



Playing by Ear

The Ultimate Goal

Playing by ear is the *ultimate goal* for any musician when playing a musical instrument. It's true whether you're singing, banging a drum, strumming a guitar, or our favorite instrument, the ukulele.

If your fingers can already interpret and follow what your inner ear commands, you've obtained your goal and are *playing by ear*. However, the fact is that it's actually very uncommon for individuals to be able to "play by ear" with no apparent effort.

If you are like most people new—or relatively new—to learning to play an instrument, you need a plan to train your fingers to follow your ear melodically, harmonically, and rhythmically. This comes from an understanding of the music principles that drive music and lead the ear to direct the fingers **so that** then, and only then, can you start on the road to *Playing by Ear*.

Whether performing or practicing, music involves three elements: your mind, your hands, and your ear. When *performing* music, your *ear* directs your hands. And if all goes well, your mind is not involved and only gets involved when things don't go as planned. Getting to this performance goal, whether it's simply performing for your own enjoyment or on stage takes work and an organized approach to developing an “ear-hand-mind” connection so all will work together.

Common wisdom states that it takes 10,000 hours to master any skill. This is essentially true—it does take hours and hours of dedicated practice and exploration. I've found this to be especially true when learning any musical instrument, even the ukulele, despite its reputation as an easy to learn instrument. Getting really good and getting comfortable in performance—and learning to play by ear—takes not mindless hours and hours, but an organized, dedicated,



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systematic approach with distant goals and building blocks to ensure that you reach that ultimate goal.

The Internet is full of debate and examples of people who seem to be able to cheat at this without putting in the time. I regret to inform you that there is NO shortcut, and simply putting in the time alone is also not always enough. A lot of people *put in the time*. So what makes someone more successful when learning a musical instrument than another? Or, more importantly, how can you set yourself up for success?

Tips for Success

Here you go...my tips for success:

Get a **coach, advisor or teacher**—and not just any coach. Whether you have a coach, advisor, teacher, guide, guru or whatever you call them, they must be successful with a proven track record of helping others obtain their goals. Finding the right coach can take work, trial, and error. Some look to performers of their chosen instrument to become their teachers. This can be good place to start, but not all performers make good teachers. However, they probably had a good teacher. It's sort of like getting past the Academy award-winning actor and finding their most significant teacher—the behind-the-scenes person who played an invaluable role in the actor's success. Early in my development, I found Chuck Anderson. So hopefully you're be as lucky as I was to find a great teacher, coach, or mentor early in your development.

Practice deliberately—have distinct goals and a plan for each session. Monitor your success, practice specific skills and problem areas, and constantly strive for improvement. If your practice sounds good, you're probably not really practicing but may simply be repeating something you can already do. Work instead on what you really need to improve: **work on** what you can't do, or want to do better.

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Teach others—we learn by doing, and learn more and learn better when we teach others what we “know.” There is nothing like presenting what you know to others to truly understand it yourself. In all my years of teaching, I’ve found this to be extremely beneficial in my own musical development.

The Mind, the Ear, and the Hand - each one of these needs training, with specific steps to obtain the *playing by ear* goal. The *ear* needs to recognize the intervals, chords and rhythm that make up the melody, harmony, and rhythm of a song. But for all of the training needed for the mind and ear, it’s largely up to the *hands* when playing an instrument, that is, they need the most training to successfully execute what the ear wants. So, make a plan, set your goals, find a good teacher, and practice, practice practice!