

Discover Your Unique Musical Voice

We jazz players tend to obsess a bit over our technical prowess. We constantly strive to play higher, faster, and louder, and view ourselves as players in terms of our command of those much sought-after attributes. Okay, maybe not you, but a lot of players!!

Improve your ability to play faster, higher and louder but realize there is another critical aspect of playing. Perhaps this applies more to the jazz/latin players and other improvisers than to the classical players, but then again maybe not.

That aspect is finding and playing true to one's unique personal musical voice.

It's natural to be drawn to emulate musicians with incredible technique. Who doesn't love Maynard Ferguson's high range, Trane's speed, or Oscar Peterson's technical command? But can good music be played on without superhuman physical powers? And, more importantly, is the advanced playing of those athletes part of YOUR individual inner voice? While were at it, what IS your individual inner voice for your instrument, anyway? Do you hear it or is it being drowned out by the little voice in your head screaming that you still don't play high enough, fast enough or well enough?

Your individual voice on your instrument is a beautifully unique personality that plays music to the fullest extent of your musical gifts—regardless of your current technical level.

Faster, higher, louder. I am proposing that if you assume that your playing necessarily requires those attributes, you may be limiting your potential to perform great music.

Did Miles chase after Maynard's range? Did Paul Desmond chase after Bird's speed? Did Monk chase after Art Tatum's flawless technique? No. They each pursued their inner voice, and along with their supernatural musical gifts they became great musicians.

Think about a very technically proficient player you've heard who played lots of high notes throughout their im-

provisation. Did you resonate with the playing emotionally? Did it move you or simply blow you away with their technique? Did it say something musical to you?

I'm not suggesting that you forgo developing your technical proficiency. I'm suggesting instead to develop your proficiency as a means to an end, not as an end in itself.

In the end, there is no wrong way to use your instrument if music is your goal. Armed with whatever musical tal-

ent you possess, you have the best shot at making great music if you first hear your inner musical voice and then stay true to it with whatever level of technical proficiency that music requires. Before Jimi Hendrix, feedback was considered wrong.

Am I giving you a pass on improving your technique? No way. I don't call it art simply because something happens to dribble out of an

instrument. Art is a purposeful focus of expression that requires a command of the medium. The question is: what are you commanding? Is it the vehicle of your inner music or is it the mechanical reproduction of artists you think you should sound like?

One morning in the late 1940s, Ray Charles had an epiphany. He realized that he was building his reputation by sounding like two of his heroes, Nat King Cole and Charles Brown. He was doing fairly well, but he wasn't setting the world on fire.

He remembered his mom admonishing him to be himself and to not be someone he's wasn't. He also remembered Nat Cole telling him "You're going to want to find your own way." Ray admitted being a bit scared to do his own thing but he did. The rest is historic music.

"But I don't have Ray Charles' musical talent" you might think. Well, this isn't about the amount of musical talent you may or may not possess. It's about getting the most out of whatever happens to be inside of you.

The question you must ask yourself is, am I playing what I hear inside or am I chasing after what you're hearing from the media, your teachers, your peers and anyone



you think has a more weighty opinion than you.

Now, there's context here. If you are just starting out learning to play jazz, it's okay to model someone. The modeling, however, is simply a tool to improve an aspect of your playing you believe is necessary to your overall development as an artist. Please transcribe solos - lots of them. Use them as a means to learn improvisation, not as a substitute for your own improvisations.



How will you know your unique voice?

I think everyone recognizes it differently. Perhaps some naturally fall into it and don't have to think about it much. Others must dig deep in order to hear it. Are you trying to sound like a player you admire? If so, how's that working for you?

Do you feel that your playing has been a long-term struggle to sound a certain way and you can't seem to get there? Do you ever feel that if you played what you hear and in a way that would feel more natural, you would be rejected? Worthwhile questions I think.

"I tried to find a rhythm, and I stopped comparing myself to anybody else. One of the great phrases for me is "Compare and Despair." If I compare myself to Kate Middleton or Dame Judi Dench, I'm going to come out at the bottom and be sad."

- Jamie Lee Curtis

There's more context to this subject. As an orchestral player, your job is to sound a certain way. You were hired because you have the sound and style the orchestra was looking for. As a musician in a Broadway pit, an odd and unique approach is probably not welcome. As a soloist,

however, you may have more stylistic latitude. As an artist creating your own music, you have perhaps the most latitude. So consider all of this within the context of your musical and professional goals.

If you aspire to be a creative artist on your instrument, listen to the voice inside. Be ruthlessly honest with yourself and admit if you are chasing someone else's ideal of how your instrument should sound. It can be scary but I know of no great artist who reached that stature by clinging long-term to how others thought he or she should sound.