

Bradley Laird's

Issue #16
Winter 2008

MandoUniversity News

BRAD LAIRD MANDOLIN CAMP FEB. 17-22, 2008

I am excited to announce that I will be teaching a week of mandolin classes as a part of the Alabama Folk School February 17-22. If you are interested in picking your mandolin and picking my brain for an entire week in the beautiful North Alabama setting of Camp McDowell I encourage you to sign up today!



Alabama Folk School
at Camp McDowell

The material taught is designed for beginner AND intermediate players. Beginners will learn my thoughts on how to tune, how to play basic chords, how to play rhythm and how to set up your mandolin for easy playability. After going through the basics, the beginners will learn to learn a group of songs in a variety of styles including old-time “fiddle tunes”, Celtic influenced dance tunes, and bluegrass jam session favorites. You also learn the secrets to effective practice. All written materials will be provided so you’ll be able to keep practicing when you return home.

Intermediate students will get a hands on week of the material covered in my book “Mandolin Master Class”. The classes will focus on improvisation, theory, navigation on the fingerboard, effective practice techniques, and more advanced tune embellishment ideas. If you have the book you have a pretty good idea where I am headed here, but you might benefit from a week of hanging out and going over all those ideas in person, one-on-one.

The week will go something like this:

Sunday:

3:00-5:30 Registration

5:30-6:00 Meet and Greet

6:00-6:45 Dinner

7:00-8:30 Meet your Instructor (That would be me.)

Monday-Thursday:

8:00-8:45 Breakfast

9:00-12:00 Class*

12:15-1:00 Lunch

1:15-4:15 Class*

4:30-5:30 Break

5:45-6:30 Dinner

7:00-8:30 Evening Social (Pickin', of course!)

Friday :

8:00-8:45 Breakfast

9:00-10:00 Departure

Space is Limited so sign up today!

*The classes will be divided between beginner and intermediate as needed depending on who attends. For example, I will work with one group for an hour and then move to the other group while the first group practices those ideas. Some topics will be better covered as one complete group.

I will also dedicate time to working with each person individually in any way that I can be of assistance. I think it is obvious to most of you that I dearly love the mandolin and get great pleasure out of helping others with their playing.

The holidays are over now so **YOU DESERVE** a week to yourself with nothing on your mind but mandolin! Go to: <http://www.campmcdowell.com> and click the "Folk School" link. Check out the facilities! This place is beautiful. Your meals and lodging are included! If you have any questions contact coordinator Megan Huston by email at folkschool@campmcdowell.com or call her at:

Alabama Folk School
105 DeLong Road, Nauvoo, Alabama 35578
(205) 387-1806

AN E-MAIL EXCHANGE THAT MIGHT INTEREST YOU

- > From: Cory (email address removed for privacy reasons)
- > Date: December 17, 2007 12:43:24 AM EST
- > To: sales@cvls.com
- > Subject: Premium Mandolin Courses
- >
- > I recently purchased and downloaded the premium mandolin course
- > covering basic pentatonic improvisation. I am rather disappointed in
- > what I received. Although the lesson was instructional and useful, and
- > I did learn about pentatonic scales, the instructor didn't really
- > cover improvisation. He did give some examples of playing up and down
- > the scale in patterns, but never did any in-depth explanations of how
- > to improvise with the pentatonic scale as was suggested by the
- > advertisement (and the course title). The instructor, Brad Laird, made
- > several references to part two of the course where he would cover
- > improvisation. Where do I find part two of the course? Will that part
- > truly cover pentatonic improvisation?
- >
- > Thanks,
- >
- > Cory

*OK, so I got this email and, **crushed** by the idea that someone would be disappointed with the "culmination of my life's work", decided to reply and try to regain some credibility in his eyes. **At least he did say that the lesson was "instructional and useful"** but when he said the instructor (me) didn't really cover improvisation, I was scratching my head going "wha?" I should mention that the "Premium Mandolin Course" consists of a 29 minute QuickTime video lesson called "Pentatonic Improvisation Basics" and sells for \$4.99. Anyway, I replied to him and tried to explain further...*

