

FROM "TRAVELING MUSIC" by Neil Peart

I once read a comment that Frank's singing was felt so powerfully because he seemed to be singing "to you alone," while others opine that, like Billie Holliday, he was able to convey all the passion and heartbreak of his own life when he sang. It seemed to me that the key to Sinatra's magic was that when Frank sang, he *meant* it. As he said himself, "Whatever else has been said about me is unimportant. When I sing, I believe I'm honest."

Perhaps the key to *any* great performance is just that quality: sincerity.

Of course, many singers become phenomenally successful *without* that magic ingredient. A golden voice and good looks will often appeal, even when it's obvious to a caring listener that when that singer delivers a song, he or she (read "diva") doesn't mean a *word* of it. You'd think that difference would be apparent to the listener, but I guess that is the clearest difference between art and entertainment. If people only want to be diverted and distracted, rather than moved or inspired, then fakery will do just as well as the real thing. To the indiscriminate, or uncaring, listener, it just doesn't matter. Sometimes I have to face the reality that music can be part of people's lives, like wallpaper, without being the white-hot *center* of their lives, as it always seemed to be for me.

← ON MUSICAL
"HONESTY"

But for me, the fire was definitely lit by *The Gene Krupa Story*, and there's often a clear difference in the playing and musical values of drummers who traced their inspiration to Gene Krupa or Buddy Rich, compared with those who set their childhood sights on emulating a simple rock drummer, like Ringo Starr, and stopped there. A matter of taste, perhaps, but also a matter of ambition — an accomplished drummer can play simply if he chooses, but it's quite a different thing from playing simply because that's all you know. As a young person attracted to the idea of being a musician, do you want to play the role, or do you want to *play the instrument*?

← ON BEING A
MUSICIAN

I don't know how it is for other music lovers, but it's rare for me to have a "committed relationship" with a piece of music. So many times I become briefly infatuated with a record, listen to it regularly for a few months, then grow tired of it, and never feel like listening to it again. Of course, I have a long list of "timeless classics," those I will always appreciate and speak well of, but even with many of those, once I come to know them by heart, I don't necessarily feel compelled to listen to them again. They are held in memory, complete in every detail of song and sound, like digital recordings. The exceptions seem to be the "aural feasts," the

Philosopher Kings, Massive Attack, Isaac Hayes, all that stuff, where the recordings simply sound so good, musically and sonically, that they are a pleasure to hear repeatedly, just as a *sensual* experience. And more, it's when the actual *construction* of the music — the composing, arranging, performances, and recording — is artful and subtle enough to bear repeated listening. Perhaps the difference is that you can't get to know such music "by heart," because it brings your heart, and your ears, something different every time, in line with the saying that you can't step into the same river twice.

Insights I gained from books on art criticism by E. H. Gombrich have served me well in deciding how I feel about artists of any kind. Professor Gombrich suggested judging a piece of art by two basic criteria: "What are they trying to do?" and "How well did they do it?" Simple, yet so profound, and the starting point for a reasonable assessment of any artist's work.

In a world so desperate for heroes that we have to *invent* them, buying and selling super-humans made from the common clay of actors, athletes, or artists, then turning on them when they betray us by being, as old Fred Nietzsche put it, "human, all too human," maybe the role models we really need are found all around us, right in our own neighborhoods. Not some remote model of perfection which exists only as a fantasy, frustratingly unattainable, but everyday people who actually show us, by example, a way to behave that we can see is good, and sometimes even people who can show us what it is to be excellent.

Here's to all my teachers.

← ON GOOD
MUSIC

← ON "HEROES"

In the same way that Ernest Hemingway changed literature forever by chiseling his prose down to spare, almost taciturn phrases that could still convey deep emotions (while also licensing generations of would-be imitators), and the lush, carefully-orchestrated paintings of Jackson Pollock allowed too many hacks and dribblers to call themselves Abstract Expressionists, the legacy of Miles Davis and other adventurous jazz musicians (perhaps beginning with another great original, Louis Armstrong) was to unleash a flood of self-styled improvisational instrumentalists who figured that an aloof soloist noodling scales over an arbitrary set of chord changes — or a Disney showtune, or a sappy easy-listening ballad — put them in the same arena as Miles Davis.

