LEARNING MUSIC TO MAKE MUSIC

By Dr. Tim Lake

When we seriously consider the endeavor of becoming a musician and undertaking the 'life long' commitment involved in improving on our instruments, it is essential to create a solid foundation based on the understanding of music. As we move into the 21st century, and the demarcations between musical genre and style become increasingly less clear, it is more important than ever that musicians from all backgrounds speak and communicate through the language of music by understanding 'how music works.' In this series of articles, I will try to discuss the 'path' that will enable the musician to evolve from a beginner to a player who could, with work, undertake and perform any type of music. I, being a banjo player and teacher, will couch my discussion relative to the banjo, but it should be remembered that these principles are true for ALL instruments and ALL music.

Throughout this discussion, I will concentrate on what I like to call the three E's; Education, Entertainment, and Elevation. These three attributes are present in ALL great music. Hence, our long journey in the quest to become better musicians should always have these attributes as our guide posts. When we seriously listen to great music, whether it be Flatt and Scruggs or Ludwig van Beethoven, we are receiving an education while being entertained by true musical achievement. We must first recognize this achievement and then allow it to elevate us to a higher consciousness, musical and spiritual. Simply stated, striving to understand great music will make us better people. In the beginning, I think it is fundamental to understand the difference between musical achievement and pop success. True musical achievement is not always rewarded with pop success, although as musicians such as Bela Fleck and Bruce Hornsby can attest sometimes musical achievement and pop success do go hand-in-hand. I will not attempt to impart my particular views concerning this difference, but through examining the basics of music I think the difference will become clear.

If you are a beginner spending hours trying to learn complicated banjo solos, the likes of Bela Fleck, there is no doubt in my mind that you are wasting your time. Players come to me after their frustration becomes overwhelming and say that they don't know what to play. It is imperative that you engage in a course of study that will create a solid foundation of musical understanding and enable you to know what you must learn. This course must clearly lay out the chronological progression that you must take in order to achieve skills and knowledge so you will always 1.) know what you need to practice and 2.) maximize your practice time.

It is my opinion that a fledgling 5-string banjo player can begin in no better place than as a devote of Earl Scruggs and the style that bears his name, "Scruggs Style." I have developed a step-by-step method that must be followed in a chronological manner. It is a building process. Just like building a house, we start with a strong foundation of blocks and mortar, then, much further down the line, we add the shutters and ornaments that make the house entirely our own. In much the same manner, we should spend time on basic left and right hand techniques, understanding 'how music works,' learning songs, and much further down the line on developing individual style and approaches. By studying the Scruggs style , we

immediately begin to deal with two of music's cornerstones; timing and tone. We as banjo players can find no more consummate masters of timing and tone than Earl Scruggs and his logical successor, J. D. Crowe. Just as classical musicians spend years trying to produce a good tone in proper time, we can do no better than to begin by emulating legendary banjoists that best represent these fundamentals.

When I started, after learning the roll patterns from a fine player named Jim Cales, I had the good fortune to be able to go hear J.D. Crowe and The New South at the Holiday Inn North in Lexington, Kentucky at least four nights a week. I was too young to go in the bar, but J.D. and the waitresses let me sit close to the stage without drinking any alcohol. At first, he played so many things I didn't know that I found it very difficult to logically comprehend or remember anything. My solution was to memorize a different 'lick' every night until I compiled a 'library' of stock, "Scruggs style" clichés that I could organize into recognizable songs. I would listen to records and aurally categorize the things that I needed to know. Then, I would go to hear J.D. and see where his hands were when he achieved the sound. I did not grow up in the mountain culture or in musical family. Therefore, I had to study and memorize the 'musical literature' of bluegrass music just like I studied any other subject.

