

"I've been playing banjo for about 20 years, but some of the things I've discovered I've only discovered in the last couple of years. I'd like to pass some of these insights on to you to help you shorten your own search. They're the kinds of things you won't find in banjo books."

A Weekend of Music and Theory

with Bill Keith

By Jim Tarantino

BILL KEITH TEACHES a lot more than banjo styles at the workshops he gives around the country. He teaches music. Keith has charted important musical directions with his banjo, but in the workshops the banjo becomes a learning tool, a musical slide rule, as Keith strives to provide his students with an understanding of basic musical concepts that will give them a solid foundation for any style or lick.

"I'd rather be a good musician who plays banjo than a good banjo picker," Keith told the students in his November 11-12 class at Philadelphia's Vintage Instruments shop [1721 Walnut St., Philadelphia, PA 19103]

last fall. "What I try to do is get everybody's minds actively thinking about musical concepts. A lot of what I talk about is theory, which can be a source of confusion—it makes some people uncomfortable. My goal is to show you that theory is not that far removed from the instrument."

The workshops are geared toward intermediate and advanced pickers. Knowledge of the fretboard is a must, as is some familiarity with different playing styles. The material Keith presents isn't as difficult as it is lengthy, with students having to assimilate a great deal of information in a short time. A tape recorder is a big help. Though Keith passes around some handouts, the sheets only serve as blueprints. The details come as he slashes on a sketchpad with a felt pen or plays examples on his banjo.

"I feel that the best thing I can do for people is to create some excitement so they will want to find stuff on their own—to give them the curiosity and the tools to go with it," Keith told his Philadelphia students. "It's not a great service to teach somebody a lick. I think that the basis of all licks is hidden in there [music theory], and I'm looking for them as much as you are."

The crux of Keith's presentation is the logical relationship between musical elements. His emphasis is not how to play something, but how to think about it. Keith describes chord progressions and relates them to the circle of fifths; he shows the relationships between scales and certain modes; and he takes the separate elements of notes, scales, and chords and puts them in a working musical context.

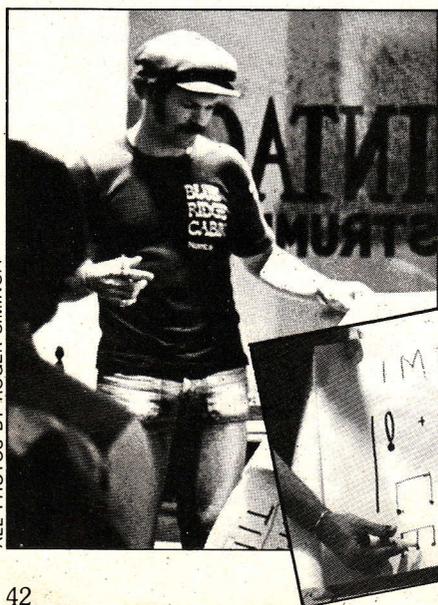
"I conceptualize music in a certain way," he said at the Philadelphia workshop. "I use it like building blocks. Take a sixteen-note D7 block: there can only be one way of doing those notes. But if I break it down into two smaller-sized blocks, I can reverse the halves and get two ways of playing that run. If I take those smaller halves and break each of them down into two smaller blocks, I now have twenty-four different orders that can be

played. We all learn licks. Let's take it one step further and realize that there's more than one way to do it. Turn a lick into building blocks and it becomes a whole new stack of ideas. If you want to get away from clichés and patterns, that's the way to do it."

Keith carries his building-blocks approach over into studying the structure of other musical elements. "One technique I think you'll find useful," he told the Vintage Instruments workshop, "is this: If you know one major scale, you immediately have information about two others. That is, the last half of the C major scale (C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C) is the first half of the G major scale (G, A, B, C, D, E, F#, G). And likewise, the first half of the C major scale is the last four notes of the F major scale (F, G, A, Bb, C, D, E, F). So with just one piece of information you're able to complete two other scales. Just remember there's a half-step between the third and fourth notes and between the seventh and eighth notes. You can now go further and complete the Bb major scale, ending at the first half of the F major scale; and the D major scale, beginning at the top half of the G major scale. Keep this going and transfer some of this newfound information to your instrument. You'll be surprised at the new licks that will start to pop up in your vocabulary."

