

## **Finding your artistic voice**

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All work, when properly evaluated and processed, is a learning experience and just another step in the life-long journey of discovering and deepening your own artistic voice.

As an artist in any medium, your greatest challenge is connecting with your own personal style and voice. “But, I don’t sing,” you might say. “Whaddya mean, ‘voice?’” Well, righteous reader, by voice I mean the distinctive tone or style of your expression with your chosen instrument — and this holds true for all forms of art. The great artists of any age have had personal artistic voices which identify their work at first listen, first read, or first view. Everybody knows what a Picasso looks like. Certain Shakespeare quotes are not just recognizable for their distinctiveness but have entered the permanent lexicon. In music, the great recording artists are identifiable not just by the sound of their voices and/or instruments but by the sounds of the other instruments they choose to have around them.

Finding your artistic voice can be a long process and there are many who never quite get there. If you’re committed to the journey, though, chances are you will create personal, unique work. Everybody has the capability, but not everyone is willing to do the work. Here are a few ways to actively engage in the process.

### **Detach from your audio library**

This is a tough one for me personally. I’m a record fiend! I LOVE other people’s music. Especially those who have who inspired me to pick up a guitar in the first place. But in order to progress in finding our own style, we need to disconnect from this need, often unconscious, to make our work sound like “great music” or “real music.”

We all possess internal — and often external — libraries of the great records and well-known artists we love, and, without realizing, will often imitate or aim our music in the direction of their successes. It is vitally important for your growth to be able to detach from this library of what “great music” sounds like and allow your own sounds, imagery, and expression to appear.

This is not to discount the value of imitation in learning music and/or songwriting exercises. But when we are talking about creating something personal and unique, there needs to be some distance between you and your musical heroes; otherwise, you will be forever creating in their long shadows.

### **Don’t rest on skills and talent**

Some of you might be supremely skilled instrumentalists, masters of the fretboard, keyboard, or drum set. Or maybe you’re great with words and rhymes and knocking off a clever lyric or phrase, maybe even improvised freestyle. Maybe you are an amazing writer of songs about cats. This doesn’t mean you ought to be writing cat songs for your entire life. Your strongest, most resonant music and choice of style is going to come from what you want to say rather than what you are necessarily best at. Sure, put your best foot forward — if you wail on the didjeridu, by all means, put

some of that on your record. But don't rely on your skills and natural talents so completely that what you want to say and express get pushed to the side.

### **Let risk-taking feel risky**

Extremely personal artistic work is very challenging because you have to be willing to explore beyond the boundaries of your comfort zone. David Bowie said it well: "If you feel safe in the area you're working in, you're not working in the right area. Always go a little further into the water than you feel you're capable of being in. Go a little bit out of your depth, and when you don't feel that your feet are quite touching the bottom, you're just about in the right place to do something exciting." You should feel uncomfortable taking risks, but not so uncomfortable that you are paralyzed. Anxiety-management strategies like meditation, exercise, and yoga can help. I highly recommend the business book *Just Enough Anxiety* by Robert Rosen on this subject.

### **Finishing for the sake of progress**

If you're working on something new that you think might be aiming you in the direction of your own artistic voice, try to finish it rather than abandon it halfway because you've decided it sucks. You'll make more progress sitting with those feelings, finishing the song/recording, and then appraising it after the fact. It's natural to feel uncomfortable when you're pushing yourself into new artistic areas. Understanding that simply finishing work is progress will help you sit with the bad feelings that will most likely arise when exploring new ground. When you've finished something, pat yourself on the back! All forward motion is good.

### **Think about the marketplace ... or don't**

You may want to reject all current musical trends and just make the music that's in your heart and soul. Or you might want to have an eye and ear on what's happening now — the current popular bands in your genre, how they look and sound — and make strategic decisions about where you are going to position your work in the marketplace. All the streaming services and online retail outlets are going to pick a genre for you anyway, so you might as well be clear about it yourself.

Neither perspective is right or wrong; ultimately the decision is yours. Artists with one foot in each perspective may find that a balance of intensely personal music and calculated marketing can open up a particular kind of artistic voice that may make their work more accessible and help people understand what it is they're trying to say.

