

Some thoughts both about mandolin specifically and my philosophy of music in general:

1. Think about the job of the mandolin in most settings, to bridge the gap between a percussive and melodic instrument. Traditionally the mandolin has filled the roll of a snare drum in accompaniment mode marking primarily 2's and 4's with the chop, but also taking occasional breaks or filling in with short melodic/harmonic runs. Either of these roles can be explored with a lot of creativity. Just an easy example, throw in a measure or two of chops on just the 1's and 3's, or a syncopated upstroke here and there between chops, and when done tastefully, you're spicing up the sound and filling two roles at the same time.
2. Hammer-ons, pull-offs and slides are your friend. Learn to use them cleanly.
3. If you're interested in improvisation (I think everyone ought to be, I am certainly not a master at this, but I think it's a great frontier to explore), one of the main things to me is to fully embrace the impossibility of a "wrong" note. There are dissonant notes, but you hear those used to great effect by master improvisors all the time. Even the 4 and 5 chords in the scale have dissonant notes to the 1 chord triad, that's what makes musical tension. There are also poorly chosen notes, and things that happen when your brain and your hands are not in sync with each other. Rather than thinking of these as mistakes, try to let them be musical.
4. Practice improvising over tunes you know well, for me that means things like Salt Creek, Blackberry Blossom, Angeline the Baker, basically tunes that have wormed their way into your head to the point that you can hear the melody even while you're playing something else. It takes a lot of practice to get comfortable. Also, start small. Deviate from the lines you know just a note or two here and there, that becomes a run, and that becomes a harmonic or rhythmic variation, etc.
5. Practice singing the notes you want to play, and playing them simultaneously. Learning to do this well is an ongoing challenge, but it's an old jazz trick for good reason. My experience is that it frees you from your fingers' muscle memory habits and allows a more spontaneous improv.
6. Resist the urge to noodle during your practice time, by which I mean play segments of tunes, licks, runs that you already know well, without applying them to an actual song, or something you're working on learning or improving. This does not apply to technical exercises, or making an effort to practice the cleanliness or technique of a certain section, sometimes you have to focus on something repetitively to imbed it in your muscle memory.
7. Muscle memory! This is the basis of most of music. Doing a certain thing so many times that your hands and brain instinctively know how, this ironically even applies to improvisation.
8. If you don't know how to read music, make an effort to learn. One of my biggest mistakes as an aspiring musician was to think that music literacy and classical training were unnecessary and perhaps even detrimental to what I thought of as 'good' music. Now, I'm clawing my way through the process of learning as an adult, and it's much harder than it would have been if I'd started younger. Any music theory I am able to talk about is hard won and tenuous at best. Trust me, if you play long enough, you will eventually hit a wall that music theory could help you over much quicker than just hammering away at it with your forehead. I wish I'd have seen that earlier.

9. Above all, have FUN playing music. Sometimes technical practice can eat away at the fun that is the whole point of being a musician. When it gets to that point, take a break from the work and go back to something you just enjoy for its own sake.
10. Music is beauty, use it as a decoration for your life. It's not the only beautiful thing though. The best thing we can do as people is learn to see life through the lens of art. Washing the dishes, fixing fence, building a fire in the wood-stove, changing the oil in your car, these are all things that can be art if you apply the right perspective to them, and this can be incredibly enriching to our lives.