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# MUSIC AS A SPIRIT OF COMMUNITY

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## **Music as a Spirit of Community**

*Live Performance Informing and Transforming Dynamic Pedagogical Experiences*

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This paper explores a Spirit of Community between live music performance and dynamic pedagogical experiences. The ability to be a strong stage performer and the vigor required of a highly motivated instructor rely on fundamental characteristics that can be learned and practiced in a host of arenas. One such trait is virtuosity in the realm of group dynamics, where the leaders are few and the participants are many. This is likened unto there being one teacher in a classroom with many students; and one or a small number of musicians on stage, and up to several hundred people in the audience.

Another characteristic that embodies the relationship between live performance and teaching is a knowledge and expertise of the tools and equipment necessary to ensure transformative experiences. For the musician, this includes a level of mastery of the chosen instruments, so that the music can become a conduit for a deeper connection between Inspiration and audience. For the instructor, a sound pedagogical methodology may be considered the necessary prerequisite. In my experience with students, however, the ability to engage in direct, open, and compelling ways far surpasses what students may expect in educator prowess.

A third attribute common to performance and teaching is the ability to learn and grow from self-critique and group feedback. In live music, the feedback is from the audience, and is usually an immediate interchange of energy. This offers the musician opportunities to alter and enhance the performance while the concert is taking place. Most classes at the college level offer the student the chance to evaluate the course. This feedback and critique proves invaluable in the re-design and restructuring of course content and instructor delivery methods. The ability to expand and adapt from community input without a breach of focus is a sustainable skill in both the arts of teaching and live music performance.

Using key live performance events from this Author's portfolio as metaphorical guides, correlations can be made between the group dynamics of class/instructor and performer/audience. This presentation will showcase audio and video clips to support ideas presented herein, and features never-before-seen footage of an archival multi-media installation concert.

### **Three Tenets of an Early Musical Affinity**

#### **1) Music should be FUN**

I began taking piano lessons when I was six years old. One of the first things I remember my Mother asking each piano instructor not demand from me a formalized practice schedule. Her reasoning was to make sure that music always remained something that came natural, and was not a forced occupational ultimatum. This laid the groundwork for applying music and live performance as a means of communicating ideas, and gathering a spirit of community.

The idea of sharing music first, as opposed to regarding music as a driver of financial gain, is essentially the same altruistic endeavor that teaching relies upon. The instructor's passion to share and facilitate knowledge and experience with eager minds far outweighs the profit margin for doing so. In order for these experiences to be maximally transformative, a robust environment of mutually enlightening endeavors must be created. At the core of learning and sharing is the idea that exercising our brains is fun because we are essentially learning creatures.

Twice a year, K-12th grade, the public schools that I attended would put on the Talent Show. Twice a year I would perform, taking the stage to an entire audience deriding me with rounds of 'boo's' and 'hisses' and waves of negative energy. It became evident very early on, that in order to persevere and overcome, the way to turn the audience around was to perform flawlessly and thunderously. This has become the primary goal for every performance, and works to turn an audience's attitude around from that of derision to that of acceptance. This kind of approach to the classroom experience can reinforce and potentially transform the positive aspects of the learning outcomes for students.

## 2) Music should be SHARED

One of the earliest memories I have of music transforming the positive aspects of learning outcomes is from elementary school music class. (This anecdote also sheds a mild degree of light on the kind of circumstances in which I grew up.) Our elementary school music teacher, Mrs. Thompson was an elderly, white-haired lady who knew a lot about music, and she was a passionate teacher because she loved music. I was enthralled and eager to learn from the first day of class. Unfortunately, the rest of the kids in the class must not have seen the relevancy of an education in the fine arts, because groups of them would get into fights every day during class.

