In Over My Headstock

"I don't think you can ever do your best. Doing your best is a process of *trying* to do your best."

- Townes Van Zandt

My last couple essays have challenged you to commit to tuning by ear and developing a relationship with your metronome. Neither task is easy at first but both are amongst the most beneficial pursuits any musician can undertake. I've been deeply pleased to see many of you take on these challenges and stick with them. Keep it up! To those who haven't, why not? Any day is a good day to begin and I will continue to challenge you with both during lessons so if for no other reason than to prepare for those moments, start by dedicating 5 minutes of practice to each on a daily basis.

Nonetheless, I did think it might be a good time to lighten things up by sharing an embarrassing story from my musical past. Recently, this memory came to me one day while on a walk of what might have been the most embarrassing performance of my musical life.

It was either the summer of 2000 or 2001. I was at the Berklee College of Music Summer Guitar Sessions. Together with my friend Alex, our parents had sent us for this weeklong program. Alex and I roomed together at the Berklee dorms in downtown Boston, took various classes throughout the week, prepared for a performance at the end of camp and in the evening attended concerts and jam sessions. Looking back, it's something that I deeply appreciate as an adult that I'm almost positive I completely took for granted as a teenager. I'm sure it was expensive for my parents and was just one of so many things they did to support me on my musical journey.

Another aspect of my teenage boy's mind was that I thought I was a much better musician than I was at the time. I'm not sure where this inflated sense of ego originated. Overconfidence stemming from passion of the pursuit? Listening to my musical heroes so much that I lost touch with reality and identified as though I was them and could do what they did? A combination of cultural conditioning and teenage hormones? Probably a little bit of everything. Reality on the other hand seemed to remain constant and was

always waiting to offer me helpful lessons in who I actually was versus who I thought I was.

I knew Alex from my music theory class at Barnstable High School in Hyannis, MA. We struck up a friendship and found out we lived not far from each other. I would usually go over to Alex's house where he had a drum set and a couple of guitars and amplifiers in a room above the garage. We would jam for hours, trading off who was on drums and guitar. It was very loud and we rocked very hard. Thankfully, the garage was detached from the house and the neighbors had a decent buffer zone. Otherwise, the endless noise of Van Halen, AC/DC, Metallica and Stevie Ray Vaughan riffs played barely proficiently with copious amounts of guitar induced feedback and drum solos might have aroused the ire of anyone within a 100 yard radius. I should mention that Alex was WAY better at guitar than I was. Amongst the circle of musicians who roamed our high school the general assessment of his skills were, "Dude, he's wicked nasty."

So the first sign that I had made a huge mistake by signing up to play at the jam session on Boylston St. one night was that Alex hadn't. I can't remember the exact venue we were in but it was a professional level performance space: big stage, fancy lights, epic sound system. It was the type of club where a globally touring act might perform. There was a house band of professional musicians backing up dozens of guitarists who were the camp attendees. Four guitarists would take the stage at a time, jamming on two songs with the band, everyone trading solos. There were some top notch players ranging from "WOW!" to "hey, they're really good!" and rarely dipping below that level of quality.

A familiar pattern began to take place, the further I was from my turn to play, the more I thought, "Wait until they hear me!" As it got closer, a faint sense of self-doubt and nervousness began to set in until as my name was called my body started to completely panic. I don't remember much about what happened, just that it was really, really, REALLY bad. I remember standing on the far left of the stage, I remember my hands feeling like I had dipped them in concrete and everything slowing down (not in the good, "in the zone" sort of way) and I remember wondering what was happening to me as the equivalent of a poorly played children's melody emerged from my guitar. I left the stage in great relief and unspeakable shame. I exited my body in denial of the entire

experience and I remember Alex was kind enough to not even bring up what had happened as we walked back to the dorms. What did the other musicians think? Well, perhaps one lesson to take away is that musicians by and large are a very supportive bunch. No one made fun of me, no one pointed out how I had stepped onto a stage I wasn't ready to be on and no one told me I should give up. They all just let it be, maybe even saw an earlier version of themselves as an overenthusiastic young musician who really wanted to do *that thing*. If I had sought out advice they probably just would have said, "Keep practicing kid."

Trust me when I say there are *many* more embarrassing stories I could have chosen from my musical past. The next time you have an embarrassing performance, reality steps in to give you a harsh assessment of where you are as a musician or you feel discouraged about your progress versus your expectations, realize this actually connects you to every musician that is, ever was or will be. It's not always going to be fun, rewarding or worth celebrating. Sometimes it's a drag, a lot of work, disappointing or embarrassing. However, assessed as part of a larger whole, that all has value in making you the musician you are becoming.

Yoda once said, "Try not. Do... or do not. There is no try". That might be good advice for a green Jedi muppet but for us mere mortals, I say lean into the advice of Townes Van Zandt.