



Thinking Good Tone Part 1

What the Pros say about Good Tone

by Ted Eschliman

Less is MAS

You have probably heard the term "MAS," or **Mandolin Acquisition Syndrome**. For many (and while we can't deny the pleasure and benefits of quality gear), the affliction of the pursuit of the ultimate instrument sadly supersedes the significance of technique and practice. A good craftsman can make the best of most any tool, but the reverse simply isn't true.

Jazz on the mandolin, arguably more than many other genres, is contingent on a pleasing, linear tone. We fail ourselves (and our audience) when we practice only to get more notes, only to aim for more speed. Listening to velocity and pyrotechnics holds most attention spans for 15 minutes; good tone can be listened to all day. So why don't we commit more energy to working on **tone** in our practicing? Just what is good tone? Maybe if we know what causes bad tone, we can develop habits that maximize the best tone in the instrument we have.

Tips from the Pros

This month, we had the privilege of interviewing eleven of some of the best mandolin tonemeisters in the industry. We approached them with our own diagnosis of what commonly causes bad tone and solicited their input and comments. Not surprisingly, every one of them LOVED waxing poetic on this subject, and we've really struggled to condense some terrific advice into this one article that we decided to present it in two parts, this one a discussion, and next article we'll show an exercise or two you can use to implement these concepts.

Cataloging Bad Tone; Five common causes of "operator error"

Let's go beyond the obvious reasons a mandolin can sound bad, improper intonation, old strings, inadequate bridge and fret adjustment, poor quality instrument - really all the faults of just bad equipment. Let's unravel the causes and components of bad tone:

- Missing, not maximizing the sweet spot with the fretting fingers for phrase "wholeness"
- Inaccurate pick timing (RH/LH coordination)
- Choking or failing to hold the tone through to the start of the next note.
- Running out of gas, prematurely losing phrase intensity
- Tepid pick stroking, lack of "follow-through."

Missing, not maximizing the sweet spot with the fretting fingers for phrasing "wholeness"

Issue: [Good tone stopped in time is a well-placed left finger.](#) Round and resonant individual notes are crucial to phrases, like skilled words coherent sentences. Once your fingers are conditioned subconsciously to where these sweet spots are between the frets, allowing no half-fretted fracks, or clams you can build larger structures of music. Without this building block, there is no hope for building a phrase. **Will Patton**, Vermont-based jazz mandolin wizard, describes his production,

"letting a phrase 'breathe' naturally." He goes on, "A musical phrase should be like human speech, with inflections, rising and falling. Each phrase has a natural arc to it, let the intensity rise to the emotional high point and then fall off. Singers do it all the time, it makes the music come alive. Singing along with a phrase can sometimes unlock the natural contours."

Without the stability and certainty of solid individual notes, it doesn't matter what you do with the pick, you'll never successfully convey a line. Will confesses the mandolin can have a somewhat limited dynamic range,

"Even though the mandolin has a limited range of volume, there's no reason not to take advantage of it. You can only play so loud, but you can really play soft! This technique is greatly aided by a receptive audience, a good sound system, and band mates who are tuned in to what's going on. There are some lovely techniques for playing soft, including a very gently vibrato played where the neck joins the body. (David) Grisman uses this to great advantage at times. Not unlike a teacher quieting a room by speaking more SOFTLY, it can be very dramatic to have the band come to a whisper in a passage of music."

With a well-fretted note, you also have a variety of places on the fretboard to produce a range of sounds. Patton adds,

"Sometimes my students and I will experiment with how many ways we can play ONE NOTE - say a nice Eb on the A string... it can be plucked down near the tailpiece for a bright soft tone with lots of overtones, or played hard and quickly (bluegrass style!) a little further up the body, or the pick can be brought thru the string, almost like you're aiming for a spot about 5 inches below the string, right over the sound hole (assuming an oval hole), which yields a rich full tone, or played up the neck a bit, bringing some other overtones into the sonic mix. This is the pick hand, the left (or fretting) hand can be static, or doing a slow back & forth vibrato (like a classical violinist) - or giving it some of that rock guitar edge with an up and down tremolo, adding a little 'bite' or sting to the note."

