The Realm of Possibility

"If you hit a wrong note, then make it right by what you play afterwards."

- Joe Pass

Life is one long improvisation. No matter how carefully we plan, we are faced with the unexpected. If we stick too stubbornly to our plans, we risk the frustration of forcing an outcome beyond our control. If we learn to let go, be open to new possibilities and become fluid, we may find ourselves experiencing a new sense of freedom. We may even be surprised to encounter a result that exceeds the expectations of our original plan.

There are countless examples both large and small that we could draw from each day of our lives. One that stands out to me is the anxiety of a forthcoming difficult conversation. Maybe we anticipate conflict, awkwardness, needing to speak a difficult truth. In these instances, I find myself mentally rehearsing the conversation over and over until it becomes like a script I've rehearsed for a role in a play. Time and time again I've learned that these conversations never play out in a way that follows my carefully planned and rehearsed script. Almost immediately they take an unanticipated turn. Though it might feel unsettling at first, if I throw out my script and enter into the unexpected, I find there is something to be discovered. Maybe there was something I was unaware of all along, maybe I was trapped in my own limited perspective or maybe I just needed to do some listening. In most cases, the resolution leaves me feeling better than I could have imagined. Instead of storming out of the room with a sense of righteous victory, I find myself more connected, empathetic and appreciative of my conversation partner.

A less dramatic example is a music lesson. I enter every lesson with a plan but I have learned over the years to postpone or even scrap my plan if a student's curiosities pull us in another direction. Those tangents often lead down exciting paths that otherwise would not be traveled.

Like all things with life and music, a skill learned in one will benefit you if you extract it and apply it to the other. Maybe some of us are naturally drawn to improvisation in music but are rigid in our day to day lived experience. Maybe others love spontaneity in life but are “just not improvisers” when it comes to music. Though I’ve heard that quote often from students (many of whom have gone on to prove themselves wrong), all it really translates to is: I don’t spend a significant or consistent amount of time trying to improvise. Like almost everything we learn to do, improvising takes sustained effort over a long period of time. Now, hang on you doubters! You’ve made it this far so read to the end before deciding this isn’t for you.

All it takes is a short amount of time in your daily practice. If you’re going to practice for 30 minutes, spend 5 improvising. If you’re going to practice for an hour, intersperse that hour with 5, 2-minute improvisations. It may feel uncomfortable at first but just focus on putting in the time. Try as hard as you can not to judge what you play. Just listen to it with curiosity, surprise and a moment to moment appreciation of the amazing sound of your instrument (that’s what drew you to play it in the first place!) or the feeling of it resonating against your body. Don’t decide if it is a good improvisation or a bad improvisation. Tell the stuffy jazz critic in your mind to keep quiet.

When this becomes part of your practice, you will find a freedom you were lacking. When you need to have a script, a song or an external source telling you what to play you still can. However, on days when you’re feeling tired of what you’ve been working on, a deficit of energy or enthusiasm for practice or your brain feels full of static and exhaustion, improvising offers a freedom that can be highly therapeutic. You simply enter the realm of possibility. There are no wrong notes, just surprises. You get to decide what to play, when to play it and where it will lead you. Maybe on these days you only practice for a short time and all you do is “noodle” as it is sometimes called.

Finally, a few more concrete tips on how to proceed. Pick a scale, any scale. Start by playing the notes in order but with varying lengths. Long, short, short, very long, short, long, etc. This will immediately make it sound more like a song.

Eventually, try skipping a note or two in the scale pattern. Try repeating a note. If you hear something pleasing, try to play it again. If you can't, lean into the new thing that just happened. If you hit a note you deem "wrong" (probably a note outside the scale), play it again. And again. What is it saying to you? Where is it leading you? Maybe it doesn't sound quite as "wrong" the third time you hear it or when you get to the next note. It will sound most "wrong" if you abandon it.

Most importantly: quality over quantity. One of the most common mistakes I observe in new improvisers is trying to play too many notes, too often. Don't try to play a lot of notes. Instead, make sure every note you play has the highest quality of tone you can produce. Embrace minimalism in a number of ways. Try using the same 3-4 notes of the scale over and over in different variations for a minute or more before adding a new note.

In my next couple essays, I'll be doing a deep dive on some of my favorite improv exercises. It's going to get weird! But weird can be beautiful too and even at its worst, it is always engaging. Until then, see what music is waiting for you to bring it forth. Look at it as your instrument playing you, rather than the other way around.