

Finding Your Own Voice

April 2011

I'm sure there was a time in your studies where you just felt way overwhelmed at the sheer amount of music, technique and knowledge that one could acquire on the guitar. After studying at Musicians Institute and The New School University, I had a whole wall closet full of music sheets, concepts of improvisation, harmonic substitutions and so forth. I had the equivalent of 50 masters' life work that I was "supposed" to learn. Where does my own voice fit in all of this?

Should I be learning more and more about what other masters of music have done? And if so, when does it end? Are we going to spend the rest of our lives focusing on what other people have done and how they did it?

COMPOSITION

We all know plenty of famous musicians who made a successful career out of only knowing 3 chords and maybe that one famous pentatonic shape that every guitarist knows.

It seems like these artists were more concerned with learning how to use these few chords to express what was deep inside of them. They considered themselves more as songwriters and composers and the guitar a tool, rather than defining themselves specifically as guitarists.

I'll take this train of thought further: I bet that most great guitarists consider themselves composers and writers and the guitar just happened to be the instrument they felt could express their voice in the best way.

You might ask, what's the difference between somebody who is a composer and uses the guitar, versus a guitarist that composes?

The first of the two is the one who breaks the boundaries of the guitar and bring something new to it. They are not confined by the physical limits of the instrument but only by the imagination of their mind. People who fit this bill are Jimi Hendrix, Jeff Beck, Eric Clapton, Jimi Page, Steve Vai, and many more. This is seen throughout the history of music: J.S. Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, etc, who were all masters of their instruments but are really considered composers. Part of the reason they are considered composers is because they not only composed for one instrument but for plenty of instruments. Nevertheless, their individual voice can be heard no matter which instrument plays it. You know instantly when Mozart is being played on the radio. :)

LISTENING

Now back to students and the development of our own sound....usually the ear is more advanced than our abilities on the instrument. The reason for this is that the average person spends more time listening to music than playing an instrument. When you start delving into your development as a musician, it is very important to not forget to listen.

Frequently I see young guitar players spending all their time playing fast and technically difficult music without having developed the ear to actually hear it. This makes playing guitar more of an acrobatic feat rather than the expression of one's inner voice. The sounds we then hear is music that doesn't touch us because it doesn't come from the inner voice and heart.

If I have learned anything during my years as a musician it's that **listening is more important than playing.**

SINGING WHAT YOU PLAY

I ask my **students to be able to sing what they play.** The voice is naturally connected to our brain. So if you can sing what you are playing, then it comes from the right source.

A great example of this is pianist Glenn Gould. His way of playing J.S. Bach's music is unlike anybody else's who plays it. He gives each note such a profound meaning. Interestingly enough you hear him singing and mumbling sometimes when he plays. Although I don't like hearing his noises over his piano playing, I am absolutely humbled by the depth of his performances.

EXPLORING NEW SOUNDS

There are times in our musicianship when we focus on one particular style of music. This is natural for our musical development.

But, any style of music comes with a limited amount of musical vocabulary. Otherwise, we wouldn't have different styles of music.

It is good to learn different styles of music because we get a better understanding of the limitlessness of musical expression.

The life path of mastering an art form or a trade is circular. You keep learning and growing until at one point you

have the experience and knowledge of a master but the limitless creative mind of a child. That's the point at which you have come full circle.

I frequently jam with the great drummer Michael Carvin and we call our style of music "fun music" because our goal is to be free of the structures of any given style and explore music on the most simple basis of composition: a melody or idea and its development. Play like master, think like a child.

Interestingly enough most people don't like playing like that because forms and styles are a natural expression of the human condition. Humans like to put things in organized boxes and labels, otherwise they are afraid of it.

That's why great artists were always ahead of their time and rarely praised while alive. It takes the average person some time to expand their set views and accept the unknown and the possibility of change.

I believe a student of music should be open to all styles of music and be an open-minded person in general. Having a mind-set like that means that you are willing to explore your inner self with an open mind. This should not be confused with liking everything. I don't like every artist that's out there but this has nothing to do with the style of his/her music as much as with the way the artist is expressing him/herself.

In order to acquire a vocabulary that you can't hear yourself yet, it's necessary to break it down into its smallest parts and approaching it from all possible angles.

For example: learning to hear and play chord extensions would entail an understanding of the theoretical (its composition and harmonic usage), the aural, the vocal and the physical (actual playing) aspects. This way the inner ear can fully grasp the new sound and start implementing it.

Learning new sounds through a particular style that frequently uses such sounds helps the student focus and learn from great masters i.e. if you want to learn Be-Bop, transcribe Charlie Parker solos.

CONCLUSION

Listen to music that you like, but give music you don't like a second listen. Have good reasons for your taste. Try to fully understand the music. Learn and imitate through transcription and composition. Out of imitation comes innovation. Consider the limitlessness of music, technique and knowledge as part of the limitless capacities of your human spirit. You are a part of the history of music and its masters.

Through this path, the student expands their musicianship with their true nature, the inner voice.

Don't die with your music still in you.

Coming Up in May 2011:

The Matrix Of The Guitar