

Performing Bluegrass With Others, Part 3: Inside a Bluegrass Class

By David Jakubiak

This is the final installment of David's article (Part 2 was in the Aug. 2009 issue.)

We know all about banjo students' desires to learn standard bluegrass tunes, but how about banjo instructors interested in new ideas about how to teach their students? In my two instructional CDs, "*Performing Bluegrass With Others*," I provide course materials for approximately 13 tunes for banjo, mandolin and guitar players. Students learn the tunes and materials as outlined below and benefit by performing with other participants within a bluegrass class. In my final BNL installment in this series, I want to reach out to banjo and bluegrass instructors alike, to provide a course outline that maybe you too can emulate. Hopefully you'll discover that with a little effort, musicians in your area can join together and learn how to perform from a qualified instructor.

Students who register for my bluegrass class get the opportunity to play with, and for, each other. Each 8-week class consists of students at various levels of knowledge and ability. Many are beginners, performing with others for the first time. Others have taken the class before, anywhere from 6 to 12 times. Each group is diverse, with a mixture of banjo, mandolin, guitar, fiddle and upright bass.

Since students are playing at different levels, opportunities exist to separate the beginners from the intermediate students or to combine the levels to allow a neophyte to gain experience from a seasoned veteran. At the start I make sure that beginners receive classroom instruction. They first learn about the major scale and how the circle of fifths can be used to play in different keys. I explain concepts such as modulation and transposition and demonstrate the difference between the two. We learn fundamentals on timing and rhythm. Other issues addressed may include song structure, 12 bar blues, playing intros and endings, transitioning from lead to rhythm and back-up. Since a class is 75 minutes long, I spend part of the time teaching and the balance letting students play music together.

Not everyone listens to the lectures.

Returning students are given the option to split into separate groups. As instructor, I separate students according to instruments, to get a decent mix for a typical bluegrass jam. Upon their arrival, I select five songs from the CD, and allow students to select a group they would like to play in. The rule is, the first to arrive are the first to choose a song. Once a song is filled, I close that group and send them off to rehearse.

Now the fun begins. After 30-40 minutes of practice, each group plays for the class. Many new students are noticeably nervous and even some of the more experienced players have not shaken their performance anxiety. The difference here is that everyone is in the same boat. They perform in front of their peers and soon learn that anyone can make mistakes.

I've recently noticed that the small groups often rehearse a song with an outline of who will take the first, second and third breaks, and when the song will end. This, unfortunately, doesn't necessarily simulate a live bluegrass jam or performance. As a result, I've begun picking a select number of students at the end of each class, place them out in front, and give them a song to play, unrehearsed. They have to pay attention to each other, make eye contact, and attempt to perform without the benefit of practicing beforehand as a group.

In regards to tab, first time attendees are allowed to use tabs while performing. After a couple of sessions, I encourage all students to close their books and attempt to play from memory. It takes a while for students to memorize a song, but as the class goes forward, it's important that students try to perform without instructional aids.

A recent post on www.fretmentor.com included the following: "I've developed a great deal of appreciation for our group class. We are fortunate, because as I understand it, this concept is rare."

The bluegrass class is indeed a unique concept. There are open jams around the country but it's not common to find a class where students work together and strive to develop their performance skills as a group. This is not a jam but a structured class for students with a desire to learn. Players who come to learn from others will get the most out of it. Others, who want

to show off their skills or play to impress others, may leave disappointed.

I believe the best way for a student to develop their skills is to perform with others. Yet, each beginner seeks guidance and confidence on how to accomplish such a feat. If you are an instructor, I urge you to organize a similar class in your area. Students will benefit from your experience, and you will gain a new appreciation for helping others become better musicians.

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