Accepting the role of a lifelong student of music is a common ingredient in the making of great musicians. As students, we must learn the musical literature as it pertains to the genre. Just as rock 'n roll musicians must know "Johnny B. Goode," and jazz musicians must know "Satin Doll," we, banjo students must know the basics of 'Scruggs style' literature. I actually have had banjo students who approached bluegrass music in a "pop" manner by only knowing the latest hit tune. I earnestly caution young players against this approach. We like to speak of bluegrass music as a tradition. Therefore, a banjo player who can't play "Ground Speed" is simply kidding himself if he thinks he is 'in the tradition.' When my students ask me what they need to know, I answer them with one word, EVERYTHING. Begin with Scruggs, then melodic-Keith style (please call this style 'melodic,' rather than 'chromatic.' Playing chromatically is an approach characterized by half-step motion that falls within the overall genre of melodic style), you should learn to frail or clawhammer, then chord melodies as in Dixieland jazz, then more complex jazz such as standards and later be-bop, and classical. As 'the tradition' continues into the 21st century there will be so much to try and learn that we can only hope to live long in order to do so. So take care of yourself and get to work.

My first approach is that of an 'ear' player. It may be true that I now have a Doctorate in music, but I learned 'by ear' and by 'seizing the moment' of opportunity to watch master musicians such as J.D., Tony Rice, Jerry Douglas, Ricky Skaggs, and Bobby Slone. However you begin, whether by sight reading music (as in piano lessons) or 'by ear,' it is important to know how to do both. As banjo players, we must have the ability to learn melodies such as fiddle tunes from written music. When we are called upon to 'sight read,' we are generally given chord charts such as for a play like "Hello Dolly" (I played plectrum banjo for this last year when the show came to my hometown). Every so often, the score will call for a single note passage which you will need to decipher and practice in order to execute at the appropriate time. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for sight reading musicians to need written music in order to play. I have had banjo students who could sight read anything on piano but could not provide an accompaniment to "Jingle Bells" without reading the music. They were unable to do so because they did not understand 'how music works.' Being able to sight read does not necessarily mean that the musician understands music enough to play 'by ear.' Of course, the best musicians that I know can do both, and I have always tried to emulate them.

How Music Works

Understanding 'how music works' should begin with a general knowledge of scales and how they are used to form key centers, chords, and songs. We should begin with the 'ABC's of music,' called the chromatic scale. The term 'chromatic' refers to the way notes fall one after another in music. We must memorize this scale and make it the underpinning of our musical language just as the ABC's provide the foundation of the English language.

Diagram 1: The Chromatic Scale

Open 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

C C#/Db D D#/Eb E F F#/Gb G G#/Ab A A#/Bb B C

\ / \ /

Half Step Whole Step

Refering to the Chromatic Scale from 'Diagram 1,' you will notice that we refer to certain pitches by two different names. For example, C# and Db are two different names for the same sound. Calling one tone (or note) by two different names is known as the concept of enharmonic equivalents. C# and Db are enharmonic equivalents. In the key of A major we refer to this tone as C#, while in the key of Gb we refer to this tone as Db. Notice that the chromatic scale is divided into half steps. The concept of sharping something means to move up by half step, while the idea of flatting something means to go down by half step. Therefore, the tone F can also be refered to as E#. We say that F and E# are enharmonic equivalents. In the key of C major we refer to this tone as F, while in the key of C# we refer to this tone as E#. We can arrange the notes of our chromatic scale into different key centers known as major and minor scales. To better understand the concept of key center, please refer to 'Diagram 2,' 'Major Scales'.

Diagram 2:

Major Scales

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

C D E F G A B C

C# D# E# F# G# A# B# C#

Db Eb F Gb Ab Bb C Db

D E F# G A B C# D

D# E# Fx G# A# B# Cx D#

Eb F G Ab Bb C D Eb

E F# G# A B C# D# E

F G A Bb C D E F

F# G# A# B C# D# E# F#

Gb Ab Bb Cb Db Eb F Gb

G A B C D E F# G

G# A# B# C# D# E# Fx G#

Ab Bb C Db Eb F G Ab

A B C# D E F# G# A

A# B# Cx D# E# Fx Gx A#

Bb C D Eb F G A Bb

B C# D# E F# G# A# B

Cb Db Eb Fb Gb Ab Bb Cb

Please take note of the double sharps (x) that we find in the keys of D#, G#, and A#. These double sharps negate these written keys because we do not write double sharps in a key signature. Hence, we always speak of these sounds as the keys of Eb, Ab, and Bb. I have seen banjo books that elude to the keys of A#, D#, and G# as if they really exist. Please remember that legitimate music never speaks in terms of these keys. In music, we have the accidentals of sharps (#), flats (b), naturals (n), double sharps (x), and double flats (bb). We find double flats in minor keys. Music is arranged in 24 key centers: 12 major and 12 minor.

