You May Not Be Who You Think You Are

"The musician you set out to become may not be the musician you discover you actually are."

- Charlie Hunter

"The more I learn, the more I realize how much I don't know."

- Albert Einstein

A willingness to be surprised is one of the keys to finding joy in the musical journey. The more fixed our idea of who we think we are or who we want to become, the more limitations we place on where we might go. Of course, setting goals is important but so is the ability to revise or even discard those goals as our awareness grows through the learning process.

Over the years, I have noticed the students who seem to find the most lasting fulfillment are the ones who are surprised by the musician they become as compared to the one they originally imagined themselves being. It always makes me so happy to hear a student tell me, "You know, I really didn't like this song when you first shared it with me but now I love it." Or, "I never thought I would enjoy playing this sort of music but after getting to know it more deeply, it's my favorite style to play." It can take many forms but usually it is the result of a student trusting where they are being led in their journey even if it isn't where they thought they wanted to go. It's worth considering whether we are actually learning if we aren't being surprised in the process.

I've also noticed the students who seem to encounter the most frustration are the ones who are not open to deviating from their original vision or preferences. They may tell me they don't like that song or that style, that they know what they can or can't do before having given it a legitimate try or that they know *how* they learn and therefore are uninterested in a particular method or approach.

I think many of those viewpoints have to do with the fact that when we begin the process of learning an instrument, the main musical experience we bring with us is that of being a listener as well as comments family members or friends have made about our

musicality. We also bring a preconceived notion of what type of learner we are from our other educational pursuits.

Our age plays a major factor in each but despite what I have often been told, our age does not play a major factor in our ability to become a fluent musician. I have seen children quit and adults excel well past midlife. Where I have noticed younger students have a distinct advantage is their natural openness in the process. Many times they have developed very few, if any, musical preferences. The younger they are, the less likely it is they have acquired the emotional baggage of negative commentary on their abilities from peers or adults in their lives. Furthermore, they are still so steeped in the learning process, they are unlikely to have a fixed idea of their identity as a learner. It's not that they possess some physical or mental skill that adults have lost. In fact, they're growing bodies have many physical limitations. Their ability to concentrate or foster self-discipline can be major challenges. Yet, they are more often a clean slate and this gives them a huge advantage. They've become attached to less preconceived notions that stand in the way of genuine discovery.

Our preferences and opinions as a listener are important but they only take us so far. Until we've had the experience it is hard to imagine that we might derive immense pleasure and connection from learning a piece of music or even an entire style of music that didn't speak to us as a listener. However, in the act of being the *player*, not only a listener, we might discover something new. Maybe it taps into a strength we have as a musician that we were unaware of, maybe we hear things in a different way when we are the ones generating the sound or maybe we find an unexpected clarity that we had been searching for in vain elsewhere. I've seen metalheads become bluegrassers, classicalists become jazzers and those who wanted to rock and roll all night and party every day become mellow folk pickers. I've also seen people's entire worldviews expand when they step outside the narrow confines of late 20th century American popular music and into the vast expanse of music making that spans the globe and includes rich traditions that reach far into our past.

Many students have shared with me the hurtful remarks made to them about their musicality, often when they were quite young and often by a family member or someone to whom they were close. These comments leave a nasty psychological

residue and can hold a person back for years. Some students show up and it is clear they have a deep desire to be musical though they feel the need to be secretive about it because of the doubt they carry. Other times, I have noticed dormant musicality in a person and pushed them into awakening it only to find out the same uncertainty had been holding them back. How wonderful to see someone first prove to themselves what is possible and then prove to those who saddled them with their unqualified judgments completely wrong. I have witnessed people who “couldn’t carry a tune” become soulful singers with excellent pitch, others who had “no rhythm” learn to keep rock solid time and others who claimed they couldn’t improvise/learn by ear/be creative/understand theory/etc. learn to do all these things. These “unmusical” individuals have gone on to lead richly musical lives while their incompetent critics have only gone on to generate more forgettable opinions.

When we learn a foreign language we start with its basic structures and rules, we learn to read and write it, we engage in conversation with native speakers gradually honing our ability to hear, process, respond and pronounce that language. Even once we become fluent as we travel to different areas where that language is spoken we pick up on different dialects, accents, turns of phrase. Given enough time we begin to bend the rules and become more playful with that language. We could say, “I just know how I learn best and that is through reading.” This may be true but if we limit ourselves to only *reading* a language, we will always struggle to engage in conversation even if our intellectual understanding is thorough.

Likewise, some people feel safest when they are reading music, when the script is in front of them and they just need to do what it tells them. Others hate the very idea of reading music and only want to learn by ear. There are so many methods and ways of learning music. Some of these processes will feel easier to you than others. That doesn’t mean you should discard the challenging ones. In fact, we often learn the most from that which makes us uncomfortable. It may not be what we enjoy the most but what we enjoy the most may not be what is best for us. So when learning music, it’s best if we don’t limit ourselves by having a preconceived notion about who we are as learners. Often, these fixed ideas we have about ourselves are a smokescreen to keep us feeling safe and not having to engage in the awkward process of learning. We should

engage with every possibility and take what we can from each. Some will come easily to us, others will challenge us or leave us feeling a bit flummoxed but everything will become a part of a bigger picture over time and inform who we become as a musician.

So stay open. Try to learn with the mind of a child, unencumbered by all of the ideas we collect about ourselves over the years. The more certain we are, the less room we leave for being surprised. Certainty can feel very comforting on an emotional level but mystery is far more engaging and contains much greater potentiality. Allow your musical journey to be an unfolding mystery rather than a predetermined path. It could lead you anywhere. As Russian composer and first ever headbanger once said, ““Music is enough for a lifetime, but a lifetime is not enough for music.”