The only way Mrs. Thompson could get the classes' attention was to bang out her rock and roll rendition of 'Bad Bad Leroy Brown' on the piano. She was playing the Jim Croce song Jerry Lee Lewis style, pounding away and singing at the top of her lungs. She would stomp on the keys with her feet like the Killer did, if the kids started their tussling during her revue. She even made a deal with the students that if they would not fight during music class, and at least pretend to pay attention and try to learn something, she would play Leroy Brown every day during the last five minutes of class. It got the other students to calm down, but I was totally entranced by the story of the Chicago pimp with switchblades and Cadillac cars, gambling and nightlife. I was even more impressed with Mrs. Thompson's ingenuity as an instructor, as well as her chops on the ivories. To this day, when I perform that song it goes out to Mrs. Thompson, and to audacious, effective teachers everywhere.

These early experiences witnessing the transformative nature of music has provided inspiration to draw upon and inform my endeavors as an instructor. At the root of what live music and classroom instruction strives for is new and different ways to help educate and enlighten. The natural extension of learning music and instruments is the live performance, where music is shared in its most venerated fashion. The evolution of the group dynamic experience has evolved hand-in-hand with the technology required to reach larger and larger audiences. Inherent to this purpose is the necessity to record, preserve and to broadcast.

### 3) Music should be PRESERVED

When the first Star Wars film came out in 1977, I was an eleven-year-old kid sitting in the front of the movie theatre, about to have his entire life transformed at light speed. For some innate reason, I knew that the star destroyer going over our heads *forever* was a big plastic model with lights inside it. I knew that light sabers and death stars did not exist. I also knew that sound did not exist in the vacuum of space. But that didn't matter for the two hours that we were catapulted to a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away.

For some innate reason, I knew that what bridged my believability in the Star Wars world was the SOUND! The work that Ben Burtt had done to create those incredible, original sounds is matched only by the passion and skill with which Richard Portman mixed those sounds in the final sound mix. This cinema experience began an intense passion for studying recorded sound and recorded music, which inevitably led to me apprenticing with Richard Portman in graduate school.

During the earliest experiments with recorded music and sound, I would simply start recording with a portable cassette player, either experiments with sound effects, or whenever practicing the guitar or piano. The playback was rudimentary sound quality at best, but I learned about microphone proximity to sound source when attempting to adequately capture and represent the sound of an instrument, or a sound effect. One important thing that struck me as a highly sustainable result of recording and playback is what I call *The Art of Practicing Without Practicing*.

This basically means that, while listening to the playback and envisioning where my hands are on the instrument, I could rehearse while listening. Invariably, after listening to the recording several times, the subsequent practice sessions would show improvement based on the actual physical practice and the intangible cognitive rehearsals. I have found this to be a transferable skill into the art of teaching, as I am constantly revising and updating tried and true class discussions by studying the outcomes of previous semesters.

In teaching Sound for Cinema, all of our students' work is recorded and affixed on readily available playback sources. In the cases of student work that most closely resembles professional practice, I usually share the work with subsequent sections of the same class. It is an effective pedagogical facilitation when students can learn from each other.

The three tenets of music being fun, shared and preserved have been ingrained in my learning and skills training, and has mirrored and transformed my understanding of scholarly endeavors. I believe that learning should be fun, shared and preserved. The classroom experience should be a challenging, regenerative and sustainable environment for both the students and the instructor. Mastering the arts of live performance and teaching requires equal attention to the study of group dynamics, skills training and expertise, effective collaboration, and critical assessment of compromises and accomplishments.

### **Three Examples of Music as a Spirit of Community**

#### **1) OVER QUALIFIED for EARTH (OQFE) ©1989, 2012**

*(Includes the screening of a 2-minute video of never-before-seen footage from the event.)*

*Over Qualified For Earth* - A multi-media live performance installation concert and theatrical event during a Buckminster Fuller Exhibit at the Nautilus Foundation in Lloyd, Florida. This installation included a hand-built set, back-projected with slide images and customized lighting. One of the performance highlights was the backlit silhouetted acting and visual effects. The entire concert was orchestrated live by a handful of artists who were playing back sound effects in synchronization with live slide projectors and lighting cues. I was performing, singing and giving stage directions for each part of the show, all at the same time.

