

Rob Benzing

By Donald Nitchie

Rob Benzing is a young banjo player whose recent self-titled recording on Patuxent we found particularly strong. Not only does Rob prove himself adept at the Don Reno tunes *Dixie Breakdown* and *Sockeye*, he also capably handles *Lonesome Road Blues*, *Armadillo Breakdown* and *The Bells of Saint Mary's*. He also showcases his fine back-up on *No Longer, a Sweetheart of Mine*, *Have You Come to Say Goodbye*, and *It's Only Right That I Should Pay*. He is backed up by a talented crew of young musicians assembled by producer Tom Mindte: Danny Nicely on guitar, Taylor Baker on mandolin, Mark Schatz on bass

and Patrick McAvinue on fiddle, along with vocalists Jacob and Joey Mosley and Scott Brannon.

BNL: How did you come to play the banjo? And how did you get started on Reno style?

Rob Benzing: I grew up in Maryland outside of DC. There was no bluegrass in my family before I started playing banjo. I heard a recording of Flatt and Scruggs when I was ten, it caught my attention and I immediately wanted to learn how to play banjo. It was the first time I'd heard bluegrass and I fell in love with it. I started taking lessons and was being taught Scruggs style from Earl's book. I took lessons for about a year and a half off and on. I had a couple different teachers. After I got the basics down I started just going to festivals and jams and teaching myself.

I first heard Reno-style banjo at a bluegrass show in Luckett's Virginia from a banjo player named Alvin Breedon. The way he played seemed a little different than most of the banjo player's I'd heard and I really liked it. This led me to start listening to Reno and Smiley.

Early on I didn't really know of anyone other than Alvin who played Reno-style but later on I met Billy Lee Cox, another fantastic player who also played Reno-style. I would try and watch him play whenever I could to see what he was doing. Some other local players that I learned from were Jimmy Kenny, Bill Beckner, Roy O'Neil and Ernie Bradley. Those were guys that went to the local jams that I went to.

My parents bought me a lot of bluegrass records so I listened to a lot of stuff. I really liked all the old school

Monocacy Crossing

Tuning: fCFAC. By Rob Benzing. Tab by Rob Benzing with Ian Perry



bluegrass when I was younger; I listened to Reno and Smiley; Flatt and Scruggs, the Country Gentlemen, Red Allen. The first Reno tunes I learned would have been *Remington Ride* and *Banjo Signal*.

BNL: What banjo are you playing now? Set-up, picks, strings?

RB: I play a Gibson RB-3; it's a 92. I've had this banjo pretty much since I started playing. It's the banjo I used on the record and the one I play every day. I use GHS PF190 light strings. Golden

Gate thump picks and Dunlop .0225 finger picks. I also have a Stelling Golden Cross that I got a few years back. I played that for about 2 years before switching back to the Gibson.

BNL: Do you teach banjo yourself? Do you have any particular advice for beginners? How to learn to play single-string, especially?

RB: I have never taught banjo. For beginners I would say get a teacher who can teach you the rolls and the right hand aspect of the banjo that's really important. But also learn basic Scruggs tunes and

style because I feel like that's what's important to know. For single string stuff I would say listen to players who use single string like Don or Bela to get an idea of how they are using single string and where they are using it. Start with basic scale's alternating thumb and index fingers to get the feel of playing on one string. Then try and pick out some basic melodies. Single string is something I'm still trying to learn.

BNL: Do you play regularly in any groups, and do they consist of some of the players on this recording?

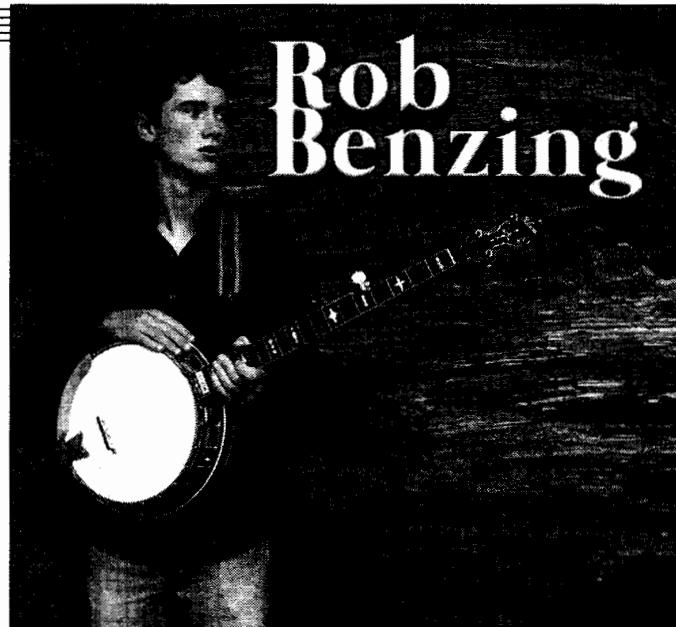
RB: I play with a few groups around DC, Maryland, VA and West Virginia. One of the groups, Headwaters, has Joey Mosley playing guitar and sometimes his brother Jacob plays mandolin as well. I also play in another group called The Short Mountain Boys and Taylor Baker plays mandolin in this group. I also play with Tom Mindte sometimes filling in with his band or playing with other groups with him. So yeah I play with some of the guys from the recording. And I'm currently playing with Shannon Bielski and Moonlight Drive.

BNL: How do you go about writing your own tunes? Do you start with a lick, or a melody, or a chord progression, or what? Do you have more tunes than these two?

RB: I don't really have any set way of writing a tune I usually just have some sort of main idea for a tune and I build the tune around that idea. I have a couple more I have written since the album has come out.



Photo by Michael Stewart



From Patuxent: A mix of songs and tunes from this talented young player and his terrific back-up musicians. Tunes include *Sockeye*, *No Longer a Sweetheart of Mine*, *Armadillo Breakdown*, *The Bells of St. Mary's*, *Dixie Breakdown*, *Lonesome River*, two Benzing originals and more. For more info go to <http://www.pxrec.com/>

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