



# Keyed Up

P I A N O

EVERYTHING YOU NEED

TO KNOW

TO PLAY BY EAR

By Joseph Pingel

# Everything You Need To Know To Play By Ear



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I wanted to be a rock star when I was a kid. I was good on the guitar at an early age and used guitar-chord knowledge to teach myself piano (after a couple years of lessons).

That changeover from one instrument to another drove home some music theory concepts that rocked my musical world. I made an unobvious discovery; a discovery missed by most musicians out there. That’s what this book is about.

No matter your musical skills, you will either acknowledge and recognize the rare insights I share here or aspire to understand them better.

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Keyed Up

## Introduction

Do you think that I have nerve to say that this book is *everything* you need to know to play by ear? Well, this isn't no ordinary play by ear book. You're not going to learn any keyboard tips or tricks here. This is inside information that you rarely (if ever) see. It models the mind set of a play-by-ear master.

Playing by ear is many things and cannot be isolated to just one key concept. It's proficiency and knowledge combined with experience and a heavy desire to play music independently. There's a lot to it and you can only attack one chunk at a time. **This is the mental chunk.**

### NO ROCK STAR ACADEMY

There's nothing out there that addresses the problem of learning how to play piano like your favorite rock star. They seem to do it easily enough. How did they learn? What I discovered is that, people who learn how to play by ear do it pretty much on their own. All of their stories are interesting.

- Some have "classical training" and just "get it."
- Some understand a little theory and can see repeating patterns.
- Some have super-smart fingers and can play by "feel."

The "super-smart fingers" can be amazing because often they are GREAT and sometimes ignorant of music at the same time. Things fall into place and they see it, feel it and do it. It's the X-factor. **They just get it.**

But **the majority of us *don't get it*** and we've got to approach the subject from a different angle.

### My Story



When I was 16 years old, I played the guitar fairly well. I knew a lot of songs and I could play by ear. I was young and had a lot of passion. I wanted to be a rock star. . . not only on the guitar . . . but the piano as well.

After taking two years of piano lessons, I was very disillusioned. I could play Beethoven but not the The Beatles. So I figured out a plan to teach myself and I quit taking piano lessons.

### Just Like The Guitar

I realized I could learn how to play chords on the piano just like I did the guitar. How hard could it be? I sat down with the guitar and transferred the chords to the piano.

It only took me a month to learn the 12 basic major and minor chords (I was motivated). Once I had the goal in mind to learn the chords, it seemed so natural and easy to reach it. It's amazing how fast everything fell into place.

After I learned the chords, I realized I was pretty good. Admittedly, I didn't have a lot of style, but man, I knew what I was doing. . . I could teach myself.

Unwittingly, I figured out the "secret" to playing by ear. . . and that is . . .

### PLAYING BY EAR IS A SCIENCE

It's not some ethereal concept in music. It *is* music. It's an understanding and a process that separates those that can play independently, and those that can only follow what someone else has written. Leader versus follower.

- It's not a smart-pill.
- It's not a single tip.
- It's not a single trick; and
- It's not a single formula (although these last 3 can be useful).

Like ALL sciences, playing by ear has some **preliminary requirements**. Whether you are a beginner or advanced player, those requirements will always be the same.

#### Requirement #1:

“Be able to play and identify the basic major and minor chords.”

I call this level COMMAND. It's a limited list; only 24 chords in all. Now, there are a lot MORE chords than those but these chords are the foundations. It's very important to concentrate just on the basic chords first.

COMMAND represents a **benchmark level** of playing and understanding that you can reach quickly, but only if that's the focus of your attention. It is the next requirement that was much much harder to discover.

**Requirement #2:****“Know How To Think”**

After I learned all the chords, I started studying any music theory books I could get my hands on. I had tough questions.

Questions that you cannot hope to find the answers if you don't know what to look for. Questions which I soon discovered were not easy to find answers. I looked everywhere but couldn't find the type of book I was interested in.

