

Loop2Learn: The Banjoist's Essential Companion

Warning: If you don't have access to high-speed internet or a connected smart phone or tablet, this article is not for you.

For the rest of you, hang tight for an important review of a new product that opens a new handy toolkit for learning banjo, other instruments, and who knows what else!

I have been around a lot of banjo and old-time music camps. Most successful teachers rely on few key elements to teach a new melody. They pick the right tune, play it through, slow it down, and break it into smaller sections. The learners are prompted to play back the small sections, gaining accuracy through multiple repetitions. An often overlooked part of this process are the opportunities for learners to not only listen but to observe the master's hands navigate through the strings and fretboard while producing the melody.

This formula works great for camps or in the private studio of an instructor, but what about at home?

We hungry students use whatever tools are at hand to crack the banjo code. First we hijacked the technology of music recordings and tortured it to yield secrets. We slowed down 78 and 33 1/3 RPM records to half-speed, where the recording dropped an octave. We lifted the needle up and placed it back down as near the spot as we could and then frantically grabbed our banjos and played along to what had previously sounded bright and sparkly, but now sounded dark and drunken. Reel-to-reel and specialized cassette decks made it a little easier, with half-speed playback settings complete with digital dials to mark the sections. With the age of computers, a number of programs became available taking this process mainstream, allowing precise sonic dissection with independent pitch manipulation.

Loop2Learn ushers in the next step in home learning. It is a new application designed for Apple iOS and Android phones and tablets, which opens all of YouTube and beyond, and costs a mere \$1.99. To use Loop2Learn, open the home screen, touch the magnifying glass icon and enter a search term. For example, I entered "George Gibson Banjo". On page 1, up popped 19 YouTube Videos of George playing various tunes and songs. I picked "George Gibson Kentucky" (a video that I placed on YouTube years ago of George playing Kentucky Gambler), and upped popped George playing the song. It was easy to create loops of George by pressing "Start" and "End" icons. I started my loop at the 2nd second and ended at the 20th second, creating an 18 second loop of George playing the tune before he begins to sing. I touched the "-" icon to slow down the loop in 10% increments. As the loop played over and over, I listened and watched George's fingers, and played along. When I am ready, I hit the "∞" which resumed uninterrupted play. Touching the "∞" icon again, restored the loop. Some exploration revealed a right upper corner icon whose function is to magnify the video, making it easier to see George's hands. When I was done, I entered a title to save the loop for future play.. I have used

Loop2Learn to learn from videos of fiddlers and banjoists. There are definitely times where the ability to actually see finger placement made all the difference. While Loop2Learn can be operated successfully simply by common sense and trial and error, there is a 9 minute video tutorial included, which I found helpful.

Loop2Learn will not replace face-to-face instruction, which remains the gold standard. It can't observe your playing, give suggestions on your technique, answer your questions, or offer personal mentorship and support. However, if you are lucky enough to have found a good teacher, you can video record portions of your teacher's instruction, and import the video into Loop2Learn through its "Gallery" function, which should make sure you get the most from the lesson.

A free limited version of Loop2Learn is also available for computer use by going to <https://loop2learn.com/>. This will take you to a Loop2Learn website which comes with a window that says "Paste URL here". After you enter a YouTube URL address, it will appear in the Loop2Learn window where you can slow down the video and create loops. The computer version has fewer slow down speeds, will not allow you to save loops for future reference, and does not have the gallery function so it won't work for videos that you have stored on your hard drive. But hey, it's free!

In terms of value for investment, Loop2Learn hits it out of the park. For less than the cost of an average set of strings, all of YouTube and beyond is at your command. Get to it!

-Banjo Newsletter - September 2017
<https://banjonews.com>