

HOW TO LEARN TO PLAY DIATONIC ACCORDION WITHOUT A TEACHER

By Kay Hickman

There are many reasons to learn to play accordion without a teacher. Many of us don't live close to anyone who knows how to play a diatonic box. Some of us live paycheck to paycheck, and we don't have the extra money needed to pay a teacher. The local teacher might be teaching theory and that might not be what you want to learn. I lived in Wichita Falls in 1998 when I started learning to play, and there was nobody around who even played a piano accordion, let alone a diatonic box. I had no choice but to learn by myself.

Learning to play accordion without a teacher sounds like a daunting task, but it really is not. Diatonic accordions, by their very nature, are folk instruments - meant to be played with folk music, which is normally a fun type of music - not meant to be serious music like classical music. One can learn to play a box knowing absolutely nothing about music or theory.

Certain types of music are normally played with a specific type of diatonic accordion. For instance, in France, they mostly play G/C. In the Netherlands they mostly play C/F. In England they use D/G. But, the same music played on a G/C accordion can be played on any other key. And played just the same way. Using the same buttons. So if all you have is an accordion in D/G or C/F and you want to learn to play French music - you can learn it on whatever accordion you have. It is not necessary to purchase a different accordion to learn.

There are different ways to learn to play. One can use tablature, or music notation, or learn by ear. Another way to learn is to watch how someone else plays a tune on their accordion and to mimic it exactly. No one way is better than another. All the different ways, used all together, work best for most people. You might find, as I did, that some people think they have special powers because they only play by ear, or have special powers because they use music notation and know theory. Just ignore them. Squash the boasters!

Using tablature in the beginning is a good way to become proficient quickly and to get a feeling of accomplishment. Being able to play a tune or two halfway decently in the first week of playing is great for the ego. And heaven knows, we could all use a bit of ego boosting! Some people only play with tablature, and there is nothing wrong with this way of playing, but it does limit the person in the long run. There are at least 3 different tablatures systems - possibly many more. All are easy to learn, and with time and practice, one can immediately play a tune when looking at tablature.

To mimic someone else's playing is another way to go about learning, and one can learn a lot of tunes this way also. This also is limiting though - especially if one can only learn tunes this way and the people they learn from don't have a very large repertoire.

Some people learn what each note is on their accordion - and then use music notation to play music. This takes a lot more thought than other ways of playing.

Playing by ear is another very easy way to learn, and will ultimately give one satisfaction when getting a tune down. The way to get started with learning a tune by ear is to first find a tune one wants to learn, and then to listen to it over and over. Possibly hundreds or even thousands of times. You first need to get the tune into your head and then you can put it into your hands. You can record a tune onto a blank CD over and over and listen to it as

you drive. Or put the CD onto your CD player at home and use the “repeat” function to listen to the tune over and over. You could even listen to it while you sleep (though I have never resorted to this). When you feel ready to learn the tune, find a quiet spot to sit down and start learning it. It doesn't matter if you have the accordion that is in the same key. Much of the time you will not have an accordion in the same key - so you have to be able to hear it in your head sounding lower or higher. Something that happens often, particularly if you are learning to play a tune and not using the same kind of accordion as someone else, is that you don't always have the notes you need. If you do not have the note you need, then try to find something else that sounds equally as good. The only way you can know ahead of time that you will have all the notes you need is if a tune is being played on a specific box and you know that it is tuned the same way your own box is tuned. If you want to play tunes exactly the same way as you hear them, then of course you will need a box tuned the same way.

It helps to find other people who are playing the same music as you. If you live in a remote area, and this is not possible, then use the internet to meet people online who have your same interests. You can find people all different ways. The newsgroups are good for getting to know people and sharing what you have learned and learning from others. You might get emails out of the blue from people who find your name on website guest lists and chat profiles. You will find that diatonic accordion land is really quite small and most people are very friendly and like sharing what they know with others. And if you meet the occasional snob online - just forget them and go about the business of finding friendly helpful people. If someone sends you some music or tablature, then it is important that you immediately thank them and send something back. It's a give and take world.

