

# 2006 BNL Reader's Survey Results

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By Donald Nitchie with Duane Brandon

**M**y favorite part of the Reader's Surveys are the suggestions. I want to thank everyone for sending in their surveys, and especially their detailed answers. Here are some of the constructive criticisms we received, in no particular order (and which I'll feel free to consider or ignore):

The tabs are too easy [*maybe for you...*] The tabs are too *hard*. Less ads. More pages. Move to glossy paper. ("Don't move to glossy paper!"). More in-depth analysis of banjo playing, less fan-type articles. "More interviews like the one with Danny Barnes." More tab. "Do not allow tab to be used in *BNL*. It is a plague on banjo playing. It nauseates me!" Keep *BNL* the same. Change the logo. And finally, "I miss the pick letters!"

*Here's a detailed evaluation:* "Roger Siminoff is interesting, but I'd always rather choose to play banjo rather than take it apart. Tom Adams commendable column is always interesting, though I can't always get the tunes to work. Murphy's column is mildly engaging, but reads like a combination trade journal report on a convention and an article in *People* on who went to what party and who their date was. But once in a while she scores. She wrote a column wherein she derided people who came up and asked specifics on her banjo construction. Her reaction described me exactly. I couldn't tell you how many plys there are, or what the weather was like when they shaped my neck, but I know how I like it to sound, and when I'm not playing well."

*More suggestions:* Publish two times a month; four times a month [*sorry, but... no*]. Include metronome settings with tabs [*always a good idea, something I'll try to do more often*]. Start a tab of the month submitted by readers [*send me tabs you think are worthy, and I will always consider them. It helps if you send a tape or mp3*]. Photo page of festivals, from subscribers [*again, send in photos. The problem with this idea is space*]. "Add video instructions for tabs to the website."

There were several requests for more

articles about everyday pickers, about beginners, about subscribers. More encouragement for beginners; especially senior beginners. "There are legions of us who will never be the next Scruggs or Fleck. Some of us will never reach a level where we can play in a band. None the less, we all love to play. We are the people who go to the jams and festivals. We have struggled and suffered to learn, even though we may not necessarily have an aptitude for it. We may never be on a stage, but we all have something to offer, especially to those who share our situation. I recommend giving exposure to the folks jamming at the festivals and not just the featured performers. You may be pleasantly surprised at the wealth of material available, and do your readers a service by presenting techniques, licks and info from a level to which they can relate."



*More:* Provide feedback from readers as to "what ways they've found helpful to confront learning obstacles." Give an explanation on how to read tab. Include chords with clawhammer tabs. "I need fingering of both hands (that's what's so great about Janet Davis's book)." "Please, highlight the melody notes!" Contrast the styles of various players.

There were also the perennial "less old-time" and "more old-time" complaints. Many requests to make old tabs available without having to buy the entire back issue. Offer the MP3s on disk. Do a "Best of *BNL*" book. Requests for downloadable archives. Better proof reading. Bag the issues for mail protection. Use musical notation. "Include CDs with all tab (for those with dial-up service.) Would subscribers pay for this? If within reason, yes!" Print more letters. More jazz, blues, country.

Don't like layout with articles spread all over. Separate old-time from 3-finger. Revisit banjo techniques, set-up.

*And more:* Have an archive of reviewed items. More Don Reno. More fiddle tunes *a la* Munde, Trischka. More backup for fiddle tunes. Bring back James Rau's column. (Alternatively, "less scientific analysis and more basic maintenance.") More articles on banjo history. Articles on performance advice. Transcriptions of classic records. More popular songs.

Finally, it's always reassuring to hear "Great as it is!!!" "If it ain't broke..." etc. We got a certain amount of those.

