

RENO-STYLE WORKSHOP

Part 3: Banjo Set-up, Reno Style

Jason Skinner

I thought we'd start off this month with some banjo set-up tips. If you want to pick like Reno, you probably want your banjo to sound like his famous old Gibson which he named "Ol' Nellie." Who wouldn't? Well, that will be impossible because a lot of the sound comes from the person, not the instrument. But, you can do some things to help you get closer. Just keep in mind that every banjo is different and none of these set-up suggestions are "one size fits all." These suggestions are not guaranteed to make your banjo sound like Don's. So experiment with these set-up techniques and find out what works for you. Just remember, it helps to have a great set-up but it's up to you to make it sound good when it's all said and done!

The Banjo Head

Don's banjo wasn't set up to be "thuddy" be any means. His banjo was bright and clear. Don says he kept his head tuned to about a "B" or "B flat", which is considered very tight when compared to the looser "G#" trend of today. As with most early pickers, Reno used a skin head in the 50's. He later switched to a plastic Remo "Weather King" in the 60's and then 5 Star head in the 70's. The banjo head brand can affect the tone because of the varying thicknesses of the plastic or coating but no matter what brand head you use....keep the banjo head tight!

The Bridge

One of the most important things that will help you achieve Don's tone is to thin down the banjo bridge. Don would always thin down his bridges to get a brighter, better tone. Most new banjo bridges are way too thick. You need to thin the bridge from the sides and remove some of the maple under the ebony top. This really opens up the tone and volume of the banjo. How much to thin down and how much to remove under the ebony depends on the banjo, the bridge, and your personal preference. But be careful not to sand off too much at one time. Sand a little and try it out. Then if it doesn't suit you, sand off more and try it out again. Just repeat this process until you get it like you want it. Remember you can't put wood back on after it's been sanded off! Don also discusses in his instruction book that he treats his bridges with burned linseed oil. Then he bakes the bridge in the oven to get the moisture out. He then finishes it off with a coat of clear fingernail polish to seal it. Does this work? You'll have to try it to find out!

From my personal experience the standard maple and ebony bridge still produces the best tone. But for years Don used a maple and ebony bridge with bone inserts. The bone inserts were in the ebony top and were at each string. Many of his 60's and 70's recordings were done with this bridge. So you may want to try one of those out. But be warned...trying out bridges can be habit forming!

Finger and Thumb picks

Don's picks played an important part in his tone as well. Most importantly was his thumbpick. Don sanded the top side of his thumbpick blade to make it thinner. The thinned blade makes a big difference in your tone when doing the brush technique and single-string picking. How much to thin the blade depends on the original thickness of the pick and your personal tastes. Don used a clear plastic "Dobro" brand thumb pick for a good portion of his career. I don't believe these are made any more, but Dunlop makes a virtually identical thumbpick, very close in tone and feel. Don also used a stainless steel thumbpick for many years. Many of his classic recordings were done using this thumbpick. He also used custom stainless steel fingerpicks, though in the early days he used Nationals like everyone else. The stainless steel fingerpicks are very light and comfortable. It used to be very hard to find a set of these picks but now Sammy Shelor has his own brand of stainless steel picks that are very similar to the ones Don used and are available online. They are pricey but may be just what you're looking for.

Banjo Strings

Don always used light gauge strings. Even though medium gauge will work for Reno style, the light gauge strings make the wild pull-offs, single string picking and brush technique a little easier to accomplish and have a more authentic Reno sound.

Tailpiece

Don used several different tailpieces over the years but his most famous is probably the Paramount-style tailpiece. It was actually a gold plated Gretsch tailpiece. I would guess that the same company that made tailpieces for Paramount made them for Gretsch because they're identical except for the Gretsch logo on top. I use one of these tailpieces myself but I've found the tailpiece brand has very little to do with tone. It's the amount of pressure on the back of the bridge from the tailpiece that matters. For Reno style you want a good amount of pressure on the bridge but not extreme pressure. It's hard to say exactly how much pressure because every banjo is different. So you'll have to experiment to get it just right.

The Brush Technique

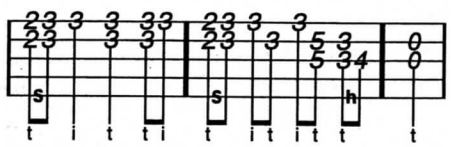
Now that you have your banjo sounding like Ol' Nellie, let's get back to picking! This month we will discuss my favorite part of Reno style...the Brush Technique. To me this is the most defining characteristic of Reno Style. *I Know You're Married* was the first bluegrass tune I remember catching my ear. I didn't even know it was a banjo. I thought "What is that? Is that a banjo? That sound's awesome!" So how does Reno get this sound from a banjo? It's done by slightly muting the banjo by putting the side of your right hand on the bridge while you brush down on the strings with the thumb. It is usually done in conjunction with using "double-stops" with the left hand. "Double stop" are partial chord positions fretted on just two strings and strummed together at same time. This is a technique that mandolin and guitar players use a lot. The double stops are not always fretted with two separate fingers. Usually if the double stop notes are on the same fret and on adjacent strings the notes are fretted by laying your finger flat across both strings. Also double stops are not always played with the thumb brushing down. To get the really fast up and down licks, like the ending of Don's break on *Love Please Come Home,* you have to

brush down with the thumb then come back up with the first finger. A lot of people thought Don was using his thumbpick in an up and down motion. like a flat pick. But according to Don. "That would be disastrous!" All thumb strokes are *down* in Reno style. You can also get different sounds by varying the amount of pressure you put on the bridge with your right hand. A great example of this is *I Ain't Gonna Walk Your Dog No More,* from Don Reno's solo album *"A Song For Everyone."* He really put pressure on the bridge to get an almost electric guitar sound. Pure genius! How did he think of this stuff? As with single-string picking, when trying to figure out Don's brush licks, remember that they're usually played out of chord positions. So the notes you're looking for will probably be in or around a particular chord position. Now let's go over some of his most used brush licks.

