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Welcome to this month's issue of the MandoUniversity Newsletter! In this issue I am going to jump around and hit on some topics that have been on my mind lately. First is an article on solving the problem often reported by all mandolin players--the problem of not being able to hear their own instrument.

Second, I am including a question sent to me by readers of "Mandolin Master Class" and "Mandolin Training Camp". Maybe my reply will have something of interest to you. I plan to include other reader questions in future issues.

And finally, I am including an arrangement of the old jam session standard "Cripple Creek." Hope you enjoy the newsletter and if you don't have the books go to the web site and check 'em out. Thanks!

Bradley Laird

Trouble in Paradise

All too often I find myself having trouble hearing what I am doing on the mandolin. In jam sessions it can at times be maddening to see your pick moving and yet hear little or nothing coming out of the instrument. On stage, using monitors, the same problem crops up and can be equally frustrating. Here are some thoughts I have on the subject and some specific things to try that might help solve the problem when it pops up and rears its ugly head.

Keep in mind that sound is highly directional. Especially at high frequencies. A large part of the sound coming from your mandolin comes from the vibrating soundboard and as the sound exits the instrument it travels away from you and your ears can be a long way from the path. In a quiet setting the sound reflects off nearby surfaces and some of the sound ends up at your ears. In a noisy jam session the mandolin sounds do the same thing but what comes back to your ears is mixed with 4 flamming guitars and 2 loud banjos. You try to find the mandolin sound in that mix but it is difficult. People across from you in the jamming circle will often hear you just fine.

Here are a couple of things I try to do when jamming to increase the odds that I can hear more of my own instrument. First, if you can see the head of any nearby banjo then it is probably directing it's punch right in your face. Look at a banjo head from directly in front and it appears like a circle. Walk around so you see it as an oval and suddenly you turned down the volume. If you can't see the white of the head at all you will get almost no direct sound waves and you will, by comparison, hear your mandolin better.

The same idea can protect your ears from overly loud guitar players, fiddles, etc. Just move! Be flexible. Don't plop down in a chair and hope it all works out. Try different locations until you are hearing what you want to hear.

In jam sessions I like to have a good ear full of bass. More so if the bass player is playing well. The bass and my mandolin live in different parts of the frequency spectrum and there is rarely any serious "blackout" caused by too much bass. Hearing plenty of bass helps me stay in time better too. I try to be near the bass player when possible.

If moving around doesn't help the situation, especially when dealing with an overly loud banjo player, I sometimes will even use the upright bass player as a physical shield between me and the offending sound source. Let's say I am standing with the bass player to my right side and there is a banjo player to the right of the bass player. I am usually happy there. I get plenty of bass, less banjo, and even sometimes get some close reflection off the back of the bass if he or she has the body of the instrument turned more facing the banjo player.

The idea I hope you are getting from all of this is that positioning yourself can be a great benefit in hearing the "mix" you find most enjoyable. And this isn't completely about serving your own self-interest because if you are hearing a "better mix" that allows you play better and make better music for anyone who is listening. If you are miserable you will likely play miserable music.

On Stage Monitor Woes

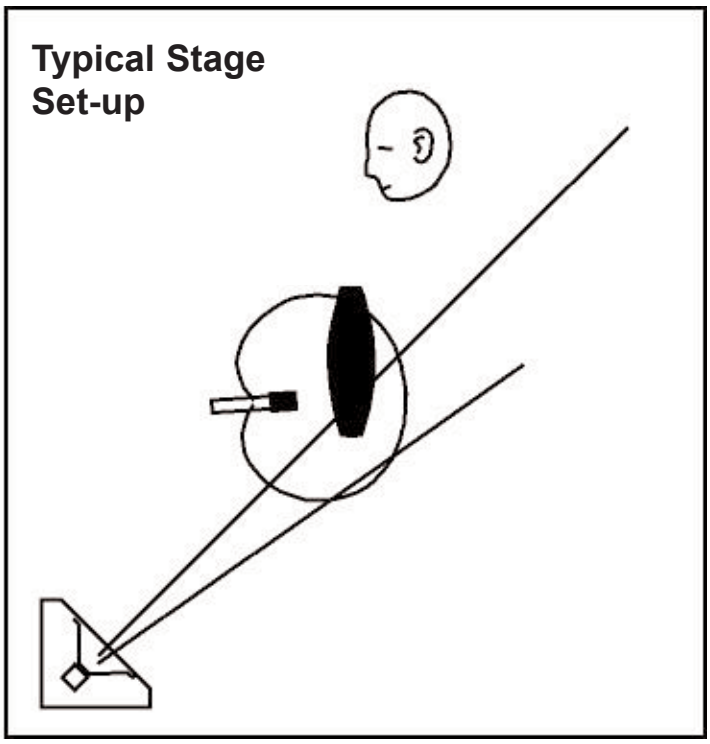
In a typical stage setting you will most likely be playing your instrument towards some microphone, it will go through an amplifier and be shot out the front of some sort of speaker system so the audience can hear you. With a quiet, listening audience usually you can hear the main speakers to some degree and with the band spread out facing forward you will usually hear your instrument fairly well. But, you may not hear the other players well. Or, when the audience is loud, or when you