Finally, pickers to profile (and there were a lot. Here are some we haven't featured, or not recently, anyway):

*3-finger:* Mike Lilly, Richard Bailey, Ken Windbeck, Rick Vella, Frank Doody (Moncton, NB), Jim Mills ("long overdue"), Mike Snider, Roni Stoneman, Mike Scott, Rudy Lyle, Raymond Fairchild, Bill Emerson (again!), Annie Thrower, Joey Cox, James McKinney ("he should have a column!"), Andy Rau, Don Shean, Barry Palmer (Bluegrass Alliance), Ray Hesson, "more European players," EARL SCRUGGS!, Dan Block, John Stewart, Tim Lake, Kristin Scott Benson (again), Patrick Costello, Junior Goodrum ("a hidden gem!"), Steve Sparkman, Jeremy Stevens, Haley Stiltner, Dennis Moore, Greg Brown, Bruce Bowen, Jeff Blankinship ("Courtney Johnson-type chromatic style"), Ian Perry. Jens Kruger (many), Ronald Smith (of Lost and Found), Donnie Little, Rual Yarborough, Gibson Brothers, Morgan Sexton, Roy Clark, Little Roy Lewis, Ray Goins, Mike Munford, Billy Ray Latham, Pat Cloud, Billy Connelly, Fred Geiger, John Anderson (Albuquerque), Kurt Rossell...

*Luthiers:* The Deering staff, Stan Werbin, Vince Sadovsky, Mark Zimmerman, Barry Luft, builder Dale Small, Arthur Hatfield, Bobby Smackula.

*Clawhammer:* Abigail Washburn, Riley Baugus, Cece Conway, Donald Zepp, Rik Palieri, Kirk Sutphin, Dan Gellert, Lee Marcus...We've got our work cut out for us.

We last did a Reader's Survey in 1995

(those results are available online at [www.banjonews.com](http://www.banjonews.com)). When we compare this year's results with those, we discover that not much has changed.

### *Playing Levels:*

Approximately 9 percent of our readers have been playing banjo for under a year; 11% under two years, 23% between two and five; 13% between ten and twenty; 17% between twenty and thirty, and 17% more than thirty years. When we compare these results to the 1995 data, we find, again, that our readers are an even mix of beginners, intermediates, and advanced players. Specifically,

9% consider themselves beginners  
27%, beginner-intermediates  
27%, intermediates  
24%, intermediate-advanced  
14%, advanced

One fascinating result is how long it took for pickers to get to a specific level (combining length of time playing, and ability level). For everyone, it took, on average, 5.8 years to reach the Beginner-Intermediate level;

12 years to reach intermediate;  
23 years to intermediate-advanced,  
31.5 to reach advanced.

When we break it down to clawhammer and 3-finger, the results are very similar. For 3-finger,

5.5 years for Beginner-Intermediates  
10 years for Intermediate  
22 years for Intermediates-Advanced  
29 years for Advanced

For Clawhammer players, it takes

7 years to reach Beginner-Intermediates  
13.5 years to reach Intermediate  
25.5 years to reach Intermediates-Advanced  
31.5 years to reach Advanced

While one might usually assume that 3-finger is harder to play, and would take longer to learn, this data suggests otherwise.

90% of our readers are male, and about 10% are female. 8% have children who play the banjo (one subscriber responded to this question by writing "No, but I think that offering to teach them was one of the great motivating factors in getting them all to move out." 5% have parents who play the banjo.

### *Demographic*

4% of our reader's are under 30  
10% are between 30 and 40;  
26% are between 40 and 50;

34% are between 50 and 60,  
22% are over 60

In terms of playing styles, we found that a whopping

86% of readers play 3-finger style  
29% play clawhammer

...with many who play both styles. This is almost exactly the same ratio as 1995. We also found that 27% say they play melodic style, 14% single-string, and 5% play "others" (two-finger, etc.)

### *Learning methods*

books; 78%  
tapes, 61%  
videos, 68%  
teachers, 49%  
DVDs, 31%  
self-taught, 6.5%

### *Favorite banjo players*

Earl Scruggs, 57%  
J.D. Crowe & Bela Fleck, 21% each  
Jim Mills, 16%  
Tony Trischka, 13%  
Tom Adams  
Alan Munde  
Ralph Stanley  
Alison Brown  
Bill Keith  
Sammy Shelor  
Don Reno  
Sonny Osborne.

