

Lesson 32 - Practicing

Here I'd like to share some tips with you on constructive ways to use your time "in the woodshed."

A - FOCUS YOURSELF. Have a specific aim, or aims, in mind when you start a practice session. It could be a general one, like "I'd like to know the F minor scale better," but even that will help focus your attention. Each one of the lessons in this book has a specific focus, with sub-goals within that larger focus, so using this book as a practice guide will certainly help keep you on track.

B - USE THE METRONOME REGULARLY. Your ability to keep good time is crucial and using the metronome will help strengthen this skill. In general, setting the metronome as slow as possible (to click on half notes or even whole notes) will keep you from depending on it to keep the time—it should be an outside reality check, not a crutch. (For swing-feel jazz, try setting the metronome on 2 & 4 instead of 1 & 3.)

C - PLAY THROUGH MISTAKES. As a rule, don't stop in the middle of an exercise if you make a mistake—just keep playing through it. In a real-life situation you won't have the luxury of stopping in the middle of a tune, so don't get in the habit of doing that at home. People generally make mistakes because of a lack of ability to *sustain their concentration*, not because of real technical limits. By doing regular, focused practicing on a daily basis your ability to concentrate will increase greatly over time. If you do run into something that actually is beyond your technical ability to execute, *Slow It Down*. Virtually anything is easy to do if it is slow enough. After you have mastered it at a slow tempo, you can use the metronome to gradually speed the tempo up, a few clicks at a time, and presto! your technical problem will be solved.

D - REMEMBER WHAT YOU PLAY. Speaking of concentration, if you are like me then your mind will have a tendency to wander onto irrelevant things while you are practicing. This will make your practice time much less valuable, so try to fight this tendency by being as present as possible while practicing. A good way to check on this is to ask yourself "What did I just play there?" If you can't remember the last phrase you played, then, by definition, your mind must have been elsewhere (or else your memory has seen its' better day!) On the other hand, being ready to answer that question at any point in time means that you are really focused in. One good way to do this is to visualize each note as you play it, in your mind's eye, so that you can see each phrase "light up" on an internal picture of the fingerboard (include the sound of each note too!). Another way would be to give your improvising the respect it deserves by having each phrase you play comment on, extend, answer, modify or transpose the phrase that came immediately before it—creating one long string of related ideas.

E - LEARN HOW TO READ MUSIC. There is a tremendous amount of great material out there that requires that you be able to read music—bass method books, fake books full of great music, classical pieces like Bach's "Six Suites For Solo Cello" (which has been re-worked for bass), song books from your favorite bands, etc. Don't miss out on this treasure chest because of laziness!

F - PLAY ALONG WITH RECORDS. It is good to try to play bass lines completely by ear that work along with recordings that you like. It is also useful to get charts of songs you want to learn from books and use them to help you know what notes to play. For jazz or Latin music, Sher Music Co. publishes the best fake books ever created. See www.shermusic.com for details. In addition, try finding some of the notes that the bassist on the record plays. You should also pay attention to the time feel that the bassist has and see if you can imitate that as well. If you are ambitious, pick a tune and learn exactly what the bassist on the record did, note for note. This is the best way to internalize what the masters who came before you were up to.

G - SIMPLIFYING TASKS. Break problems into smaller units and it will be much easier to master them. If you want to learn how to play on John Coltrane's "Giant Steps" for example, try taking two bars at a time and, at a relatively slow tempo, go over and over them until you can easily negotiate your way through the changes.

Then the next two bars, etc., until you have the tune under control. By working on smaller units at slower tempos you will have a much more productive way of using your time than banging your head against the wall trying to play “Giant Steps” up to tempo without stopping.

H - BODY AWARENESS. Periodically watch yourself as you practice and see if you are carrying tension in your body that is preventing you from playing smooth, strong bass lines. Watch your left hand and make sure that its shape is correct, not collapsed onto itself. In general, economy of motion is the goal. Anytime you are flailing around with non-essential body movements, you are getting in the way of your optimal performing (unless it’s part of your conscious stage presence!). It is worth finding a good bass teacher just to help you with the physical aspects of playing correctly.

I - PRACTICING TUNES. After you have gone through the first 14 lessons or so in this book, you should be able to successfully practice songs on your own, if you couldn’t do that before. A good general rule would be to spend about half your practice time on learning tunes and half on learning the fundamentals of bass playing covered in this book. Of course, these two things are not mutually exclusive. Any tune can give you plenty of individual elements to practice using the format we’ve established in this book. A good procedure might be: a) Play a tune. b) Figure out what needs working on and practice just that element, as we did in this book. c) Go back and play the tune again for a while. d) Isolate another element and practice that, etc. etc.

J - PRACTICE MORE, WORRY LESS. Which brings me to another question I’ve heard a fair amount—“What should I practice?” To me, the basic answer is, “Anything you can think of, one thing at a time.” No effort you expend in the woodshed is ever wasted—it will bear fruit in its own way and in its own time. So work hard and enjoy the process of getting more comfortable with each one of the elements of music we’ve covered.

K - EMOTIONAL AWARENESS. Periodically check in with your emotional reality as you practice and see if you can tell what are helpful as opposed to unproductive emotional states. In general, determination is good, putting yourself down is useless; gratitude is good, complaining is useless; having fun is good, not having any fun is not so good. But virtually any emotion can be used to make music happen. So if you are sad one day, for example, let the process of practicing help you express how you are feeling. Emotions are just energy of one kind or another, so put that energy to work, whatever it is, and it will make your musical life richer and more soulful.

L - OVERCOMING SELF-JUDGMENT. One thing to avoid while practicing, however, is believing the “I can’t do it” voice. Or the part of you that worries about having to always play things that are “correct.” Or the feeling that whatever you do is inadequate by some mythical standard of musical brilliance. These self-judgmental aspects of yourself (which we all have) will get in the way of the music if you let them. So keep an eye out for them and let the power of the music inside you overrule them by making sure that what you practice is directly connected with your internal sense of music, however you can access that—by singing along with yourself; by hearing what the notes will sound like before you play them; by starting with a rhythm and have your choice of notes be secondary to maintaining that groove; or by just grabbing ahold of a feeling and making the music work to express that emotional reality inside of you. Music is a great teacher—the lessons you learn in the practice room will serve you well in the rest of your life too. Don’t wait to enjoy being alive!

M - PRACTICING FROM YOUR GUT. For a change of pace, you should spend some part of every practice session completely dispensing with your brain. Then what? As big-band bassist Chubby Jackson told me one day, “In the old days we didn’t have any amplifiers. We had to play the bass like an animal!” Try this out for yourself by playing through a simple tune, or just a two-chord vamp, without thinking about anything except hitting the roots on beat 1 when the chords change. You might play a few more wrong notes than normal, but it will be a good trade-off if you can access some deeper, gut feeling of pure intention—“I want to play these notes,” or “I want music to come out of me,” or simply “Nothing exists except getting to the next main note.” Or whatever gives you that feeling of being a conduit of pure life force. This is Big Fun, for sure!