Cory:

I got your email about the Pentatonic Improvisation Basics lesson. I am happy that you found it useful, at least in some way. Imagine that you decided to take mandolin lessons from some instructor and you were paying \$20 for a half hour and you walked in and said "I want to learn to improvise." (I have had many, many students do precisely that.) Six lessons later you will barely be scratching the surface. Six months later you are barely scratching the surface, but making progress. Here I am, 30 years into the quest, and I am still scratching the surface. Read on and I'll try to explain.

As the title indicates, this lesson is about "basics". There are a lot of concepts, techniques,

scales, patterns, and ideas which gradually accumulate in the player's mind and the net result of this is what pops out when you "improvise." Whether you choose to play note "a" and then note "c" while I might choose to play note "a" followed by note "b" is incredibly difficult to explain. Maybe impossible.

What the lesson set out to do, and I believe it does fairly well, is begin to define a sub-set of musical notes which YOU then choose from to suit you and which will not clash or be dissonant with the chord played. As to which of those notes in particular you choose, and in what order, and in what timing, no one can tell you. The note choice decisions must ultimately come from your mind or it would not be improvisation---it would simply be copying of my ideas of the moment.

This is very much like writing a poem. You can learn to spell. You can learn the meaning of words and build a large vocabulary. You can read poems written by the Great Poets. You can memorize them if you like. But, when it comes time to express yourself, you must write your own poem. You will do this better, after a few thousand lousy poems, because you will gain experience. You learn to write better poems by studying the poems of others, by adding to your vocabulary, and etc. But, if you really want to write THE GREAT POEM, you must fall in love, lose a loved one, go to war, make a grave decision, or live through some other ACTUAL experiences. Then, with pencil in hand, the acculated treasure of information and technique allows you to write something truly poetic. All I can provide is information. With mandolin in hand you will gain these experiences.

What the lesson does, and what others on the subject of improvisation which are coming, aim to do, is provide some sense of organization to the "block of notes" which YOU then select from. Rather than being faced with a bewildering selection of the complete chromatic scale, from your low open G string, all the way up to the highest possible E string note, I am attempting to show you ways to select a sub-set of those notes to choose from. It's a lot like the way a songwriter or composer sits down and chooses "hmmm... should I go up after that last note or stay here on this note?" It's all subjective and you get to be the one to decide the answers to those questions.

The patterns I played in the video are just a starting point--a way for you to learn the locations of those notes. You can practice them, exactly as I played them, and you will gain some familiarity with their locations and their sounds and how those sounds relate musically to the chord currently in progress. But, ultimately, you will find new and probably better ways to select from these notes.

Consider a hot Sam Bush solo versus, let's say, a guy at a local jam session who has been playing for a year. Sam, using the exact same available notes, is more likely to create a solo that is MUSICAL whereas the less experienced player may improvise a solo that sounds "pattern oriented", or "amateurish", or "repetitious", etc. The difference is, assuming that they both know how to select a set of notes which will at least "work" with the chord (which a pentatonic scale can do in certain circumstances), is that Mr. Bush doubtless has a great deal

more experience in making note selections and lining them up in ways that register to our ear as "good music".

Everyone starts at the same place. We don't know anything. Then we learn a few things. Like don't play a G# note in a G major chord. We begin to learn a sense of "right notes" and "wrong notes." We experiment. We hit lots of bad sounding notes that might sound perfectly alright in some other chord context. We learn from experience. But, if you start with no information--for example, if you don't know the basics of the pentatonic scale, how to make one, how to locate the notes, what chords they will sound good with--how can you then try to make music with a pentatonic scale? Information is power and reduces the mistakes made. But, information only matures into music when coupled with experience. And, sadly, experience is not available on the web for \$4.99. If so, I would buy a couple of hundred bucks worth myself! (Or perhaps I could sell some my old, worn out experience.) See the absurdity of that?

