

## It's a Whole Other World at Banjo Camp

As I rapidly approach my twilight years, I tend to spend more time reminiscing. For example, I have many fond memories of my experience at banjo camp.

It was just last week, so the memories are still pretty clear. For four days I attended the Midwest Banjo Camp (largest in the world) in Olivet, Michigan. Yes, there is such a thing, and no, I don't play banjo.

Olivet College has a beautiful small-town campus midway between Lansing and Battle Creek, about a six-hour drive from Iowa City. It would have taken longer, but the traffic on I-94 east of Chicago is such that I was going 80 miles per hour in the middle of three lanes and being passed on both sides.

This year there were instruction tracks for fiddle, guitar, mandolin, dobro (a guitar with a metal dome resonator, played flat) and upright string bass, which is where I come in. As opposed to real life, bass players are in high demand there due to the number of (mostly) banjo players in the numerous jam sessions who can't keep a steady tempo or can't figure out the chord progressions.

I had an easy time deciding which instructional sessions to attend (there was only one bass track), but banjo players needed to weed through dozens of diverse sessions with names like "Missouri Reels & Hornpipes for Clawhammer" and "Important Licks Using Hammer-ons, Pull-offs and Slides." One instructor who evidently had poor attendance at his sessions last year entitled his "Hot Licks and More Hot Licks: Shameless Pandering to Attract a Big Turnout."

Anticipating several days of continuous playing I had put Band-Aids on three fingers of each hand to keep from getting blisters, when another bassist turned me onto Super Glue. She said painting a coat of it on fingertips acts as callouses and will come off the next time I wash my hands. "You mean it's permanent?" I asked.

She said she had done the same thing for another bassist, and had left him in a chair (with fingers extended) waiting for the glue to dry. A half-hour later she

found him sitting in the same position and explained that the glue was long since dry even though it still looked glossy. "Thank God!" he exclaimed, "I really have to go to the bathroom, and I don't know anyone well enough here to help me."

Plucking strings instead of bowing is common in bluegrass music, but one of the instructional sessions had eight of us who had never bowed before trying to learn it. The result was a decidedly un-musical sound akin to very loud, desperately unhappy cows. Our instructor said, "The ironic thing is that I got into this line of work because of my love of music."

He also changed the entire positioning of my left hand, so I pretty much need to relearn how to finger every note. The harder part is explaining to people why I'm a worse player now than I was before I had four days of training.

At one point I asked him a question he couldn't answer, and he responded "JFGI." Nobody in our class knew what that meant, and it turned out to be a slang phrase his teenage son had taught him. It means "Just (Freakin') Google It."

One of the women in our class had trouble following our first instructor as he played his 5-string upright. All of us students had the standard four, so when he played his second string we were supposed to be playing our first and it kept giving her trouble. She was therefore happy when the instructors changed, only to find out the new guy was missing parts of two fingers on his left hand and she could never figure out which strings he was pressing.

All told, it was a hoot! As a musician who loves bluegrass and old-time music, I was practically giddy, but I realize that for many of you the prospect of listening to over 250 banjo players of varying abilities playing the same tune at the same time may bring to mind the phrase, "There's a special place in Hell."

*Writers Group Member Dave Parsons can usually be found at the weekly bluegrass jams on Tuesday nights at the Hilltop Tavern.*