

One of the people listening to the broadcasts of WWVA from Wheeling, West Virginia back in the 1950s was Ian Joel. Like many others, Ian's ear was snagged by the banjo of Earl Scruggs, and it's been a part of his music ever since (the banjo, not his ear).

Asked about particular influences, Ian says, "There have been so many great banjo players down through the years," that it is impossible to attribute his style to any one influence. Not only that, but his own musical tastes have also changed.

After hearing Scruggs and receiving an introduction to the three-finger forward roll from a musical acquaintance, Ian began picking *Jesse James* and other bluegrass favorites with a Scruggs-style approach. He also encountered Bill Keith and heard the music of Bobby Thompson, and for a while his own picking had a substantial melodic flavor.

Ian does single out Allen Shelton as a particular influence, citing Shelton's diversity of musical ideas and melody-oriented approach. And he noticed that, unlike J.D. Crowe's non-stop driving right hand, Earl Scruggs would back off while playing backup, using a style more complementary to the singer or solo instrument. These ideas eventually influenced Ian's solo style.

"My playing has changed quite a bit compared with, say, 30 years ago," says Ian. In assessing his own style, Ian suggests that he has simplified his music and recognized the importance of the downbeat.

One evening as his current band *The Sleepy Eyed Johns* played at the *Muddy Rudder* (their regular gig in SE Portland), another banjo player at the table asked, "What is that he's doing?"

Having watched Ian pick many times, I tried to distill the essence of his playing. Figure 1 is a tab with what I *think* might be a basic Joel-roll. Notice the thumb residing on the downbeat, and also the use of the right hand middle finger to pick the second or third string at times. Ian mentions these as possible differences between his picking and that of others.

But, as you can see in Figure 2, any basic pattern becomes infinitely variable as he interprets a song. This is a transcription of *Red Wing* as played by Ian, and though he doesn't play what I've claimed is his basic pattern, you still get the feel of it all the way through. Meanwhile, there is much that will be familiar to Scruggs-style players, a few melodic moves, and some surprises to tickle your ears.

Give it a try. You can hear Ian play the piece (and two variations!) on the OBA website at

[http://www.oregonbluegrass.org/BGExpress/articles/Theory\\_Of\\_Bluegrass\\_2013\\_2\\_Ian\\_Joel\\_Red\\_Wing.mp3](http://www.oregonbluegrass.org/BGExpress/articles/Theory_Of_Bluegrass_2013_2_Ian_Joel_Red_Wing.mp3)



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PS: All "Theory of Bluegrass" articles will be available on the OBA website. To make things interesting for both beginners and advanced pickers, the Express column will bounce back and forth – going back to cover some basics, then forward to cover some technical detail that we hope will captivate the advanced player.

## Ian's Picking Pattern Ian Joel

Banjo

Figure 1: This banjo tab describes the basic Ian Joel picking pattern. Notice the thumb on the downbeat, right hand middle finger sometimes pulled in to the second string.

# Red Wing

Kerry Mills

Banjo

5  
5 0 5 0 5 0 5 | 4 0 4 0 0 0 0 | 6 5 7 2 2 3 | 3 0 0 0 3 2 | 0 0 2 4 0 0

10  
3 0 3 5 0 | 5 0 6 5 0 | 3 0 3 0 | 1 0 2 0 | 0 0 0 0 0 0

15  
2 0 3 2 4 | 0 0 0 0 5 2 0 | 5 0 5 0 | 5 6 5 5 0 | 3 0 3 0

20  
7 2 3 0 0 | 2 0 2 2 4 | 2 3 0 2 2 4 | 0 0 2 0 3 | 4 0 0 3 4

25  
5 0 5 6 0 | 5 5 4 5 5 0 | 3 0 0 0 0 | 0 0 3 2 | 0 2 3 4 2 2 4

30  
2 3 2 2 4 0 | 0 0 0 2 0 | 0 0 0 2 0

S  
P

Arrangement: Ian Joel (S=slide, P=pulloff)

Figure 2: This is a transcription of Ian's version of *Red Wing*. You'll see Ian's picking pattern, some melodic moves, and lots of left-hand flourishes. You can hear this, along with two variations, using the link on the OBA website.