

How To Learn By Ear

& Retain What You've Learned

Learning music by ear is easier than you think. Follow the steps below and you'll be playing by ear before you know it!

Preparation

- Listen a lot
 - In the car
 - On your phone
 - On every music player you have
- Learn the chords & chord progression
 - Strum Machine is a great resource for learning chord progressions
- Set up your practice space with the things you will need to avoid distraction
 - Pencil & paper
 - Beverage
 - Instrument & pick
 - Device you will use to slow down or transcribe music if the goal is to have a written copy of the song

Start Small

- Choose a short, easy passage. This may not always be the first lick of the tune or song
- Listen to the passage
- Hum the passage out loud (or in your head if you're feeling shy, but out loud is more effective)
- Start with the first note, or a note that you can easily identify and find it on your instrument
- Add one note at a time, listening to the passage frequently
- Transcribe each lick in musical notation, tablature, or your own shorthand. This will help you memorize the material. Be careful not to use the written music as an excuse to not memorize the song since this will diminish the value of learning a song by ear

Use Strategy

- Is the note high or low?
- Use process of elimination to find each note – random guesses are a waste of time and effort

- Once you have learned a few notes, leave them behind and start on a new set of notes, then loop back later
- Do not start from the beginning of the first section when learning subsequent sections, this will lead to wasted time because playing the old notes will cause you to forget how the new ones sound
- Practice each section separately and review each section one at a time before learning new sections
- Once you have memorized a few sections, start combining sections to make longer licks
- Pause and practice the longer licks before learning the rest of the tune or song
- Take breaks as often as needed – learning by ear can be tedious
- Be kind to yourself when you make mistakes, mistakes will happen
- Don't get in a hurry to learn the whole tune or song at once. Learning by ear is best done in pieces.

Record & Transcribe

- Record and transcribe your progress frequently
 - This will help you learn the material more quickly, and you will be more likely to retain it
 - Listen back to your recordings to make sure you're playing the song correctly
- Use the recordings and transcriptions to jog your memory when you want to play the tune or song
- Use written and visual memory cues to remind yourself how the licks go, and what order to arrange them
 - Give things names and mental pictures as often as possible.

Practice Ear Training & Related Skills

- Practice ear training every day
- Play ear training games with your picking buddies
- Use interval training apps to practice identifying intervals
- Learn scales, arpeggios, and chords
 - These are the framework for the melodies you are learning.
- Hum along with everything you play
 - This will help you find the right notes more quickly when learning by ear.

From the classroom of Nate Lee at Nashville Mandolin Camp, 2019

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