This video, and all other lessons, books, videos, ever written by anyone, will never fully explain "what to play" when improvising. If they ever do that they, paradoxically, then become NON-improvisation lessons.

Hopefully, this makes sense and that you hang in there with your mandolin studies. I appreciate the comments and questions regarding the lesson and rest assured that I spend a great deal of time thinking on these ideas and yet, when it comes time to finalize a script and get it on camera, one must make choices and I am fully aware that there will never be the Perfect Lesson. However, I am trying.

Sincerely,
Brad Laird

And then Cory responded...

- > Brad,
- >
- > That was very kind of you to respond to my email with such an in depth
- > explanation of the art of musical improvisation. It certainly does
- > make sense. The example of the poet really helped me understand the
- > concept much better.
- >
- > Thanks for the link to your website too. I took a look at what you
- > have there and read a few of the past newsletters. You have some
- > really good stuff there. I think that I will order your book and CD,
- > The Master Class.
- >
- > Also, on the \$5 Internet course, you made several references to Part
- > II. Is this something that will become available soon?

>
> Thanks,
>
> Cory

And my last response to him...

Hi Cory...

Yes, part 2 is now available on the site. However, as with the first, remember that this is just another small step towards obtaining a set of tools that you can use for improvisation. Part 1 describes how to use a pentatonic scale over the 3 major and 3 minor chords in the key. Part 2 discusses the concept of changing to a new pentatonic scale when the chords change. (for example: using G pentatonic over a G chord, then changing to C pentatonic for a C chord, etc. etc.)

Future lessons in this series will discuss how other scales and ideas can be used in our quest towards totally free improv. As I put each video lesson together I am striving towards demonstrating ONE particular concept or idea and give some exercises and demonstrations of how that idea functions in the real world.

I am also creating some "tune based" lessons that you have probably seen. (Salt Creek, Cripple Creek, etc.---) These "tune" lessons are designed to work for people of a variety of levels. An absolute beginner can learn the ultra-simple, basic melody to get started. Then I present an intermediate and a bit more advanced version of the tune. Those breaks are a vehicle for understanding improvisation. On another level they (when I get a sufficient number of tunes filmed and edited) will be a good source for flat-out stealing (I mean acquiring) licks that you can stick into your playing however you see fit.

When you really get down to it, improvisation and tune composition (or creating a solo for a tune) ARE EXACTLY THE SAME PROCESS--except that you simply have a lot less time to think when improvising. Good improvisation means to take whatever skills and knowledge you have at the moment and instantly write a melody (maybe adding some embellishment) that makes some sense to the listener. Not an easy task when you have milliseconds to plan your next note! It's a lot easier when you have all weekend to decide how you want "the B part to sound." That's how getting into songwriting (tunes) trains you in the skills of instantaneous improv. It's just ultra-slow, low-pressure improvisation.

I will eventually get around to doing a vid or two on composing your own instrumentals. I really strongly urge every player to write tunes. That exercise really helps a person think about why we choose one note over another and it furthers the improv. quest a lot. The other nice thing about writing tunes is that they come from YOUR MIND and are therefore, naturally, easier to play!

One other great way to make progress in your quest to improvise is to work on "ear training." In a nutshell, ear training is about learning to find melodies on the instrument. In other words, if I played "Red River Valley" could you repeat that tune on the mandolin without a lot of missed notes? Just sit there, think of a song that you know so well (like Happy Birthday, Home On The Range, etc.) Pick some starting note at random on the mandolin and see if you can play the melody correctly. The more you fool around with improving that skill the more credibility your improvised solos will take on since your musical ramblings will be far more likely to include hints from the original melody. I mean, getting far out and playing crazy sounding notes that "work with the chords" is one approach (I will not mention any names as I would have to include myself in that list at times), but if you weave that melody into the improvisational mayhem it will always come across better to the listener.

