Lifetime Thoughts on the Philosophy of Music Teaching

By Jerry Leake

After three decades of teaching, a number of philosophical phrases have surfaced that I believe have merit for students from every conceivable background, instrument, and style. I'd like to share those phrases, my personal background with them, and briefly elaborate on their meaning in teaching. I hope they can work for you and for all students of percussion and music.

TRYING IS A GOOD THING

I was an Ewe drum student in Ghana and making good progress. After two weeks of work, I was proud of myself and felt I deserved a compliment of some kind from my teacher, a simple pat on the back with words of praise to feed my ego. "Reuben, how am I doing with my drumming?" I asked. He looked at me and with a smile replied, "You are trying." I was devastated. "Trying? That's all I get?"

I went to the corner of the compound and pondered my self-pity. Reuben came over, stood next to me and put his hand on my shoulder. "Jerry," he said, "you see the other students, over there?" He pointed to a gathering of other American students. "They are not trying. *You* are trying." His comment did not feed my ego and inflate my head. Instead, it made me realize the error of my ways. All along I thought the other students were "trying" when, in fact, in my teacher's eyes they were not; their painstaking effort and sacrifice was not there.

This simple yet valuable lesson is not limited to music. I adopt a "trying is a good thing" attitude to everything I do in life. In many parts of Africa there are no equivalent words for "can't" or "won't." These words are famous in western society but do not exist in the land of my teachers. This forever changed my perspective on everything! Yes, trying is good thing; it is, in fact, the only thing!

MUSIC IS ABOUT PROCESS, NOT PRODUCT

As students who are hungry for knowledge and ideas, we sometimes lose focus on the fact that learning music is a lifelong journey—complete with pain and suffering, along with the benefits of reward. Today is a particular point in your craft (in your "process") and tomorrow you will be one day farther along, a day deeper—but only *if* you do the work. Of course, we have to deliver a periodic "product" in the form of a gig, a recording session, or whatever.

Some people look back on their past and wish they could have done things differently. Why? The reason you are here at this point in time is because of all the work you did in the days, months, and years leading to this moment. Do not deny the painstaking process that is your past, your history. Always embrace it and let that process guide you to the next stage in your artistic maturity. Then, imagine all of the quality "products" you will produce.

MUSIC IS AN OCEAN

Some swimmers are content keeping their heads above water, looking up to the bright sky, admiring all the out-of-water scenery. Similarly, some musicians are content to swim on the surface of their craft, admiring the scenery, detached from the water/musical environment that surrounds them. This is not going deep; it is playing it safe above the surface.

Musicians must be like deep-sea divers with the courage to hold their breath and go deep below the surface into uncharted territory, to risk their wellbeing (ego) for the sake of discovery. Sure, you will likely bump along the jagged walls as you descend into the depths. You will also hit a few clams (wrong notes/ideas), but you will be recognized for having taken chances. Next to a clam you may also discover an oyster with pearls of richness and reward. Any great artist who has descended into the depths has learned how to turn clams into oysters—mistakes into moments of brilliance. Hold your breath, dive beneath the surface, and discover the rewards of taking exciting chances.

MUSIC IS DIFFICULT, BUT IT SHOULD ALSO BE FUN

Music is one of the most difficult of all art forms. A vast history of master musicians have raised the bar of excellence to seemingly insurmountable heights. You've heard it before: "Be yourself." And yet, I can hear the major influences (and sometimes outright stealing) of ideas from musicians who aspire to play like their idols and fail to find their own voice.

We are glad that music is difficult, otherwise everyone would be doing it and no one would be great; but playing music should also be fun. When the joy vanishes from your art, when it becomes all work and no play (remember we are "playing" music), then you should think about moving on to some other profession. If so, you may be able to play music as a hobby and recapture the fun without having to rely on music to feed your family. Embrace the challenges, find your voice beyond your idols, and have fun!

EACH IDEA IS A SEED

Each piece of information you are blessed to receive from your teacher is a seed that you must plant in your personal musical garden—a garden that requires constant, diligent care and nurturing. Have you ever tended a garden before? Hours of work are involved in preparing, planning, planting, fertilizing, weeding, and watering—repeat, repeat, repeat. It is a mountain of hard work that requires daily, sometimes hourly focus.

