

Jens Kruger

By David Jakubiak, www.fretmentor.com

On Sunday April 19, 2009, I had the pleasure of seeing the Kruger Brothers perform in Palm Beach, Florida. Afterwards, I introduced myself to Jens Kruger and he extended an invitation to talk in more detail about his banjo playing style and philosophy. Our subsequent conversations left me with a wonderful impression of Jens, as a bright, articulate individual who could arguably be recognized as one of the greatest masters in the history of the five-string banjo.

When listening to a Kruger's Brothers concert, a listener can't help but feel an emotional connection to the music. Sounds

vamp chords in their back-up technique, Jens hardly vamps at all. In fact, when I later asked him about his predominant use of rolls while backing up the lead player, Jens advised me that the way he hears the music sounds better with a consistent roll and fill-in riffs, played lightly. To him, the banjo drives the rhythm better this way and the downbeat is not lost. Most players may not be able to accomplish this, since their rolls may drown out a lead player. When watching Jens, I noticed that when he plays bluegrass, his leads are played closest to the bridge but when playing his original classical styled compositions, his right picking hand is closer to the neck



David Jakubiak and Jens Kruger

at the soul of da Vinci.

When you listen to Jens Kruger play the banjo, you hear the soul of a master musician. His dynamical range is something to behold. Take a song like *Beautiful Nothing* from the latest Kruger Brothers album "*Between the Notes*." [See tab notes on page 10.] A banjo player like myself may at first, find it to be a relatively simple tune to play but the expressive ideas demonstrated by Jens's banjo playing could never be duplicated. It is so much more than a simple tune.

Jens first became interested in the banjo at age 7, when he listened to one of his father's albums by the Cumberland Clan. A rendition of the song *John Henry* evoked romantic feelings of the Mississippi, Tom Sawyer, Samuel Adams and the Last of the Mohicans. He took to the banjo easily, and although he briefly considered playing the violin instead, his approach was to adopt the banjo and play it with the thought provoking dynamics and sustained sounds of a violin.

When Jens and Uwe were growing up they would sometimes practice in a nearby church tower, because of the resonance of the stone interiors. The church priest could hear their playing from where he lived, and one time after Jens had been practicing alone, the priest came up to him and said, "I can hear in your playing that you're worried. Are you?" Jens admitted he was sometimes worried that he wasn't good enough. The priest told him, "The more you worry the worse it gets. You need to relax, and find peace. If you find peace in your music, your audience will hear that."

While the brothers were practicing in the church, they also began to understand the value of silence, of the spaces between the notes. "Silence," Jens says, "can be as beautiful as the music."

Jens's wife Christa remembers how Jens, still a teenager, would carry his banjo



emanating from Jens's banjo are warm and vibrant. His style is unique, whether he is performing bluegrass like he did on this day with his special guest, fiddler Bobby Hicks or when he is performing his classical chamber style compositions with his brother Uwe on guitar, and Joel Landsberg on bass. According to Jens, the music's connection to the audience is extremely important to him. As he says "the audience should receive hope when listening to my music and the more my compositions provide a feeling of hope, the better I feel I have done my job".

During the concert, I observed some unique aspects to Jens's technique; like the way he embellishes the sound of the instrument by lightly strumming up on the banjo every so often, or the way he gently moves the banjo neck back and forth to achieve a longer sustained note. Also, while most banjo players are taught to

Bobby Hicks, Jens Kruger, Joel Landsberg and Uwe Kruger in Palm Beach, FL, 2009

and away from the bridge. Dynamically speaking, many of these subtle techniques are what distinguish Jens from a typical banjo player.

In my subsequent conversation with Jens, I quickly learned that he is more than a banjo player; he is an artist with exceptional vision. His approach to playing music can be compared and contrasted to the visual ideas presented by the greatest artists of our time. Picasso, Van Gogh, Leonardo da Vinci are some of the great painters whom he studied throughout his life. In referencing the Mona Lisa, for instance, Jens recognizes that this masterpiece consists of millions of ideas and no one but da Vinci could have made all of those decisions. According to Jens, when you look at the Mona Lisa, you look

with him everywhere. “When we would take walks,” she said, “he’d take it, and if he had an idea he’d stop and try it out on the spot.” (Christa also remembered how in 1979 she ordered an issue of *Banjo Newsletter*—not the easiest thing to do from Switzerland—to give to Jens as a present. When she handed it to him, she said, “Want to go to the movies with me tomorrow night?”)

In 1982, when Jens first came to America, he met Bill Monroe at the Bean Blossom Bluegrass Festival. Monroe’s advice, which left Jens first feeling discouraged, was for Jens to not become a bluegrass musician. Monroe advised that Jens needed to make his own music, since he came from a different place (the City of Lucerne, in Central Switzerland). Monroe would later become Jens’s mentor, and Jens lived for a month with his then fiancé on Bill’s farm. Jens related how Bill Monroe would sit on the porch 10 to 14 hours a day playing music. They would often play music together, and Jens remembers Bill

saying to him once, “Play me something.” Jens obliged, playing something by Earl Scruggs. Bill’s response was, “No, I’ve already heard that. Play me something of yours. Like this...” And Bill proceeded to play something on his mandolin that Jens hadn’t heard before—one of Bill’s on-the-spot “one-minute” tunes. “Play me something like that,” Bill said. Eventually, Jens did.