GOOD JAZZ
VS.
IMITATIONS

It has been pointed out that a true abstract painting is still of something, and similarly, the minimalist credo of “less is more” includes the tacit understanding that less has to *mean* more. It takes a certain subtlety of taste to *understand* what a master has accomplished, let alone to imitate it. There was nothing random about what Miles Davis achieved with *Kind of Blue* — the musicians were a carefully chosen ensemble of masterful players who could help him achieve the sound, musical content, and over-

all mood he envisioned: Cannonball Adderley on alto saxophone, the legendary John Coltrane on tenor sax, Bill Evans on piano, Paul Chambers on bass and James Cobb on drums.

Usually a finished performance would be edited together from several sources — the beginning of take three, cutting to take four, then back to take one, for example. In any case, the performance was still *spontaneous*, but selected from moments of inspired, sublime spontaneity. As Somerset Maugham wrote, “Only a mediocre man is always at his best.”

GOOD QUOTE!

In my instructional video, *A Work in Progress*, I quoted producer Peter Collins’s response to my own efforts to combine careful preparation with a spontaneous performance: “Don’t leave spontaneity to chance.”

The real avatars of popular music over the years seemed obvious to me, but like everybody’s list of such all-time greats, it had to remain arguable. I never included those who were merely *popular*, or even just *talented*, but the true artists who were lightning rods, signal fires, receivers and amplifiers and transmitters — those who held their audience, heart and soul and *zeitgeist* in their very being, and sang it back to them. Flaubert said a novel should be “a mirror moving down the road,” and that’s a fair ideal for a song, a musician, a band, and a career.

MUSICAL
COMMUNICATION

For all of us, life is mostly a gray matter, with occasional patches of blue, and maybe a few of black, and the starburst flashes of yellow are the eternal diamonds we hold in memory to show that life is precious.

By saying that life is mostly "a gray matter," I don't mean a cynical

dismissal of life as colorless and boring, but rather a description of the more-or-less neutral, undramatic, comfortable rhythm of the regular, humdrum, neither-up-nor-down procession of ordinary days — work and play. There is a quiet happiness, a contentment, in that gray which more often shines in memory than in the momentary present, but sometimes I pause and appreciate its steady warmth and light — the hearth.

Blue represents the sad days, the bad days, the nights when sleep won't come. And black is when you are weighed down by the worst of life, real or imagined — impending doom, the feeling of being cursed, wretched, and utterly miserable. When you were truly "in the black," that succession of gray days seemed like a bright, happy place to be.

Yellow, though, were the brief flashes of existential joy, comets of exultation, the lightning bolts of pure excitement that seem to sizzle through your nerves and veins like electricity. Yellow was the supernova of ecstasy, the sensation that perhaps embodied a rarely used word like "glee."

ON LIFE...

A couple of weeks later, the guitarist from Music, Tony, asked me if I wanted to join him and an electric-piano player playing "soft jazz" in a London businessmen's club. The extra money would be welcome, and I said I would give it a try. We set up in a corner, me with a couple of drums and a pair of brushes, and plinked out soft standards amid a crowd of portly, stuffy, loudly-drinking "managing directors," all wearing what a friend of mine called "twelve-piece suits."

It was unbearable — I felt cheap and humiliated, squirming at having to play mindless music for heedless boors, and after two sets, I apologized to the other guys, packed up my drums, and left. It was the only job I ever walked out on, and I'm not proud of it, but I just couldn't stand it.

