

Musical Creativity - Observations and Personal Development

by Robyn Verhoeven

What does musical creativity involve? Provided within are my thoughts and experiences that have led me along the path of musicking thus far. Having these experiences and sharing them with you will hopefully allow me to convey what I believe to involve musical creativity.

I am a returning student to the UPEI Music Program. As part of my degree, I take June Countryman's Philosophy of Music Education course. We had recently done a compositional activity wherein 4 classmates in preselected groups were asked to get together and create a piece of music. We were given a list of haikus and we had to select two that we would write musically appropriate movements to. We used instruments on which we were proficient, our voice as well as any desired auxiliary percussion. We would be evaluated on the timbres we used, if we sang or spoke the words, the form, musicality and of course our performance of it.

What I noticed first in our Haiku project was the student selection for groups. The group I was a part of, in particular, had a membership of dynamic experience. One a classical flute player, the other a classical pianist with a vested interest in club music and a third who was a saxophone player equally well versed in jazz/pop improvisation as well as classical and, myself, a trumpet player with a heavy background in ska, improvisation as well as jazz/pop and classical genres.

What I found most interesting and was soon to find out was how little experience some of my colleagues had with improvisation on their respective instruments. I thought to myself, how is this going to affect the creative process? How are we to write (compose by some definition) as a group with half the membership having virtually never done so? I then became worried, having the most experience with such scenarios, that I would assume too much of a leadership role and write the song on my own dictating to the other group members what they were to do. I was also concerned that they may potentially know my background and would be too intimidated by my experience to come forth and experience what it means to collaborate and create.

In the interest of the project and for genuine results I actively took a back seat in the creative process. I hoped in doing so that I would compel the members with less experience to feel more comfortable putting forth ideas for the musical direction and to my excitement they did. That said, it wasn't as simple as I may have made it sound. They did preface the compositional endeavour by speaking of how little experience they had with creating music, which I found mind boggling. How could someone so adept play for so many years and never delve into the creative/improvisational process?

We had agreed on two passages that we would write to. We then began talking about what we'd do with them musically. We analyzed the poetic content and agreed on the musical context it should be put to. What happened first was something that often happened through the middle of my time writing music with my Ska band, The Sidewalks. We started to play our ideas with frequent stops, analyzing what we'd done so far and discussing if it was appropriate or if it could've been better, having not even made it to the end. We were writing the song before we wrote the music. How could we tell if a storybook was any good, having never heard how the end ties into the rest of it? Musicianship was far from its peak, as some of us were outside our circle of comfort. After a few minutes discussing the above, the sax player suggested that we 'jam it out'. We would keep eye contact with each other and listen for cues, follow each other's lead to the next section based on what we were hearing and how it related to the poetic text.

The tension that had been present to begin with slowly dissipated as we did what comes to us so naturally. They started to trust themselves and each other, tapping into their born musicality and so did the music flow. Everyone created riffs that were stylistic of their instrument. There were no stops to see if one was playing 'properly' and we made it to the end with consistent and coherent ideas. For lack of a better word, I was proud of what we had accomplished in so little time. Having started the experience with what came across as self-doubt and coming through in the end to create something was a unique experience for me.

In summary, what I found to be most influential in the creative music process was trust; trust of one's self, trust of others and trust of music. We are inherently musical and with each day we become better at it. We have to trust ourselves that we know more than we may realize. We have to trust others to not pass quick judgment. We have to trust that music is present throughout the entirety of it.

Beyond that, in so far as group creation, next comes interpersonal vibe. Providing a healthy mental environment and proper attitude is key, without it we lose the medium with which to communicate - which brings me to my next point.

Communication. Not limited to verbal, but mental (covering emotional, ESP, etc.), musical and physical (body language, props, etc.). All parts equally important to the process and essential to growth.

These being the top 3 but not limited to are what I believe to be the foundational factors of group musical creation. Without question there are many pieces to the jigsaw we call musical creation and we could certainly delve indefinitely to what influences the process. Until such time as we discover immortality, I'll leave you with the above.

As for what has contributed my personal musical creativity, if I could cite my entire life up until this point that would likely provide sufficient experiences as to who/what/when/where and why. Major factors that have contributed (and continue to do so) to my growth are jamming, The Sidewalks - an original works ska band I played with for 4 years, listening for music where you wouldn't normally hear it, The Music Lesson by Victor Wooten and inner honesty.

What better way to improve at something than through doing? Jamming is a low pressure opportunity (or should be) where you can practice creating music and it goes far beyond notes. Some of the more 'expert' jams for lack of a better word that I've participated in were heavy into dynamics, style and otherwise. I would listen to the picking style of a guitarist, groove of a bassist, cymbal accents of a drummer, articulation of another instrumentalist. I would intentionally enter at my opportunity to solo at a very quiet dynamic and the group would match. It's an environment to refine solo ideas as well as riffs and hooks.

Being a part of an original works pop band was huge for my development and essentially where I cut my musical creativity teeth. Each person bringing their own musical element to the table is how we wrote, never an individual or duo bringing forward completed ideas. Through this I learned how to harmonize, when best to do so, how to write stylistically appropriate lines to lyrics. This also taught me a lot of ensemble writing how to fit lines with drum beats, guitar riffs and bass grooves.

In my time out west I lived in a musically derelict land. The town I lived in had a bar that brought a live country band in once a month. The people who lived there from what I could tell weren't

particularly interested in music beyond it being something to blare over the sound of a 450 horsepower Cummins heading down the highway to the next job. In my time in the oilfield I had much time to reflect why I was there and why wasn't I pursuing music. What I found was that I was listening for music in places it might not thought to be found. Standing next to giant engines half the size of a tractor trailer I would sing in different modes along with them as I fueled them. Being that they were set to a consistent RPM they provided a consistent pitch which I used as a drone to sing to. This is one of many examples I have of discovering musical qualities among our daily tasks. If you can listen for music in situations like these, and find it even - imagine what you're capable of hearing in a setting of artists all playing together.

Perhaps the most influential in regards to the honing of my musical creativity is Victor Wooten's book, the Music Lesson. I had always been curious about the book and had a few musicians over my travels recommend I read it. I decided to buy it for the lengthiest of the Sidewalks tours to central Canada knowing I would have much time in the van. What happened to me in those two and a half weeks, musically and otherwise, is beyond anything I can put into words. I was told to read the book a chapter at a time and really digest its showings. I had the book finished in 10 days and could feel the results immediately as I read it. Seeing my enthusiasm, my band mates also read the book on the tour, one was able to finish it the other was halfway through come the end of our tour. They, too, can attest to its influence in shaping their musicianship. Everything I learned from this book leads me to my final point and perhaps the most important overall: Inner Honesty.

How can you be true to your musical voice if you aren't true to yourself? Really knowing who you are I believe is most important in the process. Be true to yourself - fear nothing and no one. You are the most qualified person to sound as you are, you know your sound better than anyone else - have confidence in this! "What we do in life, echoes in eternity" - Maximus Decimus Meridius. The same is true for what we play and sing. Don't look back on notes played, wishing to have done something different - look forward to the music you have yet to create. Pure, true inner honesty will yield your pure and true musical voice.