



Roger Landes – Portrait of a Teacher

by Michael J. Keyes, MD

We all know Roger Landes as a prodigious musician and tireless promoter of Irish mandolin and bouzouki, as the founder of Zoukfest, and as a strongly opinionated Irish music scholar but what many don't know is that he is an outstanding and devoted teacher. Roger first became interested in Irish traditional music the way a lot of Americans did: by listening to the Chieftains. In the 1970's he had an epiphany while listening to Paddy Moloney play the Uilleann pipes that brought him first to piping and then to the tenor banjo and eventually the mandolin. His bouzouki playing, which he is best known for, came a little later. Since then Roger has produced and played on numerous records and concerts and has developed a mandolin style that uses Irish piping and fiddling as an inspiration.

Roger is an interesting guy. He reminds me of the Olympic level athletes I used to work with in 1984. He is immensely talented, extremely bright, has a strong work ethic, is perfectionistic about his work and passionate about his chosen field. This has led to an ongoing examination of Irish traditional music and how the mandolin and bouzouki fit in.

One of the products of this search has been a strong desire to both pass on this knowledge and develop ways to make sure that his students benefit from his expertise. Over the years, he has become a superb teacher who has an easy to understand style that cuts right to the heart of the matter. He uses humor, illustration and clear demonstration to get his point across (see below) and you cannot help but learn in his class. I wish that all of my teachers were as good as Roger.

Roger is in the planning stage for a set of educational books and DVDs on the bouzouki and mandolin which he hopes to publish within a year or so. After taking a class from Roger at the O'Flaherty Irish Retreat this year, I am looking forward to these (he already has a DVD tutorial from Zoukfest) and any other learning aide he is willing to bring out.

I was lucky enough to interview him about his teaching:

MJK: "How important is teaching to you and how important is it to you in your overall career?"

Roger: "Teaching is very important to me personally. I've always really enjoyed teaching and have a knack for it. I think that my experience as an American of non-Irish extraction has helped me become a better teacher since I didn't grow up in Irish traditional music and had no master teachers myself. Having to learn in isolation, from recordings and sessions, and the odd pointer from players at festivals, was really difficult. And it took a lot longer than it might have had I been part of the music community in Boston or New York. But it ultimately paid off in that I found my own way to teach based on what I didn't have access to when I was learning. I really enjoy helping folks who are in a similar position as I was. It's very rewarding."

"Camps are great fun and it's nice to have them supplement the income from time to time. They are a great way to meet folks and get one's name around, sell a few CDs, make contacts for gigs, too, but the best thing is being able to be a part of peoples' musical process - to affect their musical life in a few short hours or days. I feel privileged to have that opportunity. And you always make a lot of new friends, too. And learn new jokes!"

MJK: "How has your approach to students changed over the years? "

Roger: "Teaching bouzouki, especially, in workshops and at camps, has taught me to quickly assess where everyone in the class is at with their playing and find a thread to hang the classes on that will help everyone there. This is a really useful skill and I thank the hundreds of students I've worked with over the years for giving me this opportunity. This sort of 'one off' approach is necessary at short camps or in one

time workshops. At my own camp, ZoukFest, we are able to structure the classes more since they take place over five days and we have multiple classes on a variety of subjects for each instrument." "And lately I've started to integrate some graphic representations of some of the issues we deal with on the instrument. Being very much an 'ear first' learner I was reluctant to do that at first but I have learned that some people really respond well to visual input before dealing with the auditory information. A student and dear friend taught me that recently, which I really appreciate."

But you don't have to take my word for it. Here are three video clips of Roger teaching mandolin. It is hard not to love his style and level of knowledge. They take a while to load, but are worth the wait.

[Roger teaching triplets](#)
[Roger and mandolin vs. banjo styles](#)
[Roger teaches pick angle](#)

References

You can learn about Roger, his music and Zoukfest at his site: <http://www.rogerlandes.com/index.html>

The O'Flaherty Irish Music Retreat occurs every year in October in Midlothian, Texas. Their website is here: <http://www.irishtradmusic.org/oflaherty.htm>

You can get a free copy of Apple's Quicktime at that will work on PCs and Macs at <http://www.apple.com/quicktime/download/>. There are Linux versions available at <http://heroinewarrior.com/quicktime.php3>

About the Author

Mike Keyes, a native of Franklin, Tennessee, has played tenor banjo since 1957 and over the years has learned to play five string banjo, mandolin, and guitar. He earned his way through college and medical school playing in bluegrass and dixieland bands and currently plays in the Irish band "Good Luck." He is an expert in sports performance and has written and book and over 200 articles on the subject.

His interest in Irish music started a number of years ago when effort to learn more about his musical roots led him to the discovery of session playing. Since then he has been to Ireland to learn more about the music and has taken classes and interviewed such banjo greats as John Carty, Charlie Piggot, and Gerry O'Connor.

His medical practice is in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin where he practices Psychiatry. You can email him at mikeyes@charter.net if you wish to discuss some aspect of the Irish tenor banjo.