(followed by a long list of others—see our website for entire list)

### *Clawhammer*

Ken Perlman  
Bob Carlin  
Reed Martin  
Mary Cox  
Mike Seeger  
Dan Levenson

### *Favorite Columns:*

Beginner's Corner, 33%  
Adam's County Banjo, 23%  
Interviews, 21%  
Murphy's On The Road, 17%  
Tech Talk  
Callous Thumb  
The Old-Time Way  
Back-up  
Concepts and Systems  
(all tied for fourth place)

} 14%

*Favorite Old-Time columns*  
(in order of popularity)

The Old-Time Way  
Melodic Clawhammer  
Banjos on the Border  
Old-Time from the Ozarks

**Banjos:** Our readers own an average of 3 banjos, with the maximum banjos owned (by one person) being 150(!). For those owning banjos costing more than \$2,000, the average reader owns one of those (with the highest owning 35).

In the favorite banjo category, we did see a change. Where in 1995, 37.5% of our readers owned Gibson banjos, in 2006 we saw that percentage fall to

Gibson, 19%  
Deering, 14%  
Stelling, 9%  
Gold Tone, 4%  
Gold Star, 3%

Nechville, Ome, Sullivan; Bart Reiter; Osborne Chief; Vega all came in at 2% each, with Wildwood; Gibson copy, Chuck Lee; Morgan Monroe, Rich & Taylor, Prucha, Ramsey and Crafters of Tennessee at about 1% each. Compared to 1995, the percentage of pickers owning Deering and Stellings stayed about the same.

Our reader's purchase an average of 11 CDs a year, with some readers buying 100. They attend, on average, two festivals a year, with a few attending as many as 40. And they purchase, on average, two instructional videos a year, with a few buying 20.

**Internet:** One thing that has certainly changed in the past ten years has been the percentage of subscribers using the Internet. We didn't even ask that question in 1995, but now we learn that 91% of our reader's use the internet in some fashion, and 61% download MP3s from our website.

**MP3s:**

Tom Adams's MP3s are by far the favorite files (including *Tuesday Afternoon*, *Rocket Man*, *Pink Panther*, *Feeling Stronger Every Day*, *Country Roads*, *Linus and Lucy*, *Classical Gas*, and the blanket "anything by Tom!"), followed by "Old-Time,"

Beginner's Corner (Eddie Collins), Bill Evans and Intermediate-level MP3s.

I was especially glad to see many of my personal favorites on this list, including Ben Freed's *Nine Below*, Bruce Stockwell's *Skye*, Scott Walker's *Sidewinder*, Jim Mills's *The Old Hen* and *It's Raining Here This Morning*, Gene Parsons's *Banjo Dog*, *Ashokan Farewell* (both the Tom Adams and Ian Perry versions), Butch Robins's *Jerusalem Ridge*, *Tennessee Waltz*, Sonny Osborne's *Siempre*, and David Talbot's *Bevans Lake Crossing*.

As far as favorite clawhammer MP3s, they include Mark Johnson's *Mosby's Rangers*, R.D. Lunceford's *Star of Munster*, *Willott's Hornpipe*, and Ken Perlman and Alan Jabbour's *Billy n the Lowland*.

**Websites:**

As far as favorite banjo-related websites, *Banjohangout.org* is clearly the most popular, followed by *banjonews.com*; Janet Davis's *banjostore.com*, Phil Mann; Bill Palmer, Elderly, Folk of the Woods, *Banjoteacher.com*, Acutab, First Quality, and the Bluegrass Blog. In terms of specifically old-time related sites, they are Bernunzio's, *Ezfolk.com*, Turtle Hill, Zepp, Mugwumps and *Sugar In The Gourd*. Other sites mentioned include *drbanjo.com*, old Time Slow jam Clawhammer, Uncle Ben's, *Woodsongs.com*, *Cybergrass*, Paul Hawthorne, and Bluegrass radio.