Again, critical to these techniques is a stable left, **David Grisman** describes as "squeezing golf balls." Interestingly, **Paul Glasse**, Texas-swing standard bearer and mandolin bebop master, also warns about what he calls risking fluidity in using too much pressure, he admonishes

"If you chose to pick hard with your right hand it doesn't mean you have to bear down hard with the fingers of your left hand--though that's often the first instinct. Regardless of volume, try to keep the left hand fingering light. You'll sound more fluid."

This gets us into the next subject of timing.

Inaccurate pick timing (RH/LH coordination)

Issue: Synchronizing pick attack and left finger placement. John Reischman is a bone fide master of Right Hand/Left Hand coordination and suggests,

"Having the right and left hand in sync so there are no flams is important. Practicing with a metronome will help address that."

Scott Tichenor, site author and administrator of the widely popular online resource, MandolinCafe.com (and amazing mandolinist in his own right), concurs:

"To me it's all about left and right-hand coordination and timing. Few things provide more benefit than playing simple scales or perpetual motion exercises well below the speed you would ever use in performance. Use a metronome to assist, concentrating on pulling the very best tone out of each note. If you're missing notes or some aren't as clean as others, concentrate on those moves until they're perfected."

Jamie Masefield, renowned for his internationally acclaimed jam band, **The Jazz Mandolin Project**, has an interesting take on the subject of timing, also.

"There is a mysterious world that is hard to perceive that is the place where good tone and good time overlap. It's as if two countries have agreed to own an area jointly. Isn't it interesting how mandolin players credited with good tone very often have good time? When [so], not only do they not speed up or slow down, they generally have a great ability to vary rhythm within a musical passage, and they do it with ease. When we hear them execute it effortlessly we often end up contemplating that region where time and tone overlap. What the mandolinist played was beautiful and thus they seem to have good tone. When the duration of notes are exact and uniform to each other we hear good tone. When I contemplate this topic I always end up grimacing at my right hand (my picking hand). The left hand gets off scott free, its the right hand that's in the dog house.

"Most of the reason for this is that it's not relaxed enough. There's no way that a picking hand can have precise rhythmic diversity when it's tight and tense. My right hand generally needs a lot more practice

time than the left. For many years, my practice regimen has begun with what my band mates call 'deedle deedle' (because that's what it sounds like to them). That's where I sit in a corner and mute the strings with my left hand so there is no tone and just work on my picking and strumming without any notes (it sounds more like a clicking sound to me). It's an exercise to warm up just the right hand. I pick just one string at a time then alternate between two strings with various rhythms (making sure to work on patterns that are in both 4 and 3). After a while I go to strumming all eight strings and finally after I've warmed up the whole right hand then, and only then, do I actually play a note using my left hand. It's always surprising to me how much better the tone sounds compared to if I hadn't warmed up the picking hand by itself. By then I've chased everyone out of the band room and I have it all to myself."

Choking or failing to hold the tone through to the start of the next note.

Issue: You don't want to "cough" notes with the left hand; think about it, once the note is picked, the right hand has nothing more to do with the tone. Sustain defaults to left hand stamina. Chicago-based JazzMando hero **Don Stiernberg** exhorts,

"Tremolo is a good route to sustain of course, but I also try to hold notes down a long time, just let them ring. Some of my students were looking for ways to develop strength in the left hand for this approach. A good drill is to play a scale or tune without the pick, trying to see/hear how much sound you can generate with only the left hand fingers. You'll be surprised! But practice this gingerly--too much squeezing can lead to straining those small muscles in your fingers."

This also gets back to the issue **Paul Glasse** described in regards to loosing "fluidity" in faster passages, but he reminds us,

"Legendary Count Basie guitarist Freddie Green said 'Give each note full value.' At first glance one might reduce this to 'Don't rush' but I think Freddie's comment is much more all-encompassing than that. For mandolinists, sure, it means don't rush. I also think it means get comfortable letting that note ring, giving each note you play it's full due. No, you don't have to use tremolo as pseudo sustain, no you don't have to keep a bluegrass-influenced 'motorboat' right hand going. Pick each note individually, by choice, and make each note count. Get comfortable letting some of those notes sit there. Let your phrasing be driven by your ears not any physical auto-pilot."

