

# Life and Music

The understanding of music should always relate directly to real life. Ultimately every aspiring musician has to find their own way to the level of expression that says “listen, this is me and no other”. This is a highly individual process. It’s often said that the ability to improvise can’t be taught. Many aspiring musicians listen to great improvisers and wonder how they do it. Many musicians trained through the classical approach know all the music theory, all their scales and arpeggios, can read any written music you put in front of them, and yet, they still can’t improvise. Let it be said that knowledge and technique alone are not enough. The secret of how to improvise fluently lies somewhere else, but where? Let’s look at life.

The first aspect we have to understand is *Vocabulary*. In our social interaction with others we employ the process of improvisation in every day speech without knowing it. We learned the words we speak by listening and absorbing their meaning from those around us, in other words, by ear. Over time we acquired enough words to begin putting sentences together, and we too were able to communicate.

We learned what the words really meant by the *way* they were said. As a child when you were about to put your hand in the flame coming from the burner on the kitchen stove, and you heard your mother say *NO!!!*” It was the raw emotion she put into the word that made you listen and taught you the true meaning of the word. It was also the raw emotion she felt when she reacted to what you were about to do that made her instantaneously choose that particular word from her vocabulary.

**Feeling** in the artistic sense, is knowing instantaneously without having to process on an intellectual level. Knowing, reacting, and choosing through feeling is so much faster than the process of intellectual thought that it’s like comparing a supersonic jet plane to an ox cart. The left hemisphere of our brain is the analytical intellectual part, and the right hemisphere of our brain is the intuitive creative feeling part. The left half is a necessary tool in the process of acquiring a musical vocabulary, but its main value is as an organizing and exploring tool. When intuitive inspiration fails us, the left half can be used to figure out a way to revive it.

Here is a left half, right half example of what I mean. Suppose there was a beautiful mountain, and you wanted to discover how it looked in autumn. The organizing left half of the brain would be used in reading a road map to decide theoretically the best route to get there. Once you made the trip, making sure that you followed the map, and had taken all the right turns, and you had arrived at the mountain, you would then dispense with the left half, and let the right half of the brain take over.

You would sense a feeling of awe at the size of it. The multitude of the colors of the autumn leaves would be inspiring. The sun through the scattered clouds passing over the

mountain would add another dimension of subtlety to the view. You would hear birds calling each other in the majesty of the stillness, and feel a soft breeze caressing your face. The creative right half of your brain would allow you to take it all in. Your spirit and feelings would embrace it, absorb it, and it would become an experience you would always be able to recall, never to be forgotten.

In acquiring a musical vocabulary the process is exactly the same. If there is a chord, a rhythm, or a melodic combination of intervals you want to add to your musical vocabulary, you use the left half of your brain to search for, organize, and set them up. Then the real process of learning can begin. You put the left half of the brain aside, and let the right half, and what you feel take over.

Your feelings can then begin to absorb the musical elements on an emotional intuitive level so they can always be recalled. Absolutely everything and anything intellectual has to be put aside while you're doing this. What does a rhythmic phrase you want to absorb say to you? Does it remind you of a kitten pouncing across the floor as you drag a string in front of him? In short, what does the musical element you want to become part of you make you as an individual feel and imagine? This is how you develop your personal vocabulary.

In everyday improvised communication, if we are totally involved, and listening, we react emotionally to what's said by others. Our emotions automatically choose the words we respond with, and the rhythmic intention of their delivery.

Therefore, intellectual recognition of the meaning of a word alone is not enough. The words have to have an emotional image for you that you personally identify with before your feelings will automatically reach for them. The process of listening to chord progressions going by in real time, reacting to them, and having those reactions trigger emotions to select notes that create melodic lines as a response, is exactly the same.

Through rhythmic accent and tone of voice, a thousand different emotional meanings can be conveyed using a single word. "You're Coming!" is a command, and "You're Coming?" is a question. It's the music in the words that conveys their true intent to the listener, not the grammar. Someone deeply connected to the core of their feelings can convey the universe with a few simple words. Others can talk all day and say nothing.

The exact same parallel is true in music, a rhythm, a chord, a melodic phrase, a single note, fully felt and absorbed into the personal vocabulary of a musician, can be used to convey a thousand different meanings in thousands of different moments.

Next comes the concept of ***Knowing Your Instrument***. Let's suppose that within, you have a magnificent emotionally justified vocabulary, and you have great thoughts to convey to others. However, you aren't sure of how to make your mouth work to form the words.

You are unsure of how to touch your tongue to the roof of your mouth to make a "T", or press your upper teeth to your lower lip to make an "F", or press your lips together to make a "P", or allow air to pass over a tensed tongue to sound an "S".

Even though you had a lot to say, You would not be sure of what was going to come out of your mouth when you tried to speak. Doubt would rule. Doubt impedes or kills the creative flow, and you still wouldn't be able to communicate effectively.

We *never* think about the physical actions that our mouths perform during speech, and that's the key. We can't think or worry about the mechanical process of speech as we speak, or the technical aspects of grammar. When we do, the left side of the brain interferes with the right side, and we lose the emotional connection to our train of thought.