The show ran for two consecutive sold-out weekends with three performances each day. The video to be screened shows the exhibit, the installation and some of the performance, and is backed by outtakes from my first original studio recordings for the album 'Catharsis.' All total, several hundred people saw the performance.

The overall theme, or message was that of military industrial technology versus environment and conservation, and was presented in two parts - the 'industry' segment, and the 'nature' segment. This installation performance was the culmination of some evolutionary ideas I was working on that was a study of how content and delivery can juxtapose and interweave to reach the widest demographic.

I found that content becomes judged when delivery is circumspect, and that delivery becomes a vital and variant conduit for content that is initially met with skepticism. These same discoveries can be applied across the arts of live performance and teaching. Students are hungry for class discussion to have levity and to challenge their comfort zones, but they also feel the need to be treated with the uniqueness of a new generation. At the same time, students sometimes have built-in safeguards to protect themselves from unfamiliar scholastic territory.

This is vaguely reminiscent of the old adage about 'testing the water before you dive in.' Invariably, once a student attempts new skills and overcomes the inevitable setbacks associated with learning curves, they are usually more inquisitive. This is especially the case when the student initiates much of the study of the unfamiliar subjects or skills. This too, is vaguely reminiscent of the old adage about 'doing something with a greater investment of interest if people think it's their own idea to try that something in the first place.'

The ability to successfully guide the cast and crew through each performance of *Over Qualified For Earth* was a fairly monumental task. It involved a great deal of collaboration and rehearsal, fine-tuned timing and synchronization of live, in-the-moment events, and particular attention to the response and reaction of those in the audience. These skills are immediately transferable into the art of teaching, for the same reason that makes group dynamics and knowledge of tools and techniques of critical interest to the curriculums we present to students. These are the foundational building blocks of dynamic pedagogical experiences.

## 2) MONTICELLO OPERA HOUSE CONCERT ©1998, 2012

*(Includes audio segments from recordings made of the concert.)*

The Monticello Opera House in Monticello, Florida was built in 1907 to advance the cultural significance of opera... and wrestling. Such were the original shows this venue boasted in its heyday. During elementary school and middle school, I would sneak off campus and visit the dilapidated Opera House on Courthouse Square. It was the most cultural place in that small town. Fast-forward some twenty years later, and the venue is restored and is a cultural haven for Monticello.

As fate would have it, I spent a few years working as the Stage Manager from a Grant the Opera House had received. During that time, I was specializing in stage lighting and live sound mixing, as well as performing as a musician. In the spring before entering graduate school, I was finally able to perform a three-hour concert at the Monticello Opera House, with a five-piece band. I also had the foresight to record the show.

Since it had been a life-long dream to perform at that venue, I produced a multi-band benefit show with catered food, beverage, two opening bands, and then performed as the headliner. All in all, there was about five months of planning and preparation that went into this gig. It taught me a great deal about envisioning and producing this kind of event, which is not an easy task. Greater than the sum of the individual elements, was the overall sense of community this concert generated from everyone involved. There was also a high degree of recognition going to the Opera House itself as a culturally significant bastion of creativity and live performance.

Many of the skills learned in this endeavor are transferable to the art of designing courses from scratch. The requisite combination of materials include course length, course content, projects designed to instruct and support specific learning outcomes, and the tools and materials available to reach a professional level of proficiency. In many scholastic institutions, I have been instrumental in re-designing and maximizing the physical classroom and work studio space with resources to best fit the evolution of the course. This has also been a highly collaborative process.

The ability to embark upon, and successfully complete a multi-faceted undertaking like the Opera House concert, and being responsible for the multitude of professional positions to accomplish this, bears a striking resemblance to the skills training it requires for a student of cinema to function as a thoroughly trained cinema artist. Though not always required in the industry, it behooves today's film and cinema sound students to be multi-talented across a broad spectrum of disciplines.