That was the course I would follow, refusing to compromise music for anything, and it could be said that, in a way, I devoted myself to *musical* integrity at the expense of *personal* integrity, in an ideal sense of doing what I wanted. For other young musicians I grew up with, the principle was reversed; the point of honor for them was to make their living as a *musician*, no matter what they had to play, and they would more-or-less happily work in polka bands, or country groups — whatever they had to do. Nearly all of those musicians I grew up with moved into other, more practical professions, but some of them continued to pursue their own ideal of musical pragmatism, playing wherever and whatever they could, and I have to respect that.

MUSICAL
INTEGRITY

So often it has been a single player who brought an unfamiliar style of music alive for me. A blistering guitarist in a gypsy quartet playing a Paris bistro, a bass player in a Caribbean reggae band, a dashing violinist in St. Mark's Square in Venice, or a West African playing a piece of brass with his fingers and a stick; even that subtle, expressive flow of rhythm behind the village choir was undeniably the voice of an artist. These gifted and totally committed musicians were able to pour their whole lives into their music, and because of that complete existential passion that went *into* the performance, so much life and passion radiated *out* of it.

Among all the mariachi musicians in Oaxaca's zócalo, there was one who shone that way for me, a singer and guitarist with a fire in his performance that was unmistakably deep and sincere. In his silver-buttoned brown suit and sombrero, his features were knotted with intensity and naked vulnerability, his eyes closed as he sang, and his talent was equal to the challenge of expressing that intensity and vulnerability through his singing and playing. His wide brown face was completely rapt in his singing, while his fingers sped over the fretboard and his strumming hand flew, igniting and elevating the music from sidewalk entertainment to compelling art.

He was one of the rare ones, the precious ones; indeed, perhaps the *only* ones who can communicate an unfamiliar style to the listener. History has shown that it is difficult for such a burning spirit to balance the rest of life on that level of intensity and vulnerability, not only for musicians but for all kinds of artists, but what a gift it is to the *art*.

In music, any competent player can evoke the listener's response to a familiar piece. Even the bare notes of the melody carry a resonance of association, and the song itself has already been communicated, and rests somewhere in memory. Any half-decent combo can crank out jazz standards or rock covers and please an audience. Even if the performances are

shallow or inept, melody sparks memory and some warmth is felt.

This would be true of familiar *styles* as well, for even a banal composition in a given style can serve to evoke a pattern, a dance, that is already intuitive, and can spark feelings the listener has already experienced. There is an African saying that "wood that has burned once is easier to set alight." Popular music is full of hackers and panderers who know how to rekindle an automatic response, who know which buttons to push to *simulate* emotion or excitement, but only a real master can spark a *new* response. That passionate, talented, and skilled mariachi master in the streets of Oaxaca had lit the fire of his music inside me.

Great story
about the
ability to
create a
"response"
with music.

Especially after playing many of the songs on tour, they became familiar in every detail, worn into grooves in the brain by sheer repetition. There were also recordings of the live shows to listen to along the way, to review my performance, examine the technical aspects of execution and time control. But all of that was entirely different from the experience of simply *listening*, of trying to step back and experience the music as just one more music lover.

What would I think of this if it wasn't me? That was always the question I tried to answer, though it was difficult, perhaps impossible, to really see it that clearly.

If a piece of work was an honest expression of its maker, it was also a milestone of his progress, and a benchmark to build upon in the future. As much as the notion of "progressive" music has been mocked, used to denigrate a particular style of experimental, ambitious arranging and musicianship, it was really the only possible kind of honest music.

Wow...

- During a wakeful period last night I remember thinking about generalities, and how people dislike them because they always feel themselves to be the exception, whether they are gender generalities, or racial ones, or whatever. So, to counter that we can use "all generalities are false, including this one," and also "if you accept my generality, I'll accept your exception from it."

Funny...