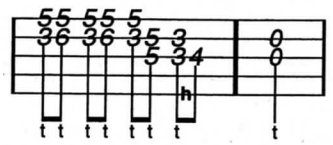
The Chuck Berry Lick

Okay, here it is, rock 'n' roll on the banjo! This was used in a lot of Reno's instrumentals and great breaks. Don uses variations of this in *Love Please Come Home, Bringing In That Georgia, Another Day* and many others. This is also the basis for *I Know You're Married.* Remember you need to brush down with the thumb then come up with the first finger on some of these licks.

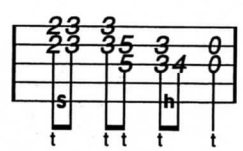
Don Reno Ex. 21 *G tuning*



Don Reno Ex. 22



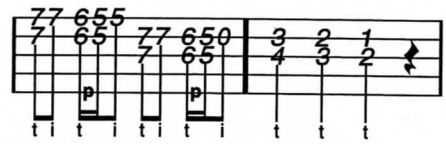
Don Reno Ex. 23



The Tumble Lick

This is one of my favorites. It's a flurry of double-stops and up licks. It's very difficult to get it right, and even more difficult to explain but I'll try my best. It will help to hear this lick played so check the *BNL* website for the corresponding sound clips. The trick to this lick is to fret the parallel string double stops by laying your fingers flat across the two strings. And it will help to get your fingers into position. Lay your ring finger across the 1st and 2nd strings on the 7th fret, your middle finger flat on the 6th fret, and your first finger flat on the 5th. Begin by brushing down then up with the first finger on the 7th fret. Then do the same on the 6th fret but immediately pull-off the 6th fret to the 5th in a downward motion. The pull-off is a double-stop pull-off. Then you'll basically repeat this same pattern on the 2nd and 3rd strings and finish the passage off as shown in the tab. The fingering is crucial to do it fast. This is why it's important to have your fingers in position ahead of time. Basically what's happening here is, Reno is "tumbling" through a barred D chord at the 7th fret and ending on a D7th at the first and second frets. It's quite ingenious! There are many variations of this lick. It appeared on numerous Reno records from the 60's and 70's.

Don Reno Ex. 24



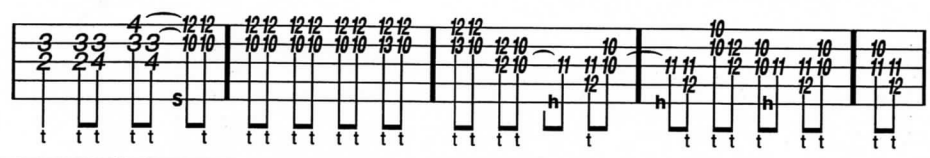
I Know You're Married

This kick-off is probably one of Don's most famous. This is the break that got me interested in Reno style. It has a very rock and roll-ish sound. The licks used to create this break can be applied to many tunes in any key, but especially the key of D. Don had a certain knack for playing in D. It seems he could always count on D to come up with a great tune or break. I almost like playing in D more than the key of G myself. Once you get the hang of it, you'll love it. We will dissect the break into separate parts.

I Know You're Married, Part 1

We'll be going from the regular lower "D" position to the higher "F" position "D" chord. As mentioned before, it is mainly all done inside the chord position itself.

Don Reno Ex. 25



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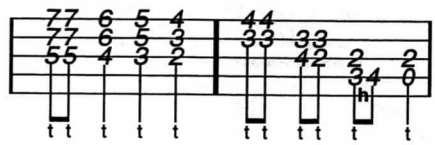
Timing and phrasing is the key.

(See Ex. 25, below)

The last part is a walk down from a D7th chord on the 7th fret to the lower "D" position we started with. This the same walk down and chord shape used in Reno Ride just moved up to the "G" position at the 12th fret.

Don Reno Ex. 26



The brush technique seems simple but it can be difficult to get the hang of it. As with single string it takes a lot of practice, so remember…be patient. Once you get the hang of it, it will open up a whole new world of possibilities and sounds. We will discuss more of the brush technique in the next installment of the "Reno Workshop" but this should get you off to a good start.

Well, that's about it for this month. Next time we'll begin learning what I call the "Reno Roadmap" of the banjo which will teach you the typical positions and walk ups/downs that Don used to create many of his famous breaks and tunes. So stay tuned.

If you have any questions or comments please e-mail me through my website at *www.skinnerfamilyband.com*

There are audio files of these examples at www.banjonews.com

Keep Pickin' Reno, Jason Skinner