



Performing Bluegrass With Others, Part I

David Jakubiak, www.fretmentor.com

Now that you have acquired a banjo, and have learned some rolls and left-hand techniques, you want to move on to the various songs. Most banjo players are interested in the standards, such as *Foggy Mountain Breakdown*, *Cripple Creek*, *Ballad of Jed Clampet*, *Dueling Banjos*, *John Hardy*, to name just a few. So you start right on those tabs, correct? Not necessarily. You have a bit more work to do if your goal is to play with other musicians.

Over the course of many years, I've had students ask me whether they are practicing the banjo correctly. Often I find that too much of their time is dedicated to playing a song from measure to measure without understanding the music, such as the tempo, timing, and chord structure. Since three quarters of your performance is playing back-up, as much time must be spent learning the various chord positions and progressions, as is spent learning how to play the lead and melody line.

For the past four years I've structured a class entitled "*Performing Bluegrass and Acoustic Music With Other Musicians.*" Since I play and teach the banjo, mandolin and the guitar, I'm fortunate to be able to write standardized tablatures for all three instruments (while including the music for the fiddle as well). You will be able to read more next month on how these materials and the class is taught from the teacher's point of view. For now, I'll address some of the important issues that a banjo player confronts when playing with others in this class.

A time will come, if it hasn't already, where you'll be brave enough to join a bluegrass jam at a festival or in your neighborhood. Your first experience playing with others may be filled with apprehension. This is now your first opportunity to try out your skills in front of other musicians, some of whom will be better than you. Do you know the song they're playing? Are you prepared to take a break? Do you understand the chord progressions in any given key so you can back-up the others, even if you don't know the song?

Summarized below are some of the most important issues that a beginning banjo student must address when playing with others in a group. For more experienced intermediate banjo players, I have also identified some areas that may be useful to you as well, to take you to the next level of performing.

Level I – First Time Beginners

Do you understand basic song structure?

Just about every bluegrass song has a Part I and a Part II and each part likely repeats. First, learn the chord structure of the song and how to play those chords on the banjo. A song in G, for instance, will have two or more chords, with your three major chords consisting of a G, C and D. After you are familiar with the chords you should take the time to learn the lead of the piece.

When attempting to play the lead of a song, learn each part a little at a time at home and pay attention to the variations in the endings of each part. Play slowly and don't get discouraged if your first attempt at playing the lead in front of the group does not meet with your expectations. At least make an attempt to play the lead and give yourself credit for trying. As they say, if at first you don't succeed, try and try again. Most importantly, if you're familiar with chord changes, you can join a group and at the minimum play back-up, whether or not you know the lead and melody line of a song.

What Key are we playing in?

First, let's start with the Key of a piece. A banjo player loves to play in the Key of G, since the banjo is normally tuned to open G. The Key is normally defined as the first chord of the song. However, not every song will be in the Key of G.

It's important for a banjo player to learn how to play songs in various keys and not just invest all of one's energy in playing in the Key of G.

What is the timing of the piece and is my tempo correct?

Timing and tempo is the area of greatest concern for the instructor and should be for the student as well. Many banjo players learn a song, and their greatest challenge is to play the song without speeding up and slowing down the piece. When you play at home on your own, you may not notice that your timing is incorrect unless you utilize a metronome, play along with a pre-recorded song in slow and standard speeds, or record yourself and listen to the piece afterward. Once you join a group, or play live on stage, this issue comes to the forefront.

When you are rehearsing a song with others, play your song slowly at first and make sure that everyone in your group comes into the piece together. One person should count 1, 2, 3, 4 at an even tempo (similar to the metronome). While this seems very basic, inexperienced players may count slowly and speed up right from the start or vice versa.

How about playing a song in $\frac{3}{4}$ time? A banjo player has to play slow as well as fast and songs in $\frac{3}{4}$ time will require a different roll and vamping technique. It pays to understand the difference.

What if I don't know the chords to an unfamiliar song?

Many times, an experienced player will help a beginner to understand the chord progressions to a song. However, there are times you may have to jump in to the deep end of the pool and learn to swim. In other words, you learn the chords as you go. As a banjo player, if I don't know a particular song, I'll look at the chords on the guitar to determine when the chords change. On the instructional CD I prepared for my class, I included photographs of each instrument's basic chords, and advise students to try to recognize the chords played by the rhythm guitar player.

If you're more experienced and have an understanding of the common chord progressions relative to the major scale,

as mentioned below, you would likely become more adept at learning chords to unfamiliar songs. When in doubt, ask a member of the group and they likely will guide you through the tune.

How do I use a Capo?

