# Developing Musical Fearlessness

"It's not the note you play that's the wrong note - it's the note you play afterwards that makes it right or wrong."

- Miles Davis

Flying over a river, we look down and see the main body disperse into a series of tributaries, meandering off on different courses. We pick a fallen leaf from the ground and upon examining it closely notice the same visual pattern as the veins branch off from the midrib. We open an anatomy textbook and there it is again as we examine the circulatory system. Examples abound as we look more closely at the world around us whether under a microscope or gazing deep into the universe through the most powerful telescope. In fact, when we look closely at an atom we see the nucleus, a dense core containing most of the mass, orbited by electrons but mostly we see empty space. When we look at our solar system we see the sun, a dense core containing most of the mass, orbited by the planets but mostly we see empty space. Patterns are all around us yet embedded in each one, is a sense of spontaneity. Much like a snowflake, no river, leaf, body, atom or solar system is exactly the same. The spontaneity within the larger patterns gives way to the amazing variation we see all around us.

When it comes down to it, music is essentially elaborate patterns of sound. Yet what keeps it alive with the possibility of endless interest is spontaneity. The vast majority, if not all, of what we play is based on patterns. The entire process of learning to play an instrument is the process of developing muscle memory from repetitively practicing patterns we are being taught to physically and mentally recognize. We call them things like: a G chord, a C major scale, an A minor arpeggio, all sorts of strumming and picking patterns. Learn enough patterns, group some together in a particular way and eventually we have a song.

Even when improvising, much of what we play is based on a pre-determined pattern we've practiced beforehand: a scale, an arpeggio, a "line" or "lick." We may vary how we play the notes of those patterns or how we string those various ideas together but rarely are we generating something completely spontaneous.

Most often, it happens by accident. Or in rare cases, some masters may generate spontaneous ideas with greater frequency than the rest of us. However, pattern based playing still underlies it all.

It is of interest to note that musical patterns based on symmetry sound bizarre to us. For instance, a chromatic scale is a scale that moves in half-steps or one fret at a time. To hear one, just play every fret on the same string sequentially. It will sound a bit like circus music. Or you could play a whole tone scale. A scale moving in whole steps, or jumping over a fret each time (fret 1 to 3 to 5 to 7, etc.). This will also sound bizarre, maybe like you're scoring a strange dream sequence in a movie. You could try other patterns like whole, half, whole, half, etc. Any symmetrical pattern will be full of dissonance and tension.

On the other hand, the major scale (the familiar sound of do, re, mi) sounds happy, pleasant, uplifting to us. Much of the music we have heard or played in our lives is based on the major scale. Yet, this scale's pattern is irregular: whole, whole, half, whole, whole, whole, half. It would appear that unevenness or spontaneity in the larger pattern is essential to what many of us would deem as sounding "good." There are no straight lines in nature.

Of course, sounding "good" is really no more than a subjective judgment and for every musician, trying to sound "good" all the time eventually becomes oppressive. This is why I recommend practicing sounding "bad." Give yourself a break from all those patterns and embrace the freedom of spontaneity. Unlike the predictable security of patterns, that freedom can be scary. So let's habituate ourselves by taking a musical journey into the unknown with what I call the Random Note Jam.

There is no script, no "right" or "wrong" notes, no one to tell you what to play. No rules! Woohoo! Play a note. Then play another. Then another. If you notice yourself beginning to play a pattern you've practiced before, abandon it by making a wild jump to a new note. Strive not to play patterns. Experiment with randomness in note length as well. If you notice you've been playing short, punctuated notes, try holding the next one and letting it sustain.

There are only two things to focus on doing well in this exercise: tone and timing. Be intentional about each note you play in the sense that you want that note to

have the richest possible tone and to be struck at a moment that has a relationship to the notes that come before and after it. You may find that you have to go incredibly slow at first. When I first have students try this I often hear a lot of clicking, clacking and buzzing as notes are not accurately struck. Coordination of the fretting and picking hand becomes difficult. Why? Because you're only used to playing the patterns you've practiced. So slow way down, there is no rush.

Allow yourself to have a sense of humor and as I often encourage, a sense of curiosity. What you play is going to sound weird. It may sound like musical gibberish. Again, make sure you're focusing on tone as the highest priority, timing as the next. This will help greatly to make what you're playing more palatable, especially at first. However, the longer you go, I guarantee you will begin to hear some really interesting, engaging and unexpected things. You may even find something you think sounds great. If you do, this is the one exception to the randomness. If you enjoy the sound of something you discover, try it again. And again. If you can't find it again, no problem, it's just time to venture back into the unknown.

This exercise is well-suited to playing alone. Especially when you're a bit tired, loopy or in need of a sense of freshness in your practice. It can also be a great micro-practice when you're low on time. I often end the day with a Random Note Jam. I like to pick up my instrument and just see what surprises it has for me after a day of structured patterns.

However, I've found this exercise excels when you do it with one or more partners. It is a great way to loosen up, bond and develop a sense of trust and openness with another player. I began developing this exercise after opening for a Guitar Circle at a gig I had at an art gallery in Cambridge, MA back in 2012. The circle consisted of about a dozen guitarists. They started by one player making eye contact with another player in the circle, then passing them a note. That player then passed a note to another and on and on until eventually they erupted into a free for all. You can follow that model in a larger group or as is more often the case, if you're playing with one other person, choose a leader. The leader passes one note to their partner. The partner passes a note back. Do this for a short time, then pass two, then three, then four back and forth. Around five, the leader interrupts their partner and the two enter into a

free for all, playing simultaneously. Listen closely to what the other person plays and let it inform your next choice. Respond to them in a conversational manner and the dynamic will really take off. Don't worry about ending the jam. The ending will present itself to you and you'll both just know when it does. Most of the time you'll find that the ending will be followed with a hearty shared laugh. Always a good sign.

What is most important about this exercise is that it brings every musician face to face (ear to face?) with their worst musical fear: sounding "bad" or playing the "wrong" notes. Usually when we do, we immediately try to cover it up with what we deem good and right. By doing so, it not only makes our mistakes sound worse by making them stand out in stark contrast and we don't give ourselves any time to acclimate to the experience. In the Random Note Jam, we intentionally spend a prolonged period of time in the experience until it isn't quite as threatening anymore. Think of it like a form of musical exposure therapy. That way when we find ourselves there by accident we can say, "Oh, I've been here before, I know what this place sounds and feels like and I know I'll survive."

When I hit a wrong note that I can't seem to weave into the narrative of my playing, I may spend the next few moments of the song in chaotic randomness, beeping and booping like an angry computer. As I'm doing that, I'm thinking about where that safe place I want to return to is and by the time I get there, all that chaos sounded intentional.  Sometimes I throw the chaos in on purpose, just for fun!

Eventually, we may even start to more deeply question all of these judgments we place on our playing: bad, good, boring, exciting, cliche, creative. These descriptors are empty in their subjectivity. We rarely comprehend the truly unique response of every listener. I prefer the neutrality of words like consonant and dissonant which both seem to contain a more natural acceptance of their place in the whole of music. When we listen to what we deem a beautiful piece of music, we often are looking at the experience of the piece as a whole when in reality, amidst all that beauty is a dance of tension and release, consonance giving way to dissonance giving way to consonance, again and again. Spontaneity embedded within larger patterns. It's what makes it possible for every song you've ever heard to be the product of only 12 notes. Next month we close out this three part essay on improvisation with: One Note.