

MandoUniversity News

Newsletter Goes Quarterly And New Book Coming Soon

Some of you may have noticed the absence of a MandoUniversity Newsletter in July and August. I simply got so busy with other things that I was unable to dedicate the time needed to write it. Both bands have been steadily working and I am not complaining about that!

I have also been steadily plugging away at the two new mandolin books I have in the works. When I wrote the first book, **Mandolin Master Class**, I envisioned exactly five volumes, each covering a different major aspect of mandolin playing. The second book, **Mandolin Training Camp** was part of this overall master plan.

The third book is very close to completion. I am doing the second round of proofreading on the typesetting and, let me tell you, proofing tab is very tedious and time consuming. But, the job is nearing completion and I plan to have it available by the end of September.

This new book, called **Mandolin Excursion**, is the third step in the process started with the other 2 books. This new book is a tune book. It contains 44 tunes or solos to bluegrass songs. In some cases I have included multiple versions of the same song to give you lots of possible choices in how you ultimately play the tune. It is an effort to merge what you learned using the first two books and accumulate some new tunes and licks in a practical way. It really is a "learn by doing" book.

The new book runs the gamut from breaks for bluegrass standards like Salty Dog and Little Maggie, classic bluegrass jam session tunes like Whiskey Before Breakfast and Blackberry Blossom, some offbeat original tunes, some Celtic flavored songs, and some old-time fiddle numbers. So, keep your eye out for it if you want to increase your stash of licks and tunes and learn some fresh mandolin ideas.

Anyway to get back to the newsletter, I would rather do a good job on the newsletter and have it come out less frequently than to throw something together each month just to beat my arbitrary self-imposed deadline. So, beginning with this issue I will be preparing this newsletter quarterly.

Send Me Your Questions

Some of the most popular columns I have published in this newsletter, based on the feedback I get from readers, have been answers to reader's questions. I don't claim to have all the answers but I am happy to sit down and tell you about the things I have experienced and ideas I have pertaining to the mandolin, playing with a band, equipment, and you name it. Sometimes I am not sure where to go next with this newsletter until I get a letter from someone who asks a specific question or asks me to do an article on some particular topic. If you have an idea or a question you'd like addressed in this newsletter just send me an email addressed to autobug@aol.com

Lessons From The Dawg

No, not him. You can learn a lot from him but I mean those four-footed rascals who freeload around our houses. Have you ever watched two dogs playing with a ball? I spent many happy hours doing that with my two dogs, Barbie and Ginger. Sometimes I was part of the game and sometimes the dogs would go on without me and I would just observe.

Here is how the game usually played out. I would show the dogs the tennis ball and Barbie would get very excited. She would bark until I threw the ball. She would not take her eyes off that ball for even an instant. Ginger, on the other hand, didn't seem that interested in the ball but continued trotting around in circles seemingly unaware that the game was about the start. Then I would throw the ball way out across the field and Barbie would race across the grass. She was able to predict with great accuracy the trajectory of the ball and would rarely miss catching the ball. Sometimes she might get it on the first hop.

Ginger, not really interested in the ball but very aware that Barbie was speeding across the field, would also race across the field in pursuit, not of the ball, but of fun itself! At the moment Barbie snagged the tennis ball and stopped, Ginger would often continue running for another twenty yards not realizing that Barbie had caught the ball and stopped with it. Eventually turning and spotting Barbie, who was at this point laying down and gnawing the ball joyously, Ginger would run back to Barbie and pounce at the ground in front of her. Ginger would run back and forth in front of Barbie attempting to goad her into running again.

Barbie would then trot back to me, ball in mouth, with Ginger running circles around her the entire way. Barbie would shove the ball between my thighs, just jamming it in there with her snout, then backing up a step or two would bark, commanding me to repeat the process. She wouldn't put it in my hand. I don't know why. I think was just her way.

This game might go on for some time until eventually Barbie would get a little tired and just stay out in the field with the ball. Ginger would race along with Barbie but she rarely seemed to even notice the ball. I think it would be better to say that she knew about the ball and the power it held over Barbie but didn't see the ball as anything other than the catalyst for the game. She knew that the ball meant the race would take place, but only Barbie actually cared about the ball.

