

Meditations for Neurotic Improvisers

By Jay Rattman

Do not compare yourself to or measure your playing against that of other musicians. They are the best in the world at playing like themselves, and you can never hope to be as good at being them as they are. Conversely, no one will ever come close to being as good at playing like you as you.

Trust in the practicing that you have done. Trust in the listening that you have done. Trust in the thinking you have done.

Do not play with any agenda other than to play what sounds the best in each moment. Do not think about what just happened. Do not think about what has happened in the past. Do not think about what is about to happen. Do not think about what you want to have happen next. Do not think about the eventual consequences of your playing, or the performance. Stay in the absolute present. Care only for what is happening in the present moment and play what the present moment demands.

Take comfort and draw confidence from past performances or accomplishments, but never try to recreate them, because that takes you out of the present moment.

Remember that the other musicians you are playing with are there to make the best music they can. To that end, they want to help you sound your best at any given moment. Take comfort in the fact that they are there to help you, and reciprocate by helping them. If it is the case that they are not trying to make you sound good, it is because they have flawed priorities. In this case, you should not be playing with them anyway, and should not care about their judgments.

If you are having a bad day, and cannot seem to execute anything to your liking, keep in mind that this is apparent only to you, because only you have the design in mind for what you intended. Nobody else can hear what you intended, and therefore nobody else is even aware that you failed to execute what you wanted. Most likely, anything you play sounds fine, or even good. Nobody but you can really tell the difference between a good day and a bad day for you.

Do not let note choices drive your improvisation. Doing so leads to stiff phrasing, and overly cerebral music. Let the phrasing and rhythm shape your solos. Rhythm is what moves people and creates excitement. Phrasing is what creates direction and movement. With strong rhythm and phrasing, the best notes will fall into place.

Play beautiful things.

Start from the scenario of playing the melody over and over again. Allow yourself to

embellish the melody. Let the melody of the song structure your improvisations. Don't play anything besides the melody except for as it becomes unavoidable.

Only play what becomes so strong in your ears as to become inevitable. If something is not unavoidable, let it go and do not play it. Play what must be played. However, do not play what is obvious. If something is obvious, but uninteresting, let that pass as well.

You are there to have fun. You are there to make other people have fun: the other musicians, the audience. Be joyful, and everyone else will be joyful as well.

Do not show your music. Do not show what you can do. Do not show anything. Share! Share your music. Share your joy.