### 3) RED CROSS WORLD TRADE CENTER BENEFIT CONCERT

for SEPTEMBER 11 VICTIMS ©2001, 2012

*(Includes audio segments from recordings made of the concert.)*

Many lives were touched on September 11, 2001, mine included. After several weeks of watching the Red Cross entreat the Nation to come to the aid of those affected by the events of 9/11, I decided that something must be done at the grassroots level. After years of working and performing live throughout the North Florida area, I knew quite a few musicians, several live sound professionals, numerous key journalists and several venue owners. It took hours of persistent contact, but I was able to get nine of Tallahassee's best bands to commit to the all-day, 13-hour Red Cross fund-raising event. I was also able to collaborate with the Florida State University School of Communications and received two truckloads of sound gear and two of their finest live sound engineers. The local American Legion Hall donated their venue, and the local press coverage included radio, newspapers, television, and grassroots advertising.

Several hundred people within the Tallahassee community participated in the event. We were able to raise approximately \$2,000 for the Red Cross efforts at Ground Zero in New York, and as with the Opera House Concert, this entire benefit was archived on digital recordings. This was an event for which all input was donated, all proceeds were for charity, and the greater community was served through the spirit and healing power of music. It would be easy to underestimate the influence this kind of planning and execution of vision, goal, purpose and intent has on my ability to be a better instructor with various groups of students.

The primary difference between the skill sets required of being a dynamic live performer and a dynamic classroom instructor are those that have mainly to do with the formalization and execution of learning outcomes. When audiences respond with indifference to live performance, the long-term ramifications are minimal, except in rare occasions (the travesty of Altamont notwithstanding...). There is a greater onus on the classroom experience because of the necessity to have quantifiable growth patterns for a student's new skills training and budding expertise. One way to delineate this into more manageable units of development is the tiered aspect of learning, where the student learns, then practices; learns more than practices both; learns more than incorporates all three skill sets into larger bodies of work, etc. et al.

The rewards of making dynamic connections with groups of people are much the same when comparing the arts of live performance and teaching. Many times during class discussions, I attempt various ways of explaining and exploring various concepts and skills with the student. Many times the student seems impenetrable in their inability to understand. Invariably, the more different approaches I take to examining the same basic concepts, and the more ways I learn to share these with the student and spark their interest, the more I learn about myself and the ability to reach others. This is very similar to performing familiar music in diverse ways.

The same holds true in the fine art of self reflection and critique when it comes to objectively judging whether my live musical performances are sustained at the kind of professional levels for which I strive. I may never embody the fortitude of Mrs. Thompson, my elementary school music teacher. I may not again get the opportunity to create and participate in such a profound sense of community and charity as with the Opera House Concert or the Red Cross Benefit. But as an instructor and teacher, I have the opportunity everyday to create transformative, invigorating environments for positive growth and change. As a teacher, and a practicing live musician, I am blessed with the ability to assess and synthesize group dynamic through example-based leadership. These careers also require an effective balance of cross-platform skills-based learning, and quality transmission of content, with self-assessment that is barrier-free, and driven by a spirit of community.

## SUMMATION

In terms of the group dynamics of classroom instruction, I remain a firm believer that the skills, tenacity, community participation and flawless delivery methods that I strive for in the live music performance arena will continue to inform and transform my teaching ability. Whenever career endeavors are reliant on tools and equipment to manifest relevant visions into finished product, it is incumbent on the mind to stay nimble, alert, and most of all open to all possibilities. The fine-tuned art of self-critique without judgment will always be a fortuitous and transferable skill.

The most recent example of music as a spirit of community came during my first visit to Hawaii, during the 2012 Hawaii University Educational Conference. Being a life-long musician, and also being passionate to experience Hawaii all my life, I felt very strongly that I should have the ability to bring my music with me to the Conference. For this reason I purchased a professional, travel-sized guitar to bring on my trip. On the flight over, I read where King Kamehameha would climb to the top of Diamond Head crater and make human sacrifice offerings to the god of war during his efforts to unite Hawaii under one rule.

When I came to Hawaii for my first visit, I carried my new guitar up to the top of Diamond Head crater and made a musical offering to the god of peace. During the walk back down to Honolulu, I was embraced with the most profound sense of inner calm that I have ever felt. This was truly a transformative event in my life.



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