

Playing in a Band

By: Michael Keyes

Whenever two or more musicians get together, there is a strong urge to form a band. This is a natural human condition. Level of competence does not count (although bands tend to be formed of musicians of relatively the same level of musicianship.) Neither does prior experience, business sense, or any sense of planning. Most bands just appear out of thin air after a few musicians are exposed to each other.

A common occurrence in Irish music is the formation of a band based on a session. Session members will often get together, especially around St. Patrick's Day, and start to play for pay anywhere they can get a gig. Most people have no idea what they are getting into the first time around.

A band is not a session. It is a business. Sessions are social events, bands are for performance, preferably paid performance. The rules are very different and violating those rules often leads to heartbreak, acrimony, and bad music. What works for a session will not carry a band very far, and if you are a banjo player, you may have special problems.

As has been pointed out in this column in the past, in the wrong hands banjos are considered deadly weapons because they are loud and can be very one dimensional. In a session a lot of these faults can be covered up by playing the tunes and not worrying about fitting in because there are so many others there. A band is a synergy of two or more players so you have to be very careful that your sound fits the band mix. The idea is not to have fun (although bands are usually fun) but to make other people have fun. The more the latter happens, the better the chances that your band will make money.

If you don't pay attention to your musicianship or help form the band's sound, your band will be dull and mundane no matter how much you love the music or how appealing the music is.

For the most part, bands fall into two categories: bands with a leader, and ones that are co-operative ventures.

Bands with a leader will follow the guidance of that leader. Other band members can contribute, but only with the permission of the band leader. Often the permission is passively given, i.e. if you are doing something good, the leader allows it without comment. If you screw up, there are be corrective action. Cooperative bands grow in an evolutionary fashion. Garage bands often start out this way and as the level of musicianship grows, so does the collective sound of the band. Unless one band member fails to keep up with the growth, these bands often stay together for a long time and are usually have an interesting and creative sound.

Either way, the band has to develop or it will stagnate and good music will not come out. As a banjo player you have to make sure that you are part of the whole whether it is as a soloist or as a counterpoint to other players in the band. You have to pay attention to what is going on, if you don't, your band will not do well and unless you are the leader, you will find yourself not in the band any more (that acrimony and heartbreak I mentioned above.) You will have to learn the skills of listening to other members, blending your sound, and taking ideas from one another. In other words you have to be part of a unit in order to make it better than the sum of its parts.

A good way to form a band that will work is to listen to how other bands work. You don't have to play like those bands but you need to see how the chemistry works for them and try to emulate that togetherness. It is a lot of work, but once the magic happens, it is great.

A good example of an emerging band is Cé (<http://www.cemusic.net/>) a Milwaukee based band consisting of Asher Gray, Devin McCabe, and Randy Gosa. All three of them have been around the Milwaukee Irish music scene for a number of years and have been in various bands but have found their voice in this new band. While all are multi-instrumental musicians, Randy Gosa has the distinction of being a banjo player

who also plays guitar. Their latest CD, *Between Words*, is their best yet and contains a number of tasteful banjo pieces including Ann's Regency Jig which was written by Randy.

This tune is in the key of C, not usually a key that you see Irish Traditional Music played in, but one that suits the banjo very well. Here is the notation for Ann's Regency Jig provided by Randy and transcribed by Devin McCabe.

Ann's Regency Jig

Randy Gosa

The image shows the musical notation for 'Ann's Regency Jig' in 6/8 time. It consists of four staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a 6/8 time signature. The music is written in a single melodic line. The second and fourth staves include first and second endings, indicated by bracketed boxes labeled '1' and '2'. The notation includes various rhythmic values such as eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests.

Here is a video of Randy playing the tune at the kickoff concert for the album *Between Words*. I filmed it at the 2006 Irishfest.

Ann's Regency Jig

Download the Movie:
arj.mov from <http://BanjoSessions.com>

Playing in the key of C

Because the key of C is not considered "traditional" (even though the Am scale contains the same notes) very little is written in it. As a result, banjo players rarely go to the fourth string for anything be passing notes and almost never take advantage of the power that the lower notes can convey to a tune. John Carty loves to use those notes in his music and you can hear him do so in any of his CDs.

The key of C is very easy to play on the fourth string (in fact it is easier than the key of D because you don't have to use the sixth fret) and the only odd note is on the first string where you have to play the F natural on the first fret.

Playing the C scale

Download the Movie:
cscale.mov from <http://BanjoSessions.com>

Here is an exercise I wrote for this column. It is a slide called Q's Night and it is very easy to play.

Q'Night

Michael Keyes



Here is the tune played slowly. It sounds “crooked” (having an extra measure) but it is very standard.

Q'Night

Download the Movie:

qnight.mov from <http://BanjoSessions.com>

Reference

Here are a few references for anyone wanting to start a band:

Legal aspects at <http://www.music-law.com/bizofband.html>

A terrific set of links for anyone forming a band <http://www.harmony-central.com/Bands/>

Here is a simple contract for a gig <http://www.blues101.org/articles/contracts3.htm> but if you google “band sample contract” you will find plenty more where that came from.

Asher Gray and Randy Gosa teach at the Irish Fest School of Music (<http://www.irishfest.com/morethanafestival/schoolofmusic.htm>) so if you live in the area and want lessons, they are ready to teach.

If you want to hear bands with banjo, listen to Four Men and a Dog (<http://www.fourmenandadog.com/>) with Gerry O'Connor, Patrick Street (<http://www.greenlinnet.com/artists/patstbio.htm>) with John Carty, or the Brock-Mcguire Band (<http://www.brockmcguire.com>) with Enda Scahill. These bands use the banjo as an integral part of the total band sound and not just a vessel to show off the banjo player.



About the Author

Mike Keyes, a native of Franklin, Tennessee, has played tenor banjo since 1957 and over the years has learned to play five string banjo, mandolin, and guitar. He earned his way through college and medical school playing in bluegrass and dixieland bands and currently plays in the Irish band “Good Luck.” He is an expert in sports performance and has written and book and over 200 articles on the subject.

His interest in Irish music started a number of years ago when effort to learn more about his musical roots led him to the discovery of session playing. Since then he has been to Ireland to learn more about the music and has taken classes and interviewed such banjo greats as John Carty, Charlie Piggot, and Gerry O’Connor.

His medical practice is in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin where he practices Psychiatry.

You can email him at mikeyes@charter.net if you wish to discuss some aspect of the Irish tenor banjo.