Anyway, I have to take off to the airport to pick up my wife and get the ol' Christmas festivities rollin' around here. Take it easy and have a good holiday.

I appreciate you writing with your question as it gives me an excuse to write some stuff that I can insert into the next newsletter! haha (I won't use your name unless you say it's OK to.)

Brad Laird

Now, to you, the friendly readers of this newsletter: My intention was not to write another book in the course of our email exchange, but when I read it all over a couple of times, I realized that the ideas in it might be useful to some of you as well. At the very least you might get a kick out of seeing me "grilled" on the fire of criticism. To Cory, thanks for writing that email and allowing me the opportunity to respond. If you'd like the opportunity to join Cory in analyzing my video lessons go to: www.freemandolinvideos.com

THE TALE OF THE FUNKY G STRING

Over the past two or three weeks I began to think something was going wrong with my mandolin. Today, upon close examination I discovered what was wrong! Let me share it with you if I may...

Lately I have had a tremendous amount of trouble keeping my pair of G strings in tune at gigs and no matter what they sounded awful. I love my trusty old mandolin and she was letting me down. I tend to beat the living snot out of the G strings and I just assumed (wrongly) that I had beaten them to death.

I have stated somewhere in these newsletters that I don't like the sound of a new string--that I prefer the sound after a couple hours of good playing on them-- when they start to get a little "thumpy" but before they totally go downhill.

Today, a friend of mine stopped by the house to have me check out his brand new Eastman 815. He hadn't even opened the case yet! I laid my mandolin in his case as we put it through the paces and under the microscope. (It sounded pretty good by the way!) In tuning the two mandolins I kept reaching over and plunking the G string on mine and I said "Your Eastman sounds better than mine, at least my G string!"

Then I noticed the problem! I had a D string on for one of my G's!!! How the heck did I do that? I buy my strings unpackaged (since I am cheap) and roll my own. I store them in old string envelopes marked "10", "14", "24", and "34". I guess I stuck one in the wrong envelope or grabbed the wrong one in the dark at a gig or something.

Anyway, I switched the fool thing out and all is well again!

AND NOW FOR A TON FOR THIS ISSUE...

SALLY GOODEN REVISTED

I thought we might take another look at 2 versions of the tune "Sally Gooden" and perhaps learn some new ways to approach the tune. I am presently in the middle of revising my book *Mandolin Excursion* to include tab and standard notation and these two versions are taken directly from that revision.

Incidentally, if you are new to this newsletter, the following tunes have been presented in past issues...

Salt Creek	Issue 1
Takin' The Shortcut Home	Issue 2
Copperhead	Issue 3
Cripple Creek	Issue 4
Sundown Waltz	Issue 5
Green Haired Boy	Issue 6
Pigeon Hill	Issue 9
Cold Hard Cash	Issue 14
Forked Deer	Issue 15

2 VERSION OF SALLY GOODEN BEGIN ON NEXT PAGE

This version goes up the neck. Take special notice of the fact that no open strings are used at all in the first half of the tune. Passages like that can be easily moved up and down the neck to play in other keys. In the second half of the tune I introduce a blues scale note. That 3rd fret note on the 2nd string in the B part. If you don't know what the heck I am talking about just learn to play it and then go read my book "Mandolin Master Class" which I think explains it very well.

Sally Gooden - Version 3

Traditional, Arr. by Bradley Laird

A Part

B Part

Everybody "always" plays Sally Gooden in A. (Except a few renegade banjo players who have no sympathy for the fiddle and mandolin players and will play it in G.) Here is your chance for good-natured revenge and a great chance to learn to transpose* into other keys. Banjo players tend to freak out when faced with the key of F but you don't have to! Learn this. It's really easy if you have learned the other three versions well.

Sally Gooden - Version 4

Traditional, Arr. by Bradley Laird

A Part

B Part

*If the concept of transposing is confusing to you, please explore my books "Mandolin Master Class" and "Mandolin Training Camp" which explain it in detail.