

Join the Jam

by Ken and Brad Kolodner

Find a good seat - Get up close and don't be shy. We know it can be intimidating but the first step is to be confident. Don't sit way in the back where you can't hear things.

Identify the meter - Most tunes are in 4/4 except for waltzes which are in 3/4.

Identify the key - Listen for the ending note of a part – this usually tells you what key you are in. There are different types of keys called modes: major, Mixolydian, Dorian, Aeolian, etc. The most common mode is major. In Old-Time, the most common major keys are G, A, C and D. The other most common mode is Mixolydian (7th note in the scale is flattened). The best way to think about this without thinking too much is to identify a tune that sounds like the one you are hearing. For example, this tune sounds like Sandy Boys (Mixolydian - flattened 7th note). This tune sounds like Needlecase (Major).

Establish a groove - At the least, try to strum (banjo), shuffle (fiddle) or bang (hammered dulcimer) along. Old-Time music is predicated on the groove. Tap your feet and find the beat.

Identify the structure - Most tunes have two parts of equal length: an "A" and "B" section. Within these parts, most tunes are composed in two measure phrases with a question and answer format. There are three and four part tunes as well. Crooked tunes (irregular number of beats in a part) also exist and can be tough to follow. At the very least, try to identify when the tune starts over again and jump back in.

Identify chord progressions - To start, guess. Phrases and patterns within the tune repeat. Spend some time learning your I, IV, and V chords for each of the four major keys. For example, the I, IV, and V chords in the key of G are G, C and D. If you can identify the chord changes, sometimes you can find important notes to play. Tunes often use slices of chords either as arpeggios or scalar patterns. At the very least, identifying the chord progression is necessary to play backup.

Identify target or anchor notes or phrases - Almost every tune has what musicians call variously the "corners," "anchors" or "target notes" that are critical to defining the tune. To new players it can be a mystery why there are so many versions of common tunes. They often want to know what the "real" tune is. The reality is that many notes in most tunes are unimportant and that there may be only a few phrases or critical notes within each phrase that are essential to the integrity of the tune. These are the "anchors" of the tune. A typical technique in learning by ear is to find these notes first and then gradually fill out the tune upon repeated listening. Some musicians call this finding the "skeleton" of the tune. The best strategy is to find the beginning and ending notes of the phrase first. Then fill in the details using scales and arpeggios. Here is where understanding chords really helps!

Do not chase what you missed. Keep going! This is a very common problem where you hear a phrase and want to try to reproduce it except the tune has moved on. You have to move on with the tune or else you will be overwhelmed. Old-Time jams frequently play the tune many times through. You will have another chance.

"I can't hear myself" - There will be a lot of noise around you in a jam. Develop your ability to focus on listening only to the strongest players and yourself. This takes concentration, practice and focus. Again, don't be shy about playing loudly so you can hear yourself.

Do not be timid - You must jump in if you are going to have a chance to pick up some of the tune. Do not be self-conscious. You may hit as many wrong notes and chords as you like and you will not bother anyone. Almost no one is paying *any* attention to you! In fact, most people are trying not to hear you!! Guessing and checking is the single best way to figure out a tune.

Listen to the strongest players - Try to listen to the strongest players in a jam. As much as you can, try to tune out the chaos. This is admittedly challenging but with practice it is remarkable how much you can focus. It is very much like having a conversation with someone in a very noisy place – we learn to tune out what we do not need to hear.

Misconceptions about learning by ear -

- First, you do NOT need to be able sing very well (or at all) to learn by ear. Trust me on this one!
- Second, you do not need “perfect” pitch (e.g. you do not need to ever know what an “A” sounds like) but only need to develop a sense of “relative” pitch.
- Third, while some people are perhaps “naturals” and can hear tunes easily, learning by ear is a skill to be learned, practiced and developed. You will get better and better at learning by ear via practicing and understanding the many components of the task.

Finally, learning by ear should not be considered “rote learning.” Rote learning usually involves playing something over and over again typically without any thinking. Some people confuse learning by ear as rote learning—that you *just* have to listen many, many times to get a tune. And you *just* listen and play it over and over again until you memorize it. That might work for some or even many people. I would argue that for many of us there is clearly much more to the process, *especially* if you want to retain the tune for a long time. Rote learning typically involves no understanding of structure, chords, intervals etc. I believe that many experienced players retain hundreds or even thousands of tunes by using a wide variety of the tools including many of those described here.