**Other instruments:** Along with banjo, BNL subscribers also play

guitar (66%)  
mandolin (24%)  
fiddle (12%)  
bass (11%)  
Dobro (7%)

...as well as piano, dulcimer, autoharp, flute, and keyboard. (Some of the most exotic instruments include theremin, Strum Stick (?), Banjouke, and bones).

**Banjo Accessories**

**Strings:** GHS strings are the most popular, followed by D'Addario, Martin, Gibson, Vega, Stelling, Deering, Earl Scruggs, Huber, and Snuffy Smith, in that order.

**Bridges:** Snuffy Smith's bridges are the most popular, followed by Grover, Deering, Stelling, Sosebee, Katzeze,

Moon, Emerson and Nechville (tied), Scorpion, Huber, McPeake (tied with Sampson and Shubb), Frank Neat, Gibson, Hatfield, Hot Spot, Stew-Mac, Desert Rose, Goldtone, Timeless Timber, and Bacon, in that order.

**Tailpieces:** Presto tailpieces are the most popular, followed by Price, No Knot, Deering and Stelling (tied), Kerschner, Gibson, Clamshell, Waverly, Nechville, Huber, Ome, Goldtone, Bear Claw, Straightline, and Elite, in that order.

**5th String:** Spikes are the most popular fifth string capo, followed by Shubb, Reardon, and Eagle Claw.

**Capos:** Shubb is clearly the most popular capo, followed by Kyser, Paige, Elliott, Dunlop, McKinney, BMF, and Showcase.

**Tuners:** Intellitouch is the most popular electronic tuner, followed by Korg, Seiko, Sabine, Boss, Onboard, Qwk Tune, Whitman, and Goldtone, in that order.

**Straps:** Levy straps are the most popular, followed by Dogwood, Cradle, Neotech, Showcase, Huber, Stelling, Super Strap, Deering and Janet Davis.

**Metal Polish:** Semichrome is the most popular, followed by Flitz, Never Dull, Deering, Brasso, Mothers, Stelling, Gibson and Maas.

**Wood Polish:** Stelling Glydecoat is the most popular, followed by Martin, Gibson, Pledge, Lemon Oil, Dunlop, Deering and Smith Pro.

**Tuners:** Keith Tuners are the favorite D-Tuners by far, followed distantly by Schaller, Scruggs, Cam, Cheat-a-Keys and Gibson.

**Metronomes:** Sabine is the metronomes of choice, followed closely by Korg, Wittner, Seiko, Qwk Time, Matrix, Boss, Seth Thomas and Yamaha, in that order.

**Slow-Down software:** Transcriber is the most popular SlowDown software, followed closely by Amazing Slowdowner, and then Windows Media Player, Marantz, Tascam, Band-in-a-Box, Sabine, Audacity, Superscope, Cooledit, and TablEdit.

**Tab Software:** TablEdit is the most popular tabwriting program (by far), followed by TabRite, Musedit, Powertab, Sibelius, and TabWin.

**Pickups:** Fishman are the pickups of choice, followed by Jones, Shadow,

Acoustic Plus, GHS, Nechville and Piazzo.

**Amps:** Fender amps are most popular, then Peavey, Crate, Marshall & Fischman.

We want to thank our sponsors for the prizes: the Ritter gig bag, the Elliott B capo, the Shubb and Paige capos, and 75 D'Addario string sets. Also, we're especially grateful for Duane Brandon's help in organizing and evaluating the data we received. Duane is a banjo-playing teacher of accounting and auditing at Auburn University in Auburn, Alabama, and his expert assistance was invaluable.