I deliberately write tablature to songs in various Keys for my class to perform. The mandolin and fiddle player, for instance, may prefer to play a song in the Key of A or D. If you do not know how to use a capo, you'll find that it is an essential piece of equipment when playing with others. You need to be prepared to play the song you learned in G to the Key of A or Bb for instance, since another instrumentalist or lead vocalist will want to play in another Key. If playing in A, you can play the song you learned in G by placing the Capo on the 2nd fret. In Bb you would place the Capo on the third fret and play as though you are in G, where you probably originally learned the song.

Level II – Beginner to Intermediates

Once you have made an attempt to play a song with others, don't get discouraged with your first attempt. The sky is the limit, as long as you practice hard and be patient. After you get your feet wet with your first jam, you can now explore other areas as identified below.

How do you begin and end a song?

You may have practiced the lead of the song but are you prepared to begin a song, and once the song is played, do you have a way to end it? It's quite common to see a student in my class play a song nicely, only to have it fall apart at the beginning or the ending. Surprisingly, many players learn a song without learning a correct introduction or ending. Playing a song requires a strong introduction by the lead player, consistent and even rhythm by all players in the group, and an even stronger ending. Keep in mind that is also becomes monotonous if the same ending is utilized for each song. To play a song without knowing how to begin or end the tune correctly is equivalent to writing the body of a paper without an introduction or conclusion. Remember to study and incorporate introductions and endings in your practice time.

If the lead player falls behind or ahead of the group, should I change my rhythm?

Never let the rhythm of the song change, unless the group is experienced

enough to pick up or slow down the tempo together. I teach my students that once the song begins, the lead player has the responsibility to follow the rhythm players. As long as the rhythm players stay on beat and drive the rhythm effectively, then the song will not die a slow death. The lead player may make mistakes and fall behind or speed up in front of the correct tempo but must learn to adapt their lead to the upcoming measures to fix their mistake. This comes with practice.



Do you make eye contact with the group?

Beginners have a tendency to look at both their right and left hands while playing. This can cause problems when you join others. When you are playing with a group of musicians, you need to be cognizant of who is taking the lead and when will the lead switch to another player such as yourself. Pay attention to the lead player. Similarly, the lead player needs to make eye contact with the group in order to signal to the next player that it is their time to take the lead. If you are not prepared to take the lead, then you can signal for someone else to take a break by shaking your head.

Level III – Intermediate Performers

Why is a major scale important to performing with others?

If you know something about playing a major scale, then you'll understand that the I, IV, V chord progression for the Key of G is: I (G), IV (C), and V (D). These are three major chords used to play a basic song and the chord progression equates to the first, fourth and fifth notes of the G major scale. There are also secondary chords that are derived from the ii, iii and vi notes of the major scale. One basic theoretical concept that you should be acquainted with is how

to play a major scale and how the scale is used to identify the chords to a song. Next, you should map out the fingerboard with the basic I, IV, V chord progressions. As you become more familiar with chord structure, I recommend that you take your back-up to the next level by playing banjo chords beyond the 12th fret.

What is the Circle of 5ths and can it assist me to play songs with others?

If you haven't studied the Circle of 5ths and how it can be utilized to play in any Key, you should acquaint yourself with it. Many players may have heard of it, but it's my experience that many do not have the experience or know how to implement this tool when playing songs with other. My website, www.fretmentor.com, as well as various past issues of *BNL*, explore these and other theoretical concepts in more detail. The Circle of 5ths can be an invaluable tool when learning to play in various keys.

What are dynamics and how do you use dynamics in your playing with others?

Dynamics is when you learn to control the volume of a roll or strum or to emphasize the melody line without playing all strings at the same volume. The banjo (as well as the fiddle) is loud, and unless the guitar and mandolin utilize electronic pick-ups you need to control your volume. This is no more relevant than when you back-up another musician. Pay attention to when the guitar or mandolin player takes the lead and play a soft vamp. Remember, when you play back-up, leave all the fancy licks to the side and understand your role as a rhythm player. You can play various rolls and riffs but they shouldn't interfere with the other instrument's lead. However, feel free to fill in the gaps between the lead player or the vocalist. You will also find that various banjo rolls and riffs complement the fiddle player.

Coming Next Time:

In Part II of this article, I'll explain how to organize and establish a successful bluegrass performance class in your local area, and identify how unique and beneficial a properly structured instructional course can be as compared to a local open Jam.

David Jakubiak has produced six books on CD for banjo, mandolin and guitar. He has been playing banjo since 1970 and has over 40 years of experience in playing, performing and teaching music. Check out his site at www.Fretmentor.com