Then, I stumbled upon Bradley's Popular Piano Chord Encyclopedia. For me, this book turned out to be the Rosetta Stone of music theory.

At the time, I thought I understood music theory fairly well. I realized however, when I looked at this book that it contained information I didn't understand.

I knew immediately that Mr. Richard Bradley's book provided all the answers I was looking for and it was going to be a challenge. You see, this book explained nothing, but it showed everything!

**Unlocking The Secrets**

I studied the Bradley book intently for about 3 months before I unlocked it's"secrets" and put everything together. My discovery seemed so obvious and I couldn't believe I hadn't figured it out a lot sooner.

I thought "Does everybody that knows music theory understand this?" Not by a long shot. My realization was a defining “Aha!” moment that is explained in “The Play By Ear Discovery” (that attacks yet another chunk of the puzzle).

What follows are key concepts that teach you to develop the play-by-ear mind set. Belief in yourself and a strong CAN-DO attitude is much of it. I rattle my sabre in defiance to any song that lays down a challenge. **Figuring out tough songs is what makes you grow.**

Take no prisoners,





## Playing By Ear

“Playing by ear” is a catch-all phrase that applies to a musician that can play a song with little or no written music. Experienced players will tell you that the “ear” part is only half of it, the other half is experience and musical mathematics.

### Three Ways to Play By Ear

**Fake or Cheat Sheets** are minimal, one-note melody line arrangements with the chords written above the staff. This is the easiest way to play by ear but technically, it’s not actually doing it if you don’t have to figure anything out. When you have a cheat sheet, the “play by ear” part is playing your own arrangement.

What’s interesting about this particular skill is that it is the best sight reading tool used by great sight readers to avoid having to read arrangements note for note. They basically play what they know is written and take specific bits and pieces from a written arrangement that suit their purpose.

**Cold-Playing By Ear** is a lot harder than playing from fake sheets. It is the ability to pick out a one note melody line, add the proper chords, put together an impromptu arrangement and bake the entire song from scratch. Most people can learn to quickly play by ear to some extent but the greater your experience, the greater will be your ability to figure out more difficult songs.

**Accompaniment-Playing By Ear** is, when in the process of playing by ear as described above, you only play the chordal accompaniment to the song.

## Basic Rules For Playing By Ear

- **Pick Out a One-Note Melody.** For some people this is very easy and others find it extremely hard. It is hard to comprehend how anyone would have trouble with this but I've had some fairly proficient students that could not pick out the notes to Mary Had a Little Lamb. This is a form of tone-deafness.



If you cannot pick out a one note melody line (or determine the *direction* that a melody goes up or down), you will be heavily challenged when it comes to playing by ear. It can be overcome with experience but it will take you a lot longer.

- **Find The Chord.** Once you find the melody line. Look and see if you see a basic chord falls right in line with the order of notes. Write it down. Continue playing the melody and repeat the process of determining chords. It's a process. Figuring out the chords. That's what it's all about.
- **Determine If The Song You Want To Play is Beyond Your Ability to Figure Out.** You can't climb a mountain if you can't make it up the foothills. In the beginning some songs may be outside your comprehension, ear and experience level. Stick with songs that give you confidence and let your experience grow. You can look forward to a day when you'll be able to figure out anything.
- **Figure Out Songs In The Key of C.** This is by far the easiest key to play and figure things out. Easy key. It gives you a lot of confidence. Once you figure it out in C, transpose to a more comfortable singing key.
- **Figure Out The Skeleton Chords First.** Just sing the song and pound out the basic major or minor chords first. Establish the progression. Once you get that in place, change the chords to suit your purpose. Add a 7<sup>th</sup> or voice chords differently in whatever way works for you. Your chord choices will get better as your ear and proficiency improves.
- **Find The Tonic In The Bass.** Sometimes when searching for the right chord, you can't find it. Try to find the tonic in the bass. That should give you some insight as to where you are and where you might be headed.
- **How Well You Can Build Your Chord Arrangements Depends a Lot on How Much You Play Other Songs.** When you play lots of tunes out of songbooks and fake sheets, you will acquire a better ear and more intelligent fingering reflexes.

