

David Keenan

By Ivan Rosenberg

In the August 2008 issue of *BNL*, banjo whiz Wes Corbett mentioned his Seattle, Washington-based banjo teacher, David Keenan. Those in the northwest's bluegrass, swing, and country music scenes consider Keenan to be a musical treasure, and I'm happy to have the opportunity to properly introduce him to readers of *BNL*.

Keenan might be best known for his tenure with Sugar Hill recording artists Ranch Romance. He is a master of bluegrass banjo, guitar (acoustic and electric), and mandolin among other



instruments. With uncanny good taste and the rare knack of knowing exactly how to make each song sound better, Keenan

will improvise a dazzling solo when appropriate, but he is just as likely to play a few subtle lines behind a verse, pick just the melody note-for-note, or devise a new rhythm groove that drives a song in a new direction. In a nutshell, he's the guy you want in your band.

Not surprisingly, then, Keenan is in more bands than I could hope to keep track of. These days you might see him on Telecaster and lead vocals with The Buckaroosters ("all Buck Owens all the time"); swing-a-billy-ing the Silvertone with Jo Miller and Her Burly Roughnecks; on banjo with The DownTown Mountain Boys (Seattle's top bluegrass band); playing National guitar/mandolin/banjo with the world music string band Mighty Squirrel; performing in Miles and Karina with his long-time duet partner Nova Devonie; on viola with Buell Neidlinger and the String Lickers; fiddling with the Rolling Blackouts—and that's not all of them, but you get the idea.

Keenan teaches every year at the British Columbia Bluegrass Workshop and Puget Sound Guitar Workshop, and he does quarterly banjo workshops at Dusty Strings in Seattle in addition to giving private lessons. He's also taught at the California Coast Music Camp and the American Banjo Camp.

Keenan started playing banjo at age 13 while living in Campbell, California in 1972. He had grown up around the sounds of banjos and other stringed instruments. Keenan recalls, "My Dad and Mom, along with their friend Ted Jackson, used to play Kingston Trio songs, and I thought the banjo was the greatest thing in the world! So Ted is the reason I started playing banjo. There was an incredible bluegrass scene happening around Campbell in the '70s, and the Straw Hat Pizza Parlors all had bluegrass bands playing in them—I saw Todd Phillips and Darol Anger there, and even Tony Rice made an appearance."

Keenan studied banjo with a local teacher named David Holcomb. "He was a very organized teacher with great arrangements. His music store in Campbell was called Holcomb's

Banjo and Guitar Shop, a tiny little place attached to a gas station. Holcomb taught me Scruggs and Keith style. Playing so many arrangements written by the same hand, I incorporated his style of playing and was lucky to have such a good teacher at an early age—which also made me a better teacher.” A few years later, Keenan entered the working world as so many other teens have over the years: he wrecked his Mom’s car and needed a job to pay for it. Keenan wound up teaching banjo at Holcomb’s for almost 3 years, and he’s been at it ever since.

Keenan has been gigging and teaching regularly in Seattle since he moved there in 1979. He also got into country music playing telecaster with local bar bands. “It was always part of a country show to have the banjo come out, but in the Seattle scene at the time, it wasn’t all that cool to be a banjo player.”

Well, as we all know, times have changed! There’s nothing cooler than being a banjo player, and Keenan has an interesting take on the new generation of bluegrass pickers. Wes Corbett is Keenan’s most notable student. “He was a dedicated student with talent, and a really nice, grounded individual. He took lessons for two and a half years every other week. Wes and his peers are the first generation of freely connected students with cell phones, internet, and YouTube. With access to everything, you can progress so much faster than when you’re just learning from Uncle Frank. When I was a young kid and wanted to learn a lick, I needed a record and a turntable. The way people can connect now is so much easier. When I hang around people of that age, I see they’re constantly texting each other about what they’ve learned. It’s fascinating—what used to take a lifetime, they can attain in five years.”

Keenan played a banjo made by Ted Jackson for 20 years, and his current banjo is one of a few archtop Nechvilles ever made. He bought it used at a festival. “Nechville banjos are like Cadillacs—it’s easy to drive them around in luxury. Mine has a radiused fingerboard and it’s built to be comfortable and lightweight. Nechvilles are woody and warm sounding, modern. The archtop takes that sound and adds more bite. Unlike many other archtops, which can be trebly and thin, adding archtop tone to the warmth of Nechville’s building style gives a perfect balance of

twang and warmth without having to spend 50 grand on an old Gibson.”

