Whenever I'm at the grocery store during this time of year I feel such deep empathy for the poor souls condemned to listen to the same Christmas songs from Halloween through New Years. How do they cope? Do they block it out like we might block out the noise of a construction site near our home or workplace? Do they enter into an altered brain state where the voice of Bing Crosby or Mariah Carey triggers ASMR? Do they moonlight as a holiday season lounge singer since they have all the lyrics memorized?

Despite how exhausting the barrage of holiday music can become by the end of December, it does offer us a musical opportunity. These are some of the best melodies to attempt to figure out by ear because we know them so well. If we can hear them note by note in our mind, we can find those notes on our instrument. What is much harder to do is to figure out a song we have yet to mentally memorize. Those we already have firmly in our memory provide us with a solid blueprint to guide us through the search. We may sometimes wonder if we've found the right note but we will almost always know when we've found the wrong note.

My challenge to you this month is to figure out one of these earworms. In fact, the next time you get a Christmas song stuck in your head and can't seem to get it out, learning it by ear is a great remedy not just to purge it from your mind but to completely change your relationship to it. One thing I've learned over the years is that there can be a major difference between our experience of listening to a song versus being the one bringing the song into being. Many times I've had to learn a song I thought I hated for one reason or another only to find myself thinking, "Hey, this is actually kind of good."

Give it a try. It is an excellent way to spend a practice session and brings you into a different relationship with your instrument. In fact, any student who completes this task and plays me their chosen song in a lesson will be rewarded and I will give/send you a musical gift! If not, I will fill your musical stocking with coal and make you learn Blink 182's entire catalogue (there is a story behind that punishment and if you don't know it, you should ask me).

Here are some tips:

- Be patient. You may find many wrong notes in the search for the right one. It's not about getting it on the first try, it's about the process.

- Once you've tried a note and you know it doesn't work, mentally cross it off and continue your search elsewhere.
- Sometimes *very close* to the right note sounds worst of all.
- Try to memorize what you figure out correctly but jotting down some notes as you go may eliminate a lot of extra work.
- Just figure out a note or two at a time and let those lead you into the next note or two. Don't barrel forward through the narrative of the song. This will only lead to frustration and a sense of getting lost.
- You are learning it by ear and teaching yourself to play it simultaneously, so you'll need to practice what you're figuring out. If you've figured out the first six notes but can't play them smoothly, don't move on until you can.
- Don't try to figure it all out at once. A few sessions may be needed to reach the end.
- Be patient and go easy on yourself. Expect to make plenty of mistakes. Try to have fun. Focus on the success of what you have figured out when you get stuck or encounter frustration.
- Be nice to your local grocery store employee. Help them through Christmas music purgatory with a kind word and a smile.