Our mission in music is to tend that idea with great care, to grow, not just a small bush or tree but a giant sequoia—a massive tree that will dominate your musical landscape. A musical sequoia is unshakeable and will survive well beyond your existence. Mastery and confidence with rhythm requires a towering degree of unshakeable force. This sequoia-like stance with rhythm (your high skill level) means that nothing in the precarious world—earthquakes or unskilled musicians—will shake you free from your foundation of musical time. Trust in it, then go plant another seed.

OWNERSHIP

Ask yourself, "Do I truly 'own' this concept, technique, or composition?" Full ownership of anything in the arts requires many years (decades!) of hard work, suffering, failure, the will to survive, and an honest assessment of where you truly are in your craft. At this point in my career I can state with confidence that I have come to own the material I have studied, deconstructed, and taught for thirty years.

Be honest: What, if anything in your music, do you truly own? In my classes, students often confess that they do not even own their own compositions; they cannot sing them back to me, or teach all aspects of groove, bass line, rhythm section, harmonic depth, melody, and interpretation to other students. This is a humbling experience and could be utilized

as a tool to understand how to dig deep, how to develop, how to mature, and ultimately how to "own" your ideas and creations.

DECONSTRUCTION/RECONSTRUCTION

Imagine taking apart a vintage car piece by piece, placing the many hundreds of components on the ground, and organizing and studying them with great depth and detail. Now put the car back together piece by piece, patiently, thoroughly, and with complete confidence that you now understand this complex machine on every conceivable level. The results may be a car that is more efficient and stronger than before.

This is what must take place in your evolution as a musician and with every idea and technique you develop. It is how you come to "own" your work. By never being satisfied with what you have at the moment, always telling yourself that there is more to uncover, you will be able to rebuild the essentials of your art to the highest possible degree.

DETERMINATION VS. DEVOTION

Years ago I realized the presence of ego-driven goals that nearly caused me to quit music: "Why aren't I farther along in my career?" I was determined to learn this or that composition, to develop this or that technique, and to play like my heroes. This "me" attitude was destined to become my downfall. Rather than being determined to achieve a specific recognized goal, I realized that I needed to be devoted to the *idea* of the goal—devoted to the art itself and not to some selfish need to be recognized.

Devotion is all about love—the love of music that compels me to work so hard. I discovered that I had forgotten the love for my art. I needed to step back and remember the reasons why I started on this journey. Picture a married couple, struggling in their relationship, but determined to solve their problems. They seek counseling, determined to fix their problems even if it kills them. Inevitably this single-minded approach will result in failure. Rather than being driven by determination, they also need the devotion to each other and the love that first brought them together. Always remember the "love" of your art through devotion.

TIME WAS INVENTED SO WE DON'T HAVE TO DO EVERYTHING AT ONCE

This phrase speaks volumes about the "Kali Yuga" society in which we live today. Hindus and Sikhs believe that human civilization degenerates spiritually during the Kali Yuga, which is referred to as the Dark Age because in it people are as far removed as possible from God. It points directly to a rapid-paced, multi-tasking world that has removed the notion of taking small steps to achieve a long-term goal.

Students today want to learn everything *now*! On occasion, students sit in their chairs waiting to be educated, entertained, and informed, without doing any of the work; in the end, they may blame the teacher.

In Africa, my Dagomba drum teacher and paramount chief, Dolsinaa Abubakaru Lunna, had to deal with my desire to learn more "stuff." Always the wise and patient man he said, "Small steps… small, small." I am grateful for his lessons in philosophy and in music, so take your time, smell the roses, and always trust in the pace and guidance of your teachers.

ALL WAYS AND ALWAYS

I firmly believe in an "All Ways and Always" perspective regarding rhythm, culture, and instrument. Explore all of the possible ways of playing a single idea, and be engaged in that idea all of the time. The point is to become the most resourceful person you know in terms of how you explore one piece of information. By never being satisfied that you have gone as far as you can with your approach, you will always discover and uncover new and magical lands of possibilities.