Then, Barbie would lay the ball on the ground between her outstretched front legs while laying there in the grass. Ginger would eventually notice the ball just sitting there and would make little attacks to try to snatch the ball from Barbie's control. Ginger was only interested in taking the ball so she could restart the running game. Barbie would tease Ginger with the ball and then pick it up in her mouth at the last instant just as Ginger ran close enough to grab it. Then, at just the moment when Barbie thought Ginger might lose interest in the ball, she would leave it between her paws and allow Ginger to grab the ball on her next attempt. ----->

Lessons From The Dawg - continued

Ginger, suddenly aware that she had the ball, would take off across the field and Barbie leaped up and followed in hot pursuit. Ginger would run in wide circles, always looking back from time to time to be sure Barbie was on her tail. If Barbie fell behind or stopped, Ginger would face Barbie and just drop the ball from her mouth and almost dare Barbie to come and get it. The ball would lay there between them and if Barbie took a step towards it Ginger would pick it up and run again. Barbie was pretty clever and usually got the ball back through some misdirection scheme as Ginger's real interest was not in the ball itself but in running and racing. Barbie's real love was the ball itself. She loved to catch it. She would return it, but only so she could catch it again. And she loved to gnaw on it and slobber on it.

Ginger could catch the ball but often missed even when I threw it near her. She would come within an inch of catching it but would just keep her mouth open and it would go through. She just never really tried to catch it. She chased after it and ran right on past. The ball was not the goal to her. It was the running! She loves to run.

I see similarities between this dog game and the bluegrass bands I play with. The first similarity is that the game always seems the same yet there are millions of possibilities for how the game is actually played out. The neighbor across the street sees "that guy playing with his dogs." But, every game was different. The number of tosses, the paths the dogs took, the direction of throws, the length of the game, the infinite number of minute differences from one game to the next. No game of ball was ever the same. Yet, they were all the same. This is true for baseball, elections, mowing the lawn, driving to the grocery store, or playing a bluegrass song. It's like a face. Everybody has two eyes, a nose, a mouth, a chin, etc. They are all different and shaped and arranged differently. But, any goofball can look at them and say "that is a face."

A casual observer can recognize that a bluegrass band is playing a song. But, in millions of small ways the song takes place in different ways each time it is played. But, it is still the bluegrass song. Always different yet always the same. The tiny differences from one version to the next are what keep a certain type of true die-hard music fan coming back time after time to hear the same old songs.

I dare say that I have never played a solo to a song the same way twice. In fact, it may well be impossible to do so! It might sound the same, taken in an overall way, because I strung together the same licks and went to the same places on the fingerboard, and yet it cannot possibly be exactly the same as the last time I played it.

Sometimes I try, deliberately, to make one version different from the last. But, whether you try to or not, it will be different in some ways. Try to play Old Joe Clark ten times in a row, exactly the same each time. It cannot be done. Now, some members of the audience (or the band if they never really listen to you) might think you played it the same. That is because they didn't discern the minute differences. You, yourself, might not be able to tell the differences, but they are there.

Another similarity of the dog-ball scenario to a bluegrass band in full swing is the interplay between the players. Barbie, alone with the tennis ball, would probably just lay there and chew on the thing. The game cannot take place alone! The same is true for bluegrass music. The music can only happen when multiple players play together. Any fool with a mandolin can tell the difference between sitting in the living room

can tell the difference between sitting in the living room playing Salt Creek alone and doing the song with a bass player, banjo player, a guitar player and a fiddle player. The bluegrass game only happens when the entire group is involved.

Also, notice the role playing the dogs naturally acted out in the dog-ball game. Barbie's interest was mostly in catching the ball. Ginger's interest was mostly in running. Ginger let out of the pen alone would not run. She wanted to run with Barbie! Each player in a bluegrass band has different motivations for doing what they do. They are not all the same. One person may get his kicks from racing through breakdowns and the next might love a good slow tune. Some people like to jam and explore the unexpected and others like to attempt to repeat with accuracy some previously determined arrangement each time. And, most likely, each player at times leans toward one tendency or another. Each player is different in infinitely small ways each time, yet always the same. Like the game as a whole. If you can be aware of the smallest changes you will better understand the other players.

Knowing what really drives a player to be playing bluegrass is important in trying to create opportunities for them to contribute at the highest level of active interest. I think of Ginger snatching the ball from Barbie. She didn't really want the ball. But, she knew Barbie did! And by running off with the ball she motivated Barbie. Barbie, knowing that Ginger knew of the ball's importance to the game, would lure Ginger with it by leaving it unattended. Seemingly unattended.

Finding the right mix of players is important too. It provides the band and the audience with a more varied and fulfilling musical experience. If I had two dogs who just wanted to run they would probably take off and not be seen for three days! There are bands like that. They are mostly found in the outer reaches of the festival parking lot with nobody standing around watching. Nobody wants to watch or listen! Their game is for their own amusement only. On the other hand, if both dogs were intent on catching the ball on every toss, if they both absolutely had to have the ball, fights would likely break out. Continuously try to be aware of the interests and motivations of the people you play with and the game will be more fun for everyone.

