

Chapter 3

Why Do We Play?



For people of my tribe, with its rich musical context, exposure to music begins in the womb, when pregnant mothers join in the community dances. From inside the womb, our babies feel the vibrations of the rhythms enter their bodies. Infants are then wrapped onto their mothers' backs with a cloth and taken into the dancing circle with everyone else.

Yayo Diallo¹

Your First Time

I remember my first time. I went to a friend's birthday party and his father played the piano for us. I was mesmerized. I had never seen a piano played before. I ran home after the party and told my mother that I wanted to play. "Get me a piano, will ya, will ya, will ya?"

For Christmas they rented one with an option to buy. If I took to it, they would buy it. I'll never forget the day it arrived. I could hardly wait to touch it. I started to pick out the notes of some songs I knew, and I remember running into the kitchen to proudly exclaim to my mother, "Good news, mom. I won't be needing any lessons. I've already figured out how to play!" I believed myself to have been a musician from that time on ...

Why do we travel the sometimes masochistic route of becoming a musician? Being an artist in "civilized" society doesn't seem as secure as owning stock in IBM (though it may be no

¹Hart, Mickey. *Planet Drum, A Celebration of Percussion and Rhythm*. New York: Harper Collins, 1991.

less so). So what compels us to try? How did we become “co-dependent” with music? We love it and can’t leave it, no matter how unsatisfied some of us are with the fruits of our efforts. Why do we do it? Take a moment to contemplate *your* first time:

Think back to the time you first touched an instrument. Remember the wondrous sound that came out? Think of that virginal experience. Anything you played sounded incredible. There was so much magic in the sound! You couldn’t wait to do it again. You probably didn’t think there was anything to learn. You were content to hear the sound come back to you. This was the unfolding of a natural process.

Stimulated by the sound, your curiosity about music could have grown from there. If you were left alone, you might have developed various relationships to the different sounds on that instrument. The different octaves, combinations of notes (if it was polyphonic), loud and soft, and so on, would have expressed something personal for you, something that “just wanted to come through.”

Perhaps we would have many more musical languages, creative techniques, ways of playing the instruments and even innovative fingerings if everyone had been left to their own devices for the first few years with an instrument. If there were no pressure to learn early on, kids might become curious about how to find the songs they hear on the radio, develop a real yearning to know harmony, and so on.

A friend of mine who is a painter told me that when she was a child, she was trying to draw a bracelet on a wrist, but she couldn’t get the perspective right. The bracelet is not supposed to be seen behind the wrist. After a long time, she became frustrated and started to cry. Her mother came in and showed her how to hide part of the bracelet behind the wrist, making it look much more realistic. Her own experimentation had led her to yearn for this knowledge, and her mother’s teaching was right on time. That lesson really stayed with her. Similarly, you would have been excited to have a teacher come forward at the right time and show you what you craved to know about music. It

would have been an artistic journey from the very beginning! But unfortunately most of us never traveled that road.

Education: The Death Knell

Usually, somebody comes along at an early stage and breaks the groove. A parent, for example, tells you things like, "You must have a teacher," or "Nothing will come of this if you don't practice." Even if that is true, the dreariness of this message drones on, and the magic evaporates. Perhaps that was not the *first thing* a child needs to know. Music has now been relegated to the maximum security prison of homework.

Many people I've talked with say that they studied an instrument at an early age but let it go in their teens. They always express regret that they didn't continue.

But why did they stop?

The answer is that the bliss of music had been filtered out of their studies. Teachers doled out their assignments with drab monotony. How could the teachers know the bliss that was there? Many of them had never experienced it growing up, either. Just as abused children become abusive parents, music teachers force-feed dry information from generation to generation. The dryness of music (as well as all other subjects) in school causes young people to tune out. It is no coincidence that they become rebellious teenagers, rejecting "rules" in favor of "fun." Music often gets identified with the rules instead of with "freedom" and "fun." When a kid gets serious about music, it is usually not the music he or she has been taught in school. However, I hear that the situation is improving in some public schools.

I used to love to play stick ball with my friends. We would play until it was so dark that we could hardly see the ball. I hated to come in to get my practicing done. That was no more inviting than doing my homework. I do not mean to blame teachers and parents for trying to do their jobs. But our educational system has not served our creativity very well. I don't profess to have the answers. I am just citing some of the reasons why an overwhelming amount of people lost their love

of music through *studying it*. Later on, many regain it as listeners, and hence the common outcry, "I wish I'd never quit my piano lessons!"

Despite the odds, many of us who get bitten by the music bug stay with it. Those first experiences make music addicts out of us, and from then on we are driven. However, as we continue to pursue music, many other motivations become superimposed onto our pure love of playing.