HIGHER AESTHETICS: GEOMETRY AND CHOREOGRAPHY

After decades devoted to developing strong technique, good sound production, and an essential repertoire of traditional material, I realized that I needed to go deeper into what I call the "higher aesthetics" of music. For me, this involves going beyond what I see right in front of my eyes and conceptualizing music from other degrees and perspectives. While writing the book *Relating Sound & Time*, I started to think in terms of the geometry and choreography of music. There is indeed a geometric aspect of rhythm in the shapes that you can perceive in your mind, as well as the literal shapes that phrases form as they are played.

South Indian music is a great example of seeing geometry within rhythm. There are drum compositions—built using the syllable system called *soklattu*—that resemble the shapes of conical drums such as the mrdangam and damaru. I started to imagine the metaphysical and metaphorical shapes taking place within patterns. It was like discovering a new level of magic inside the music.

Regarding choreography, I feel my body fully engaged in every aspect of the actual music making. I feel my heart beating strongly in my chest, fueling the motions of my arms and legs, feeling an internal dance within my body center. This results from being completely relaxed and unburdened by the world and tensions of life. It is a complete surrender of my physical self to discover the internal choreography taking place.

DO NOT CONGRATULATE OR PUNISH YOURSELF

As massive as the artist's ego can become, a level of insecurity can be equally immense. The great abstract painter Jackson Pollock suffered with an insecure ego that eventually killed him. To solve this conflict of ego and devastation I decided to stop patting myself on the back for a great gig—to stop depending upon applause and accolades. Therefore, by surrendering the glory of the good, I knew that I could also surrender the pain of the bad.

Remember, artists live in miniscule moments of time, and each time we play a gig or session the environment is different from before. We cannot recreate what was magical in a previous gig. We have to create new moments and be honest with ourselves. We need to willingly bare our souls, live in the moment, and discover the power of now!

YOU NEED TO SURVIVE THE SHIPWRECK IN ORDER TO GET INTO THE LIFEBOAT

Many of the greatest musicians in the world have endured tremendous pain and suffering in their evolution as artists. They survived numerous shipwrecks in their personal and professional lives to become stronger and more mature. You will no doubt experience a shipwreck or two (or ten or fifty) in your own evolution. How you handle these little moments will define how you will survive in the large-scale and tumultuous music business.

Some musicians who suffer deadly blows to their egos quit music entirely, whereas others see the pain and suffering as an opportunity to grow. You will always see the lifeboat within reach, with your teachers, colleagues, and family ready to pull you in and give you a second chance at life in the arts. Don't drown!

OH S*#T AND OH S*#T!

Pardon my language and redundancy. The first "Oh s*#t" is how ego-driven artists respond to hearing or seeing their heros perform. "If I can't ever play like this, what is the point?" I can recall a gifted bamboo flute player who went to India to study. Upon hearing the opening note of his teacher, he quit! I was shocked to hear this, but I do understand his conflict. He drowned as a result of this particular shipwreck.

The second "Oh s*#t" moment is fueled by the non-ego response to a great player, by seeing the possibilities of the human mind, body, and spirit. This becomes the inspiration. It is the fuel to work hard—not to become your hero, but to realize your own potential. It is like walking in the path of a great explorer, inspired by the steps before you, with the explorer wishing you well to forge your own path and find your own voice in history.



10,000 HOURS

It has been said that it takes 10,000 hours to become an expert in any field of endeavor, especially in the arts: music, dance, painting, writing—three hours a day for ten years. Notice that I did not say "become a master." I could never become a master in any field; I am far too small in the immense history of creation and human accomplishment. If you think you are a master, then it is time for you to quit your art and sit upon a self-inscribed throne of greatness. Do not be surprised if the entire world ignores you as an ignorant and foolish fraud.

"That's it, I'm ready for the next lesson." These are familiar words that I have said in the past. Students (which I will always be) should never kick back and wait to be taken to the next level by a teacher. It is your duty to discover the next level. The word *educate* comes from the word *educe*, which means to draw out from within. It is up to you to find the deeper meaning of each lesson, to play cleaner, faster, with more soul, and from every angle you can imagine. Since it takes *at least* 10,000 hours to become an expert, go play for another hour today, and two more tomorrow—and remember to have fun!

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