



## **Becoming a Better Listener**

by Paul Anastasio

To become better players, it is in our best interest to become better listeners. Besides working on playing chords, we will also want to work on sharpening our ears. The goal is to be able to hear and recognize the chords that are being played in the music on our stereos. The better we can get at recognizing individual chord shapes and chord progressions, the better we'll understand music.

I try to hear chords by number, as is done in the Nashville Numbering System. This system is a simplified version of the figured bass system used in Bach's day. Here's how it works. For whatever key you're in, the chords in the piece are given numbers based on from which note of the scale the chord is built. In other words, in the key of G, the G chord, being built from the first note of the G scale, is the 1 chord. The C chord, being built from the fourth note of the G scale, is called the 4 chord. The D chord, as it's built from the fifth note of the G scale, is called the 5 chord.

Simpler forms of music, such as vintage country music, bluegrass and old-time fiddle music, are good styles to begin analyzing using the Nashville Numbering System. This is because they generally have a relatively small number of chords which are often simple major and seventh chords, and they are assembled in a few predictable ways. The key to hearing chords is often as simple as listening to what note the bass player plays on the first beat of each bar. More often than not, this will be the root of the chord being played.

These days, the big disconnect between what we hear on recordings and what we see in written music has gotten smaller, with many music books now coming with accompanying CDs or DVDs. A good way to learn to hear chords is to listen to a CD while looking at the letter names of the chords in the accompanying book. There is really no substitute for seeing the name of a chord while simultaneously hearing it. If you're lucky enough to have a patient guitarist or pianist who knows about chords, they can really help you to recognize chords by calling their names as they play each chord. In addition, if you can learn some basic guitar or piano chords yourself, you can look at the players' hands to find out what chords are being played.

Although it may seem daunting at first to try to recognize all the chords of all the music you hear, it soon becomes easier. What you'll find is that the same few chord progressions are used over and over. This is true regardless of style, and once you learn to hear the first dozen chord progressions or so, the second dozen are far easier. By the time you get to the second hundred, you'll begin to say, "Oh, that's the same old thing too. Ho hum!"

Of course, the great thing about hearing and recognizing chord progressions by the numbers is that you can start stealing ideas from solos on records. After all, if you're playing a tune with the same chord progression as Your Cheatin' Heart, what's to stop you from stealing a lick from one of Hank Williams' band members' solos and putting it in your song? The answer, of course, is nothing, and you're on your way to a life of musical crime, stealing licks from others just as fast as they can steal 'em from you!

Years ago, I had the privilege of getting to know the great Nashville session guitarist Grady Martin. Grady was one of those musicians, like fiddle genius Johnny Gimble, whose style was so identifiable that those 'in the know' could tell that he was playing on a record within just a few notes. He told me though, and these were his exact words, "Everything I play I stole from somebody else." Hey, if it worked for Grady, it will work for the rest of us. Steal away!

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### **about the author**

Initially classically trained, Paul Anastasio soon began exploring the world of fiddling. In the mid-1970s Paul studied and performed with Joe Venuti. Beginning in 1978, Paul toured with Merle Haggard, Asleep at the Wheel, Larry Gatlin, Loretta Lynn and many others.

Paul is the owner of the Swing Cat CD label, ([www.swingcatenterprises.com](http://www.swingcatenterprises.com)), writes a regular column for Fiddler Magazine and also teaches privately. He has made thirty trips to southern Mexico, recording and studying a beautiful local fiddle style.