Self -Worth

As you can see from my story, the quality of a person's playing can determine his or her self-worth. A feeling of little self-worth is very common in musicians, young and old alike, yielding unsatisfying results. It seems as if in order to be good you have to *play good*. Musicians who fall into this trap generally don't enjoy life. Every day brings anxiety. They are either elated or depressed. Each solo is the acid test of apparent worth. Their self-respect is more volatile than the stock market. They rarely play anything of depth. They are like the person who is always trying to get us to like him; we usually don't.

Fear of Failure

Many young people go to music school because they think that it's a great idea to be a jazz musician. However, once the decision is made, they dare not quit for fear of failing. They don't know what they're doing there, but they don't know what else to do. In time, most of these kids drop off.

If you think you might like to quit, *do it*. Don't worry about failing. You'd be a failure if you *didn't* quit! You might miss an opportunity in some other field. At Manhattan School of Music, I was afraid to quit because it would mean that I was a failure. It was obvious that I was no more suited to be a concert pianist than to be a nuclear physicist. Fear of failure blinded me from this fact, but only after I moved on did my life begin.

I'm Going To Be A Star!

This has got to be the craziest reason of all. Of all the people who pursue careers in music, be it jazz or classical (or playing weddings and barmitzvahs), how many become stars? A musician's life is the riskiest investment in the universe. If it's money you're after, become a bank president!

If you are a struggling musician-artist, there are only three real reasons you don't quit: 1) you're having a lot of fun and you love the music *THAT MUCH*; 2) you have a deep-seated need to express yourself through music; or 3) you are either too lazy, too scared, or too dysfunctional to retrain for another career. I believe that if you're motivated by either of the first two reasons, or by both, you will be taken care of.

Many of us are unaware of the depths that music beckons us to. Keith Jarrett, in an article for the New York Times, used the occasion of Miles Davis' death to comment on the music scene and society in general. He wrote, "Try to imagine the first musician. He was not playing for an audience, or a market, or working on his next recording, or touring with his show, or working on his image. He was playing out of need, out of his need for the music. Every year the number of musicians who remember why they play music in the first place gets smaller, and the greatest loss from this handful was Miles Davis, who died last year."²

In the movie, *The Piano*, Holly Hunter plays a mute who travels to another country to be wedded to a man she's never met. Without the ability to speak, she develops her "voice" playing the piano. Whenever she plays, she is drawn deep within and uplifted emotionally and spiritually. The piano is her rock, her center, her lover and her voice. Intoxicated by the sound, she has little patience for idle chatter. In such a person, the divine musician manifests, and nothing is wasted.

Keith Jarrett writes, "The original musician was not looking for his image; he was using his voice to learn about the world.

²Jarrett, Keith. New York Times Article

He knew the world to be liquid (i.e., not made up of discrete entities).” Jarrett decries the fact that “we see the world as ‘bits of information,’ ” and laments that “fewer and fewer musicians let us know who they are by the expression of music.”³

The Original Purpose

Let us remember that, in the beginning, music was our sole means of communication.

“A study of ancient traditions reveals that the first divine messages were given in song, as were the Psalms of David, the Song of Solomon, the Gathas of Zoroaster and the Gita of Krishna.”⁴ So writes Hazrat Inayat Khan, the great Sufi musician.

The original purpose of music was worship, divine intelligence, and basic communication. Music intoxicated the human soul. It was, according to ancient legend, the song of angels that induced the unwilling soul to enter the body of Adam. In every way, music is our bond between the material and the eternal.

“In the beginning of human creation, no language such as we now have existed, but only music. Man first expressed his thoughts and feelings by low and high, short and prolonged sounds. Man conveyed his sincerity, insincerity, disinclination, pleasure or displeasure by the variety of his musical expressions.”⁵

Language is the retention of rhythm without pitch. In this way, poetry was born of music. Ancient spiritual texts were expressed in poetry such as the Vedas, Ramayana, Mahabharata and the Bible.

Distilling poetry of its rhythm, we have prose. So it can be said that all language is derived from music. Music can put a baby to sleep or inspire a soldier in war.

³Jarrett, Keith. Ibid

⁴Hazrat Inayat Khan, *The Sufi Message* p. 51

⁵Ibid. p. 51

Our most natural tendency is to make music. It requires no more thought than breathing. "The infant begins his life on earth by moving its arms and legs, thus showing the rhythm of its nature, and illustrating the philosophy which teaches that rhythm is the sign of life."⁶

Actually, music is derived from sound, and sound is composed of vibration. Now we get to the heart of the matter, for all matter is made up of vibrations. It is a scientific fact that, although we see solids when we look at an object, what we are really seeing is fluid vibrations organized in sufficiently gross frequencies to form solid matter.