And the “twang” is important to Keenan’s style. “J.D. Crowe has been the biggest influence on my banjo style. His licks and musical phrases have become what the banjo is—Crowe’s signature phrases are a little more ‘rock and roll’ than Scruggs. To my ear, Scruggs was kind of ragtime in his approach, while Crowe’s playing is more informed by Chuck Berry.” Keenan’s style has a heavy groove, with effortless moves up and down the neck, bluesy bends, and big tone.

Keenan has tabbed out two of his original banjo tunes: *Bug Tussle* (a hard driving tune he wrote many years ago and finally recorded with The Downtown Mountain Boys in 2007) and *Maloney Creek* (a beautiful tune that displays incredible fluidity up and down the neck).

Bug Tussle is in D tuning, and I especially noticed the unique hammered-on double stops in the B section. “This tune has lots of two and three fret slides, forward and backward, and all forward rolls. I like the lower and warmer sounding tone of D tuning. If you’ve never tried it, the G-tuning chord shapes on the 1st–3rd strings all work in D tuning if you just move them one set of strings lower. Changing tunings inspires creativity—it sounds different and makes you think in new ways. If you’re composing, it’s a good technique to change tunings and see what comes out.”

For *Maloney Creek*, Keenan tunes the banjo down to open E (eBEG#B), or “as

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and alt.country is just the kind of thing that I love. Check out Jake’s playing on *Boxcar Blues* at www.myspace.com/jeffandvida

Dan Campbell, who has been selecting the BNL website’s Banjo News items for the past year or so, has a banjo blog at <http://banjonews.wordpress.com>. Some of his recent posts include a five-minute video from the Science Channel on how banjos are made, short set-up videos from **Jamie Boss**, an interview with **Steve Martin**, and an intriguing video by **Kieran Kane**, whose recent group the Dead Reckoners consist of banjo, electric guitar (by famed blues guitarist Mike Henderson), drums and baritone saxophone. Their cut *Don’t Try to Fight It*, from his recent “*Somewhere Beyond the Roses*” release, recalls the 1990’s sax, bass and drum trio Morphine—

low as it can go, without changing string while still sounding like a banjo: snar resonant, chocolaty, rich, thick. Having the banjo tuned down in Low E, the song just came out. I recorded it with an accordion playing the melody in unison—the two most feared instruments on the planet together at last.”

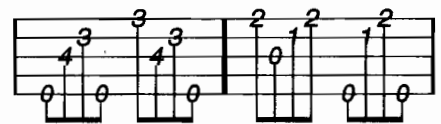
I asked Keenan about how this melody lays out on the fretboard: the first line phrase starts high and descends back to open position, bending into tonic notes and quick bluesy notes on the way down. It’s such a smooth sound, and certain phrases sound as if it’s being played in melodic style, but not quite. As Keenan explains: “The melody is all on the second string. There’s a banjo player from Seattle named Harley Bray. He performed with The Bray Brothers in the ‘50s. He had that technique of placing melodies on the second string; he can play any fiddle tune with the melody on the second string. In fact, the third banjo style I teach is Bray style, with a lot of up and down movement on the neck. Play it like Earl, play it like Ralph Stanley, and then play it like Harley Bray.”

Find out more about David Keenan at www.davekeenan.com. Audio for *Maloney Creek* is available at www.myspace.com/milesandkarina, and a soundclip of *Bug Tussle* is waiting for you at www.downtownmountainboys.com, where you can also pick up DTMB’s latest CD “*Blue Darlin’*.” Thanks for reading, and I hope you enjoy these tunes as much as I did!

moody, dark yet funky, and with Kieran’s pairing of the sax and banjo, completely unique.

BNL’s *How To Read Tab* instructions are now posted on our website, at www.banjonews.com, with soundfile examples.

Correction: on page 42 of the October 2009 issue, the arrangement of *Wildwood Flower* has one extra measure. You need to delete the first measure of the last stanza (the measure before the D chord). Also, Jack Baker includes these two alternative measures (for measures 13 & 14):



Clarke Buehling recently drove over to Oklahoma City to play a set of minstrel tunes at the opening of the American