There are a number of basic transitional changes and turnarounds that occur over and over again in music. When you play more songs, you naturally start applying these things. You steal bits and pieces from different songs and start working them into your playing.

- **Focus On The Hook.** This is the part that catches your ear and is the most memorable part of an arrangement. Some famous hooks are the driving guitar part of the Rolling Stones' Satisfaction; the guitar lead-in to No Time by the Guess Who; the harmonica lead-in to the Beatles' I Feel Fine and many others. Always listen for hooks. They are the things that make your playing by ear recognizable and interesting.

In addition to lead-line hooks, also listen for chordal, arrangement hooks. These include the driving, syncopated chord progression to Carole King's I Feel The Earth Move Under My Feet and the 8-beat repeating chord arrangement of 96 Tears by Question Mark and the Mysterians.

By listening for and incorporating hooks into your arrangements, you achieve the desired effect. Think about some of your favorite songs. Are there specific hooks in their arrangements that keep them moving? Build your arrangements around them.

- **Develop a CAN-DO "Play-by-Ear" Frame of Mind.** You are capable of figuring out a lot of songs on your own with just a little practice. Even somewhat difficult songs can be figured out if you put your mind to it. You have to try and not give up on the first sign of difficulty.

Playing by ear gets much much easier as you get better playing chords and being consistent in your desire to play often. Most songs are 4 chords so you get sort of bored at structure. Look at difficult changes as challenges because, in the beginning, they are. Life changes considerably when you are in Total COMMAND and don't have difficulty finding the chords anymore.

- **Write The Chords Down As You Go Along.** This way you don't have to figure songs out all over again the next time you play them (like 5 minutes later) or the next day.

Don't forget, playing by ear is mostly playing by experience. The following pages reveal some of the more basic methods used by musicians to figure out songs. Depending on what you want to figure out, some approaches work better than others.

### Hunt and Peck

This is the most common method of figuring out songs. For a surprising number of songs, when you link together the notes of the melody they often reveal the chord to be played.

Of course you must first be able to hear the song in your head and pick it out on the keyboard. Some melodies fall naturally in line with the chord structures of the song. Other tunes have notes in between the notes that make up a chord.

Your ability to hear and visually recognize the chord in a number of note combinations is crucial to your being able to play this way. On average, most songs have four to six chords. Hunting and pecking is a very effective way of figuring which chords they are.

First, get familiar playing the simple one-note melody line until you feel comfortable. Next, start inserting chords at and in between the melody line notes. Use only your right hand for the moment. When you've got the basic chord progression down, add a simple bass and then work your way up from there.



Don't forget that you will be using a lot of 1-4-5 chords that share similar fingering positions. Again, the key of C is the best key to figure out songs. Really look for common patterns and recognize that more often than not the chords fall right in line with the melody line notes.

### Think Key Signature

This type of playing by ear centers around understanding what the 1, 4, 5 major and minor chords of a scale may be. Those are the most probable 6 chords you will be using in any given situation.

Songs modulate to different keys in all sorts of creative ways. Understanding that procedure is also helpful when trying to figure out more difficult songs.

## Fake Sheets

Fake sheets make up a big part of playing by ear. They give you the simple, one note melody line with the chords written above the staff. In addition to professional lead sheets, practically any popular songbook can serve as a fake sheet as well.

The magic of fake sheets is that they give you all the information you need to play your own arrangement of a song. You can make your arrangements as simple or as complex as you wish. Sometimes when sight-reading a standard arrangement in a songbook you'll discover that you can play a *better* arrangement by faking it. Other times you will realize that what is written is *exactly* what you are faking. When you play your own arrangement you get a great sense of accomplishment because you "own it."