Jens says that month with Monroe was especially important to him as a composer. It opened the door, leading to Jens writing the original tunes that filled his subsequent albums—tunes that sound like no one else; music that only Jens could write, and that come as much from the European folk, classical, and Celtic traditions as they do from bluegrass.

Jens said this about learning to play the banjo: “If you concentrate on learning a bunch of traditional things, that’s probably who you’re going to be; that’s the road you begin on. The world is divided between those who invent another world, and those

who want to just recreate the world that is already there.” It’s clear which world Jens sees himself in.

Years later, Jens Kruger is gaining the attention that he deserves. He has always had a burning in his head to be a musician, so much so that he dreams about it. As an artist, Jens prefers his solitude and practices his banjo nightly from 11 pm to the early morning hours. He composes a minimum of 4-5 compositions a week, most of which will never be released to the public. Jens stated “to be isolated is a good thing, since artists and painters alike are alone in order to be creative.” He does not strive to be the fastest banjo player, nor a technician of the instrument. His ideas flow through the instrument and the music follows.

According to Jens, what he plays is only a fragment of what he hears in his head. His interest is to study the themes, explore the vision of his musical composition, and to implement his ideas to the pleasure of the audience. That is what a true artist is about.

Beautiful Nothing

By Jens Kruger. Tuning: gDGBD.

A Part

B Part:

Tab Notes: Joel Landsberg writes that *Beautiful Nothing* came about when Jens was giving a banjo workshop, where he was demonstrating various complicated techniques. There was a gentleman there looking frustrated, so Jens switched gears and came up with the theme that became *Beautiful Nothing*. The tune was used on the Jens’s Homespun instructional DVD, and titled *Sustain Exercise*. It’s important to note that the A Part really benefits from the back-up chords to get the full effect. You can find it on YouTube.

Tab source: “*The Banjo Techniques of Jens Kruger*,”
Homespun Tapes.
Recorded Source: “*Inbetween the Notes*” by the Kruger Brothers.

Music From the Spring

Review by Donald Nitchie & Ian Perry

BNL had the opportunity to hear Jens's *Music from the Spring: A Romantic Serenade for Banjo, Guitar, Bass and Orchestra* this past May, when the Krugers were backed up by the Thayer 36-piece Community Symphony, in Fitchberg, Massachusetts. The performance was like a Concerto for the Krugers Brothers, ranging from bluegrassy fiddle tunes and banjo breakdowns, to folk songs, classical, Celtic, blues, and with a solo banjo cadenza. Some of the piece's separate tunes, like *Up 18 North*, *Sarah*, and *Shower*, are familiar to Kruger Brothers' fans, while others Jens wrote especially for this piece. There were many beautiful moments: trombones doubling a melody, the string section rising to a dynamic crescendo, then quieting to a hushed pizzicato—all the orchestral features one might expect. It was a wonderfully competent performance, considering that there had only been one rehearsal with everyone present. The Kruger Brothers gave an immaculate performance, and Jens's eight-minute solo cadenza was a virtuosic display of banjo technique and intricate composition that was comparable to a classical violinist's or pianist's, and was easily the highpoint of the evening. After the concert I asked Jens if some of the cadenza had been improvised (he didn't seem to be looking at his sheet music) but he said no, the cadenza was played as written; he'd memorized it.

We asked him how he chose what tunes to include in the piece. Jens said that his criteria for the music he decides to record and perform is that it be moderately accessible, positive, and uplifting. He sees his melodies as stories that ideally end with a morale. "I don't want to make people listen to music that is hard to follow. When I think of the greats—my *own* greats, Brahms and Bruckner—no matter how dense their music got, there was always a theme, a lifeline, that listeners could hang on to, that would pull them through. So for "*Music From the Spring*," you'll see there are mostly very readily apparent melodies, and not so much development of motifs, which is so often the case in classical music. With folk melodies, they are usually longer than simple motifs, and while they might be more demanding on the listener, they are more like *stories*. Dvorak is perhaps my favorite composer, because in the New World Symphony he uses folk melodies and orchestrates them. This is partly what I intend with "*Music From the Spring*." The tunes I chose to orchestrate are melodic, and folk-like. They are simple, so there is room for the orchestra to join in."

(Just as an aside, Jen Kruger is remarkable in that, when we were talking, he also asked us about *our* music—not always the case when we interview musicians. It's a sign of how generous Jens is, and interested in others.) You can hear about ten minutes of *Music From the Spring* on YouTube. And for those interested in a more complete look at Jens's musical journey, we recommend Bill Evans's excellent interview with him in BNL, from June 2000.)