are outdoors, you either hear nothing being reflected back to you, or get swamped by the loud mid and low frequencies coming off the back of the main speakers. Monitor speakers are supposed to be the answer.

Monitor speakers are placed at your feet and send sound back towards the musicians so they can hear themselves better. But, monitor systems can create as many problems as they solve so let me give you some basic tips on having some success with monitors.

First, remember again that sound is highly directional. Speakers and instruments tend to put out sound in a directional manner. Microphones and ears tend to be less directional in receiving sound.

I often see mandolin players set up something like this.



The microphone is pointed directly at the mandolin and is in danger of creating feedback from the sound coming from the floor monitor. Also the floor monitor is directed at the knees or waist of the player requiring them to be turned up louder--also creating more feedback danger.

In case you don't know what feedback is it is that "squealing" or "howling" sound that is created when a microphone "hears" the output of it's own signal coming from a speaker. In other words sound goes in the microphone, is amplified and sent to a speaker and then enters the same microphone again to be reamplified and sent again to the speaker to hit the mic again and round and round until your eardrums pop!

Microphones typically used for stage are somewhat directional. The heartshaped "orb" around the mic in my illustration approximates the directional sensitivity of an average "cardioid" microphone. Cardioid mics hear things pretty well from front and from an angle but don't hear much from the back.

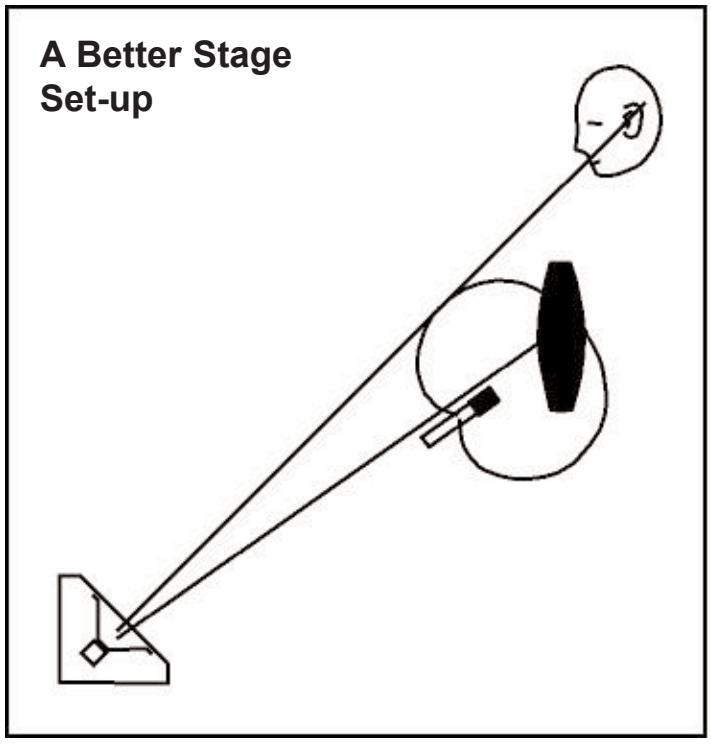
Check the type of microphone you are using and see what the rejection pattern looks like so you know how to position it. An omni-directional microphone picks up sounds from all directions equally making omni's a poor choice when monitor speakers are in the scenario.

