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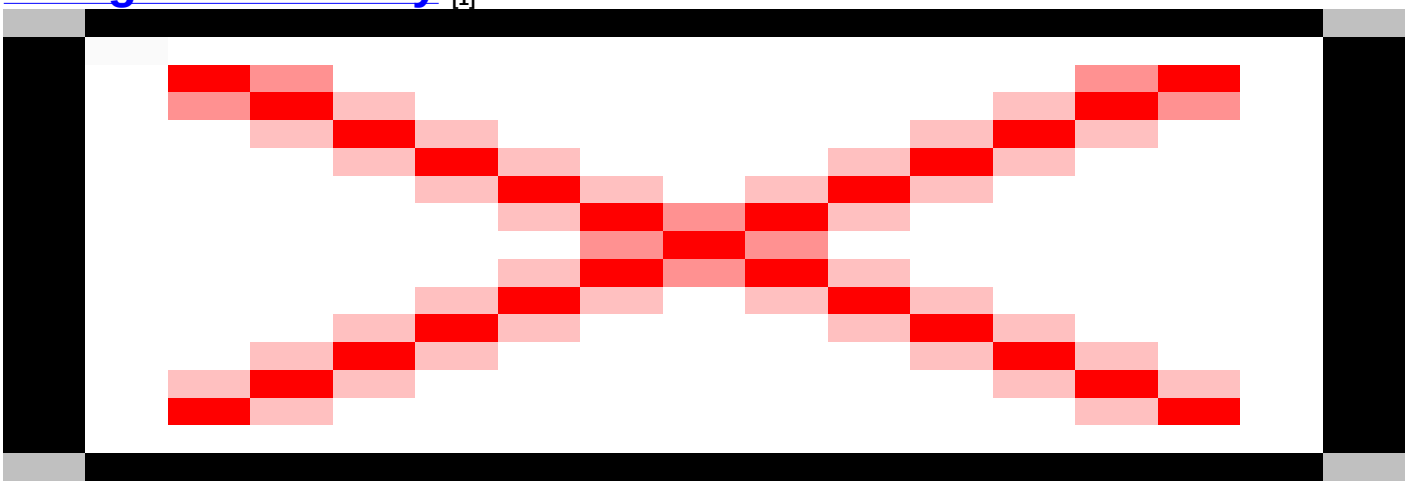
ArtistWorks Academy of Bluegrass Changes Face of Bluegrass Industry [1]



ArtistWorks Academy of Bluegrass Changes Face of Bluegrass Instruction

By Nancy Cardwell

Bluegrass music is usually not written out in standard musical notation. Many of our artists do not read music, and improvisation is an essential skill to be able to play bluegrass music well. For these reasons, the primary way to learn to play has been from a more experienced musician?whether in person, on a recording, with the help of tablature, audio recordings or video.

With the 2009 launch of the Tony Trischka School of Banjo and the full launch of the ArtistWorks Academy of Bluegrass in June 2011 which added instruction on four more instruments, bluegrass education has taken a giant leap forward in accessibility. Individual teachers have been utilizing Skype during recent years, but the Academy of Bluegrass takes the educational experience a step farther with a ?library? of online content and the potential for all kinds of interaction. Subscribed students have the opportunity to send their teacher a recorded video of themselves practicing and receive personal feedback and individualized instruction in the form of a video response. These videos are then paired and posted in the online academy?s ?Video Exchange? library.

Along with Trischka?s School of Banjo, the ArtistWorks Academy of Bluegrass offers the School of Mandolin with Mike Marshall, the School of Fiddle with Darol Anger, the School of Guitar with Bryan Sutton and the School of Bass with Missy Raines. There are plans in the works to add a Dobro instructor in the near future.

ArtistWorks was one of the first companies to take advantage of the rise of the iPad and tablet

devices by making it possible for users to take music lessons anywhere. Their success is a part of a wider growth trend in e-learning?estimated to be worth $49.6 billion by 2014, with Asia in particular growing at an annual rate of 33.5%.

The origins---

ArtistWorks is based in Napa Valley, California, but CEO David Butler is originally from Memphis, Tennessee. ?I grew up going to some of the bluegrass shows at the Lucy Opry, and also going down to the annual events in Mountain View, Arkansas,? Butler says. ?I grew up around a lot of different kinds of music, but once I heard bluegrass I really liked it a lot. I ended up in the D.C. area in a technology career, working for AOL. I?d always played guitar, and my musical interest broadened.?

