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ARTIST OF THE MONTH: TONY TRISCHKA – PART 1

Banjoist [Tony Trischka](#) is a brilliant creator, an entertainer, and educator who makes his own time. He's always on the run, trying new things and yet always ready to stop and have a friendly chat and a catch up. His musical life includes teaching, performing, and recording as well as studying music history. And, at a very young 75, he's always up for an impromptu jam.

In 1976, when he was 28, Oak Publications published his *Melodic Banjo*, an instruction book featuring his transcription tablatures of pieces by and introductions to the top players of this new style of bluegrass banjo in which he was already recognized as a virtuoso. The book became a modern bluegrass banjo classic and was later published in new editions by [Hal Leonard](#).

When Rounder reissued Tony's first two albums as "*Tony Trischka- the Early Years*," Berklee's Matt Glaser wrote:

Rarely, perhaps three or four times a century, some music will be created that is a pure explosive expression of life energy and uncontaminated joy. The music on this CD is, in my humble opinion, exactly that ... I put Tony's early music in the same category as the best of Charles Mingus, Cecil Taylor, Scotty Stoneman, and Wagner, mad and magnificent. ... It's some of the most unjustly neglected of all popular music masterpieces.

Tony's passion about bluegrass banjo history came

to the fore in 1988 when he co-edited the most comprehensive banjo book ever written, "*Masters of the 5-String Banjo*," with Pete Wernick, his partner in the early '70s band Country Cooking. There's not enough room here to write about Tony's full career, but it's important to know that in addition to performing on the banjo doing everything from straight-ahead bluegrass to rock, avant garde, and theater, he's also a band leader, producer, teacher and historian. A Grammy nominee and winner of the IBMA's 2007 Banjo Player of the Year award, he now teaches an online banjo course for [ArtistWorks](#), and continues to appreciate the pleasures and challenges of jamming – the subject of his latest album, *Earl Jam*, which was released June 7 on Down The Road Records.

I met Tony in 1986 in New York where I was giving a lecture to promote my new book, [Bluegrass: A History](#). We got together afterward to explore our shared interest in bluegrass banjo. Since then, we've worked together on several projects, the latest being *Earl Jam*. In November 1990, we reconnected at the Tennessee Banjo Institute. He took me to hear Institute faculty member [Carroll Best](#), a North Carolinian who'd been playing melodic banjo since the '50s. We ended up together at Best's campsite. In 1992, *Banjo Newsletter* published our interview of him along with Tony's transcription of his work.

Trischka's 1993 album, *World Turning*, reflected his eclectic experiences in taking the banjo to the world. Bob Carlin called it "his bid to move the

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instrument back into the mainstream." Beginning with an African tune, he explored the banjo in a variety of genres – minstrel, classical, old-time, ragtime, new acoustic, and rock, along with his own brand of bluegrass.

In 2001, Tony and I reconnected at Banjo Camp North in Massachusetts. In addition to its concerts and workshops featuring big-name instructors like Tony, Bill Keith, Pete Wernick, Tony Ellis, and Bill Evans, there was free time for informal music-making. Tony and I spent a pleasant evening jamming together.

For his 2007 album, *Double Banjo Bluegrass Spectacular*, Trischka recorded duets with 10 banjo pickers, with backing by top-flight bluegrass instrumentalists. These recordings have taken on new meaning now that some of his musical partners on this award-winning production – Earl Scruggs, Kenny Ingram, Bill Emerson, and Tony Rice – are no longer with us. The album introduced a generation of young musicians, showing the remarkable depth of Tony's musical connections. Tony's brand new Down The Road album, *Earl Jam: A Tribute to Earl Scruggs*, reflects his longstanding interest in bluegrass banjo's late founder. The album began during the pandemic, when *Banjo Newsletter* columnist, Bob Piekielek, author of "Earl's Way" and a Scruggs family friend, sent Tony a thumb drive containing two hundred songs and tunes recorded at jams with Earl Scruggs and John Hartford during the '80s and '90s.

Tony and Piekielek had been working on the "tabs" – tablatures – for a [new Scruggs banjo book](#). Since the early 1970s, bluegrass banjo tabs have been key musical manuscripts. None are more important than those of Scruggs, whose iconic statements – the ones he recorded – were published by [Scruggs himself in tabular form](#) in 1968. Many banjo pickers learned "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" and other familiar favorites from Scruggs' tabs.

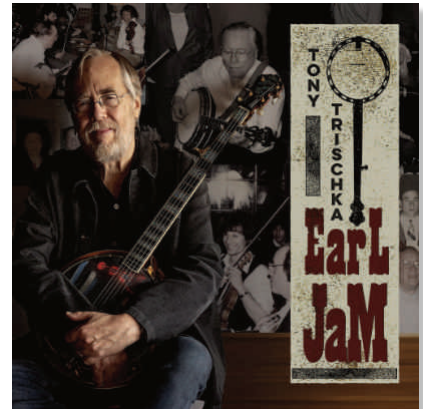
Like any written music, tablatures are scores meant to describe how music is created on an instrument, while simultaneously prescribing how it is to be reproduced. Tony made tabs of Earl's jam breaks so that he could recreate them. Jamming with Hartford, Scruggs played familiar pieces he'd never before recorded or performed in public. On that thumb drive, Tony found Scruggs' impromptu banjo statements as interesting and entertaining as the old familiar recorded and transcribed ones from his commercial appearances.

By: Neil V. Rosenberg

Change and innovation are part of the ambiance at jam sessions.

Playing an old tune or song in a new way is a sure route to pleasant interaction in these friendly musical conversations. Here, ideas are expressed, tested, embraced. Participants play for their own delectation and to pique the interests of the other jammers. It's not easy for those of us who enjoy hearing commercially produced Nashville music to know what goes on informally and privately in that town's local music scenes. Beyond the bars, stages, and studios, away from the producers, who jams with whom? In 1998 when Tony interviewed the late [Bobby Thompson](#), melodic banjo pioneer and Nashville studio A-lister, he got Bobby's answer to that question:

Scruggs, he's real nice. Me and him would get together and play a lot. Lately I do him and John Hartford and bunch of them come over here a lot.



In his notes to Earl's 1972 album, *I Saw the Light with Some Help from My Friends* (Columbia KC 31354), Bill Williams wrote about star-packed jams at the Scruggs home, calling it "a gathering place, a watershed of talent, a place to be oneself," adding that "while the industry has known many outstanding jam sessions, there are none quite like these." By that time, jams had been going on at the Scruggs house for a long time.

Part 2 of "Artist of The Month : Tony Trischka" will appear in the April issue of Bluegrass Canada magazine.

Neil V. Rosenberg is an author, scholar, historian, banjo player, [Bluegrass Music Hall of Fame inductee](#), and co-chair of [the IBMA Foundation's Arnold Shultz Fund](#). He also authored the album liner notes for Earl Jam. [Check out Neil's regular BGS column, Bluegrass Memoirs, here.](#)

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Tony Trischka photo credit: Greg Heisler

