

Technique Versus Inspiration

by Vivian Clement

Last Summer I went down with a few musician buddies to one of the local watering holes to see this great guitarist perform. We all watched in awe as this guy ripped up and down the fretboard like he was the one who had actually invented the guitar. Although it was obvious that he knew his instrument inside and out, the most memorable thing was how he was so "in the zone" the whole night. He was the epitome of the zone.

Being in the zone, I would venture to say should be the goal of all musicians. If you haven't yet heard about the zone, it's that extraordinary place where you get totally immersed in the moment. Where every note played is effortless and magical. In his classic book *Effort-*

less Mastery author Kenny Werner goes to great lengths to convince the reader that playing in the zone is really the only way to go. Learning to play scales, riffs, chords and everything else you need to know to be able to manipulate our instrument, is only the introduction to our journey as musicians. The real object is to learn the necessary techniques, allow them to sink into your subconscious, then let go and let your playing take over. Warner explores the theory that our biggest obstacle is our ego: our need for approval by others and our fear of making mistakes. This mind-set causes us to focus on the wrong things. We are no longer playing music for inspiration's sake but to inflate our egos. We are playing to impress our friends and show them how great we are.

We've all experienced those moments by ourselves where we played for hours on end because we felt motivated to do so. We discovered that space where time disappears and we are infused with the intoxicating power of music. We felt at one with our instrument and when we finish we sense this deep contentment that is truly difficult to put into words. These experiences are the fuel that keep us hungering for more. The trap is when we shift our attitude over to where we use that inspiration to drive us to become better. Of course wanting to be better is part of evolving, but in our quest for improvement, we tend to abandon the habit of remaining inspired. It's easy to get out of the zone and elevate our technique above everything else. The shift is very subtle and its course causes us to deviate from our intended aim. It's similar to the proverbial parallel lines, where both lines start out at the same place but one line is slightly angled. If that line is then drawn out it will keep moving away from the other line so that eventually it is miles away from its original point. The same applies to our growth in music. The straight line is our inspiration. This is the one that we know to be the most important. But our technique can be that curved line leading us down a path where our playing becomes mechanical and empty.

Often when we start out as musicians, we possess great passion. We are having such a wonderful time practicing, jamming and writing our own music that we hardly notice how much work we really

need. But somewhere along the way we start to put more emphasis on our technique. We work tirelessly in order to improve our skills, and then are rewarded by seeing our hard work start to show up in our playing. People begin to comment on our improvement and this sets us off to work even harder. If we are not careful, we can lose sight of our initial intent. Many of us started playing because we saw someone perform who just blew us away and we knew we just had to have that same ability. Wasn't it inspiration that gave birth to our decision to buy a guitar and give it a try in the first place?

When I was in high school I took art classes. I learned how to paint with oils, acrylic and water. I learned about the different brushes to use to accomplish different effects. I didn't really care at the time about technique and brushes, I was just anxious to start painting and see what I could come up with. I enjoyed the creativity of art and the ability to be able to start with nothing and end up with something completely unexpected (sometimes very unexpected!). What I found was amazing about art, was the journey itself. It really didn't matter if I could paint or not, I was swept away by creativity. In this respect music is similar to art. Musicians must always endeavour to find that place of inspiration and play from that place. When we are in learning mode and are spending time on the nitty gritty, we must be quick to merge our new tools with our passion. It's easy to lift up technique on a pedestal. We must keep in the forefront that technique is only the vehicle used to get where we are going and not the goal itself.

Although I occasionally take out my brushes to paint, I have never mastered the techniques required to be a great artist. I understand the importance of technique, particularly since I have studied guitar for quite a while. I know that inspiration and technique are both important components necessary to reach excellence. But I also know that technique alone is lifeless and mechanical. Inspiration and technique need to work in concert so we can be complete, balanced musicians.

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