Butler found a jazz guitar teacher he liked in Philadelphia, but when he moved to Miami it was no longer convenient to drive over for regular lessons. ?This is where my interest in music and knowledge of technology finally combined,? Butler says. ?I decided to do something online so I could take lessons, without having to travel the distance. It occurred to me that there were probably other people in the same situation. Also, it?s difficult for a teacher to have enough students in the region where they live, to make a living. But if you were able to aggregate all the people around the world who wanted to study with them, then it might work. I worked on a prototype of that, showed it to several artists, and worked toward adopting it. One of the first teachers I talked to was Tony Trischka, which suddenly smacked me right back into the bluegrass world. We worked on it a year.?

The ArtistWorks Academies started with instruction on classical piano, jazz guitar, a hip hop DJ school, and harmonica. The Martin Taylor Guitar Academy and the Andreas Oberg Guitar Universe offer jazz instruction. The Qbert Skratch University teaches turntable scratching, and the Peery Piano Online school covers piano. ?The Howard Levy Harmonica School features Levy, who is one of the world?s top diatonic harmonica players and a founding member of Bela Fleck & the Flecktones,? Butler says. ?Before we were a full Bluegrass Academy, we had Tony Trischka on the banjo, teaching. We?ll be opening other academies?. We?re on the verge of finalizing a set of drummers for the ArtistWorks Academy of Drums. It?s an effective platform to teach anything with a big visual component. We may expand beyond music. We love the bluegrass,? he adds. ?We have a staff of 11 at our office, and we?re all listening to bluegrass all the time now.?

The Tony Trischka School of Banjo---

After launching Trischka?s School of Banjo in 2009, Butler noticed two things. First, the students were really getting better on the banjo. ?The other thing that happened accidentally is it?s become a central meeting place for the banjo world,? he notes. Along with lessons, ArtistWorks post hour-long interviews with influential artists who play their instrument. ?For this community, it?s really great to be able to see interviews with legendary banjo players like Bill Keith, Pete Seeger, and others.?

?I?ve always enjoyed interviewing other people to get their perspectives on playing,? Trischka says, ?but now I do that and the students get to watch the video. In addition to the lessons, we?re building a historical resource. We?re talking to legendary banjo players and getting their words down on file in one place, for whoever wants to come along in the years to come. Pete Seeger is 91 now, and we have that interview down, with a little playing too. Plus, as a teacher it?s great to get other people?s perspectives. I don?t have all the answers. It?s

interesting to find out, ?What does Sonny Osborne say about this? What does Bill Emerson say???

Schools of Bass, Fiddle, Mandolin and Guitar---
After launching the banjo school, Butler asked Trischka what he thought about adding more instruments to cover the whole genre. ?He said, ?Absolutely we should do this.?? Butler says. ?He proposed the artists we have on the roster now, we started filming in January through March of 2011 with Bryan Sutton, and the ArtistWorks Academy of Bluegrass launched in June.?

Trischka says he tried to think of ?people who are teachers, and who are also killer players. Bryan Sutton had called me about ArtistWorks before they decided to expand to the Academy of Bluegrass. Bryan was thinking of doing something similar himself, but to do something like this yourself is a pretty big undertaking. I contacted him and he said, ?Yeah, let?s do this!? Mike Marshall and Darol Anger are not strictly bluegrass, but they are great bluegrass players. I wanted to find people so ridiculously talented, that they would be able to teach anyone from beginners to way advanced. These folks can go as far as a student wants to go. I?ve known Missy Raines for a million years,? Tony adds. ?She?s a great bass player. And this is not a token thing, but bluegrass gets to be such a male-centric world. It?s still a male-dominated field, but we?re not just a men?s club now. All the interviews I?ve done so far for the site have been men?Riley Baugus, Steve Martin, Sonny Osborne, Bill Emerson?. I?d like to get an interview with Alison Brown. I asked Bob Carlin to do a series of lessons on clawhammer banjo, and Mike Munford did some lessons on banjo set-up. I can do clawhammer, but I thought, ?Why not get someone who really does it?? I?m not a banjo set-up guy, but Mike is great at it.?

