

## **5 Keys to Improvising on the Banjo**

by: Ryan Crist

Have you ever wanted to pump the room full of energy with a hot banjo break while watching your very own fingers dance across the fretboard? You can be that awe inspiring banjo picker with a little bit of vision and a lot of guts!

To bring your banjo improvisation to the next level, try implementing the following steps into your banjo style.

### **1. Listen for the melody.**

Don't think you have to know the melody note for note. What you must know is the direction in which the song is moving. Determine whether the melody line is going up or down, how long, how fast it's moving, and when.

Try to visualize the physical notes as the road map of the song. Once you have a clear direction of where you need to go throughout your banjo break, then you will have the freedom to follow that map wherever you choose.

Picture a path made of stepping stones. Once you know where it leads you have the liberty to skip, hop, stroll, twirl, jump, or dance over the stones along the way.

### **2. Determine your kick-off.**

Knowing how you're going to enter a banjo break can determine a great deal of the energy that is generated by the following licks. You must hit your turn of improvisation with a confident kick-off. If you're not sure

how the break is going to pan out, it will at least appear as though you do.

Leading into your improvisations with confidence is crucial. Practice and master just a few solid kick-offs and lead-ins into different chords during your practice time. This will pay huge dividends when you're put on the spot in front of eager bluegrass fans.

### **3. Follow the chord progression**

Let's say you're at a jam session and the mandolin kicks off a song that you've never heard before. You have no idea of the words to this song, let alone the name. This is where real improvisation comes in to play.

The crowd has gathered around your jam with roughly twenty onlookers and your turn is next. Here's a little secret. Learn the chord progression as quickly as possible and embed it into your mind as the first verse is being played. Now, when it's your turn for a break, you'll have the road map for your improvisation. You'll know exactly where you need to go (chord wise) and will be able to anticipate the movement of the song.

### **4. Sing it out**

Whether or not you have a rock solid voice is beside the point. If you're going to improvise you should sing the song in your head, or hum the tune to yourself. This one piece of advice will send you soaring into your next banjo break of the dreaded unfamiliar tune.

While the band is playing through the song simply try to find the melody on your banjo one note at a time in an inconspicuous manner. This will give you a general idea of where the melody notes are on the fretboard. Now all you have to do is add some rolls and lead-ins to chords and you've got it. When it comes your turn to shine remember to hum the tune in your head as your working through the break.

## **5. Don't be shy**

When I was a beginning banjo player, I used to have the very bad habit of passing up a banjo break that I did not feel comfortable playing. This is detrimental to you progressing as an improv player. The fact is that you are going to have to make a huge mess out of a song or two before you get the hang of it.

Don't hesitate when everyone turns to you (the banjo player) and asks for a kick off or a banjo break. Just think of it as a stepping stone toward becoming the best improv player of all time. If nothing else, "fake it till you make it!" You will eventually make it and then you'll know it was worth the temporary embarrassment.

The beauty of improvisation is that it is true art being created for your fans. You have the power to twist the rhythm of your listener's emotions.

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