

Thoughts On Playing And Practicing

ORIGINS

Have you ever had a silent conversation with yourself, thinking about something you needed to say to someone? In your mind, you hear your voice saying the words of the dialogue you feel you need to express. You also feel the emotions that are compelling you to gather your thoughts, choose your words, and the way you want to say them. Even though you're not voicing it, within you, you hear and feel it all.

Hearing music in your mind is the exact same process, but it's hearing melodies along with the chord progressions that accompany them. As the Chords Progress they feel like emotions surrounding and enhancing the meaning of the melody. Music conveys the deeper feelings that written or spoken words can never completely describe.

When speaking aloud in the moment, your voice speaks the words simultaneously as you hear them within you, and feel them. The strength of this connection is what tells listeners where you're coming from, and will make them listen, or not listen. One thing is for certain, the mind and feelings are always the genesis of your personal intent and self expression.

The process of improvisation on the Guitar, or any instrument is also exactly the same. Hearing and feeling the notes in your mind always comes first, and must be your primary inner focus. In the mind is where you build your strength, knowledge and confidence in playing.

Putting your fingers on the strings of the guitar, finding the notes, and synchronizing exactly with what you hear in your mind while playing is always the task at hand. Therefore, developing the mind's ability to hear, and building confidence in the connection between your mind, hands, and the Guitar is a task where the MIND IS ALWAYS the first consideration in practicing.

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INTERNALIZING RAW MATERIALS

The Five Basic Key Positions and their Temporary Alterations, the Harmonic Minor, Harmonic Major, and Melodic Minor are the source of the basic raw materials we use in learning to improvise. OK, but how do we approach these to get a functional result.

First, we have to listen to the Guitar, and pull the sounds contained within the Positions into our minds so we can internalize and develop a personal feeling for them. In your mind is where you “Play” with the notes you’ve absorbed, bounce them around and have fun. in the mind is where the spontaneous musical ideas take place. This is gets projected through the guitar. You **don’t** “look” at the fretboard to just to “see” what you’re going to play next without hearing it first.

The positions can be broken up into intervals, arpeggios, and chord voicings. Internalization is accomplished by **practicing slowly**. Go as slowly as you need to in order to fully make contact with your inner self and **LISTEN** as fully as you can. Also, listen in your mind to make sure you **hear** the next note before your finger reaches for it. If you’re unsure, play the note on the Guitar, sing, and match your voice to the note, then continue.

Here, the Guitar is serving as an **external source** that you’re totally and completely involved with, and listening to. Nothing else exists for you except the sounds you’re listening to, and internalizing. Practicing fast without really listening just wears out your hands, and will not enable you absorb the sounds or play fast.

Have you ever eaten a hamburger that tasted so good that you savored every bite, and were totally captivated by the flavor and the juices in your mouth? When you think back on this experience does the taste of that hamburger come back into your mouth like you’d just finished tasting it? This is how you listen to, learn, and remember the notes.

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INTERNALIZING RAW MATERIALS

In order to play fast, you have to be able to accurately and clearly conceive of a fast melodic phrase in your mind. There also has to be an artistic impulse that tells you that it's the right thing to do at that point in your improvisation. Hearing the notes and conceiving musical phrases in your mind **first** is what motivates your fingers to move fast, and go after the notes you hear.

This is the point where you begin to truly train your hands to play fast. Your mind the, clarity and the intent of the fast musical idea gets behind your hands and says "MOVE"! If they can't quite get to it, hold on to the image of the idea in your mind and slow the tempo down, keep the idea in perspective, get it together, and gradually speed the tempo up. Then work out another one.

IF you have practiced ***SLOWLY***, always making sure you **heard the note** before your finger reached for it, and your hands have remembered the **sensory location** of that note within the Key Position, you'll be on the right track to being able to automatically play what you spontaneously hear in the moment.

What your trying to achieve is this; you put your left hand on the fretboard, and anything you spontaneously hear , just comes out. It's as if you opened your mouth to speak. No doubt, no fear, you're aware of how your feelings are shaping the meaning of the sounds.

In "playing" with other musicians, you feel them within you on the same level that you're connecting to within yourself. Musicians Play together like a group of children play, and everyone "feels" where everyone else in the group is coming from.

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LEARNING A TUNE

The Melody is your guide to everything.

1) **The Melody gives you the song form. A A B A, A B, A A B C.**

Keeping track of the form is the broad basic overview of the tune. If the song form is 32 measures long, each repetition of the form is called a chorus. Knowing the melody is fundamental in keeping your place in the chorus, and knowing where you are at all times.

2) **The Melody gives you the Meter, 4 / 4, 3 / 4, 6 / 8, etc.**

The tempo of the beat and the meter are the “time flow” you ride on, and gives you the ability to anticipate in advance what’s coming up as the chorus progresses. This will all be there if you really know the melody

3) **The Melody gives you the two and four bar phrase lengths.**

Sing or play the melody and tap your foot every two bars. This can be Voiced or done in the mind. The two bar phrase makes you aware of the architecture of each phrase of the melody, and also where the open spaces are between the phrases. Next, do the same thing by tapping your foot every four bars. The object is to anticipate the first beat or “One” of the next phrase before you get there. This keeps your consciousness moving forward.

4) **The Melody gives you the Key Changes if the tune modulates.**

If the tune changes keys, you should be able to hear the key changes right through the notes of the melody. If you can’t, then you still don’t know the melody.

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5) The Melody is also your guide to the Chord Changes as well as the Key Changes.

If the melody note isn't the Root, 3rd, 5th, or 7th, of the chord at that point in the tune, it's going to be the 2nd or, the 4th, or the 6th. If the melody note is not in the Key, then it's a chromatic note. These revolve around, or lead into the notes of the Key, and the notes of the Chord that's functioning within that key.

6) Feeling the Chord and Key Changes.

Every chord change in a tune feels like an individual emotion in transition that adds shades of meaning to the melody. When improvising freely, if you're truly hearing within you, chord changes are changing feelings that you react to. It's your reaction that points your hearing and your fingers in the right direction. The less you think about "theory" the better. The less you rely on visualization just to make sure you're "safe", the better. Playing "safe" visually detracts from your inner hearing.

7) Within Your Mind

You should be able to practice all of the above in your head. Where you're not sure, use the guitar to play the chord changes as a means to solidify and define your hearing within you. Faith in what you hear is your strength, your inner anchor, the place you run to in times of stress. When I asked a great player about how to practice swing, he answered " in your head, just imagine the most kick ass rhythm section on earth. Hear the Bass, Drums, Piano, everything, and let your self go with it".

Dave Woods, August 26, 2008