Not only are the four teachers Trischka recommended at the top of their games technically, they also have the ability to stretch, he says. ?Mike Marshall can go in the direction of Brazillian and Italian styles on the mandolin. I included the clawhammer lessons, and also a section on old-time finger picking and turn of the century banjo playing so people can be aware of these things and broaden their perspectives. Bluegrass is definitely the main thrust, but there are other worlds to explore and to bring into bluegrass.?

The Curriculum---
The ArtistWorks method of teaching is to ?take whatever the teacher is wanting to put forward and break it into bite-size amounts, five to eight minutes long,? Butler says. ?Then the students go to work mastering one small skill at a time. I?ve done a lot of research and have developed ideas on how music education should work for people who aren?t fulltime artists,? he continues. ?The curriculum is online, so students can learn at their own pace,? depending on the time they have to devote to it. ?You could finish the beginning curriculum in two or three months, or it could take two or three years,? Butler says. ?We?ve found that if people are improving, they feel good about subscribing to the program. It?s affordable, and it combines education with entertainment. People may go to the website and watch an interview or videos instead of turning on the television. It?s not a huge expense for even a casual student, but you get a great deal if you?re a serious student.?

Students subscribe to the ArtistWorks Academy of Bluegrass in three-month segments, for $90. Discounts are offered for longer lengths of time: six months at $150 and a year for $240. After landing on academyofbluegrass.com, students scan through the series of lessons and

jump in at their own level. ?Over a period of time we?ve discovered that the core curriculum is only half of the value,? Butler says. ?The other half is based on the teachers? response to students. Both halves combine to form what we refer to as the genome of the learning of a particular instrument.?

Teachers sometimes grow weary of teaching the same material over and over again. ArtistWorks teachers ?love the fact that they can come in and get their lessons professionally captured with multiple camera views,? Butler says. ?A lot of students claim they can get information this way better than in person. They might be too nervous at a live lesson with a legendary artist, or they might miss seeing something that?s demonstrated.?

Teachers have done the bulk of their work before students even sign up, because the lessons are already posted. ?What happens is the teachers look for videos their students have submitted in the ?artist queue,?? Butler says. ?Maybe Bryan Sutton is touring at Telluride and doesn?t have a computer. That video will wait until he has time to get to it. When he does, he looks at his queue of six or seven submissions in the past few days and films his responses. We equip each of our artists with a home video studio, and provide them with all the equipment to film responses. Usually they?ll go online every day and look for questions to respond to, but they may wait a few days to do the video responses. If they?re going to be on tour a long time, we encourage them to the responses from the road.?
Some lessons include play along tracks with an entire band. ?Missy Raines and her husband Ben Surratt, who is a producer and engineer, brought in full recordings without the bass for some of her lessons,? Butler says. ?Students can play with the tracks, and there are also things to be learned about performing with other musicians?the signaling that takes place when you?re playing together, knowing what to play when someone else is soloing, how to be polite?that sort of thing.?

People of all ages want to learn to play instruments, so there are no age limits for the academy, Butler says. ?Sometimes a parent will create an account for a 10-year-old son or daughter. ?We leave that up to the parents. We also have a student in his 90s who lives in Canada. He plays the guitar, and he knew Django Reinhardt personally.?

The Academy of Bluegrass hasn?t changed the way Tony Trischka teaches radically, he says?other than than providing him with a broader base. ?I?ve discovered there?s a desire for learning music theory, which was a surprise. Most avoid it,? he laughs. ?People are curious about the theory that underpins music, so I added some new lessons?one which deals with theory. That?s the beauty of this thing. When a book is written, you can?t go back and change it, or at least not until you print a new edition.? Online lessons, however, can be tailored to what students need. ?Sometimes I?ll go online and ask for input?which fiddle tunes they?d like to learn, or what kinds of lessons,? Trischka says. ?I get more ideas than I can handle, but maybe over time when I?m in my 90s I?ll get to all of them,? he smiles. ?It?s also great that I can do this at home.?

Social Networking----
Subscribers set up a student page similar to a profile page on Facebook, with info about themselves, posted videos of their bands, and space to make comments to each other. ?The first thing you see when you log on is a list of people who are online with you,? Butler explains. ?You can instant message anyone you see. At ?The Hub? you can interact with anyone on any instrument. Or if you want to be more immersed in your own instrument, you

can go to the Guitar School and see a list of people online from that school. If you want to hook up and find a band, you might hang out at The Hub?. There is real time instant messaging, and each school has a chat room where groups of students can interact if they want to. Mike Marshall might say, ?I?ll be in the chat room at 4 p.m. Central Time.? The large group chats are available 24/7, and then there are the traditional forums that are topic-oriented discussions with many different threads. Someone might create a topic in the Guitar Forum about their favorite kinds of guitars or tuners. Gear is a big deal with musicians. Or they might talk about their favorite guitar players and biggest influences.?