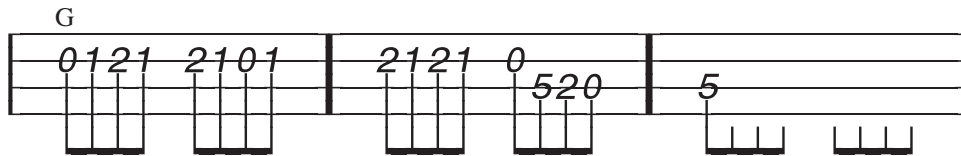
But, be careful. You might think you know what revs the banjo player's motor but be dead wrong! People change. Their motivations and needs change, sometimes from minute to minute. Try to see what makes them tick. Watch the other players in the group. With some practice you can learn to notice whether they are "into it" or "just running along." Look for ways to give everyone in the group what they are looking for and foster an environment where the reciprocal is true. If you do this the game will be more fun and you'll play better music. It doesn't have to be about you all the time. Sometimes you are along for the ride for a few minutes. Try to give the other guy what he is looking for and he will be more likely to do the same for you.

Go play with your dog.

Getting That Stupid Lick Out of My Head!

Have you ever been playing in a jam session or a gig and you notice that you keep playing some lick over and over and over. Every now and then that happens to me. It usually happens when I am playing so fast that my thinking is falling behind my playing and some otherwise cool lick gets repeated over and over and I seem powerless to stop it!

Here is a little example of a lick, one that is quite nice when used in moderation, that emerged at the last gig and I think I must have played it 40 times, on different songs, transposed to be played over different chords, etc. Here is that lick:



So, what does it mean if you keep recycling the same ideas over and over? And how do you remedy the situation? First of all, I think the over-use of a lick can arise for a couple of reasons. I know a couple of guitar players who only know one "run" on the guitar--the good ol' Flatt's G run. And man, do they use it over and over. I think they use it because they simply don't have anything else in their musical vocabulary. So, that is reason one. Maybe you are overusing certain licks because you don't have enough licks to choose from stored away in your noggin somewhere.

You can remedy this by **learning some new tunes** and deliberately trying to increase the number of musical phrases you can play easily. It is impossible not to increase your stash of licks when you learn new songs.

Another possible cause for over-using a lick might be that you are just not able to think of anything because the song is going too fast. You might have some other things you can play but you just can't think of them at the moment when you need them. That is a tougher nut to crack! You can try to get the other players to slow down a bit or you might use the minutes between songs to fish through your head for other licks.

It can also just be plain, unthinking habit. We all have habits. Kicking a habit is harder than developing one. I think teenagers in love experience a similar fixation when one of them "falls in love" with someone and can't seem to get that person out of their mind. The surest way to get that object of fixation out of the mind is to replace it with a new object of fixation! But, you see the risk here. The old fixation is gone but you soon have a new one. The answer is not to find a new lick, but find a bunch of new licks and try to develop some new ways of thinking about certain licks and why you use them.

One method you might try when you notice you are overusing a lick is to make a vow that you will use it only once per song. Or better yet, only once every 10 songs. Sort of like the cigarette smoker trying to quit but allowing himself one smoke per day. So, I don't know about this method, but it is worth a try.

Another corrective method is to try to preemptively practice some new things. If you think there is a good chance you will be playing a break to "Sittin' On Top Of The World" in the next session, why not sit down in advance and design yourself a new way to play the solo. You will then have all the time in the world to find something interesting to play--and you can practice it to perfection--instead of just "burping" out those same old licks subconsciously. I should do the same!

Here is another method. You know the phrase "one man's trash is another man's treasure"? Your tired overused licks might be fresh and exciting to another player. You can get rid of that old lick by giving it away!


I ask every one of you to accurately jot down in tab (with the chords) that lick that you tend you use over and over. The lick that you use way too often. Please limit your overused lick to 1, 2, or 3 measures only. (My guess is that most will be 9 or 17 notes long.) No complete songs, even if you are sick of them! Just little licks like the example above--or smaller.

I will publish all the licks received in the next issue of this newsletter. You will officially be rid of your lick and someone else can put it good use.

Consider this the price of a subscription to this newsletter. Prove to me that you are actually out there reading this stuff and send your tired and worn out licks to:

Brad Laird's Lick Recycling Program
5856 Foxfield Trail
Rex, Georgia 30273

No emailed files unless it is a TabPerfect Macintosh file, or a JPEG.



If you have already purchased one of my 2 books, "Mandolin Master Class" or "Mandolin Training Camp", I want to thank you and I hope you are finding them useful to your playing and understanding of the mandolin.

If you have not tried the books I invite you to take a look at them on my website:

www.mandouniversity.com

Thanks!