## 2006 Reader's Survey Revisited

originally published in the July 2006 issue of *Banjo Newsletter*

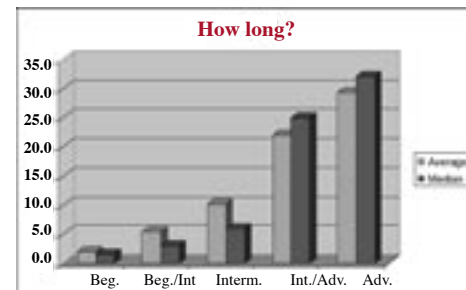
By Duane Brandon

While assisting Donald in compiling the *BNL* survey results, I quickly noticed an opportunity to explore quite a few questions I've had during my brief tenure as a banjo player. The most interesting questions, to me, have to do with ability. In the last issue, *BNL* reported respondents' perceived ability along with an average of how long they have been playing. The results were likely disconcerting to those, who like my, hover somewhere between beginner and intermediate (12 years to become an "Intermediate"!!!). As most of you know, averages can be misleading. For example, many players never advance beyond certain levels and can bias an average upward. One player, categorized as "Beginner-Intermediate," had been playing for 42 years!

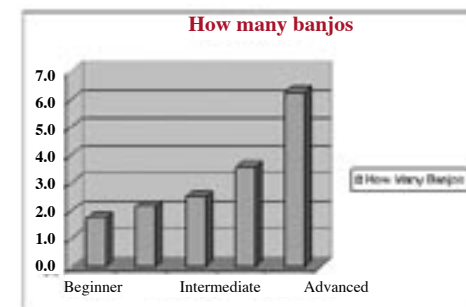
	Average	Variance	Median	Min.	Max.
Beginner	1.9	2.6	1.5	0	10
Beg.-Int.	5.9	52.3	3.0	0	42
Intermed.	12.0	130.3	6.0	1	54
Int.-Adv.	22.7	180.0	25.0	1	50
Advanced	31.7	91.2	32.0	8	56

The table above contains the averages along with some other common statistics. The *variance* is simply an indicator of variability in the answer. Notice how large it is for the higher ability levels. The *median*, like the average, is a measure of the length of time a typical person has been playing that plays at that particular level. The median is the middle answer if we were to rank the answers in order. Looking at the median, it looks like it might not take as long as originally thought to reach the intermediate stage (Whew! I feel a little better already!). Some of you may be thinking this is still "wrong". Well, it is. The average and median are likely overstated if you want to know, "How long will it take?" This is because the measures indicate the middle or average time, not the low end. The *Minimum* shows that some people obviously felt they progressed rather quickly. Looking at the raw data (using the "eyeball method", not tabulated and definitely not scientific) by ability, people begin to really show up

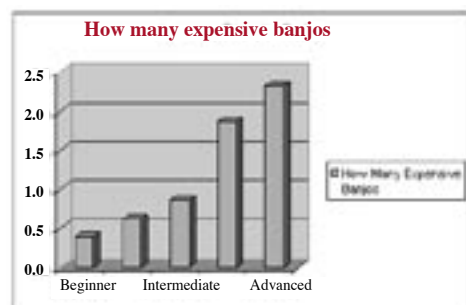
at beginner-intermediate at year 1 or 2, intermediate between 2 and 4, and intermediate at 3 to 5 years. Intermediate-advanced is where the spread really starts to happen. So, after 3 or 4 years, you can get to the point where you feel like you have reached intermediate status; beyond that it is difficult to say when transition to the next stage occurs.



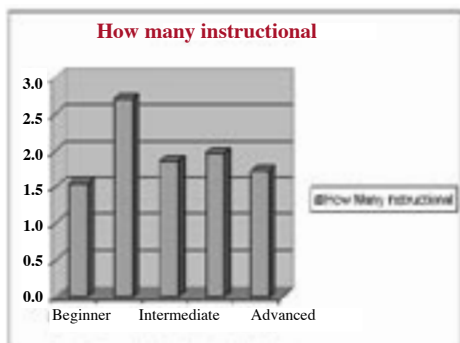
Another question I had was what the people of higher ability are doing different than the others. In other words, is anything else associated with higher ability other than playing for 30 years? I didn't have data on practice time, jamming, etc... so I was limited to the questions in the survey. To begin to get at this I've first provided some graphs. Most of the graphs speak for themselves. For some, I'll give you an idea of what they are and/or the motivation behind them.