?There are so many different ways of how this can operate,? Trischka agrees. ?You can just take lessons, or just watch the interviews or various concert footage, or take part in the forums, or just chat with someone. The video exchanges aren?t immediate?it?s usually a week or week and a half, depending on whether I?m on the road or not. When I reply I comment on their video, but I also add some extra material?why not try this variation, or try in another key? The ArtistWorks template hits from so many angles. They?ve obviously put a lot of thought into it.?

Missy Raines got involved for a couple of reasons. ?I think it?s really cutting edge technology, and I liked the idea of building a community online and being able to reach a broad number of students across the world,? she says. ?It?s really cool to be a part of something like that. There?s no way I could teach this many students at once in person, and still be out on the road.?

Raines particularly likes the video exchange format. ?I think there?s an immediacy that can happen, even though it?s virtual,? she says. ?Folks can go to my lessons and view them as many times as they need to. They video themselves applying whatever it is I?m trying to get across, they upload it to me, and I then can watch them play and view it over and over myself. I can critique and give constructive advice on what they can do better in person, but the great thing about video is when I do give them my response, they can go back to it over and over again and they?ll have access to it. It?s a way of taking the process of playing apart piece by piece, and then putting it all back together.?

Like Trischka, Missy likes the open-ended aspect of the Academy of Bluegrass ?The site is meant to be a growing, living thing,? she notes. ?I?ll continue to add lessons, and there?s new information coming in. I?ll also be adding special features and interviews with other bass players.? One of her favorite places on the site is The Hub, ?It?s the cafeteria in the middle of the big school, where all the other students can hang out and chat,? Missy says, ?a place where you can open yourself up to the rest of the band. Some people have discovered they live near other players, and they didn?t know each other. That kind of community building is really powerful. You?re using the best of technology, but enhancing the human experience?. There are lots of threads going on in the forums?different tunes and who?s doing what, and sharing of videos of your band. There?s a lot of support. It?s a really supportive and safe place to learn because you can be as active as you want to be. You don?t have to post a video if you don?t want to. It?s not a requirement. But once you see other people posting a video and putting themselves out on a limb, you realize it?s a good way to learn. It gives you the confidence to step up and ask questions. Everyone is there for the same reason: to learn. It?s a very cool environment.?

Bryan Sutton became aware of ArtistWorks program a few years ago and enrolled as a jazz

guitar student in one of the earlier academies. He didn?t post any videos, but he was intrigued by the format. During the past 10 years Sutton has taught occasional private lessons on the road, and he has participated in workshops and camps when he was able to. ?I?m a big fan of the master class approach,? he says, ?because of the way I learned to play the guitar. I learned things by trying stuff out in front of other people when we came together in jam sessions.? Playing bluegrass guitar is a ?such a group thing,? he explains. ?You learn to play better by jamming with other musicians and watching each other.?

Like Raines, Sutton likes ?the idea of seeing lessons that have been submitted, then seeing people go to work on that skill, and then seeing the response from the teacher. There?s a lot [for everyone] to learn from watching each teacher and student interact. I want to see people step up their playing---not just to impress the other people around the house, but to actually go out and play in a jam session.?
I?m happy with the curriculum that?s posted, but I know it will continue to change and grow organically,? Sutton adds. ?I started with lessons based on what I?ve taught at workshops in the past, but now that students are involved I?ll get a clearer sense of what can change and be added. My goal is to create a big bank of songs in this format, that students will be able to learn. ?I also like the other aspects of the website,? he adds. ?So far I?ve interviewed David Grier, Kenny Smith, Aubrey Haynie, Sam Bush and tomorrow I?m going over to Gruhn Guitars to interview George Gruhn and get a ?behind the scenes? tour of his shop on Lower Broad in Nashville. This kind of stuff is really fun for guitar nuts like me,? Sutton laughs. ?I?ll be putting my own slant on the interviews?getting beyond a Q&A format and just start chatting. I want it to be a natural conversation.?

