

## **SOME TIPS TO HELP FIDDLERS OR OTHER MELODY PLAYERS TO LEARN TUNES BY EAR**

- 1) Listen, first, as much as you can. Ideally listen to the tune many times or even for several months before playing it. If you are listening to it, you are learning it.
- 2) Sing or hum the tune. Get the general shape into your head.
- 3) Practice playing back single notes by ear first, then a series of two or more notes. Gradually increase in order to be able to play back a two bar phrase after two or three tries. Don't give up. This takes time and is difficult for some and easy for others depending on prior experience.
- 4) Learn to recognize open strings when you hear them. It will help you find the key and the notes before and after the open string is played.
- 5) Listen for the "big notes" and play them when they come around during continuous playing. Play small phrases when they come around and gradually add in other notes as you begin to catch on to what they are. Listen or hum during the parts you haven't gotten yet.
- 6) When you are away from your instrument, try to recall the melody and hum it out loud or in your head. Imagine playing the notes on the instrument.
- 7) This can't be said too often: "Listen, Listen, Listen!" You will be getting the tune and the style into your head and you are learning the tune, even if you aren't playing it yet.
- 8) It is okay to watch other players' fingers to figure out what they are playing if you can't figure it out just by hearing. Better yet to be able to just play what you hear without any visual aids, but this will come in time.
- 9) Learn the tune by repeating two bar phrases over and over, and divide the tune into sections that way. Notice which two bar sections are repeated and which are not. In a typical fiddle tune there are 8 bars in the A part and 8 bars in the B part. If you divide each part into 4 sections of two bar phrases, you will often find that the first and third section are often identical while the second and fourth are often different. Many B parts are played differently the second time around. You may color code the sections if that helps to visualize them and remember the structure (i.e. A part: Green for two bars, orange for two bars, green again for two bars, yellow for two bars. It will help you remember where you are in the tune better!).
- 10) When you are learning a tune and play the "wrong" note, it just helps you know better what the "right" note is OR, you may discover your own way of playing the tune! For the most part, if you honor the general shape of the tune so that it is recognizable as well as stay within the key and chord structure, then your variation will probably work. If there is a leader, though, respect their version and do your best to match it.
- 11) Look for patterns and arpeggios, and learn to find chords in a tune. If you know the chord that is being played, that will give you a tip as to which group of repeated notes are likely being played at a given moment (not always, though!). If you learn to recognize the chords in a tune, you can play simple accompaniment or harmonies until you get the melody. Listen to the backup instruments to help you with this process, as well as study and learn about common chord progressions for fiddle tunes. Write out a chord chart, if you find that helpful, and learn some basic chords on your instrument that you can progress through with ease. There are many resources available and music teachers who are willing to teach you about music theory, if you wish.
- 12) If you are at a session that is playing at full speed, don't ask musicians to slow down for you unless you are in a setting where you are sure they won't mind. Look for slow jams, instructional audio/video materials, private lessons and workshops at your level to help you learn to pick up tunes faster so that you can eventually learn tunes at full speed. There are also tools for slowing down tunes on cds such as the Amazing Slow Downer (google it!), and special software or hardware available at music equipment distributors online or in stores.
- 13) When you become more advanced you will find that you pick up an entire A part more easily than hearing it in two bar phrases. Use the skills listed above at full speed sessions. Purchase a mute to use while you put a CD or mp3 on loud on single repeat in your media player. Play along with it for 10 – 60 minutes until you have the tune down. Some media devices let you select passages to isolate.
- 14) Once you have played the tune following a leader or CD, play it by yourself to check and see if you have it on your own. Find your uncertain passages and focus on them.
- 15) Play the tune for at least 6 months, if you can, before you retire it to your personal archives. Even if you are an experienced player and can play the tune accurately right away, it will take roughly that long for you to really "own" your version and have it internalized enough for it to stay with you if you happen to stop playing it for quite a while afterwards.

# What is a slow jam?

A slow jam is where a number of tunes are played continuously and slowly so that participants can learn the tune at a more moderate pace (not phrase by phrase as is common in workshops or lessons). This method helps train musicians to pick up tunes, develop their ear, and prepare for picking up tunes more easily while at a full speed jam or while sitting in with a band at a contradance (with permission of course!—see below). Slow jams are for musicians of all levels but are most commonly attended by beginning and intermediate level musicians. Slow Jams are either led round robin by each individual that attends, or led by a band or individual leader who take requests and leads all the tunes of the day. Tunes may be from any style that are most popular to group members or may be of a specific style (usually announced prior). The tunes are generally played several times slowly; then increased to a moderate tempo for one or two rounds before moving on to another tune.

Bring a recording device to record tunes for learning in-between sessions. Ask permission to record tunes. (Never post your recordings on social media without prior permission, please!) In most jam sessions (but not all); written sheet music and music stands are not used. Try to learn to live without these aids as it will increase your skill of learning by ear to not be dependent on them. However, some people find that this is what they need at first. Leave your music and stand in the car if you are not sure, and bring them in later if they are welcomed and you feel it would be helpful to you or someone else, but it is really best to just try your hardest to learn to play solely by ear-- and be patient with yourself using the skills outlined above. You will get better at it!