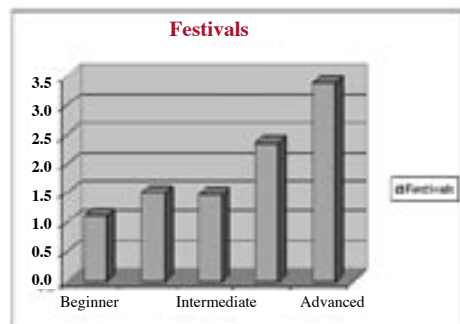
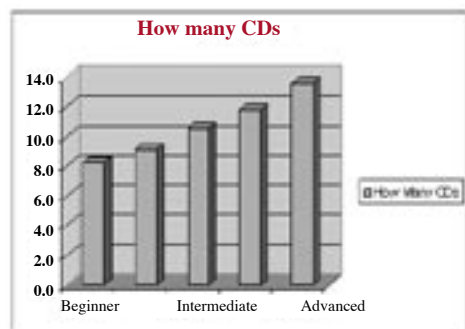
As you probably would have guessed, the better you get, the more banjos you end up owning. Or is it, the more banjos



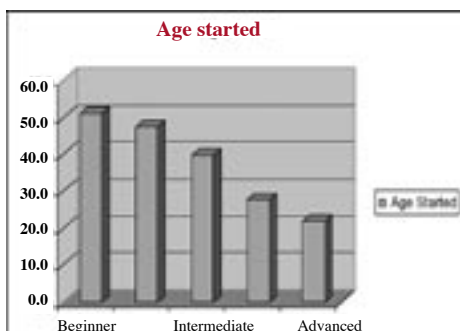
you own, the better you become? I think I'll try using the latter on my wife. It also looks like some of them are fairly nice! I'm definitely using this one on her.



This was surprising to me. Looks like most folks are buying instructional videos and DVDs. However, it is the beginner-intermediates leading the way and not the beginners. Hmm...



The advanced guys are going to the most festivals. I would probably go to more as well if I could play at that level.

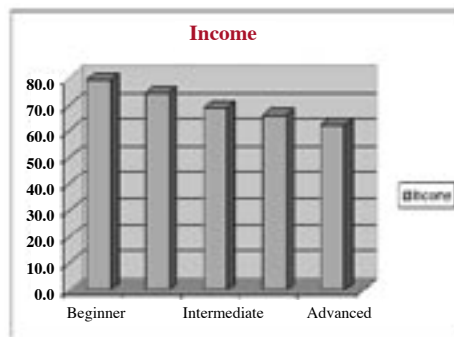


The motivation for the next one was a joke I once heard on a Bonus DVD with one of Bela's recordings with Edgar Meyer:

Q: What is the difference between a savings bond and a banjo player?

A: The bonds eventually mature and make money.

I'll let you come to your own conclusions on this one.



I also examined whether methods of learning the banjo differed by ability. Surprisingly, there was not much difference. Overall, about half of folks use teachers. The only differences were the better players were more likely to use videos and the less advanced players were more likely to use DVDs. Of course, this is most likely due to the age of the players when they started playing.

The last thing I did was something called a backwards regression to see how various things relate to ability while simultaneously considering other things. This method is typically used by scientists to predict something of interest (like the weight of a fish given certain measurements). Of course we are missing some potentially valuable information, like practice, time away from the instrument, jamming, etc... but the results are somewhat interesting. The regression resulted in five items (relationship is in parentheses): Years playing (positive), Age (negative), Styles Played (positive), Festivals Attended (positive), and Income (negative). This means is that these items are individually related (and statistically significant) to ability after considering the effects of the others. Most of these are somewhat intuitive. Age is likely negative because most advanced folks began playing at a much earlier age than beginners. Again, I'll let you come to your own conclusions on income.