Like the Hunt and Peck method, when playing from a fake sheet, you must first play the one note melody until you are comfortable with it. Next, insert chords where it is shown and decide which inversions of chords will work best. Practice the song using only your right hand. Then add a simple bass and work your way up from there. Playing by ear isn't always the same as *playing off the cuff*. It sometimes takes practice to play what you figured out.

Where do you find fake sheets? Outside of music stores that have good, legal, published collections, your best bet is other musicians and the internet. Usually, the people who use fake sheets *have a lot of them* and are open to you copying them. There are a lot of restrictions when it comes to copyright law and you should always consult an attorney before you duplicate any kind of copyrighted material (that's my legal disclaimer).

## Play Along With Records

This is kind of like playing with other musicians but without any flexibility. You don't have any input as to the key or chord progression. The music doesn't stop just because you can't follow closely on the spot.

Yet, there is something very compelling about playing with records because it is challenging. You've got to find the chords quickly using all your resources, figuring out the notes and finding the key. Another great thing about playing with records is that hooks become more obvious.

Playing with records is invigorating. It pushes you outside your comfort zone. When you can consistently, quickly and successfully play with records, you'll be able to drop yourself into any jam session. At that point you will be able to take on just about anything. At that point you won't be thinking about this book much.

## Study Arrangements

When you play by ear from a fake sheet or music songbook, you have to know how to count music properly. You also have to quickly size up the piece and make some decisions about the rhythm and tempo. Remember, when you enter the world of reading music (and we're talking about a one-note melody line here . . . ), you will be playing a lot of songs you have never heard before. If you can't count right, you won't be able to play them regardless of knowing the chords.

At some point you get very good at counting and no longer need to study arrangements with any regularity. But in the beginning, it is good to analyze arrangements of songs that you know and try to figure out why they are written a certain way. Why is it 2/2 instead of 4/4? Why is a particular size scale of notes used? What kinds of musical directions are used and how are they used? When you look at a piece of music you are seeing the result of somebody's opinion. Is their opinion of how to write the song any good?

The more you analyze and study arrangements, the better you get at forming your own opinion about whether or not what is written says what you think it says. For example, a lot of new written music uses a 32<sup>nd</sup> note. If you see that, you can almost be certain the music was generated by a mindless MIDI program. MIDI compositions may show a mathematical fact but they don't care one bit whether or not you as a musician can count what's written. There's a lot more to writing feel and intent than just showing accurate math.

## Play With Other Musicians

This is a great way to get good fast. When you play in a group, you have to play in whatever key the group decides. Guitar players like to play in C, A or E. With saxophone players, you have to play practically everything in the key of B $\flat$ . Whatever case may be, if you find it hard to play in a particular key, playing with other musicians will inspire you to practice.

Playing with other musicians also inspires you to get better control of improvisation. When jamming, everyone usually takes a shot at playing a solo. Improvising makes you think!!! You don't have to be a hot-shot virtuoso to do your part. Base your improvisations on the internal progressions you've learned or other solos you think up and practice ahead of time.

The key of E is sort of tough to play a solo off the cuff (it's much harder than C). In that case, you probably *have* to practice ahead of time. At any rate, when solo time comes, if you can play the progression without too much trouble, you are well on your way to learning improvisation. It takes time.

## Practice Playing Songs In Your Own Key

You get good at anything you concentrate on. There is a lot to learn outside the Key of C and one of the motivating factors to learning another key is have a great need.

## Apply Sight-Reading Skills

You might be wondering how sight-reading applies to playing by ear. As mentioned before, most popular songbooks serve as fake sheets as well. When playing your own “fake” arrangement of a popular song (which you are not sight-reading note for note), you may find that borrowing select bits and pieces of the written arrangement is just what you need.

It might be playing the written bass pattern or playing a certain chord voicing exactly as it is written. Use a written arrangement to your best advantage. Play the parts you like or need and leave the rest to your creative imagination.

