

# REVIEW

**Jens Kruger's Banjo Method For Beginners: An Easy and Joyful Way to Start Picking.** Homespun Tapes. \$29.95. 90 minutes. Tab file on DVD.

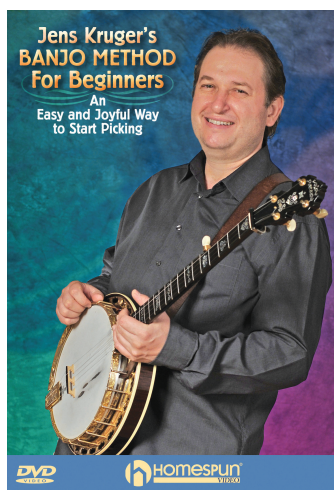
Review By David F. Jakubiak, [www.fretmentor.com](http://www.fretmentor.com)

Those of you already familiar with Jens Kruger would love an opportunity to have Jens and his band the Kruger Brothers in your living room for a personal banjo lesson. For those who may not know about Jens, it's time for you to embrace him as one of the truly great mentors of the 5-string banjo.

In this instructional DVD, Jens simplifies playing the 5-string by demonstrating how picking one or two strings (the open 5th and 1st strings) can result in the accompaniment for traditional tunes like *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*, *Swanee River*, *Go Tell Aunt Rhody*, *Shady Grove* and more.

I recently had the opportunity to speak with Jens, and asked him what he would like his audience to get from viewing this

DVD. Jens explained that the main idea behind it is to show a way to play the banjo that is not necessarily based on learning licks. This alternative way of playing reflects a close relationship between the banjo and the mountain dulcimer. As Jens mentioned, while many banjo students are familiar with Earl Scruggs and his three-finger style, there are other pre-Scruggs style banjo pioneers in the 1930s, such as Johnny Whisman and Snuffy Jenkins, who also played three-finger folk styles of banjo.



Many traditional banjo methods on the market today provide instruction based on a combination of rolls, licks, introductions and endings. In his DVD, Jens chooses to add an approach free from the basic vocabulary of traditional rolls and licks, and believes this methodology is an exciting addition to the other styles.

In the DVD's first section, the beginner learns about the basic forward roll, and Jens provides a brief explanation of how to use a metronome to develop timing technique. All students will benefit from playing with others, since one's timing will improve tremendously. With the assistance of Uwe Kruger on guitar and Joel Landsberg on bass, Jens shows how the Boom (guitar bass) & Chop (Cha) down beat & upbeat can be demonstrated with a basic banjo roll. He combines simple left hand fingering of one note for each open chord position to play *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* with a forward roll. Next, Jens quickly takes a student up the neck to play a melody line up a single string while playing the same roll.

According to Jens, the banjo makes a fine melody instrument. Melody lines are derived from playing scales. In the second section, Jens addresses playing scales up the strings, yet he advises that too much theory can clutter up a student's imagination. So he asks

the student to listen to the sound at first. He starts by playing a melody with the right and left hand index fingers.

Jens says that one problem students may encounter is how to place a melody within a rhythm. In the basic tune *Go Tell Aunt Rhody*, Jens expands upon the “Boom Cha” up and down beat, and creates a simple melody line from singing the words to playing the notes on the banjo. First, he uses single notes, and then adds three fingers at one time to add some harmony. Next, he adds a simple roll to the melody line. As though he were coaching you along, Jens encourages students to stick with playing the melody notes without worrying too much about the roll. You learn to play a forward roll while gliding your finger up and down the neck until you find the correct notes that fit the melody line. He advises you to slide your finger back and forth while keeping the roll simple. Soon, you’ll start to play along, and with the benefit of a rhythm track with Uwe and Joel, you can, in fact, play along.

Another suggestion Jens provides is that students shouldn’t worry about making mistakes. In fact, he encourages everyone to play with passion, and shares his favorite Beethoven quote: “To make a mistake is nothing, but to play without feeling is

unforgivable.” The joy of playing comes with the joy you put into it. In this manner, you will enhance your musicology.

In demonstrating how to play *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*, Jens addresses playing the melody line using the 2nd string. First, though, he advises the student to simply place a finger on the G note at the 8th fret and play a forward roll. Next, he suggests that the student finds some of the scale notes to see if they can formulate a melody line. After picking the melody with single notes, Jens plays the same melody with an accompanying forward roll. Alternatively, Jens suggest you play a G Major scale on the third string and attempt to play the song higher up the neck and switch to the middle finger or multiple fingers of your fretting hand. Jens also demonstrates how you can include half note bends, hammer-ons, pull-offs or slides while playing the melody line with a roll.

