Reflections: Greatest Hits

This is not your typical essay. Though I do share my responses to the prompts and offer a few brief notes of commentary (italicized), this essay was written by you, for you (quotations). It is mostly the insights and wisdom (and humor!) of fellow students. I have discussed with many of you how even though the musical journey is full of moments of joy, it is also full of moments of struggle. In those struggles, we often feel very isolated. By necessity, we spend so much time practicing by ourselves that we are often left alone with those struggles and our inner-critic. That jerk constantly tries to convince us that the problem is our own inadequacy rather than acknowledging that music is a great challenge that takes daily commitment for year after year after year. As a music teacher, I receive the great gift of seeing how many of those struggles are universal. I see my struggles in your own and your struggles in those of other students. We are all human beings trying to be musicians. Now you have an opportunity to get a glimpse of that for yourself. May it serve you well.

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Of my musical weaknesses are:

Playing it safe/Playing to please/Playing for perfection

"I hold my breath when I am nervous or very focused."
"Perhaps wanting to learn it all is a weakness?!"
"Dinky practice routine."
"Too much thinking."
"Fear (of judgement, failure, mediocrity, etc.)."
"I can be sloppy, preferring expediency over precision when I could have both with a bit more practice."
"Lack of confidence/Poor memory/Inconsistency of practice (fix #3 and #1 and #2 will improve)" *I love the built-in solution.*

Of my musical strengths are:
Listening/Leaving space/Supporting those I play with

"I can generally now keep my place in a song if I make a mistake when playing with you but also playing alone."
“I enjoy playing and practice a lot."
"Deep passion.”
“I am persistent. I'll do muscle memory and scale exercises repeatedly or practice a piece of a song over and over."

Musical goals I had in 2024:
Explore new directions/Continue exploring exotic scales/Explore the microtonal world through slide guitar & fretless bass

"I set a goal about mid-July to not skip out on any lesson when I don’t feel I have gotten enough practice in or when I don’t feel ready. I remember one lesson I really, really wanted to cancel because I didn’t feel prepared. I had an internal battle right up to the start of the lesson. To my surprise, the lesson was really a great lesson, and I was happy that I stuck with it. " *Hear, hear! Many of you have heard me say that one of the steepest learning curves for me when I first began teaching was to realize that if I was having a rough day and dreading a lesson, the lesson itself would be the medicine. I would think, “I can’t possibly teach feeling like this” only to leave the lesson feeling elevated. Music will save you.*

*** Did I accomplish them? If not, are they worth reinvesting energy into or moving on from in favor of new goals?** *Yes but I'm not done! (I think we should all feel this way.)*

Songs I loved listening to in 2024:
Ludovico Einaudi & Ballake Sissoko - Niger Blues/Miles Davis - Mademoiselle Mabry/Fela Kuti - Gentleman

Songs I loved playing in 2024:
Cantina Band by John Williams, You've Been a Good Old Wagon by Bessie Smith (Dave Van Ronk Version), Invention No. 13 by Bach

Songs I hope to learn in 2025:
Pyramid - Duke Ellington, Nuages - Django Reinhardt, Tenebroso - Ernesto Nazereth

Best books I read in 2024:
The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store by James Mcbride/The Last Season by Eric Blehm/All the Little Live Things by Wallace Stegner

"Vaster Wilds by Lauren Groff/Eastbound by Maylis de Kerangal /Overstory by Richard Powers/House in the Cerulean Sea by TJ Klune/Harmonic Experience by W.A. Mathieu/Letters from Life by Becky Hemsley/The Comfort Crisis by Michael Easter/The Handmaid's Tale by Margeret Atwood/Broken Earth Trilogy by N.K. Jemisin/The Great Believers by Rebecca Makkai/The Last 7 Months of Anne Frank by William Lindwer"
I have read and enjoyed many of these (often thanks to your recommendations). What I have not read has been added to my list. Thanks!

Things that surprised me about my musical journey in 2024:
The shruti box!!!/There is so much good music out there past and present that I'm unaware of/Flat wound strings

"I am surprised at the ease I feel playing ad lib or just random music from the heart."
"I was surprised that I was able to change out a guitar string on my own, no fuss no procrastination... music was waiting to be played, so I just did it."
"How slow and sneaky the progress can be."
"There is a wrong way to put on strings. What the %$#@!."

Interlude note from a student: "It appears I have shifted from 3 things to 1. 1 seems like enough. 3 goals?!? You must think I'm some kind of dream achiever." *Dream small my friend.*

Ways my relationship to music have changed since beginning to learn an instrument:
I became a musical omnivore/I can hear, separate and identify individual instruments in a mix/I continue to hear higher and higher levels of musicianship that once went over my head as a listener

"I always wanted to just be able to pick up the guitar and make some music for me – something that just feels good inside; I am there."
"Acknowledging that it's a long road and the journey is the prize."
"I can almost hear the bass now."

Lessons I've learned from music that would benefit me by applying them to other areas of my life:
Shut up and listen/Remain open/I'm just a tiny part of something much larger

"I should trust my instincts and try to turn off my brain more often."
"Break hard things down into small chunks."
"Don't call attention to my small mistakes."
"Perseverance/Patience/Practice." *The 3 Ps!*
"You may fail at first, but don't give up."
"Music is timeless and cross-cultural, a way to connect with anyone."
"Loosen up and things usually work better."
"I guess I could be kinder... since you're not supposed to beat up on yourself or others for their music playing." *This was nearly a universal response. Please, let's all be kinder to ourselves. Being kind to others then follows naturally and easily.*
"Be real, be free, speak intentionally."
"Focus on one thing at a time."

“Practice makes better, not perfect.”
“It's possible to learn something new."
"Joy can be found in the smallest/simplest things (or sounds).”
“Going through the motions can actually bring you where you want to go even if it doesn't feel like it.”
“Just try.”
“Making it ‘perfect’ isn't always the only good outcome.”

This more than any other prompt contains insights that deserve to be read and reread, deeply considered and relentlessly pursued. Serious wisdom here my friends. You are my teachers too. Thank you!

Ways I can improve my musical practice in 2025:
Schedule my formal practice/Focus on my body: posture, technique, identify and release tension/Work on my YouTube channel and create more public lessons on a consistent basis

"Consistency in practice.”
“Courage."
"Daily practice first thing every morning."
"10% of practice devoted to other aspects of music besides learning and playing songs. I really like this goal, as it stirs my curiosity which leads to fun discoveries."
"Play outside on the porch when the weather is good."

Musical goals I have for 2025:
Stop worrying about being “good” and just make music/Take more risks during performances/Strive to connect with the audience (make and hold eye contact/smile/be expressive)

"Write at least one song with music and lyrics.”
“See more local musicians perform in my spare time."

“Have fun with music.”
“Improve my tone and play more with others.”
"Be less frustrated when I can't learn something immediately (especially in lessons!)."
“Improve technically - continue to play better sounding notes more often.”

Reasons I make music:
Joy/Sorrow/Connection

"It’s good for my brain and it is WAY OUT OF MY COMFORT ZONE."
"Satisfies my soul and nourishes my mind."
"It’s so much cooler than not playing music."
"To push myself into the unknown (while holding a large wooden lifeboat).”
“To vibrate and be vibrated (it feels good)."
"So I can make the sounds I hear in my head."

When is your birthday? Just 1 will do here.
Chris Paradis born 12/23.