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WEEKEND BREAK

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CONFESSIONS of a NOTORIOUS DILETTANTE



Submitted Photo

The writer Ed Hunt plays his open-backed banjo while dog Wendy wanders by.

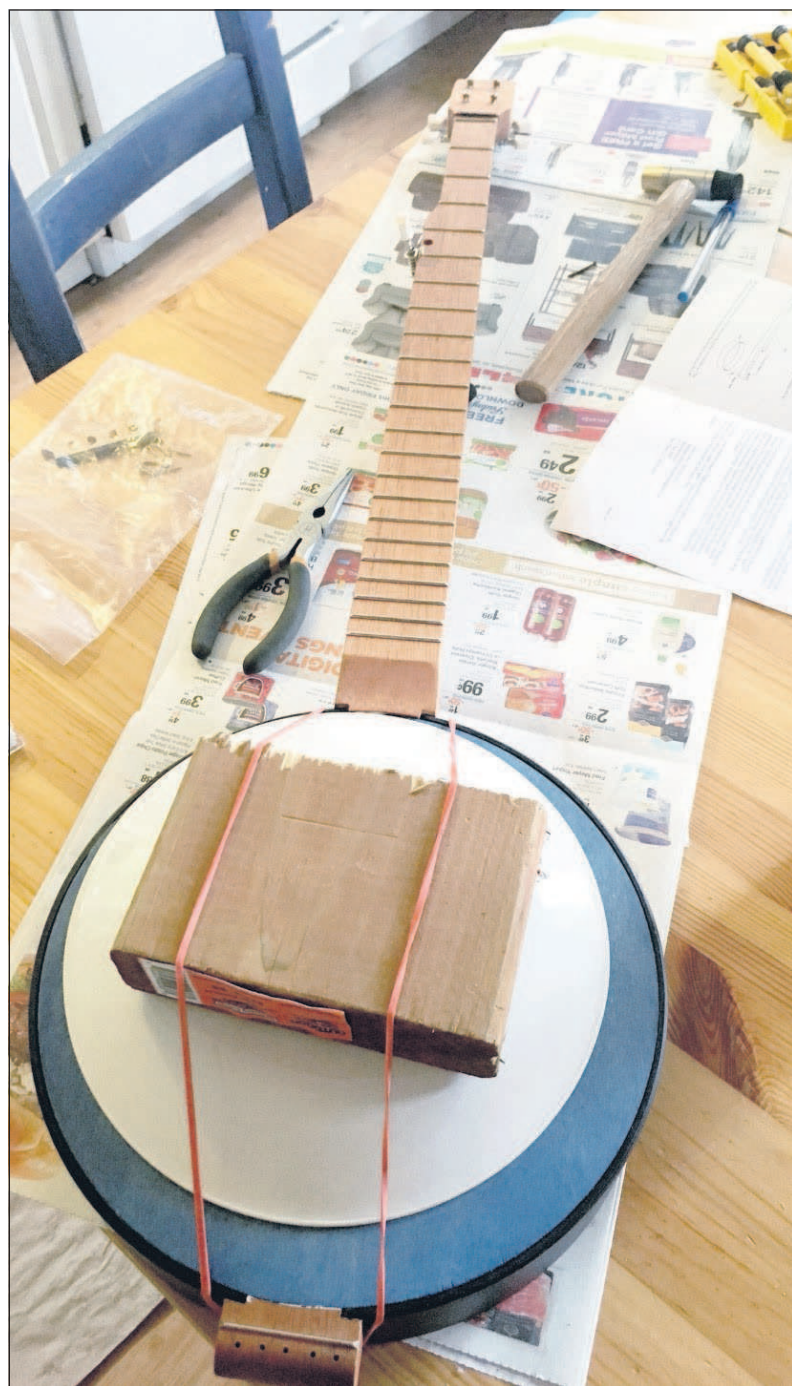


Ed Hunt/For The Daily Astorian
 An open-backed banjo from a kit.

The most important part of failure is learning, and sometimes the most important part of learning is failing.

Ed Hunt works on his open-backed banjo.

Ed Hunt
 For The Daily Astorian



A blue banjo and the wonder of learning

By ED HUNT
 For The Daily Astorian

When I was a kid, I used to read encyclopedias. We had two sets. The World Book 1975 was my favorite. It had a few color photos and it was amazing. Pick a letter off the shelf, open the book up and learn about something.

I loved learning about things. I still do.

