Music Man

Try something new—especially when you're no longer a kid—and you may have to feel funny before you can have any fun

BY DAVID HOCHMAN

The author found the courage to take up a musical instrument nearly 30 years after his last piano lesson.

To the outside world, we probably don't sound like much. Our banjo player is deaf in one ear and sings like he's deaf in both. The nine-year-old on fiddle is sawing G notes though we're playing in A. Then there's the mandolin player (yours truly), whose bluegrass jamming skills before today were limited to air banjo renditions of that song from *Deliverance*.

What our group lacks in musicianship is offset by our willingness to humiliate ourselves. Failing publicly is the point at Dr. Banjo's Bluegrass Jam Camp, where I have come to strum alongside kindred spirits—rank beginners like me whose families couldn't bear the twanging anymore.

My path to musical greatness was diverted roughly 30 years ago. At age 11, after three years of indentured servitude to my crabby piano teacher, I was at the Baldwin upright when my father and I (in matching three-piece corduroy suits, no less) sang "Heart and Soul" for the extended family at Thanksgiving dinner. The cheek pinching afterward was the final straw. I vowed never to play again.

It turned out the joke was on me. In the decades that followed, any urge to express myself musically had to be exorcised in the privacy of my shower or car. And while I could clap, snap, and hit all the high parts of "Bohemian Rhapsody," so could a howler monkey. As I approached 40, I felt a craving to actually play something—and not just my iPod.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY LORI STOLL

The mandolin looks harmless enough. About the size of a tennis racket, it's easy to get a clear, golden sound just by brushing your pick across its four sets of double strings. That doesn't mean I didn't feel slightly panicky when my wife surprised me with one when I hit the big 4-0. "We support you, sweetie," Ruth said, speaking for the family. By day seven, she and our four-year-old would quietly slip into another room whenever I took a crack at "Turkey in the Straw."

But I was in heaven. I signed up for lessons at a music shop in town and felt deep satisfaction even as I butchered "This Land Is Your Land" and "Sweet Georgia Brown." I was making music! And by choice, not because my mother or anyone else was forcing me to. The focus and fancy fingerwork the mandolin demands were a relief from pecking mindlessly at the computer all day. Plus, there was something powerful, mystical even, about the old songs themselves and the sweet simplicity of lyrics like "Through the ages I'll remember blue eyes crying in the rain."

Even more remarkable was how grounding it was to play. Somehow the usual anxieties of life—money, status, the possibility of a meteorite landing on my head—didn't matter when every atom of my humanity was focused on mastering the four-fingered D chord. Experts in positive psychology call it flow, the rosy feeling of losing oneself in a challenging activity. One night, while working out the melody of "Over the Rainbow," I was startled to see I'd been picking and grinning nonstop *for four hours.*

Which is not to say I was very good. My sister-in-law, who was dating a professional guitar player, brought him over one evening so we could play together; part of me still believes my plinky, stop-and-go rendition of "House of the Rising Sun" was the real reason he never called her again.

But that experience got me thinking. What good was banging out songs alone in my living room when I could be inflicting them on complete strangers? When I typed *jam camp for mandolin basket cases* into Google, the first result connected me to Dr. Banjo and his happy circles of hapless beginners. "It's easier than you think!" his website promised. Learn to take "your first out-of-the-closet solos!" Next thing I knew, I was that guy on the airplane trying to shove his instrument case into the overhead bin.

Dr. Banjo is Pete Wernick, who's been running camps around the country for bluegrass greenhorns since the early 1980s. His PhD is in sociology, and he clearly knows something about the wisdom of crowds. Before we even had our instruments out at the camp in Boulder, Colorado, he asked, "Who's the worst player here?" All 28 of us shot up our hands.

Wernick's philosophy is that private music instruction often fails, which is why most instruments in America haven't seen daylight for decades. "The only way to learn to play and keep playing is by playing with other people," he tells us.

At the moment, our little group within the larger group is ripping through (make that ripping apart) the normally inspirational gospel hymn "I'll Fly Away." Our Dobro player, a shy computer nerd who's never played outside his basement in Cheyenne, Wyoming, has his eyes shut so tightly and is playing so quietly, I fear he might be dead. But then comes the real horror. Our lead guitarist, a garage door installer with a bushy gray mustache, nods in my direction and utters the three words I was hoping might never come my way: "Take it, David."

There are many ways to grow as a musician, not to mention as a human being. So far this weekend, I've learned the importance of patience, gratitude, humility, resilience, and, above all, listening. On the practical level, I've discovered that once you master four basic chords, you can pretty much play along with every song in the bluegrass songbook. I know, too, that jamming, like life itself, isn't about perfection but about playing through your mistakes and trusting that you'll get back on track if you just keep up the rhythm.

That said, when you're called on to solo, the only lesson that matters is, Sometimes you just have to jump right in. Dr. Banjo showed us how a beginner could take a "break" on mandolin. I flutter my pick up and down on the E strings, then switch to A, then back to E, remembering to make the chord changes as I go. And to stay on beat. And not to sway too much. And to smile. "You are the music while the music lasts," T. S. Eliot wrote. And I am, though luckily the solo doesn't last long. My talented companions come in on the chorus with harmony as beautiful as I've ever heard. "When I die, hallelujah, by and by," we sing as we play our hearts out, "I'll fly away."

When I actually do fly away, back home to Los Angeles, the world somehow feels like a different place. My older brother, never one to follow my lead, tells me that he, too, has decided to take up the mandolin. Around the same time, two friends—a photographer and a buttoned-up lawyer—show up at my door with a guitar and a banjo, respectively, asking to play. And last week, my dear, sweet Ruth emerged from the other room to say she wants to find the violin (she calls it a fiddle now) she hasn't played in three decades. That might not sound like much to the outside world, but it's definitely music to my ears. ■

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