



# LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

## *Banjo Bullies Needn't Peel Paint and Other Jam Etiquette Issues*

*Pete Wernick*

Just last weekend I really wanted to jam and there was a good one going in the campground at our local Bluegrass on the River festival. I watched and listened... and didn't get out my banjo. Why? Two good banjo players were already there, playing very well and mindfully of each other... and I thought, that's easily enough banjos. What could I have done to add to the music? Play a break here and there, and otherwise chop chords lightly and stay out of the way. More than that would be a little too much like inviting yourself to dinner when there's not enough food.

I love a good jam, and try to caution banjo players only to add to, not to clutter up a jam. The temptations are many on a Saturday night when banjo pickers want to pick, and sometimes they cluster and become a bit dangerous. I believe this phenomenon contributes to our troubled image. Every festival season, memories return of "banjo bullies" of years past. More on those later.

**Let's face it, banjo brothers and sisters, we're loud.** Banjos project like crazy and can often be easily heard unamplified 50 or 100 or more feet away. It's both an asset and a problem that the sound is directed *away* from the player—who then has the impression the banjo is not particularly loud and couldn't be more wrong.

At my banjo camps I have everyone lay their banjos on their lap like a dobro and pick the strings, head facing up. Everyone starts looking surprised. They have never heard their banjo so loud! But you know... that is *exactly* how loud they actually are. Something to ponder.

The Gibson Mastertone banjo was designed for volume... the (4-string) banjo in the 20s and 30s was a rhythm instrument in brass bands playing to large audiences unamplified. The need to be loud was still there when young Mr. Scruggs chose a 5-string Mastertone to deliver his sound.

Its power and brilliance cut through those funky 40s no-high-end single-mic recordings and broadcasts. As better microphones and sound systems came into use, a banjo's volume became less important, but pickers still are wowed by it.

I've been interviewing bluegrass teachers for certification in Wernick Method jam teaching. One applicant when asked about his playing experience, said he'd not been a band in years (hmm, strike one), and then started talking about his banjo. When he mentioned it could peel paint, that was strike three.

Why would a banjo player want to peel paint? Volume is definitely needed at times, but musicianship has more to do with varying and *controlling* volume and tone artfully than with just "volume." I like what someone said on his camp feedback form: "I learned there is more than one volume on my instrument."

If banjo players need to control their volume, what's a good example to follow? Well no surprise, Earl Scruggs. Ever notice how he uses volume changes to make his music more dramatic? Before the solo starts you hardly hear him, then BANG, you really hear him! Even within his rolls, the notes are not all the same volume: he punches the melody notes and accents notes like a singer. On backup he often chops chords cleanly to leave space for the fiddle or dobro to do fills. In Earl's world of the 40s, 50s and 60s, volume control involved choreography around microphones. Records were recorded around a single mic, and at shows a second mic for banjo and dobro breaks was added.

Jammers don't have mics, so everyone, banjos especially, has to take special care not to be a nuisance to an unamplified lead singer. Lead singers after all, (not banjos) are the central element of bluegrass, so please show them respect. Avoid pointing the banjo at a singer, and if you do forget, it's good to mention it apologetically.

They'll appreciate that you even noticed and that you understand. The same goes for lead guitar players, whose solos are usually quiet, so that everyone tones down for them.

Another banjo fact to watch out for: The banjo's open strings' pitches fall within the vocal range of most singers. So singers' voices and banjos produce many of the same notes, and can easily overlap each other and get in each other's way. Keeping backup very simple and rhythmic lets the vocal stand out. Or playing high on the neck to keep out of the vocal's tonal range.

Banjo rolls are a stream of defined notes that use a lot of sonic space. Turning the constant stream off sometimes gives the listener a break and lets other sounds be heard more readily. I like following Earl's example by just chopping sometimes, and even laying out.

And now it's time for...

### *Pete's Protocols:*

#### **When more than one banjo is in a jam**

First, just for the record, just two banjos by themselves trading breaks and chopping chords for each other can be huge fun, and I recommend it. But...

What happens when you're at a bluegrass jam picking banjo and so is someone else? It's not unlike two shortstops taking the field. The bluegrass sound we love calls for just one, and two is a crowd. Probably the best way to handle it gracefully is for the two to take turns being the "one" banjo player in the group on back-up—so only one may roll at a time or play "active backup"... while the other just chops or lays out completely. By watching each other and periodically switching off, they can reach a harmonious tag-teaming that can be fun.

Two banjos playing a break together using harmony can sound really cool, and sometimes can work in a jam even when improvised (but not on every song, please). One way is for both players to focus on the melody, one rendering a harmonizing line just above the melody played by the other. Matching right hands as closely as possible makes a particularly nice paired-up sound, worth the time it takes to work out. When Tony Trischka and I got into that in 1970 and 71 as members of Country Cooking, it was a good time of discovery, and we saw it lead to new music and to both of our careers in music. "14 Bluegrass

*Instrumentals*" (Rounder #0006) was made 40 years ago this summer, believe it or not!

### **The Night of the Banjo Bullies**

I promised a bit more about the banjo bullies, those aggressive pickers who peel paint when no one wants paint peeled. A bit of aggression does have its place in bluegrass—as Monroe harnessed to get his band fired up. Earl says Monroe would try to get him to “fight him” at the mic, pushing him to show his stuff, so he could top it. Whether that kind of combat might fit into a jam, I guess it depends on the jam...

Way back in the annals of Colorado festivalia in the late 70s, a loosely organized gang of rowdies calling themselves the Banjo Bullies sprang up at the big annual Rocky Mountain Bluegrass Festival at the Adams County Fairgrounds. The bullies, many of whom now live respectable lives, would make sudden late Saturday night

appearances en masse at selected “Rocky Mountain High” campsites, do their business, and vanish into the night.

This was long before the banjo jokes started up (right around 1990 I recall), and in fact may have helped provoke that senseless craze. The Banjo Bullies knew they would draw some disapproval from the mostly peace-loving bluegrass community, but still felt a sense of mission and accomplishment in wielding their fearsome power.

By now most people prefer the Bullies remain nameless, and the general sentiment seems to be: it’s good that they *did* exist, but also good that they *no longer* exist. Amen to that. So Banjo Bullies, rest in peace... at least until the Banjo Rapture.

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