One of the candidates for the eighth wonder of the world, to a non-musician, is watching a musician figure out a piece of music without the written page. A musician’s ability to create something in the place where there was musical emptiness, is nothing short of astounding to a non-musician! I equate it to the awe that I experience, as I watch an artist take a blank canvas or a block of clay and create a visual masterpiece.

Many non-musicians, and some “musicians”, assume this ability is granted through superior genetic coding. While perfect pitch is a genetic blessing (and a curse if the person blessed does not learn how to also use relative pitch), the ability to find a melody by ear, is a process that can be taught.

The process of learning to play by ear is more a function of use than ability. We all have the potential to learn to play by ear. The main difference is that some people take the time to develop the ability and some do not. It’s no different than developing the ability to draw. If you spend a lot of time drawing, you will eventually improve. If, on the other hand, you never pick up a pencil or crayons or a paint brush, watching those that have developed the ability will always produce a sense of wonderment in you.

So the first step is to just do it! Sit at the keyboard and try hunting and pecking until you find a melody you recognize. As time goes by, you will eventually pick up on certain “guiding principles” that will make the hunting and pecking a little bit more “scientific”. You will find that you will figure out the melodies quicker and with less missed notes. That is the purpose of this report, to give you those secrets at the beginning of your path to becoming part of the Eighth Wonder of the World club! But first, let me share a story with you on when I recognized this eighth wonder…

About 22 years into my study of the piano, my sister got engaged. And as with all events in my family, music played an integral role. (My Dad was my music teacher, my Mom is a singer, one of my sisters played piano and flute, the other played piano, voice and bassoon, and my brother played trumpet and soccer!)
After the party “proper” had taken place, we all naturally gravitated toward the piano. I performed my typical repertoire of both classical and jazz literature and then the “Do you know…” game started. At first, I knew many of the standard party songs that people requested. (Stairway to Heaven, Piano Man, Goin’ Out of My Head, etc.) But after about a half hour, I started to run into requests that I had not played, but had heard. So, I continued to play the songs to the best of my ear’s ability.

After about another hour of this, one of my sister’s friends came over to me and said, “Wow, you memorized a lot of songs!” I looked at this woman and said, “Oh, no. I ran out of the songs I memorized over an hour ago!” To which she responded with astonishment! She was completely dumb-founded as to how I could translate sounds in my head into recognizable music. That’s when it hit me…

Twenty-two years of piano study, 4 years of music in college culminating in a Bachelor of Arts degree, countless private lessons, a career as a music educator in the public school system of New York and it all boiled down to a simple “parlor trick”! Yet this trick was what most people are most impressed with. So, the educator in me started to kick in, and I started to think, “What is the secret(s) to doing this?” “Could I actually get any hearing person to accomplish this?”

I started to observe people who had developed the ability to play a song by ear. I watched for hours, days, and weeks. I observed accomplished professional musicians, students and lay people who just loved to play the piano. I watched classical musicians, jazz musicians and rock and roll musicians. I started to see patterns emerging.
Next, I observed people who had not yet developed this ability, but who desperately wanted to. And again, patterns began to emerge.

People who could play by ear did certain things distinctively different from those who could not. I started to apply those distinctions that I believed made playing by ear possible to those people who had not yet developed the ability and lo and behold, guess what started to happen?! That’s right, those that did not, started doing! But even more astounding, it did not take years of practice. It usually occurred in a matter of moments! That’s right, not years of drudgery, but moments, as long as they continued to apply some simple distinctions. Here are the distinctions.

**Secret #1**

When learning a piece by ear, you need to utilize a listening mind, not a thinking mind. It is very much a gentle, passive process. You should simply hear the melody (in your mind’s ear) that you are learning and then play it. Do not spend much time thinking about how it goes. This is the difference between having a listening experience vs. having a thinking experience. A good way to accomplish this is by placing your eyes in the same position you would if you were trying to figure out a double-digit, carry-over math addition problem. Another way of doing this is to try the activity below.

Without closing your eyes, in your mind’s eye picture a beach. Next, picture beautifully colored umbrellas on the beach. Now add in people playing and swimming. See the sky and the sun. Okay, did you notice where your eyes went? For some people, their eyes went up, for others, down. Regardless of the exact position, your eyes went to a place of calm. A place that sent a signal to your brain that it should concentrate, very intently, on whatever it is you were doing. I call this spot the “brain’s concentration zone.” It is what you do whenever you need to focus on something in a very concentrated way. It is one of the key distinctions made by all people who play by ear.
Many people think that watching their fingers will help them. This is only true after you figure out the melody. Once you learn the melody, you may look at the keyboard so that you can replicate it faster, but not while you are figuring out the melody.

Secret #2

A second distinction is that people who are effective at figuring out a melody by ear, do not jump all over the keyboard. Most melodies occur in no more than a 10 white note range in the middle of the keyboard. Singers don’t jump around with their voices. They usually create nice smooth lines. Well, that is exactly what you want to do on the keyboard, create nice smooth lines.

Secret #3

A third distinction is that if you make a large leap, up or down, to a note that you know is correct, this leap will usually be followed by some notes that are right next to the note to which you leaped.

Secret #4

A fourth distinction is that if a melody doesn’t sound correct going up or down, remember that sometimes, notes get repeated. So don’t be afraid to try the same note you just played. And I guarantee you that even though you have just read this, you will, at least once, try all the notes surrounding the note you just played and none of them will sound correct. Then, you will come back to this paragraph and tap your forehead with the palm of your hand and exclaim, “Oh yeah!”

One final piece of advice, don’t be afraid to try the “black notes”. For some reason, unbeknownst to me, students avoid the black notes. They are simply sounds, just like the white notes! So give them a try!
As motivational speaker, Tony Robbins says, “Repetition is the mother of skill.” So go spend 15 minutes several times a day at the piano and figure our your favorite melodies! If you get stuck, ask someone who knows how to play to show you the part you got stuck on. Or, just skip it and come back to it another time. But don’t delay, become one of the “Eighth wonders of the World” today!