My parents set the example. My dad started his career on a slide rule and finally retired just a few years ago using 3D printers and computer modeling. From moon boots to grocery checkout scanners to actual jetpacks for astronauts, my dad enjoyed a rich and varied career in the world of industrial design.

The trick, he always says, is to never stop learning.

As a newspaper reporter, learning new things about the world was part of my job — the absolute best part. As the editor on an online news site during the dot-com boom, I taught myself the nuts and bolts of how to design and publish using HTML code. We were trying to create a model of sustainable success on the web before anyone thought there was a future in online journalism.

The dot-com bubble burst, I changed careers.

Whole new world

Next came nursing, where I went from an expert in one field to a complete novice in another. I had a whole world of medicine that I had to understand.

Continuing education is required for doctors and nurses because medical science changes rapidly. If you don't keep learning, you aren't practicing good medicine.

I try to teach myself how to fix things. Often, doing it yourself is barely worth the time and materials, but learning how to do it is where I find the reward.

The internet, of course, makes all this much easier. When we bought this old house 24 years ago we had to learn restoration and repairs ourselves. I thumbed through old handyman books that I picked up at thrift stores to teach myself the basics of getting an old house livable.

My motto is: "There is nothing I don't know how to do, only things I haven't learned yet."

I am a notorious dilettante. I've taken flying lessons and classes in wood carving. Sometimes I find a new skill or area is just not for me. Often I just fail.

A couple of years ago, I bought a bass guitar and tried to teach myself how to play. I'd picked bass because I played trombone in school. I figured I'd try bass because I could still sort of read the bass clef. It didn't work.

Learning from failure

The most important part of failure is learning, and sometimes the most important part of learning is failing.

This year I swallowed that failure and am trying something new — I have always been in love with the sound of the banjo. Probably a side effect of watching too much "Hee Haw" when I was a kid. I knew nothing about it other than I liked the sound. The open backed banjo is a perfect accompaniment to a rainy day.

With a Christmas gift card I bought a kit from Backyard Banjos and I'm trying to teach myself to play.

I had to start by putting the banjo together myself — staining the wood and assembling the components to make the musical

Writer's Notebook

instrument. Then I had to learn how to string it and tune it.

A few books from the library and an online video lesson plan and I'm starting to actually make music.

When the rain forces us inside, it is a great time to open our minds. We have libraries at our fingertips, experts a few clicks away.

The internet is wonderful, especially if you live in a rural community. It opens up all sorts of opportunities to learn new things. That said, it has its limitations. I'll try my online lessons but I may need to resort to in-person classes.

Lifelong learning

Thankfully lifelong learning opportunities abound in our community. We have two excellent community colleges and amazing libraries as well as a host of opportunities for learning all manner of skills to test and expand our minds and bodies. I'm dying to take a class at the Barbey Maritime Center someday where you can learn everything from building boats to basket weaving.

For now, however, I am focused on my little blue banjo.

I think it will be good for me.

Learning to play a musical instrument at any age seems to confirm neurological benefits. Music keeps our brains young, even if we don't start taking lessons until we are much older.

One researcher studied the impact of piano lessons on adults between the ages of 60 and 85. According to an article in National Geographic, she found that after six months, those who had received the lessons showed gains in memory, verbal fluency, information processing, planning ability and other cognitive functions when compared to a control group.

"People often shy away from learning to play a musical instrument at a later age, but it's definitely possible to learn and play well into late adulthood," University of South Florida researcher Jennifer Bugos explained to National Geographic. "Musical training seems to have a beneficial impact at whatever age you start. It contains all the components of a cognitive training program that sometimes are overlooked, and just as we work out our bodies, we should work out our minds."

Musical training has been shown to help improve motor skills recovery after a stroke. Other research is ongoing to see whether choir singing can help stave off the advance of dementia.

"Music reaches parts of the brain that other things can't," University of Westminster neuropsychologist Catherine Loveday told the Guardian. "It's a strong cognitive stimulus that grows the brain in a way that nothing else does, and the evidence that musical training enhances things like working memory and language is very robust."

So even if I never play a note for anyone other than myself, I'll still get some benefit from whatever neural connections come together during this learning experience. That will help keep my brain in good shape to learn other new skills in the years to come.

I'm determined to never stop learning.

Ed Hunt is a writer and registered nurse who blogs on medical issues at redtriage.com and on other subjects at theebbtide.blogspot.com. He lives in Grays River, Washington.