Perhaps it was because Keith Moon and Dennis Wilson had embodied a quality I recognized a small part of in myself, a dark side, a secret fascination with the "anti-hero," in friendships, in life, and in art. I considered the most important gift a person could receive genetically to be strength of will, and apart from any talent or sensitivity to words and music, that was certainly the quality to which I attributed much of my own success (or at least *survival*). I was grateful for other genetic gifts, once reflecting that I had inherited "my father's sense and my mother's sensibility," but none of that was any good without will — and it was surely the *lack* of that will that had been the fatal flaw that brought down others before me, like Keith Moon and Dennis Wilson. [As someone wise once said, "There are no failures of talent, only failures of character."]

WILLPOWER

TRAVELING MUSIC

(Just because Eric)

Clapton was supposed to be great, it didn't mean I had to like his music.

Along the way, a musician also learns all the *tricks*, the clichés, the "hooks," that can be a shortcut to pleasing an audience. Certain chord changes trigger feelings, certain tempos encourage dancing (disco was carefully measured in bpm's, beats-per-minute), and certain word combinations (hopeless love, broken heart, cruel world) touch the audience's *own* emotions in ways that are *already familiar*.

By learning how these effects were created, or imitated, and seeing all the ways such tricks were used, after many years a musician learned to have a built-in sense of what was real and what was fake — when the music came from the calculating brain and not the desperate heart.

In Nick Hornby's *Songbook*, he wrote about his own feelings for that quality of sincerity, and what he too wished other listeners would value the way he did:

"I don't care who you listen to, or how good they are," you want to say to kids who are about to embark on a lifetime of listening. "Just make sure that whoever it is *means* it, that they're burning up in their desperation to communicate whatever it is they want to say."

In later years, I would come to love reggae music (from a chance hearing of Bob Marley's "Natural Mystic" in a limo drive home from Toronto airport), and traditional African music, but it didn't mean I thought it was all especially *great*, in terms of artistic achievement, or that other people should like it, too. Similarly, I eventually got over the semi-guilty feeling that classical music and jazz were *intended* to be higher forms of music, and therefore music I should aspire to learn to appreciate. With a few notable exceptions, I just didn't enjoy listening to that music very much.

Did musical integrity have to be an either/or proposition? Perhaps not; sometimes I can hear where an artist has put together a collection of sincere, personal songs, without compromise to commercial considerations, then very obviously added at least one formulaic "single" — a shallow,

repetitive candidate for mass appeal and radio play — what the business people called the "money track." Maybe it was just my imagination that even that artist's genuine music seemed a little tainted by that calculation.

Realistically, maybe it was just good business for an artist to think about such practicalities, but it corrupted the entire fabric of the *intention*. Again, I come back to that same "note," which, like one voice in a harmony, seems to color everything around it. The keystone of any artistic construction is contained in that simple question, what is the *intention*?

Perhaps the most important lesson I carried with me after a year's immersion in yoga in 2000 was that concept of "intention." A yoga class often began with a few minutes of peaceful "centering," sitting cross-legged while the instructor spoke calming words, or a Hindu chant. Sometimes the more philosophical instructors evoked yoga's meaning of "union," of body and energy, mind and spirit, and on a few occasions, a particularly eloquent teacher would elevate those concepts into philosophy.

"Make it your intention to enjoy your practice." It meant more than semantics that a yoga class was not a "workout," or a "session," but a *practice*, but the key word for me was *intention*. Not "goal," or "ambition," but intention. Still focused and directed, but gentle — forgiving and understanding. Not the harsh demand of "I *will* do it," but "I *intend* to do it."

I *intend* to do better work today; I *intend* to be a better man.

The yoga instructor might say, "Let your intention be to push yourself gently, to exert yourself with care."

These are good words, and a good philosophy.

And it was by that soft criterion of "intention" that I tried to judge the music I heard, and if there was no genuine commitment there, *if they didn't mean a word they sang*, then there was not much intention, and I could only get out of it what the artist put into it.

Of course there were exceptions, brilliant ones, like Hank Williams, Patsy Cline, Willie Nelson, and many others. In their very different ways, each of those artists took the American folk music that country music was *intended* to be, and gave it a voice that was full of emotion instead of sentiment, images instead of clichés, and soul instead of style.