Hazrat Inayat Khan says: "The life absolute from which has sprung all that is felt, seen, and perceived, and into which all again merges in time, is a silent, motionless and eternal life Every motion that springs forth from this silent life becomes active in a certain part, and creates in every moment more and more activity, losing thereby the peace of the original silent life. It is the grade of activity of these vibrations that accounts for the various planes of existence The activity of vibrations makes them grosser, and thus the earth is born of the heavens."⁷

We are made up of vibrations. And thus, all things can be said to have music in them. It travels to us directly from the infinite on the wings of vibration and molds itself to our every desire. Sound, when seen in this way, is no less than a gift from God. "Music is the only means of understanding among birds and beasts."⁸

Music and art remain the best way we have to appreciate creation, hence, the Indian concept that man was created so that God could behold himself (or herself). This concept presents a magnificent image of humans as empty molds for God to pour consciousness into. When man expresses the inexpressible, he does so on the wings of song. The song evaporates somewhat as we stop hearing the inner voice. All music manifests from the

⁶Hazrat Inayat Khan, *The Sufi Message* p. 44

⁷Ibid p. 13

⁸Ibid p. 50

inner music: the “unstruck sound,” as it were. The death-rattle of any religion may be heard in the absence of song and the increase of verbiage (and fund-raising).

Many of the world’s indigenous musical traditions went beyond the point of surrender into trance. Religions were based entirely on music. Mickey Hart, of “The Grateful Dead” fame, wrote a beautiful book entitled *Planet Drum, A Celebration of Percussion and Rhythm*. Describing the shamans of West Africa and their function in society, he says that they are “professional trance travelers, handling the tribe’s communication between this world and the spirit world. Shamans are the healers, psychics, weather workers; they lobby the higher powers to assure a good hunt. A shaman typically needs three things: power songs to summon his spirit allies, spirit allies to guide him to the world tree, and a drum to ride there on.”⁹

Notice that in traveling to the “world tree,” two out of the three things he needs have to do with music: a drum and a song.

The shaman’s state is trance, a state that eludes most of us in the modern world, but which may still be witnessed in an inspired jazz soloist or classical performer.

Possession trance is a state where “the spirits ride the drumbeat down into the body of the trance-dancer.”¹⁰ Hart writes: “Scholars connect the West African possession cultures with the ancient Neolithic mother goddess culture that nine thousand years ago stretched from eastern Europe into what is now the Sahara desert. When the slave trade began in the seventeenth century, this technique of possession trance was carried to the New World. In those places where the Africans were allowed to keep their drums, it mutated into candomble, santeria, and vodun. In America, where the drums were prohibited for many generations, this legacy of possession-trance dance rhythm was

⁹Hart, Mickey. *Planet Drum, A Celebration of Percussion and Rhythm*. New York: Harper Collins, 1991.

¹⁰Ibid

shorn of its spiritual dimension, becoming instead jazz, blues, rhythm and blues, and rock and roll.”¹¹

This is a significant point, for it reveals the origin of jazz to be a “legacy of possession-trance dance rhythm shorn of its spiritual dimension.”

These comments by Mickey Hart excited me because I have heard and read of great beings who have said many times that all search for sense pleasures is really the search for God. Even the conqueror in war — what is he looking for? No matter how much of the world he rules during his life, he will have to surrender it when he dies. So what is he really after? Although he doesn't realize it, he is seeking oneness with the self in all things. When a musician superficially craves security in the level of his playing, what is he really after? It is said that one drop of ecstasy tasted from the self, the God inside us, renders all other pursuits insignificant. At that point, the seeker has found everything he has sought. Every song is either praise or an entreatment for more connection with the beloved.

As enslaved peoples are separated from their religion, the lyrics of the song change. The cry is for sense pleasures: more sex, money, alcohol. How many blues and rock and roll songs speak about that? Desire for “my God” is supplanted by the desire for “my man.” Mankind's vision decays, entangled by the search for temporary relief from its subjugation to false gods. But the cry is still there, even if man no longer knows for what. It is the yearning for unity, for oneness as experienced in the mother's womb, attuned to the rhythm of her heartbeat. The muffled song can still be heard from the God within “seeking to behold himself,” and man's yearning to be one with him. Later, the blues, drained of all meaning, decays into a twelve-bar crossword puzzle to be “re-harmonized” in theory class. Finally, jazz visionaries revive it as an Indian Tala and ascend on its numeric highway.

¹¹ Ibid, 1991.

