

# Playing with a metronome

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The metronome is many musicians' most feared accessory, yet everyone ends up using one eventually. It's very valuable for bluegrass banjo, where note timing is critical and the ability to adjust playing speed to compensate for changes in a jam session is essential. Two metronome exercises allow you to practice both of these skills. Working with the metronome will help you gain the confidence to know you can play with other people and stay in control of your own playing.

## ***Keeping time***

The most basic metronome exercise is just playing along. Set the metronome for a fixed speed and just try to match your notes to the metronome clicks. Start with an endless TIM forward roll and just listen. When your notes match the metronome, you'll stop hearing two separate events - your note and the metronome's clicks - and they will merge into a single sound. Once you've got this, keep playing for a little while, to make sure you can keep things matched. Many players warm up before a show by doing this exercise.

Once you've got the forward roll under control, switch to your favorite, most comfortable banjo tune, and go for the match again. Challenge yourself with increasingly harder tunes.

## ***Adjusting speed***

Playing to the metronome's unvarying beat is useful, but it's not the way the world works. When you play with other people, songs will speed up and slow down. That's human nature - people play faster when they're excited, or the song gets harder, or they just don't practice with the metronome as much as you do. What makes a great jam session (or a great band) great is the ability of all participants to sense the variation in tempo and adjust to it before anyone else notices. This is what people sense as "groove". To do this, you need to hear when your rhythm is departing from the group (or their rhythm from you), and make tiny adjustments in your playing speed.

The metronome can help here. Do the first exercise - the forward roll, or the comfortable song - until you have the metronome's tempo nailed. Got it? Now change the metronome speed by a tiny bit, two to five beats per minute. Up or down, it doesn't matter. Try it again. When you start playing at the new speed, you'll feel out of control. That's normal, and not unlike what you'll feel in a jam session if the tempo shifts and you're not used to it.

See how long it takes you to adjust to the new tempo. Once you're there, play for a little while, then stop and adjust the tempo again. That old out-of-control feeling will return, until you get on top of the new tempo - even if it's the tempo you started with! Shift up and down, and get control at each speed, until the tempo change feels easy to you. Now you're ready to play with other people.