The exact same parallel is true in knowing the instrument you play. When your feelings choose a note you hear because it's the right expression to play at that moment, your fingers have to find and articulate that note automatically without the intellectual part of the brain getting in the way. It's exactly the same process as speech. If doubt makes you hesitate, you have to fight through that feeling of doubt to get your ideas across. Your musical thoughts will be impeded or stifled completely.

**Fear and doubt are the executioners of creativity.** I can honestly tell you that nothing spontaneously creative happens in life or music unless you have the courage to take a chance. OK, but what gives us this courage? It's confidence, confidence that if you just go for it, it will happen. Confidence that if you can't handle what you get yourself into, you'll find another way in the moment to make it work out. Just keep dancing.

Confidence is gained through experience. Experience is gained by trial, error, and deep emotional consolidation of knowledge. If you fall on your face, get up, analyze what happened, regroup, modify your approach, and try it again. When you finally get it, you will have earned it. ***That which has been earned is the core basis of confidence.***

Great improvisers are not people who never make a mistake. Great improvisers are people who can recover from a mistake in the very moment that they make it, so fast, that no one realizes that they ever made a mistake. Great improvisers do not condemn themselves in the moment for their mistakes. They never let one bother them. The old phrase "go with the flow" hits the nail on the head.

Commenting in your head, or judging what you're playing during an improvisation, in word language, will also blow up the musical thought train. You can think "that sucked", or "wow, that was great!! And either one will push the plunger. No interior word language while you're playing please.

Asking a great improviser "how do you get your fingers to do that?" gets you "I never think about it". Asking "where do you get your musical ideas," gets you "I just play what I feel".

Asking "what do you think about when you play," gets you "I never think when I play". This leaves the person who asked the questions believing that the ability to improvise comes from Limbo Land, and yet, the improviser told the truth.

The next concept that must be understood is ***Time***. Musical time has nothing to do with clocks. Musical time is biological not mechanical. The best way to begin to understand

Time, is to listen to any two people having a conversation. Listen with the right side of your brain to the music made by the rhythm and accentuation of the words, and how the pitch of their voices rises and falls.

The first thing to perceive is the tempo of the conversation. If you listen deeply enough, you can tap your foot, or pat your hand to a conversation. If the two people are truly interested in each other, the speed of their tempos will be exactly the same. If they are not, you will sense two different tempos. One will be slower, the other faster.

Listen! when one person ends a sentence, and the other comments on what was said, the other person will come in right on time. “ I told yuh it was gonna’ happen! .....Right “Know what I mean?”....Yup. This is the concept of **comping** in jazz. The soloist ends a phrase, and the musician listening and supplying the harmonic support makes an appropriate rhythmic response with chords that compliments what was just musically said. In speaking to one another, we’re comping every day. Just listen.

There is an endless flow of rhythmic variety in human speech and it’s all emotionally justified. Organic time gives and takes, people can lag behind the tempo of their beat as they speak, and then catch up. “Uhhhhhhhh.....yeah! I get it”. It’s all there, just listen.

The body language, accentuation, and vocal inflections that a person uses in speech, express their uniquely individual personality. Do you want to be original?, then be you. I guarantee you that there’s no one else on the planet exactly like you. Learn to sense your own tempo and your own verbal rhythms as you speak with others. You’ll be surprised by your own rhythmic variety. Listen! you only get to be original by knowing and being who you are, and you’re worth listening to.

The term “**playing**” **music** means exactly what it says. Musicians are playing with the notes the same way a group of guys would play with a basket ball. The spirit of play has got to be there. In short, if you want to play and be “with” the group, the more emotionally involved with the group you are the better. This is how you synchronize your “time” with theirs.

**Concentration** is another important factor in “playing” music. Concentration in music translates into **captivation by enjoyment**. There is no “forcing” involved in musical concentration. Do you ever remember watching a movie that was so good that you felt that you too were a living part of it? Your feelings went up and down like they were riding a roller coaster as you watched. Enjoyment and emotional involvement made it impossible for anything else to enter your mind. This is captivation through enjoyment, an experience that you can’t wait to re experience.

The only difference between **improvising music** and **composing music** is that improvising is like saying it “off the top of your head”. You say it in an interactive spontaneous context, and it’s gone unless someone records it. Even though the style that’s personally yours is eternal.

Composition is like writing a book. You can rewrite a musical passage like a paragraph of words until you feel it’s presenting the exact feelings you want to express perfectly. It’s

also possible to plan the architectural design of the composition in advance in the same way that a writer would create an outline for a book. Other than that, the process of understanding and expressing life through music is the same. I hope that these philosophical explanations provide some insight into the process of learning and expressing yourself with music.

All successful guitarists have had to work out their own concepts and individual creative approaches to the Guitar. The question is how and where to start. **Jazz Guitar, Starting Right** should serve as an indispensable guide in helping you to find your own way to accomplish this.

Dave Woods 11/08/2006 Copyright 2006 Callicoon Music ASCAP, All Rights Reserved