



BY PETER MURRAY

## GREY AREAS ARE THE MOST COLOURFUL

Over the years, I've noticed a division between what could be seen as two opposing factions in the musician population. On one side are those who staunchly believe in formal training, practice a lot, defend sight reading and hold strong opinions on gear. The second camp consists of musicians who play mostly by feel, hide their inadequacies behind 'style', feel threatened by theory and don't know what gauge strings they use.

Of course, this dichotomy is an exaggeration and there is overlap. But often, issues in music are reduced to simplistic and extreme arguments between these camps. For example: should you go to a music school and learn all of Western music theory, or cut your teeth in a local grunge band? Should you learn to read everything including Zappa charts, or preserve your soul by remaining illiterate? Should you research all the amps and instruments on the market until you've discovered the ultimate set-up, or should you put your faith in the feel and sound in your fingers?

These questions can never be answered with black or white answers. Music is an art and the arts are distinguished and blessed by their tolerance for — indeed insistence on — grey area. Into that area we throw the magical element of the creative individual; and we are more varied and complex than snowflakes could ever aspire to be. The potential results are perpetually staggering. That's, in large part, the beauty of music.

However, some see music as a physical challenge, or an academic study, or a competition. Indeed, it can be all of these things. But those who lose their grasp of the artistic dimension forsake a lot of joy. Studies and competitions should exist to support the aim of making good art; not merely to get through a gig. So yes, school can be very helpful, but it can also have negative effects if it turns music into nothing more than a job or an academic exercise. Anybody who gets into music to get a job has made a bad career move, I can tell you. As a job, it's low-paying, unstable, unpredictable, bad hours, no benefits, and far less chicks than advertised. As an artistic passion, it offers more than any job ever could, but only if you tap into your creative potential.

At the same time, players should not feel threatened by learning. Knowledge is power. Studying, either formally or informally, expands your options and ultimately allows you to be unrestrained in the expression of your creative impulses.

I think musicians as a whole would be a happier and better-fulfilled lot if we cultivated the area between these two extremes. Music study freaks should invest in some right brain development and spend as much time as possible creating their own music; feel players should go out and get some lessons or

work through a book. You don't have to sign up for a three-year program — learning can be taken in very small doses and is effective at any and every level; and it will not diminish your feel.

Next to interest (which we should probably more appropriately refer to as love), the biggest asset you can have as a musician is curiosity. You have to have a sense of wonder about music and sound and creative ideas in general. If you do, you will probably train yourself very well to be yourself. You'll explore the things that are of interest to you, and that should include experimenting, talking to others, reading books and taking lessons from others who have more of a certain background than you. If you want to explore jazz, for example, study it with someone who knows it well. The journey may also include playing other instruments, singing, painting, dancing, cooking or skydiving; because developing yourself as an artistic individual transcends theory, technique and the instruments themselves. Ultimately, what makes musicians great is not their technique, but their ideas. Having a great voice is not too useful if you don't have anything to say.

If you don't have a voice, however, it doesn't really matter what you have to say, because no one will hear it. This brings us back into the grey area. As a musician, you have to develop both a store of "things" to say and a strong voice with which to say it. Technique has to be studied and ingrained, to the point where you can essentially forget about it and let your creative ideas flow out of you without being hindered by self-consciousness.

My new book, *Essential Bass Technique* (Mel Bay Publications), is very much centred around the concept of ingraining, which I introduced in previous CM columns. It's also the result of large amounts of curiosity and exploration, which led me further into the depths of bass technique than most others have dared to tread. If it weren't practically impossible, I would have written a book on generating ideas, not how to express them, because ultimately I feel that's more valuable than technique. However, getting ideas is a very personal task — it's up to you. The most help I could offer would likely be in helping bassists convert those ideas into music through technique.

Anyone can learn the basic skills required

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in playing an instrument. Theory texts are abundant, readily available and, for the most part, understandable. If you want to develop technique and chops, you can do it. Piece of cake. I wouldn't quite call it a no-brainer, but building up chops is a physical exercise. Anyone can do it. Other musical skills, such as reading and ear training are also well-developed areas of study. Maybe the hardest task is the personal part: developing your self-confidence, encouraging ideas and nurturing your imagination. Instead of always copying your heroes, you should try to do what they did: teach yourself how to wrap your character around your experience and deliver it to the world via your imagination. Explore the world and yourself and share some of your findings with whoever cares to listen.

There's an old expression that goes: "Those who work with their hands are labourers. Those who work with their hands and heads are craftsmen. Those who work with their hands, their heads and their hearts are artists." I admit to being somewhat biased, but I submit to you that artists easily have the most fun.

Peter Murray is a bass teacher, session player and producer in Toronto who plays with surrender industry. His first instructional book, *Essential Bass Technique*, has just been published by Mel Bay Publications.

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