### **Clearly state your goal**

Frank Zappa said, "Writing about music is like dancing about architecture." While he was using this to disparage music critics who didn't get his work (and he was also stealing the quote from Martin Mull), he was missing the fact that there is great benefit in being able to articulate your artistic goals in terms of honing your own voice. Zappa's artistic voice came very easily to him! We are not all so lucky. Putting something audio-based into words might feel strange, but it can help clarify your intentions and lend value in your own mind to what you are trying to achieve. "I'm making a dream pop album." "I want my new band to be a combination of Phish, polka music, and Tuvan throat singing." This kind of articulation is very helpful in all artistic mediums, especially theater and film/TV where the primary question to ask is often "What story are we telling?" That's a pertinent question for musicians, songwriters, and producers as well.

### **Don't repeat yourself just to repeat yourself**

While this might sound like an item from the Department of Redundancy Department, commercial musical artists are encouraged to constantly repeat their previous successes for the benefit of the record label and the people making money around and off of them. Repeating successful work does seem less stressful and can be more secure financially. But it can also prevent the development of your own artistic voice and stifle you from discovering what you have to say. You might have to do some repeat work to pay the bills, but you can also strike a balance in adding new, more personal work to your schedule. The important thing is to be aware of when you are moved to repeat yourself so that you can choose to do so consciously, not unconsciously.

### **Embrace your past**

As we grow older, it's very easy to let our genuine passions fall by the wayside. You may have moved from the country to the city and forgotten how much you loved nature. Or you may have gone the other way to find yourself missing the hustle, bustle, energy, and visual human-made splendor of urban life. Finding your own artistic voice can involve reconnecting to those things that used to move you. For me, much of my own musical voice lies in Broadway show tunes and pop music of the early 1980s that moved me as a youngster, before terms like "good" and "bad" meant anything. I just knew I liked it. Owning that and reclaiming it can be productive work, and might be as simple as making a list of your forgotten musical/artistic loves and highlighting the ones that are still exciting to you.

### **Integrate your different threads**

Maybe you make two sorts of music: Beatles covers and free jazz. At one point you probably decided, or life decided for you, that you couldn't do both simultaneously so you split into two directions or personas. Combining the two could prove to be very interesting! While it may have been done before (see the work of Eugene Chadbourne for an example of what Beatles covers combined with free jazz can sound like), it's likely that you could bring something to the party in your own unique way.

Or maybe not. Maybe you are not happy with the results and you resolve never to do it again like that. Some musical combinations are not necessarily meant to be. Whatever you discover from this investigation, whether it moves you forward or helps you recommit to current work, it's beneficial to your understanding and the development of your own artistic voice. Stretching yourself involves experimentation, and detaching from terms like success and failure can be helpful to progress. It's often more important to be more binary and just think about what "works" vs. what's "not working." Integrating your various, seemingly unrelated, artistic threads is one possible sphere of experimentation.

### **Accept new results**

In their excellent book, *The Artist's Way*, Julia Cameron and Mark Bryan say, "At first, going sane may look a lot like going crazy. Be patient and have faith — a newer and clearer you is emerging." Their book is a great tool to explore and deepen your own artistic voice. It is important to note that when you first find your own artistic voice, not having heard it before, you may not recognize it! Be patient with yourself. Often new music, especially truly groundbreaking and innovative music, sounds like nothing ever heard before. The Boredoms must have been both incredibly excited and a little intimidated when they finished their groundbreaking album *Vision Creation*

Newsun. Miles Davis was certainly unsure initially of how Bitches Brew might be received.

Newness can be disquieting and disconcerting. Don't rush to judgment. It may seem like a mess, a mistake, or a misguided intention, but give it time to grow on you and give yourself time to catch up with it. If, like Bob Dylan says, "you have a pure heart and something to say," then most likely your new work is of quality. And if all else fails and you've made something you're really unhappy with after you've sat with it for a while, use that "mistake" to make something new. Write a completely opposite song that's totally different from the "crappy" one you hate. All work, when properly evaluated and processed, is a learning experience and just another step in the life-long journey of discovering and deepening your own artistic voice.

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