

# **Bobby Hicks**

## **Elements of Good Fiddle Playing**

There are four main areas you need to learn and develop in order to become a good fiddler - Music Theory, Technique, Intonation, and Style. The outline below provides further discussion for each of these areas.

### **Music Theory**

- Learn the notes on the common scales used in your genre of fiddling – for example, bluegrass commonly uses G, D, A, E, Bflat, B, and C.
- Familiarize yourself with the *Nashville Numbering System* and learn to read/create chord charts.
- Know the chord progression for each of the keys – in particular the I, IV, and V chords [and the relative minor]. Learn to recognize the chord progression when you hear a song.
- Learn to recognize a chord from the make up of the chord notes and sound. For example, you should be able to hear a G chord and know it's a G chord, simply from the way the chord is built.

### **Technique**

- Proper hand position for noting accurately – anchor your hand to the same spot every time you pick up your fiddle.
- Using your bow arm effectively – loose wrist, use only as much bow as you need to get the sound you want – incidentally this is also the key to playing fast.
- Keep your fingers close to the fingerboard – in order to play efficiently [and fast] you can't waste time moving your fingers around any more than necessary. When not using a finger keep it as close to the string as possible without touching it.
- Stance – stand straight, tall and open
- Learn to properly tune your fiddle – preferably without the aid of a tuner – although you may need a tuner to get one note – for example the A note – after that train your ear to hear when you are in tune.
- Your fiddle is tuned in fifths from lower to the next higher string is a “fifth interval”
- Keep your bow parallel to the bridge about half way between the bridge and the fingerboard for maximum sound.

## Intonation

- Play your scales IN TUNE – develop your hearing so you know when you're playing in tune and learn where your finger position is to get the proper intonation for the note you're trying to play. Make sure your hand position stays in one spot so you develop muscle memory.
- Learn to play the scales in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> position on the fiddle and develop your ability to easily move between all three positions on the fiddle neck.
- Learn your chords/double stop positions – learn which notes make up a chord.
- Play clean/crisp – proper spacing between notes. Think of it as the difference between someone speaking in a dull, monotone and someone that speaks in an articulate and passionate manner.
- Learn to invoke different emotions by using a variety of bow pressure and bow speed.
- Develop bow control – use exercises to improve your bow control

## Style

- Kick offs – setting the tempo for the song will affect how [and how well] you and others can accomplish their breaks later in the song. Each song has a tempo that feels right; experiment until you get it there. Listen to other fiddlers kick tunes off.
- Fills – accompanying singers/other instruments in a tasteful, pleasing manner.
- Breaks – initially follow the melody line, then improvise if there is another “round”
- Do exercises to develop your improvisation ability.
- Listen to other fiddlers weave in and out of tunes – examples are abundant in the “Bluegrass Album Band” recordings.
- Know when NOT to play. The biggest thing I see lacking in the fiddle playing today is *tastefulness* in playing. Just because you can play something doesn't mean you should – it may fit a lot better if you wait for the appropriate fill or break. Sometimes it's better not to play at all. Great bluegrass comes from a group sound, not one instrument flashing out above all others. Pay attention to how what you play affects others in the group – does it allow them to “play” off of you or does it leave them in a rough spot to have to play out of. Remember you are part of a team. Playing notes just for the sake of playing notes and filling up the song with fiddle is at best annoying and certainly won't endear you to other bluegrass instrumentalists/singers.
- When appropriate, chop when not playing – usually when the mandolin takes their break is when the fiddler “chops”
- Learn to improvise a break using melody variations, bowing/timing patterns variations
- Bow patterns – learn which bow patterns give a “punch” to a riff. Try to identify which bowing pattern gives a certain “drive” to a song and whether it's created using a down bow or up bow.

- Harmony – twin fiddles. Learn to identify two and three part harmony and which notes make up the harmonies to the lead line. Practice playing the harmony parts [thirds and fifths above or below the lead or melody line]

DO NOT SACRIFICE ANY OF THE ABOVE FOR SAKE OF SPEED.

## Resources

**Software** – any software that will slow tunes down without changing the pitch – for example *Slow Gold*, *Acid 2.0* [or higher], *Cakewalk*, and *Audio Cleaning Lab* to name just a few. Most programs are multi purpose recording programs and can usually be purchased for under \$50

**Books** – *Music Theory Made Easy* by David Harp – an excellent introduction to the basics of music theory, including the Nashville Numbering System. Easy to read and sells for under \$15.

**Discography** – The Bluegrass Album Band vols. 1-6, Texas Crapshooter and Fiddle Patch [Bobby Hicks], any Bob Wills recordings, Vassar Clements, Aubrey Haynie, Randy Howard, Johnny Gimble, Buddy Spicher, Dale Potter