Running out of gas, prematurely losing phrase intensity

Issue: Plectrum players' tone production isn't driven by breathing as with wind instrumentalists, so we need to be conscious of where phrases start and stop, and not lose intensity along the way. **Don Stiernberg** contemplates,

"As the years go on I find everything matters - string gauge, pick style, mic and mic placement, and so on. We could all go crazy trying to replicate an ideal sound made by one our heroes at a show or on a record. Still I've had my best results by working on the concept of the sound as opposed to the tools which produce the sound. In spite of the instrument's natural lack of sustain, it is a melody instrument, so I'm trying to get the thing to sing. So sometimes I'll challenge myself by asking 'How would Ray Charles sing this melody?' or 'What would Zoot Sims sound like on this?' Believe it or not, that mental exercise has an impact on how long the notes last, whether or not the notes finish well, and how much 'breathing' there can be in a melodic phrase."

Bluegrass and Canadian mandolin master of tone and melody, **Emory Lester** puts it this way,

"When a note is struck well, then the full tone of the instrument comes through. The challenge is to try to get this to happen, whether it is an easy sequence or a difficult sequence for you. I hear all the great players paying serious attention to this, whether they do it consciously, or sub-consciously, and they deliver their music, and their 'tone', in a clean, clear, and 'unpolluted' way. If you intend to play 10 notes, as a listener, I want to hear all 10 notes....not 8 out of 10.

"I think a lot of it has to do with listening. I listen to other players, I listen to all kinds of music, and I gravitate toward songs and sounds that are pleasing to me. I listen to my own playing, and I try to make my sound and my tones as musically pleasing for myself, and for anyone listening, as I can. I try to make the mandolin 'sing my songs' as clearly and confidently as I possibly can."

Is this impeccable consistency easy for us? Emory further opines,

"A mandolin is sometimes not a 'user friendly' instrument, and will often fight you back when you are trying to hold down a difficult chord, or make a complex sequence of fingering. The challenge sometimes is not only to be able to pull these things off, but also to make them fluid and comfortable enough that I can play them well, any time I attempt to play them. It is so important to 'deliver' your music to the 'listener', as good as you possibly can, so that the 'listener' can receive it, and enjoy it in it's best form."

Tepid pick stroking, lack of "follow-through."

Issue: Isolating the pick stroke mechanics in slow scale passages and consecutive notes gives us insight into the three areas, **pluck, stroke, and follow-through**. Starting the note with appropriate grip, **John Reichman** offers these tips,

"I think you need to use a pick that will not flex, anything over 1.0 mm. I always use the rounded corners on a standard shaped pick, or a golden gate shape. I hold the pick pretty firmly, without clenching it. I think of the pick being locked in my hand. Once the pick is locked, I am not really conscious of the pick. I use the weight of my hand to generate the tone. My right hand makes a fairly wide sweep. I also angle the pick up a bit so it strikes the string at a slight angle rather than flat against the string."

Think about a golfer hitting a ball off the tee; it's not just the wind-up and stroke before the ball, it's good contact, and the follow-through swing. (Remember: It don't mean a thing, if it ain't got that swing!...) If your attack is sufficient, the pick *must* continue on, so home in on where it goes. For the Gypsy Jazz guitarist, "**Rest-stroke**" skills, this is a crucial factor; consistently driving the pick to the next string (and stopping) is the way to get maximum tone out of both slow and fast passages. Solo classical mandolin guru and American "Duo Style" master, **Evan Marshall** offers an amazing workshop on this and comments,

"One pitfall where the remedy is surprisingly similar from different stylistic specialists is the "Tepid pick stroke." A rest-stroke downstroke as described by yours truly or **Caterina Lichtenberg** would be quite similar to a Monroe-downstroke as described by **Mike Compton**, if I have understood Mike correctly at the Mandolin Symposium: A robust open D calls for picking through both D's with the pick coming to rest against the inside A string, all with a single downstroke motion." Evan recommends starting EVERY practice session warming up the right hand for 8 to 10 minutes.

