and not feel as “responsible” for the rhythm, because you know the machine will hold steady. Your right hand needs to be good and experienced at being rhythmically “responsible”—not just following a machine. “The whole band is the rhythm section,” as Jerry Garcia once told me.

Also, it’s good to hear the tone of your banjo all by itself. If it’s always partly covered by drum sounds, you don’t hear the full tone (and/or pick noise!).

I hope the above helps, Pete

Last note re the drum machine: Steve Martin and I both got a DB-90 when they first came out. His next email to me was titled “My nemesis.” A few days later he wrote again, “My new best friend.”

*Find out about Wernick Method Jam Classes nationwide, on [www.DrBanjo.com](http://www.DrBanjo.com).*