## Learn Diminished, Augmented and 7 $\flat$ 9 Chords Right Away

These kinds of chords really add the extra touch to your playing. The diminished and 7 $\flat$ 9 chords are very similar in fingering. I played the piano for at least 20 years before I made it a point to learn these chords. Almost immediately my playing improved. I don't know why I had waited so long. Don't make the same mistake I made. Learn these right away.

## Practice Arpeggios

It takes a while to learn how to perform arpeggios fluently. Work on them often until you get a feel for making the thumb cross-under. Once you learn that, it is much much easier to arpeggio just about any chord you want. The easiest chords to arpeggio are in the Key of C so that is where you should concentrate your early efforts.

## Learn How To Play All The Songs Of Your Favorite Album

Inspiration is the key here. If you love a certain album and wished you could play all the songs on it, go for it. This type of goal can drive you to the next level. Getting the book will move things along quickly. Doing this one simple thing will push you towards establishing your roots and basic style.

## Invest In Other Improvisation and Styling Piano Courses

Do this after you've reached a reasonable degree of COMMAND. To get the most of advanced piano courses you must first reach a higher degree of minimum proficiency.

## Teach Somebody Else How To Do This

You always become the greatest student when you teach something to someone else. You can't expect success from others without first having mastered the skill.

## Spend More Time Playing Chord-Pattern Accompaniments

"Patterns" is when you play various chords as a foundation to accompaniment when singing. Here, you don't have to play the actual melody. There are all kinds of ways to gussy up your arrangements with different voicings and alternative chords. However, do not do this to the extent that it stands in the way of you playing many songs, quickly.

You are better off in the beginning (and for quite a while thereafter), simply pounding out the basic chords of songs in order to play them. Don't get too fancy before you've had a chance to allow COMMAND to sink in.

## You Play *Everything* By Ear

When you play by ear you are free to roam. You are not aimlessly following what is written without variation. Playing by ear adds pizzazz to playing. It lets you gussy-up easy arrangements and gussy-down the hard ones. When you play by ear you develop the mindset that ***you can play anything.***

Every time I play the piano, it is by ear . . . even when I'm reading music. Every arrangement is by ear. *The only way to play the piano is by ear.*

When sight-reading requires exactness, a solid, play-by-ear ability helps you memorize difficult passages and understand what you are doing. Reading music becomes a LOT easier when you can play by ear.

## High Points To Keep In Mind

- You can improvise with any notes as long as you maintain a sense of direction with rhythm in the bass.
- As you begin to learn more difficult chords, try to figure chord triggers that help you to find the right chord quickly in any key.
- Listen **for hooks** in songs that you like. A hook, played at the right time, will make your arrangement sound like a million bucks.
- Be sure to play a variety of bass patterns in each song. This will keep your arrangements from getting monotonous.
- Learn to make augmented and diminished chords an active part of your chord repertoire- **in the beginning**. These chords really add a lot of dimension to an arrangement; so use them.
- Finding your way around on the keyboard is mostly a matter of feel. It doesn't make any difference whether or not you understand the names of each individual chord as you play them. The main thing is to understand the guide-posts of the key. What you do in between those guide- posts is up to you and your own creative ability.
- Watch and listen to other pianists to develop a style of your own. It may take you several years before you feel that you have developed your own style. But then again, does anyone **really** have their own style? Everybody steals from everybody else.
- Practice arpeggiating your chords as soon as possible. Your ability to improvise is **greatly dependent upon this skill**. This will take a while to learn and do fluently. It is well worth your time to put in some practice on a daily basis since speed is not something that will happen overnight.
- Try to spend a little bit of time playing along with the radio or with records. This really tests your proficient abilities but even more, your mind. Remember, **GUIDE-POSTS** play a big part of playing by ear. The radio is a challenge.
- Play around...you'll always discover something new.



“Extreme complication is contrary to art.”

**Claude Debussy**