Facetime---
Although there are obvious advantages to the accessibility and scope of interactive online lessons, of course there?s something very satisfyingly simple, authentic and fun about standing in a circle and playing bluegrass music in person. The Academy of Bluegrass is planning some live events, too. ?We have the ArtistWorks Academy of Bluegrass Band, with the five teachers,? Butler notes. ?When we can get them in one place, you?ve got a super group. They?ll all be together at RockyGrass in July, and we?re going to have some workshops and opportunities for people who are subscribers of the various schools to come in and meet the teachers in person. When they walk up, their teacher will be able to greet them by name?by virtue of their video exchanges. A bond has been created. Music is such an intimate, spiritual thing; when you connect to someone on the level of music and you meet in person, it will be like meeting an old friend.?

Barriers and the lack thereof----
Butler travels outside the U.S. regularly. ?There really is a great love of this music around the world,? he notes, ?not just in the U.K. and Ireland. We?re giving these five musicians a way to teach all over the world, and we hope it helps to popularize bluegrass music.? Students have already signed up from around the globe, Butler says. ?Imagine what it could do to expand the bluegrass world if you are a mandolin player living in Singapore and you can take lessons from Mike Marshall?? English is the official language of all the academies, but not all students speak English. ?Even if you can?t understand Darol Anger say, ?Pull the bow this way,? you know to imitate his actions,? Butler explains.

?As opposed to teaching one person at a time, which is what I?ve traditionally done, I can reach hundreds of people at a time,? Tony Trischka says. ?The reach is global. I have

students in South Africa, all over Europe, and in New Zealand. The reach is great, and it?s all instantaneous.?

In summary---

ArtistWorks started because Butler was frustrated about not being able to take lessons from a teacher in another state. As the program became successful, he spent more time developing the business than picking, but now he?s back to the guitar. ?I started working with Bryan Sutton, and I was amazed that all my Tennessee roots came back!? he says. ?I?m lucky if I find an hour a week to devote to it, but I have a son who plays electric guitar. He?s 28 and likes all the ?thrashy? music. He?s studying Brian?s method, too. There must be something in the DNA?. All of our employees are musicians, and I think that makes a difference. This program started organically because I wanted to have a place where I could learn to play better, myself. We have a tremendous respect for musicians, and want to provide them with a long distance reach. At first it was a bit of a hard sell, but now we have more people wanting to teach with us than we can handle. We have to be selective, and also we make a point to be very transparent with our accounting. We?re generous in splitting revenue with the teachers, which for many artists is not what they?re used to?from record labels, for example.?

The Academy of Bluegrass is a co-sponsor at the Telluride Bluegrass Festival and RockGrass, and they?ll be at IBMA?s World of Bluegrass events in Nashville in the fall. ?We want to get more people playing bluegrass,? Butler says simply. ?Stop playing those memorized solos from someone else and do your own! Bluegrass is great fun to listen to, but even more fun to play.?

Online formats like Academy of Bluegrass Music may well change the way, and the scope of how people learn to play our music in the next decade. ?We all have books out there and what Homespun Tapes has done is great,? Trischka notes, ?but this seems to be a more inclusive and expansive way of teaching?a major educational tool for bluegrass. Over time, I can see it raising the level of what people are trying to learn out there on their own, especially in remote areas where it?s difficult to take ongoing lessons. Overall, I hope the level of music will keep rising.?

Click here [2] for a video preview of the ArtistWorks Academy of Bluegrass. More info: http://www.academyofbluegrass.com/ [3]

Tags:
Academy of Bluegrass Music [4]
Tony Trischka [5]
Mike Marshall [6]
Missy Raines [7]
Darol Anger [8]
Bryan Sutton [9]
David Butler [10]

Source URL: https://ibma.org/press/archives/artistworks-academy-bluegrass-changes-face-bluegrass-industry

Links:

[1] https://ibma.org/press/archives/artistworks-academy-bluegrass-changes-face-bluegrass-industry
[2] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wd2f1adlttc&feature=youtu.be
[3] http://www.academyofbluegrass.com/
[4] https://ibma.org/tags/academy-bluegrass-music
[5] https://ibma.org/tags/tony-trischka
[6] https://ibma.org/tags/mike-marshall
[7] https://ibma.org/tags/missy-raines
[8] https://ibma.org/tags/darol-anger
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[10] https://ibma.org/tags/david-butler