Next, *Way Down Upon the Swanee River* is taught with a major scale played up and down the neck, but this time with two strings, using the same melody-line concept as in prior tunes. In this tune, however, Jens talks about how to softly sustain a note or sound by positioning your picking hand closer to the neck. To get a more desirable sound, the student is encouraged not to play the instrument too

hard or loud.

In *White Christmas*, once again Jens shows how to create a melody line on one string and then alter it to the way you feel it. If you miss a note, he says, it isn’t necessarily wrong. “Play what sounds good to you and get the feel for it.” Jens stresses that it is important that you just play music. Other things (such as counting a rhythm) “...will come. It just takes time.”

Jens explains how to use a capo and mentions that the Key of D works perfect for the banjo. The main drone string of D is the open first string, with the V note (G) on the high 5th string. In comparison to the tunes played in the Key of G, the foundation notes, as Jens calls them, are on different strings. Jens demonstrates how you can play *Home Sweet Home* on the 2nd string, using the D scale with the root note on the 3rd fret. Similar to playing in the Key of G, Jens applies a roll to the melody line.

In *Wildwood Flower*, Jens explains that it helps to get the melody line in your head. Once you start to play melody lines, you soon learn the fingerboard. In addition, once you recognize the distance between the notes on one string that make up the melody line, you understand the instrument better.

The sound of a banjo will depend on the quality of the materials that are used to produce the instrument. Although briefly

### “Swanee River” with Forward Roll

The musical notation for "Swanee River" with Forward Roll is presented in three systems of banjo tablature. Each system consists of a staff with five lines (T, A, B, A, T) and a series of numbers (0, 2, 5, 8) indicating fret positions. Chords are written above the staff, and a rhythm line with vertical strokes is below the staff.

**System 1:**

- Chords: G, G/D, B<sup>7</sup>/D<sup>♯</sup>, E<sup>m</sup>, E<sup>m</sup>/D, C, C<sup>♯</sup>, G
- Rhythm: I M T I M T I M I I I I I T I T I I M T I M T I M T I M T I M

**System 2:**

- Chords: E<sup>m</sup>, A<sup>m</sup>, D<sup>7</sup>, G, G/D, B<sup>7</sup>/D<sup>♯</sup>, E<sup>m</sup>, E<sup>m</sup>/D
- Rhythm: I T I T I M T I M T I M T I M T I T I M T I M T I M I I I I I T I T

**System 3:**

- Chords: C, C<sup>♯</sup>, G, E<sup>m</sup>, A<sup>m</sup>, D<sup>7</sup>, G, C/G, G
- Rhythm: I I M T I M T I T I I I T I T I M T I M T I M T

stated, Jens gives some good practical advice on how to set up a banjo. For instance, he stresses the importance of the bridge being at the right spot.

*Grandfather's Clock* is taught in the Key of D. Jens advises that when playing this melody, it doesn't really matter what finger you use. Jens gives a brief history lesson, saying that he has seen various people play with one or two fingers and they played just fine. Simply put, there is no one correct way to play a song.

A student should learn to play songs in different time signatures. To demonstrate an effective use of a simple forward roll, Jens plays *Storms Are On the Ocean* in 3/4 time. He states that the use of a forward roll almost seems more natural in 3/4 time.

*Shady Grove* is a sad or reflective sounding song that Jens plays in a minor key. Played in D minor, Jens demonstrates the same previous melody line technique played up and down the second string while using a minor scale. Yet, Jens reminds the student that there is no one set rule for playing a particular tune.

As a music instructor of forty years, what I enjoy the most about watching Jens teach is how he takes what some students consider to be a difficult instrument and simplifies the technique and the explanation of the instrument, and music in general. Through this DVD, teachers can even learn from Jens about how to put themselves back into a beginner's shoes and make learning basic fundamentals of music much more enjoyable for the student. As Jens emphasizes, the prettier you play the banjo, the prettier it sounds. Don't play it so hard and find a middle ground that is appropriate for the tune itself. In this latest DVD, Jens demonstrates to all banjo students a simple dulcimer approach to playing. His non-traditional method of teaching the 5-string banjo is refreshing, unique and a wonderful compliment to your further development as a banjo player. I highly recommend this DVD to students and teachers alike.

*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](http://www.Fretmentor.com)*