Setting aside time to practice every day is very important. An occasional day off is fine, but if you want to keep improving, then practice needs to be consistent. If you think you have no time to practice because you have a busy lifestyle with a family and a job, then you might consider giving something up that is taking up time in your life and not adding to it. When I started to play, I would come home from work, fix dinner and then eat and clean up and then sit down to read the newspaper and then watch TV. By this time my children were about grown and didn't need much of my time. I would read the daily newspaper and watch TV and then go in and practice for maybe 30 minutes. I also was spreading myself thin as I was also trying to learn to play a concertina and a guitar. Finally I realized that I needed to concentrate on only one instrument if I wanted to get good at anything. I chose the accordion because I liked it the best. I have to admit, it's the basses that pulled me in. I love accordion basses. Then I decided to give up my newspaper that was taking up an hour of my time each evening and also to give up TV, which took up another two or three hours of my time. I decided to instead play accordion that same amount of time that I would devote to reading the newspaper and watching TV. I did this for at least 5 years. I still don't read a newspaper, though I do now watch movies on TV and a couple of other weekly shows. I still leave a few hours every night to practice and play for fun. If you just cannot find time in your schedule and you have nothing to give up, then at least practice at least 15 minutes every day. You need to practice when you feel alert - not when you are drop dead tired.

There are different ways to stay motivated. Every time you get a new tune down, it is cause for celebration! If there is nobody to pat you on the back - pat your own back! Drink a beer! Buy yourself a present! Eat chocolate! I work on several tunes at once - up to 10 or more sometimes, so that I won't get bored. Some people like to only learn one tune at a time. The difference in learning alone and learning with a teacher is that you don't have to have a tune learned to play for someone by a specific date. You can pace yourself that way if it works for you. Decide to learn one or two tunes a week and play them well. Then play a concert to yourself each week on the same day. That will be your recital to yourself.

Or if you are a rebel like I am, then you will want to learn in a haphazard way and just do it however you want. I don't like rules and restrictions, and I don't like anyone telling me what to do, and I prefer to learn how I like to learn at my own pace. I choose only tunes I like to listen to - to learn to play. I will never learn to play a tune that does not touch my soul. I just don't want to. When I first hear a tune, I know automatically if it is one I want to learn. I have no specific times set aside to practice. If I wake up in the night and cannot sleep and it is 3 a.m. - so what - I get my accordion and I sit on my bed and play. I have accordions in three different rooms in my house, so when the feeling comes - I pick one up and play. If I do watch TV, much of the time I am playing accordion at the same time. When I practice, I close my eyes and imagine in my head that I am playing for people who know me, but would be surprised to know that I can play. I picture them in the audience and I believe this makes my playing better. Or I picture someone who doesn't like me in the audience, and I'll show them I can play! I know a few people who play a little bit, and sometimes when I practice, I picture them in my head, and tell myself, "I will not let them play better than me". Sometimes I imagine that I am onstage at a big festival with a huge audience and I am playing with someone famous. Sometimes I tell myself while I am playing, "I will not be shitty forever".....and I believe these visions and thoughts help me to play better. Do whatever works for you.

It is important to put feeling into your tunes. Do not try to play your tunes exactly as someone else plays them. Why bother? If you want to listen to someone play a tune that way - then listen to the original person. Be your own original person - play the tunes your own way. Remember that the pauses between the notes can be as important as the notes themselves.

Do not expect to be proficient quickly. I've seen many people buy an expensive accordion and then expect to be able to play well almost immediately. Well that is a dream all of us have, but it doesn't happen. The only way to get good is to take your accordion out of the box. Diligent practice and passion for the instrument and the music are what will make it work for you. If you get discouraged because you can't play extremely well quickly, and you don't have the passion and perseverance to learn, then find another instrument that is easier to play or find something else that interests you .

What is most important in learning to play accordion by yourself, is that it is supposed to be fun. If you have a goal to work toward, it makes it go more easily, I think. My goal at first was just to play for myself in my bedroom. Then when I was able to play a little bit, I decided I wanted to be a street musician. Your goal might be to play for family, or to play at a festival or to be in a band, or to play for dancers. Whatever your goal is - work toward it. Think about it whenever you pick your accordion up to play.

If you are uncomfortable playing in front of others, then do what I did. Ask your friends if you can come to their houses and play for them. After all - they are your friends. They will be kind. I did this with several friends, and found that it did help some. I started playing for friends at their houses very early on. Within a month or two of starting to play. I remember one of them asking me if the waltz was supposed to speed up and slow down over and over. Your friends won't care if you make a mistake. The thing to remember is that people want you to do well - they are rooting for you. And most people want to hear the pleasure in the playing - not the professionalism. So just play and have fun. Learning to play an accordion is an exciting adventure. It really is better than chocolate!