Back to the drawing of our set-up. Two basic problems exist:

1. The sound from the monitor speaker is not pointed at the players ears.

2. The microphone is oriented so that it fails to take advantage of the "back rejection" of the cardioid pattern.

Here is how to fix things:



First, the monitor has been moved so that it points directly at the face (ears) of the player. Second, the microphone has been repositioned to that the dead spot at the rear is pointed at the monitor speaker. Aim the back of the mic like a rifle barrel straight at the center of the monitor speaker and you reduce the odds of feedback a lot! The off-axis placement of the mic in relation to the instrument will have almost no noticeable effect.

A set up like this will allow you to run the levels of the monitors at a higher volume upping the odds that you can hear yourself play. You will also reduce the odds of feedback.

As I wind down here, one more thought. If you can't hear yourself in the monitor mix don't always ask for "more mandolin" because the real problem may be that another instrument is too loud and drowning out your mandolin. If you think the guitar is too loud ask them to turn it down a bit and see if you can hear yourself better now. Negotiation skills with the other players come into play here. Good luck and I hope you can hear better.

Reader's Question - Falling Apart

Question: I play pretty good at home but when I get in a jam session I tend to fall apart. Why does this happen and what can I do to fix the problem?

That feeling of not performing well, whether in a jam session or on stage, is something everyone feels. I know I have! Let me give you some thoughts on this extremely frustrating issue that will hopefully help in some way.

If your public playing doesn't seem to come up to the level that you are able to achieve at home while practicing or playing there can be many factors at work. Some of them are pretty basic and obvious and some are hard to put a finger on. To identify something that is causing the temporary degradation of playing ability let's try to list any environmental, physical, or mental situation that is different from the home practice/playing environment.

One thing that is different is that most of us always practice while seated and then, about 80% of the time, we stand when participating in a jam session or while on stage. The stability of the instrument is not as good when standing. The relative locations of the body, even the visual line of sight on the fingerboard, is all changed from what we are used to. If you suspect this might be part of the cause try these things: 1) Spend a larger amount of time practicing while standing. 2) Practice, at times, with the eyes closed so that you will learn to rely less and less on the visual feedback.

Another thing that is usually different from the home practice environment is the number of distractions. To practice effectively one must eliminate all sources of distraction. But, then we go out into a room full of people, laughing and carrying on, and it is a lot harder to think about what we are doing. Some people learn to "tune out" the distractions. I think it is very hard to do that. Imagine the performance that Sam Bush would give if he had to "tune out" the audience when he performed. That sort of disconnect from the people in the room or the audience would be felt. We have all seen musicians playing with their head down, staring at their fingers, and utterly ignoring the audience. Focus like that might get your playing to improve, if you learn to do it, but it will not improve your ability to communicate and connect with listeners. I think a better approach, and perhaps the only reasonable one, is to become "over practiced" at home, expect a diminuation of performance in public, and accept the end result. For example, let's say you learned to play "Snowshoes" and the jammers tend to play it at around 120 beats per minute. If you work on it until you can do it at 120 you might only be able to make 110 cleanly with all those distractions at work. So, the solution is to practice until you can do it at 135. Then when the distractions and other factors do their evil work, you can coast along cleanly and precisely at 120.

You might even want to find out the speeds that certain tunes are actually being played at. In a band, it would be pretty easy to do. Just get a metronome out and compare with the band's preferred speed and write it all down. In a jam setting you might want to record little snatches on a small cassette recorder. Then go home and study the tape with a metronome handy. But, the concept of practicing to higher level of excellence than is actually required will do the trick. Dieters do a similar thing. I know, I did it. I wanted to lose 25 pounds so I made my goal 35. It worked. I ended up about 26 down I think. The principle is similar.

Another factor at work is plain old nervousness. In a room full of musicians, who we want to impress or at least not reveal how rotten we are, the pressure can be intense. That is hard to simulate in the practice environment. But, I have found a similar experience that feels almost the same and a solution that has worked for me. I have played in front of some pretty large and attentive audiences. I remember being the opening act for Tony Rice or somebody like that once in 1984 or 85 and really feeling the jitters... bigtime. And my performance was off. Nothing felt smooth. I felt like I was constantly screwing up in hundreds of small ways. The room was full of musicians and they all were absolutely silent and watching everything we did. I thought there is no way to simulate that, and become accustomed to the feeling, other than by being up there doing it.

