



Junior Hoedownner

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Greetings Junior Hoedowners. The subject this month is again "Learning to play by ear." It is taken from an article that Laura Barry wrote in an old issue of the National Old Time Fiddler newspaper. Hopefully it will encourage you to learn tunes in different ways. (This is only a suggestion. You may have your favorite way that works better for you.)

Laura writes. . . . I tried to learn tunes from music because I was sure I could never learn to play by ear. I learned a tune fairly quickly using notes, then memorized the notes until I could play without the music. The trouble was that I could never remember those memorized tunes for very long. I became determined to teach myself to play fiddle tunes without using music.

A friend taped a simple tune for me. He put only short phrases on at a time, leaving lots of blank tape between phrases to give me time to try to figure out a little at a time. I also started to hold the fiddle like a guitar and pluck the strings while I was figuring out the notes. It took me days to figure out even a simple tune. It was often frustrating and I practically wore out my tape recorder rewinding and rewinding in order to figure out just a few notes.

Two things happened. First, I noticed that I never forgot the tunes I had struggled over for days. Second, each time I learned a new tune by ear, the whole process seemed to get easier and easier.

I believe that learning to play by ear is worth the effort. It frees you to tape your favorite fiddlers and learn to play your favorite versions of tunes.

If you want to learn to play by ear, try this; it worked for me:

Listen to a tune for a long time before you try to learn it. Be sure you can hum or whistle it.

Make a tape of the tune that has broken up the tune in short phrases. Leave time between the spaces. As you get better at learning from tapes, you will eventually not need to have the song broken down for you.

Hold your fiddle like a guitar/mandolin and pluck the strings with your right hand thumb while you are figuring out the notes. Add bow only when you have gotten the notes right. This also gives you a free hand with which to hit the rewind button.

My father tells of the barn dances he attended in North and South Dakota as a kid. Because he was a kid learning to play the fiddle, he got to stay up and sit by the fiddler, even after the other kids had to go to sleep. When they got home from the dance, he would practice the tunes he heard at the dance. How much easier it would have been if he could have brought home a tape recording instead of a memory.

As fiddlers, we're so lucky to be living in the era of tape recording (or CDs or DVDs), both because it makes learning new tunes easier and because it enables us to preserve for always the great music of the fiddlers who came before us.

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