

INTRODUCTION

I am thankful every day for music. It has given me a lifetime of joy and solace, diversion and deep meaning, a calling, a vocation, and a place in the world. Most of all, I've come to believe that music provides one of the deepest means of connection between human beings, and a connection to things that words can't adequately express. Many of my strongest lifelong relationships are with current and former bandmates and colleagues, and those shared experiences have made some of my best memories.

If you are reading this, music is probably important to you, too. You may not have chosen to devote yourself to it professionally, but that doesn't diminish its importance in your life. As a hobby, even while playing music might seem to be a mere diversion, it can be deeply meaningful.

One of the most powerful and compelling things about studying music is that the potential for growth is limitless. There's always something new to explore, a technique to improve, a song to learn. Even players who have achieved a level of mastery in one area can set off in a new direction, or push deeper into the frontiers of the territory they know. But this is also part of the challenge to every musician: there's no end to the task, no finish line. Successes can be few and far between, and difficult to measure. The professional has benchmarks to be reached every day, and so can enjoy a sense of accomplishment from the work. But for the more casual amateur, the experience can often feel like a continual struggle marked by occasional victories.

Over 30 years of teaching music, I have worked with students of all ages,

levels of skill, and degrees of ambition. Some were (and still are) pursuing a life in music for themselves, but most just want to play. A great many come to me with some experience and knowledge, but they feel that they've reached the limit of what they can accomplish on their own. Some have struggled at a basic level of playing for years, and are frustrated by their seeming inability to improve. Others have acquired many bits and pieces of information, but are still unable to play with fluidity and confidence.

I call these students “perpetual beginners,” and I believe they make up a significant percentage of hobbyist musicians. Their goals might vary widely, but what they all have in common is a sense that there's a missing piece of the puzzle. And in fact, there is: while most musicians practice their instrument, far fewer really *practice music*. The technical work of practice is only one aspect of learning to play. The work of developing *musicianship*—overall facility and skill with the language of music—is equally important but often neglected or entirely missed.

I've accumulated a lot of knowledge and experience over my years of playing music, enough to feel that readers would benefit from my sharing it. But despite all that, I can still fall into the same traps that every student faces. Experience raises your baseline level of skill to the point that a pro can “phone it in” and still give a passable performance. But passable performances aren't inspiring to the listener or to the player.

So the title “The Perpetual Beginner” refers as much to me as it might to you. I still have days when I can't seem to make anything connect, and times when I get tired of everything I know how to do. Taking on new challenges or returning to areas where I'm weaker has always broken me out of ruts and stimulated new growth. In other words, a willingness to return to a beginner's mindset has helped me keep my playing dynamic and stimulating.

This is the heart of the message of this book: that experience can lead to stagnation, and that maintaining a beginner's openness and enthusiasm allows you to keep growing for a lifetime. I believe that this and the other insights in this book are the primary reasons I've been able to maintain a life in music, by keeping the love, commitment, and sense of discovery alive.

At the same time, there's no denying that experience builds skill, confidence, and authority. The ideas and tools detailed in the chapters to follow come from the accumulated knowledge of my teachers and mentors, as well as my own years

of work as a teacher, writer, coach, and performer. My best teachers understood the power of this combination of “beginner’s mind” and the master’s skill set. They all shared a passion and lifelong commitment to their craft and art, and showed me what a real life in music might look like. I worked with some of these people for years, but had only a single interaction with others. In every case, I walked away with lessons that still impact my playing and teaching every day.

The goal of this book is to share some of these ideas in a way that will encourage a lifetime of musical exploration. More than helping you to play one thing better today, the most important lessons will teach you how to work at being a better player. What the perpetual beginner needs most is not to learn what else to play, but how to learn.

With such a vast topic as music and musicianship, it’s impossible for a single resource to be fully comprehensive. But I’ve identified some core concepts and skills that I believe are essential for long-term learning. Some are concrete and immediately practical, while others are more philosophical and deal with perspective and motivation. Taken together, these ideas and the interactions they came from have made me into the musician I am today. I hope they will help pave the way for real progress in anyone’s musical journey.

This is not a method book or instructional manual. It will not make you a better player overnight, although some of these insights can have an immediate and dramatic impact. My hope is that this book will get you to think differently about what you do as a musician, and give you some tools and skills that will feed your commitment to music for a lifetime.