



## WHY PLAY MUSIC, ANYWAY?

by Laurie Riley

Ask any number of musicians why they play music, and you'll get a different answer from each one, ranging from, "My parents made me," to "I can't NOT play music – it's my passion!" Assuming we want to play, what is it that drives us to pursue music? The answers are as diverse as are the people.

Have you ever experienced goose bumps while listening to music? If so, explaining passion to you isn't necessary. Chances are it has driven you to play. If you get goose bumps while you're playing, so much the better!

From early childhood I always knew I'd be a professional musician. Passion propelled my desire to play well, and practicing was what I wanted to spend my time doing. I probably drove my parents nuts. Why did I love music so much? Because I felt its emotions. Because it spoke more deeply to me than verbal language. Because playing music was how I was able to communicate, and I found that people would listen to my music who wouldn't otherwise have noticed me at all. It helped me connect with the world.

In a way, music was my therapy. Many years later I would see in a Bill Moyers series, *Healing and the Mind*, that research had shown that the appropriate expression of all emotions (not just "good" ones) enhances the immune system. (The specific reasons for this are now taught in detail in most therapeutic music training programs.) Notice I said the expression of – not just the feeling of – emotions. Music expresses feelings as keenly as do laughter, crying, whooping it up, or screaming. When you really listen to music you can hear all those things in various pieces. It is an appropriate way to express emotions of all kinds.

But do you also put those emotions into your own playing? Many musicians are stuck in getting all the notes right above all else, forsaking music's real purpose. It's a worthy goal to get all the notes right; after all, that's one thing practice is for, and since accuracy is what makes a piece musically coherent, it should not be ignored. But it's not the end purpose of playing.

Can you remember why you started to play music? Surely you didn't say to yourself, "I want to play music so I can get all the notes right." Chances are you began to play because you heard some music that gave you goose bumps. If so, that wasn't so much because all the notes were right, but because you felt the deeper meaning that was inherent either in the composition or in the expressive playing of the musician, or both. If you play expressively, you enjoy your own

music far more than if you're only trying to get it right.

I find it sad that there are musicians who use music as a merely Intellectual exercise, as though they don't hear the beauty at all. Perhaps they really can't. Perhaps intellectualizing is their passion, and if so, perhaps for that reason they do get as much pleasure out of playing music as any other passionate musician. That said, regarding listening, the most intellectual individual I know feels and responds to music with every cell of his body.

This discussion naturally leads into the subject of music as therapy. People tend to use music therapeutically even when they don't realize that's what they're doing. We get in the car after a day of work and turn on the music because it's relaxing or energizing, depending on the genre, and because it can either match or change our mood. We use music as the soundtrack of our lives.

Aside from the purposely or subconsciously applied therapeutic uses of music, hearing music is like going to a play or a movie. Have you noticed that plays and movies are boring if they have no tension, no negative aspects in the story that must be overcome? That's because we humans thrive on drama. We create it in our own lives partly because it amuses us, just like movies do. Movies simply reiterate or fantasize life; otherwise, we'd have no interest in movies! It's the same with music. We sing those sad songs, happy songs, angry songs, celebratory songs because they entertain us by reiterating certain aspects of life. They make us feel our emotions. The brain's emotion-producing functions can't tell the difference between an emotion felt while being entertained and one felt due to a real life circumstance. Therefore, playing music is like being an actor. We're creating drama in music for others to feel. If we don't allow ourselves to play expressively, there's little to be felt.

For those who love session playing and jamming, music is also a form of sharing with friends in a way that produces a certain kind of elation. A musical conversation takes place that can elevate the goose-bump factor to new heights.

On the other side of the coin, and equally compelling, is the ego aspect of music-playing, which isn't so much sharing it as showing off. It's my guess that this is a struggle for almost every musician. When we've worked so hard at our skills, how tempting is it to show them off? After all, why work on them if not to make them heard? So in a way, maybe showing off isn't so bad.

I would say that developing skill is about one's own enjoyment. If I didn't use my best skills in a performance, I wouldn't feel satisfied. I like to challenge myself. But I will not try to use any skills I don't truly yet have one hundred percent! That doesn't mean I play perfectly all the time. It means I play what comfortably challenges me that I know will come out well – unless my finger happens to slip, which can happen on even the most basic tunes anyway. So I play to share, in the hope that it will cause goose bumps, laughter, tears, outrage, and celebration, and that maybe someone in my audience will be inspired to play.

However we use music, it's good for the brain. All you have to do is google "music and the brain" or some version of that, and you'll come up with more information than you have imagined on how music listening and music playing affect and enhance our neurologic systems, how it makes us smarter, how it can stave off dementia, how we absorb information better when music is being played, and so on.

So, getting back to the original question – why do we play music anyway – there are many reasons. Because it's beautiful, because it's our passion, because it's a way to communicate, because it gets us in touch with our emotions, because it gives us a way to challenge ourselves, because it connects us with others, because it's therapeutic, and because it makes us smarter. (Have I missed something? Probably.) Whatever your reason, go for it! You'll contribute to a happier world.

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