During a round robin jam session each participant is invited to choose a tune by either picking one common to the group or introducing a new tune. The participant may play it him/herself or have someone else play it. Whoever plays it needs to be able to play it slowly in good pitch and timing so that it can be followed by the rest of the participants. After it is played once through in entirety, others may join in. It is respectful to play the version of the tune that is being led, even if you know a different version, so that others don't have difficulty distinguishing the parts of a tune that is unfamiliar to them (it will also increase your flexibility and sensitivity as musician if you learn to do this!). Follow the leader's tempo. If you can not hear because of all of the sound in the room, watch bow or hand movement of the leader to "see" the tempo. If everyone does this, the group will stay together better. If you find that you cannot hear yourself, step a few feet away from the group to hear yourself better.

If you are unable to get all of the notes, try to select a choice few that you can play every time they come around. You will increase the number of notes you can play each time the tune comes around. Hum it first, or hum the parts you aren't getting. Remember, if you are listening to the tune, you are learning it! Also, if you can sing it, then you can eventually play it!

The information provided is by Sarah Hotchkiss and John Mowad of Woodbury Strings:

12 North Street, Suite 7, Burlington, VT 05401 223-8945

[woodburystings@gmail.com](mailto:woodburystings@gmail.com) [www.woodburystings.com](http://www.woodburystings.com)

Feel free to share this with a friend!

## **A FEW LOCAL RESOURCES THAT WILL HELP YOU IMPROVE YOUR SKILLS AND FIND OTHER MUSICIANS TO LEARN FROM AND MAKE MUSIC WITH:**

Young Tradition Vermont Folk Music Teacher Directory: <http://youngtraditionvermont.org/teacher-directory/>

Northeast Heritage Music Camp: [www.northeastheritagemusiccamp.com](http://www.northeastheritagemusiccamp.com)

Vermont Fiddle Orchestra: [www.vermontfiddleorchestra.org](http://www.vermontfiddleorchestra.org)

Woodbury Strings: [www.woodburystings.com](http://www.woodburystings.com)

# Guidelines for Sitting In With a Contradance Band

Occasionally, some bands allow musicians to “sit in” during a contradance. If this is the case, it will be advertised or announced. Do not sit in with a band without being invited to do so!!! Given that, below are guidelines that we developed for our band (*The Damn Yankee String Band*) during times that “sit ins” were welcomed. These guidelines are based on our own thoughts as well as being somewhat modeled after the guidelines used several years ago by *Northern Spy* for their dances in Norwich, VT. We think that you will find these helpful, but please keep in mind that every band or community of players is different and it is best to be sensitive to the specific needs of various groups and ask what the parameters are for playing along.

1) If “sit-ins” are welcome, bands will usually let musicians know which set of tunes that they have selected to play for the upcoming dance and/or may call out the name or the key just before each tune is about to start. Tune changes will be indicated when one of the leaders lifts his or her foot or calls out the change. The leaders will decide tune choices and let you know (or not!). They will solicit your suggestions of tune selections only if they want them. (Be sensitive. They are the ones that were hired for the gig or went to the effort of making it all happen—that is why they get to make all the choices!)

2) Musicians sitting in would usually be expected to pay admission and consider dancing if the hall is short a dancer or two for a particular set. Keep your eye open for that if you are able to dance. It will be appreciated.

3) The primary function is to play *for the dancers*. Awareness of what is happening on the dance floor is extremely important. If you have never been contradancing, you are encouraged to try it. It is lots of fun and it is the best way to understand and appreciate what contradance music is all about, as well as to understand what the dancers are experiencing. It is also an excellent way to learn a tune!

4) Play by ear and avoid the use of sheet music in order to match the version that the lead fiddlers are playing as well as to develop your ability to learn tunes by ear. Also, when musicians use sheet music, they are more likely to be off tempo and limit their ability to listen and see what is going on, so try to avoid it at all costs.

5) *Follow the lead fiddler or melody instrument*. At times, you may be asked to sit out for all or part of a dance set. Cooperate with all directions given by the lead musicians.

6) Avoid loud discussion or bowing and plucking between sets as it distracts the caller and makes it difficult for the dancers to hear the instructions.

## MELODY INSTRUMENTS

1) Play sensitively and unobtrusively.

2) Pay attention at all times to the lead musicians.

3) *Be ready to follow any directions given by the lead musicians*.

4) Always defer and conform to the version of the tune being played by the lead musicians. Only play harmonies if you are given permission to do so by the band members.

5) Listen, without playing, to the first time or two through a tune in order to become familiar with the tune version being played. Use the skills described above for learning tunes by ear at a rapid pace.

## ACCOMPANIMENT INSTRUMENTS

*In addition to the guidelines for melody instruments, accompaniment instruments should:*

1) Pay close attention to the chords being played by the *Designated Accompanist (lead guitar or keyboard player)*.

2) Avoid any chord substitutions, even if that is how you usually play a tune. If you want to experiment with substitutions, play VERY QUIETLY so that the actual chord being used is not compromised.

3) Use simple, unobtrusive rhythms and above all, follow the tempo of the lead band members!