Naturals are used whenever we want a note to be sharped (#G) or flatted (bG) and also natural (G) in the context of a song. For example, the popular Irish hornpipe *Red Haired Boy* is traditionally played in the key of A major which is written with three sharps in the key signature telling us that all F's, C's, and G's are sharped (F#, C#, G#). However, we play a natural G note in the melody more often than we play G#. Hence, we must designate this note as G natural or the key signature will always have us play all G's as sharps (G#).

To build our understanding, we need to continually answer two questions.

1. How do notes go together to form chords?

Major (1 3 5)

Minor (1 b3 5)

Dominant Seven (1 3 5 b7)

Major Seven (1 3 5 7)

Plug the definition for a major chord into the 'Major Scales' chart (Diagram 2) and find that a C chord is made up of 1=C, 3=E, and 5=G. C, E, and G make up a C chord. D, F#, and A make a D chord. A, C#, and E make an A chord.

2. How do chords go together to form songs?

I IV V7 I

I vi ii V7 I

I iii IV vi V7 I

Plug the following chord progressions into your 'Major Scales' chart (Diagram 2) to find characteristic chord progressions. Upper case roman numerals denote major chords, while lower case denote minor.

For example: The chord progression I vi ii V7 I in the key of C would go from C, to Am, to Dm, to G7, and C. In the key of Bb the same progression would go from Bb, to Gm, to Cm, to F7, and Bb.

By understanding music well enough to learn tunes, we must then memorize these tunes and internalize them in order to play them at any given moment for the rest of our lives. It is not uncommon for traditional musicians to know thousands of songs. Therefore, it is helpful for each new student to view themselves as a new depository of traditional American music and culture. In an age that is dominated by an omnipotent, media-driven "pop" culture, the dissemination of traditional American music and culture becomes increasingly important and regretfully, increasingly difficult. The major complaint from all of my students is that, once they have learned songs, it is difficult to remember them. In order to aid the memory, make sure that you can sing the song you are learning. The old adage, "If you can't hum it, you can't play it," is as true today as ever before. Therefore, I always include the words to all vocal songs in my book, and make sure that the students know the song before they learn to play the instrumental solo. Make sure that you can walk down the street humming the tune before you get into the technical aspects of playing the individual notes. The most enjoyable way of learning the tunes is by listening to the recorded music. Make sure that your listening library is comprehensive in that it should include everything from Flatt and Scruggs to the Flecktones and even a concerto for banjo and orchestra.

Finally, I would like to ask all serious banjo students to give ALL music a chance. Have an open mind and embrace all that there is associated with the field of music and banjo. You do not necessarily need to like everything, but you must listen to everything with respect in order to grow as a musician and a human being. Do not ridicule music that is different or unfamiliar. I find that all narrow-mindedness is based upon ignorance and fear. In the case of banjo players, our ignorance can come from a lack of education caused by never listening to divergent musical styles. Once we hear the music, we can suffer from the basic fear of not being able to play these styles. Generally, this fear manifests itself by criticizing and being prejudice against types of playing different from our own. Even though Bill Keith and Bobby Thompson introduced melodic playing over thirty years ago, I still encounter people who criticize the style and, at the same time, show their ignorance by referring to the style as playing 'chromatics.' I might add that this ignorance is not peculiar to us banjo players. I found the same narrow-mindedness and prejudice against ALL banjo players when I was getting my doctorate in the "ivory towers" of the university. All ignorance and prejudice are the same, whether it is being practiced by professors with Ph.D. after their names or a

banjo player who won't listen to Alan Munde because he plays melodically. I have always found it terribly ironic that while we banjo players fight amongst ourselves, many people are united by one fact; they dislike banjo in general. 'In fighting' and dissension are common in all human endeavors, but if we as banjo players do not learn to respect divergent styles, we will never have the where-with-all to truly embrace the global marketplace and its diversity. We must be open enough to allow the power of music educate, entertain, and, ultimately elevate us. We can all begin by buying a record of a banjo player that we think we don't like. Listen to the music with respect and give it a chance. I bet that you will find that you are on the frontier of a new world, becoming a true aficionado of music with endless possibilities and a life time of adventure and study ahead. You will never say that you don't know what to play again.