Starting the sound, or "articulation" is crucial. As **Jamie Masefield** mentioned earlier, the left hand often gets blamed for the sins of the right; **Don Stiernberg** agrees,

"Articulation is a big part of tone and sound also. I'd rather hear clean notes than loud or fat or woody or whatever. Here again I think it's about finishing the notes. Did the left hand come off the string too soon? Did the pick swing all the way through the string, without any funny angles? The right hand should work about the same way on all notes, not be jumping around attacking in different ways at different places."

Less-Tangibles

These five aspects of tone production are the more "concrete" components. Several of the professionals we interviewed talked about the less tangible, the aesthetic features one doesn't really practice or drill. Mutli-instrumentalist monster and world-class mandolinist, **Mike Marshall** offers,

"Tone comes from within. It is that deep place where music lives inside our souls. To work on tone is to work on the scariest parts of yourself. It's about being open. Letting the music come through. If you've got anger and anxiety stored up someplace, it will be reflected in your tone. If you are uncertain about your music it will show. The adjustments at some level are too small to be merely dealt with at the technical/scientific level. They become spiritual at some point. It's a big question. What makes someone's tone is maybe the resonant frequency of their soul."

Consider further insight exchanged with **Scott Tichenor** in preparation for this issue,

"Everyone at some point in their development should make a point of working on developing good tone. Unfortunately, in the desire to develop rapidly, too many students focus all of their energy on learning tunes, licks and chords, often at the expense of developing a good "voice."

We can't leave out the issue of individuality either, **Paul Glasse** muses,

"Good tone is a very individual thing. Example: **Don Stiernberg, John Reishman, Mike Marshall, David Grisman** and **Chris Thile** all have great tone yet, in terms of tone alone, don't sound very much alike, regardless of what mandolin they're playing. They have individual voices. They each sound overwhelmingly like themselves. I really can't think of a finer compliment to pay a musician."

Against the background of his musical journey, electric mandolin pioneer **Michael Lampert** reveals that a tone "mentor" or model to build off of is a great place to start.

"I think that most experienced players' tones are external manifestations of their inner conceptions of what they think the instruments should sound like. In my case, I was always enthralled with my teacher Harry Leahey's tone. This created some difficulties for me, since he was an electric guitarist."

"As soon as I knew that there was an instrument called the electric mandolin, I took out a loan and bought one. As I gained more experience as a listener and a player, I began to replace my teacher's tone with my own tone. My touch, the kind of instrument I use (a Schwab electric), the setup, the amplifier, the strings, (etc.) are all vital components of the tones I create. The end product, however, really arises from my inner conception, which is the product of God's grace."

Legendary mandolin innovator **David Grisman** registers in agreement with

"As far as I'm concerned, tone starts as an image or impression in your mind, possibly inspired by sounds you've heard brought forth by your favorite player(s) either in person or on recordings. The rest (hard part or not) is translating that to your own playing and instrument. Of course the equipment (mandolin, strings, pick, bridge, setup) consists of variables for you to contend with and select from."

"This process has taken me 45 years or so and I'm still going through it. What I've learned is that any combination of these elements will yield an optimum "sound" that's achievable (hopefully with maximum comfort) with your own [personal] "equipment" (hands, ears, heart and mind). In other words, find what's really comfortable equipment-wise, and then find the "best" or "most pleasing to your ear" sounds that you can get from it."

The Dawg adds, "P.S. and keep that thing in tune!"

Special Thanks to our "Pros"

We'd like to thank our professionals for taking the time out of their busy schedules to contribute to this discussion. Take some time to visit their websites, explore the wealth of their music, workshops, and their performance schedules:

Will Patton <http://wpatton.com/>
Paul Glasse http://jazzmando.com/paul_glasse.shtml
Michael Lampert <http://www.sojournerrecords.net/>
Evan Marshall <http://www.solomandolin.com/index.html>
Mike Marshall <http://mikemarshall.net/>
Emory Lester <http://www.emorylester.com/>
Scott Tichenor <http://www.mandolincafe.com/>
Jamie Masefield <http://www.jazzmandolinproject.com/press/>
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