Not all the banjo players who attend Keith's workshops are prepared to deal with the information he makes available to them. Most workshops are devoted to stylistic idioms, such as clawhammer or old-time picking, and some students come to Keith expecting two days of tunes, licks, and how-to's on various styles. Upstairs at Vintage Instruments, the index for the confusion over music theory that Keith had predicted was the noise level of squeaking chairs and nervous coughs. The fidgeting and coughing increased as he discussed the aeolian mode within the Eb major scale, using Eb and its relative minor, Cm, as guideposts. There were fourteen people present at the start of the workshop. There were only seven when it was over.

Keith doesn't compromise his approach for the benefit of those who are only interested in "how Earl does it." He stands by



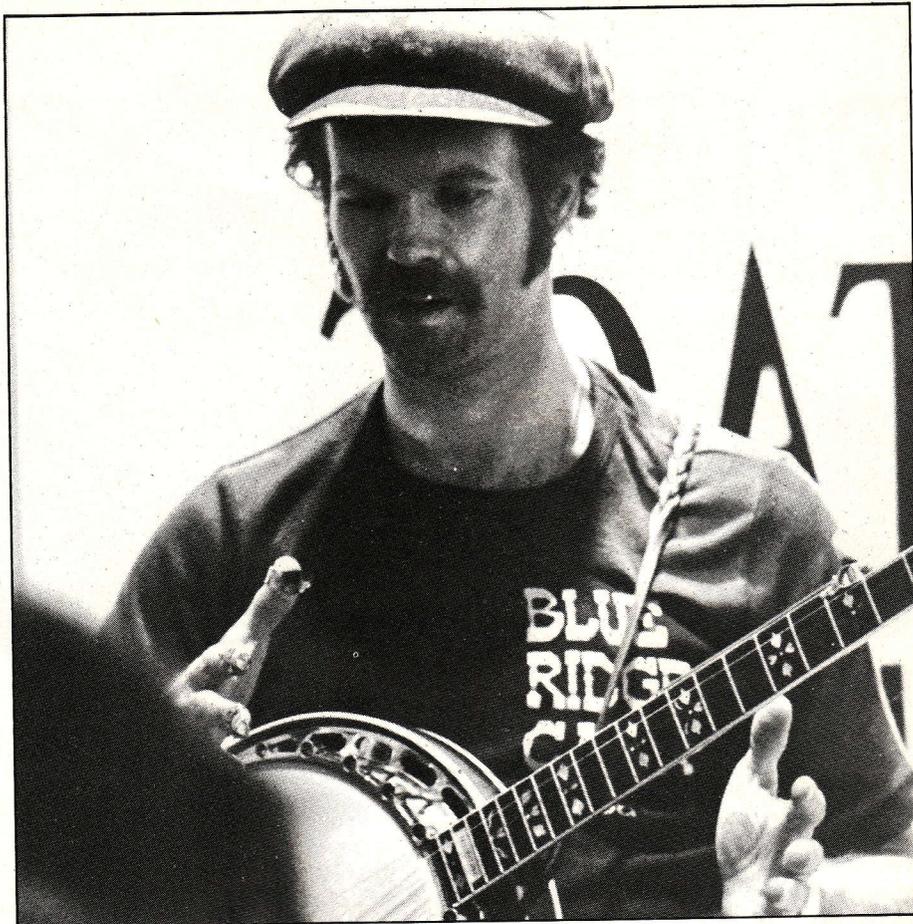
ALL PHOTOS BY ROGER SIMINOFF

his belief that the access you have to a variety of musical alternatives is proportional to the amount of information you have about your instrument. His workshops are structured around disseminating that kind of information in, as he puts it, a "banjoistic" sense.

"I noticed in the *Banjo Newsletter* a couple of months ago that there was a tune, one Alan Munde played, written out in *Eb*," Keith told the Philadelphia students. "Wow, what a step forward! It takes a certain amount of fresh thinking to avoid slapping a capo on, just to know that *Eb* lays out on the banjo pretty well anyway."

Fresh thinking is something that Keith is always trying to encourage. "When you learn a new musical idea," he said, "it's like adding a new word to your vocabulary. Suppose during a conversation a new word goes by that you don't know. That tends to halt the comprehension process while you hunt around trying to figure out what it means. Once you get used to it and are comfortable with it, the word will pop up in your own conversation. Chords are a lot like that, too. You will never find yourself using a chord that you haven't made part of your vocabulary."

The students who do stay to the end of the workshop get the benefits of 12 hours of concentrated information. Keith's concepts come roaring across like freight trains as he offers his views on a variety of topics.

