Blow Up Your Snark

"I have no sense of direction" and "I have no ear" are two statements I hear often. The vast majority of the time, I think neither is true. These are not innate abilities that we either have or do not have, they are skills that are developed with sustained effort over a long period of time. The problem is that nowadays we have some nifty gadgets that make things so effortless for us that it becomes very easy to become completely reliant upon them. Back when humans were navigating by the stars, using a compass or paper maps, I'm sure some people still said, "I have no sense of direction" but I'd guess far less than now. GPS is an incredible tool that is the cumulative result of myriad human discoveries but using it has eroded our sense of direction by removing all the friction involved in finding our way.

Electronic tuners are GPS for our ears. They light up, tell us what note we're playing and flash when we get it in tune. They turn tuning into a visual experience rather than an auditory one. Pretty soon, we might be tuning without even listening. Now, even though the title of this essay seems to suggest I want you to destroy your electronic tuner, like GPS, in particular contexts it can be a very helpful tool. For instance, in a loud environment like a jam session or a gig it can make staying in tune simpler, easier and less time consuming. However, when we use it all the time we'll never give our ears a chance to develop.

There are many benefits to learning to tune by ear. Perhaps the greatest benefit is musical self-reliance. You no longer need an intermediary between you and the instrument, making your connection to it even stronger. Another is that you'll more easily notice when you're NOT in tune. Yet another is that when you tune by ear, you can check multiple reference points across the neck. Having your open strings in tune doesn't always mean your instrument is as in tune as it could be. Your open strings are only one reference point and cross examining your tuning against other reference points such as different octaves across the neck can really help dial it in. This may also allow you to hear things in different ways. The more reference points you give your ears, the more information they have to evaluate.

I'll admit that sometimes when I'm in a rush before a lesson, I may grab a tuner to quickly get tuned up. However, when I'm at home, I try to keep my tuner out of reach. I usually keep my A440 tuning fork handy. I use that to get a reference point on my instrument in concert pitch and then finish by ear. You don't have to rush out and buy an A440 tuning fork but they are inexpensive and it is really fun to place the ball end against the bridge of your instrument and hear the entire body start to resonate with that A440 pitch. However, you can actually use your electronic tuner to get started. Tune one string as a reference point. Then shut off the tuner and tune by ear. There are a few different methods that are great to experiment with and use in combination. I've probably shown you one or more of them. If I haven't, we should do a deep dive. Even if I have, a deep revisiting might be beneficial. Once you've done your best to tune by ear, turn your tuner on and evaluate how you did. Was every string a bit flat? A little sharp? Note how you are off and try to notice trends. Maybe you always tune somewhat flat. Keep that in mind and try to tighten the string a little more than you think the next time. By using your electronic tuner in this way, it can help you develop your ears and eventually be free of your reliance on it.

I believe it is more likely that you have the ability to tune by ear than you lack that ability. It may take a sustained effort over many months and years but so do most tasks in music and life that are worth doing. I began my musical journey with no ability to tune. Over many years, I kept working at it. Now when I change strings I like to tune up with no reference point and see how close I get. Sometimes, I'm spot on. I wasn't born with that ability, I learned it.

Get curious about tuning, embrace the experience, slow down and take the time to tune by ear rather than using your electronic tuner to just get it over with. Don't treat getting in tune like an inconvenience on the way to making music. Tuning is where the music begins. Learn what it truly means to tune up and you'll be a better musician for it.