



## Styles – Regional, National and Personal by Laurie Riley

**Personal Style.** Whether you're aware of it or not, you have a personal style of playing (in addition to the genre of music you play). Your personal style is not necessarily something you develop on purpose, and though many musicians do make conscious decisions in that realm, your life experiences in general seep into your playing and/or singing, and make your way of expressing your music unique. Nearly every aspect of your personality is at play (pun intended). There are usually both negative and positive affects, and working on eliminating the negative ones and nurturing the positive ones makes us better musicians.

An obvious example of subconsciously derived personal playing style is that someone who has a gentle personality often plays delicately, and someone with a strident, loud personality often plays loudly and stridently. But many musical mannerisms are far more subtle.

Musical mannerisms are what grab your listeners and either endear you to them or not. And the listener often can't put a finger on what makes them like or dislike a performance, aside from obvious basic skills. Your subconsciously derived musical mannerisms also give your audience a window into who you are; because you cannot help but express your innermost being through your music, music is one of the most personally exposing activities we can engage in, and when we have an audience we are sharing our souls with strangers!

The only exception I can think of is with classically trained orchestral musicians, who must learn to blend into the orchestra and therefore must have no individual musical mannerisms that would cause them to stand out and be a distraction. But that doesn't mean they can't choose otherwise if they play solo, as we can readily see among famous classical soloists.

I once watched the great Segovia coaching a master student in the playing of a certain piece of classical guitar repertoire, dictating every nuance of the piece, not allowing the student to do anything his own way. Yet I guarantee that as a soloist the student went on to perform the piece his own way to an audible degree.

Personal style differences are easiest to discern when the musician is very good. Less experienced musicians' personal styles are often not fully developed or are lost among various skill issues. But then, even "issues" can identify certain musicians. When I was younger I was often told my singing voice sounded like

Judy Collins. I was embarrassed, because I knew she would have been insulted (I used to have a good, well-trained voice but I was no Judy Collins!). After listening closely to see what people were actually hearing, I realized that what she and I had in common were some very similar imperfections. Her mastery outweighed those imperfections, but mine did not. It was interesting that people identified our two rather different voices as “similar” by the imperfections we shared rather than noticing the quality disparity! Over time I took notice of how certain musicians, especially singers, seem to copy other musicians, purposefully or subconsciously, and how often what they copy are the imperfections rather than the good qualities. As a voice teacher it’s often hard to convince a student that the emulated affectation isn’t helping them achieve mastery.

So... as musicians we’re influenced by our own inner quirks and by what we’ve heard others do, and the results may be positive or negative, and we may be totally unaware. If you’re unsure about what you might be doing, video yourself and get an honest critique from someone you can trust to tell you the truth. Then work on what needs improving and nurture what’s positive.

## **Genres and Their Regional Styles**

In a previous post I wrote about musical genres, so I won’t reiterate that. There are so many styles of acoustic music that it would take a very thick book to discuss them all in detail. I want to write here about being aware of style differentiation.

Suffice it to say that when we start to learn an instrument, we choose a musical genre in which to concentrate. Any genre can be further divided by regional and national style. For example, in each region of Ireland there is a different fiddling style. One can tell where a fiddler is from just by hearing him or her play. This is true on many countries and regions.

The main reason regional styles develop is the same reason regional accents and speech idioms do. Before there was efficient transportation, regions were separated by geologic features such as mountains or oceans or great distance, and music styles evolved in semi-isolation. In the Appalachian area of the southeastern U.S., someone from the next valley over was called a “furriner” (foreigner)! To this day one can often pick out differences in fiddle and banjo styles from one area of the Appalachia to another.

Bluegrass music is an offshoot of Old Time music that came about because of the difference between those who call themselves “Hillbillies” (yes, they really do, and proudly) and those who live in lowland areas. Old Time music was traditionally played mostly by mountain people, and Bluegrass was originally played mostly by flatlanders. Further, both Old Time and Bluegrass music are products of the mixing of two very different cultures: Celtic and African - the people who settled there. (Various styles of music are often intimately intertwined with the development of the instruments themselves. The banjo’s

ancestor originated in Africa. It is now used for playing mostly American tunes that can be traced to Ireland and Scotland.)

In the modern, cosmopolitan world we have more of a melting-pot than we used to, so regional differences have faded a bit for many things such as fashion, speech, manners, morals, and music. But some influences are still strong and regional music styles continue to morph and grow everywhere.

### **Personal Styles that Become Iconic**

Styles, both regional and national, are sometimes influenced by certain respected individuals. To name just a very few, Kim Robertson has highly influenced harping style on an international scale, Ken Perlman has had a specific influence on clawhammer banjo, Doc Watson influenced guitar playing, and so on. Nearly every very well known musician influences the styles that become popular on their instrument. Also, many who are not well known but who are locally respected can inspire others locally, from whence it spreads to other regions, going far beyond where anyone knows the person who originally provided the influence.

### **Modern Influences on Traditional Genres**

Modern influences have very much found their way into what used to be traditional music. That's part of the Folk Process, a process by which aural-tradition music changes as it passes from person to person and generation to generation. Some nuances cannot be traced.

These days I see a disturbing trend happening in folk and traditional music, as many students are taught all their music from the printed page, and more and more groups play only from sheet music. It's rather generic and devoid of stylistic nuance. Traditional music was, through countless generations, learned aurally, with all its rich nuances. What have we lost? Why has this changed? Because in our modern society, music is no longer the background of our lives. Sure, we hear it in commercials and we hear highly engineered pop and rock on TV and radio, but most of us don't grow up with our parents and siblings and friends playing music every day in our homes, most of us don't have music gatherings in our homes on a regular basis, and Americans don't spend our evenings at family-oriented pubs where music is played by people we know, all evening, every evening. We've lost our music anchor, and are adrift in a roaring sea of commercial music from which we cannot learn our part. So we've become dependent on the printed page, which provides symbols that tell us the notes and the timing, but which is not the music itself, and definitely not the soul of the music.

If you really want to learn the music you've chosen, go to sessions and listen in person to players of a variety of the instruments that are used in that genre. You can't get the whole picture just by listening to the kind of instrument you play. Go

to as many performances as you can. Take as many workshops as you can. Seek mentoring. Learn from people, not just paper.

*[Laurie Riley](#)* - Reprinted with permission from [Laurie Riley's Music Blog](#)

The August/September issue of NW HOOT will feature Part 2 of Styles: Making Your Music Your Own, Within the Style You Play