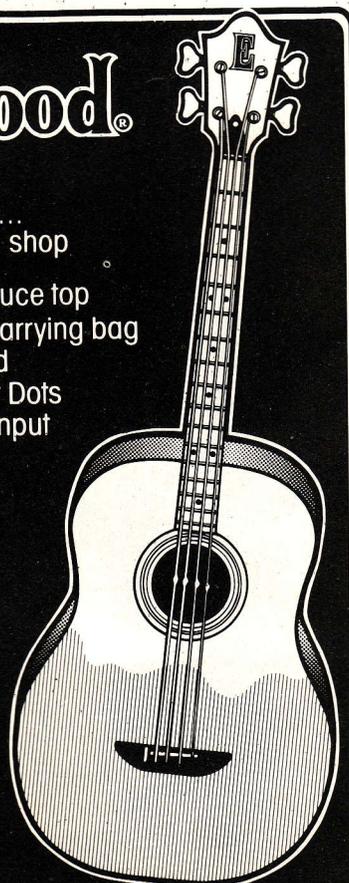


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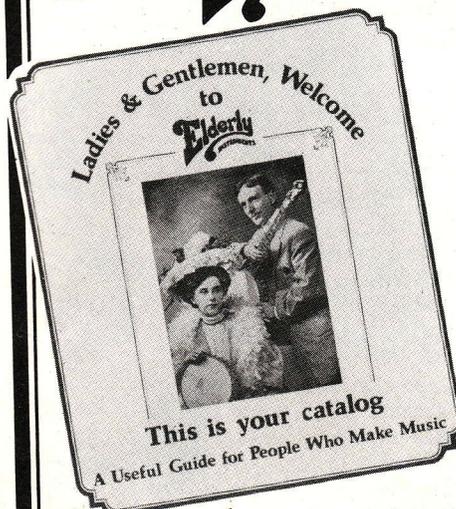
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KEITH

On the value of listening: "There is no substitute for listening. Fortunately we all have records and we can listen as much as we want. If you listen to the same album during breakfast for a week, it's making its way in there. By the end of the week you subconsciously know every note and break on the album. If you were able to go into hypnosis immediately after hearing a record you would be able to recall every lick. Our brain is that good a computer."

On banjo rhythms: "The rhythmic lilt in the banjo is something that's unique to this country. It's the basic element in jazz that didn't come from European musical traditions, the one element that has been integrated by the blacks. It's that one thing—the beat."

On the fascination of music theory: "Music has enough going for it to be interesting without having to be played. You can enjoy it by reading about it, talking about it, and thinking about it, as much as by playing. People can have fun playing intellectual games or number games; I turn music into a game and have fun with it."

On practicing: "Practicing is something you do on a regular basis, not something you wait until you have enough time for. Let's say you want to practice an hour a day, and suppose your day is going by and you say, 'Aw, I can't get in an hour today, so I'll skip it.' Wrong! Do fifteen minutes. Or do fifteen minutes in the morning and fifteen minutes in the evening. That way you're constantly reminding yourself of what's going on, and you're keeping it in your hands. A little time taken more often will be much better for you than a lot of time infrequently.... If you spent ten minutes a day learning a new tune, working it through the difficult parts and getting it in some sort of shape by the end of the week—well, if you did that every week, by the

end of the year you would have fifty tunes. That's enough to make four albums. Some musicians have trouble making just one album a year, and I'm one of them.... When you're practicing, be sure to spend time on what you don't know. Most people practice what's familiar, but you've got to keep getting the new things in there. Get them to the level of accessibility, work them up to the stuff you already know. To do that you've got to spend time searching, and that's never lost time."

On playing fast: "Speed should not be the only goal. You want to play notes fast because they sound more forceful, more effective when they're played that way. However, speed...is secondary to the notes you're playing."

Keith brings two decades of playing experience and plenty of enthusiasm to his

teaching. "I like to teach because I feel I must know something pretty well before I can explain it to other folks," he told his Philadelphia students. "In a sense, I'm testing my own knowledge in these situations."

The test works both ways, because Keith challenges his students to consider the banjo a musical instrument first, a medium for particular stylistic idioms second. It's not the path of least resistance, and it's not a simple proposition.

"Don't expect an overnight transformation into the next Alan Munde after you walk out of here," Keith said as he wound up his Philadelphia workshop. "It takes a lot of work, and a lot of study. But what's important is a certain mental attitude about the material—seeing what it can do for you, and hearing the subtle differences that are there making up the music." □