Then came a trip to a recording studio. The fear that gripped me in the studio felt just like the big stage jitters! Recording can create the same feelings of fear and that is something you can do at home. Even a little cassette machine running can increase the anxiety level and the desire to perform "as good as possible." Now, if nobody ever listens to the tape it wouldn't be as effective.

I took a piano tuning course a while back and one of the requirements was to make a series of tapes which had to be submitted for grading. I was already tuning for customers in their homes, but that didn't come close to the anxiety of making those tapes. Heart rate went up. Couldn't tune worth a hoot. Felt like a total idiot. Then I would stop the tape. Tell myself I would practice tuning for a few days and try again later. I would be doing great and then try the taping again and just absolutely make a mess of things. Knowing that someone was judging the tape was the fear factor. Even making a little tape to send to your old Uncle Ed in Duluth would simulate the experience somewhat. Or, you can send the tape to me. I would be happy to listen to it and send you an email evaluation. That should put the nerves into higher gear.

I am not saying that we should all sit around inducing nervousness during our practice sessions. But, we do need to learn how to deal with it. How to overcome the nerves.

There are two ways of getting beyond the effects of nervousness. The first is to know what you are doing so well that you are truly competent and confident. That eliminates fear. As you continue to improve, things that used to fall apart will stay together more often. The second way to get beyond fear is to keep putting yourself in fearful situations and you will learn that they are not nearly as fearful as they once were. Take snakes for example. Afraid of snakes? Get one and keep it as a pet. After a few weeks of just watching him get up the nerve to pick him up. Do it everyday. After a while you might get out your mandolin one day and see old "Mr. Snake" poking his head out of the F-hole and it might not even cause you to stain your drawers. So, the moral of all that is just keep on. Don't shy away from the situation. Desensitize yourself by immersion in the situation as often as possible until it becomes "old hat."

Falling Apart - continued

Another way to simulate the pressures of human observation is to sit your family and friends down and perform for them. Work up a little five tune program and put on a "stage show" at home. The pressure level goes up, not to dangerous levels like being called out onto the stage at Carnegie Hall, but it does simulate some of the feelings. Make it a formal little thing so everyone is really sitting there listening and watching your every move.

All of those factors could be at work. But, it could also be that you simply haven't learned it (the tune, the break, the improvising ideas) sufficiently to run on "autopilot". The act of thinking, in a performance setting, does get in the way of good performance. By that I mean, there is often no time to think, to keep track, to recall, to think ahead. You must have done it enough so that the subconcious mind is able to do most of the work. And that does come with time if you practice correctly.

Well, I am almost to the point here of completing another book so I will stop here and just recap the main points. Practice to a higher level in anticipation of some performance failure. (How many race cars running at 6,000 rpm are designed to explode at 6,001? They build them to take a lot more than 6,000 so they can just cruise along for hours without a problem.) Find out what speeds the tunes are really being played at. What might feel "pretty fast" at home, might be way under the ridiculous speed at the jam session. And, work on ways to simulate the experience of pressure.

Incidentally, my second book do help in this area. The book is called Mandolin Training Camp. About a third of the book is text which goes into a great deal of detail on the learning process, finger mechanics, thought processes, and practicing technique. The other 2/3 of the book is filled with progressive exercises to put the fingers (and mind) to work making use of the concepts. In the first book (Mandolin Master Class) I used very few written musical examples. Only enough to illustrate a point. This Training Camp book is overflowing with patterns and exercises. Page after page of them. They build on the notes of the scale beginning with seven exercises using only the root note and the octave. They progress to exercises using the 1,3 & 5. The 1,2,3. The entire major scale, the pentatonic scale, the blues scale, etc. There is also a detailed explanation of position shifting and many exercises to become better at it. At the end of the book is a record keeping section to keep track of your progress on each individual exercise. Some of the exercises are very musical and you might incorporate them into your improvising. Some are purely designed to challenge the fingers.

Tune of the Month - Cripple Creek

Here are 3 versions of the tune in key of A. The first version is pretty basic just to give you an idea of the core of the tune. Versions 2 and 3 have some more interesting variations similar to the way I might approach the tune on my second go ‘round.

Traditional
Arranged by Bradley Laird