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How To Not Sound Like Anybody Else (More or Less)
in 3 to 5 Miserably Painful Years

By

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In the beginning, we WANT to sound like who we like. That's how we get on our feet as players; by imitating the greats, or even the near-greats or the not-so-greats. Anybody, really; we just want to sound like we know what we're doing.

Eventually though, after you've tried on your various idol's shoes for a number of years by copying their licks, looks, sound, approach, etc., you may find that you yearn to put a more personal stamp on your music. This yearning feeling can manifest in many ways, ranging from a simple nagging sensation when playing that Courtney Love lick for the six hundredth time, to full-blown nausea at the mere mention of Courtney. Depending on the intensity of your self-loathing, you may want to take steps to address these feelings of incongruity. With that in mind, I list here some thoughts on the subject:

If you feel your entire perspective of what guitar playing should sound like is being dictated by another player's style, you might want to stop listening to that person. Completely. Because there is no such thing as a "right" way to play the guitar. I went through this with Pat Metheny in 1980. No, he didn't sound like me; I sounded like him. When I realized I wasn't satisfied with that, I stopped listening to him altogether. Which raises Painful Step Number One (which is more or less the crux of this article): To some degree you're going to have to GIVE UP what you LOVE, 'cause what you LOVE ain't doin' you enough GOOD. It turns into its own kind of prison, you see, and that particular prison can, in many cases, stifle your creativity.

So let's say you've gone ahead and burned all your idol's lick tapes and you want to continue the exorcism. What's next? Painful Step Number Two: take your own playing completely apart. Analyze it like an Entomologist analyzes an Acarine. Question EVERYTHING. Start with your sound - can you change it so that it doesn't immediately put you in someone else's ballpark? Change the guitar? Change the amp? Get rid of / add chorus, distortion, delay, etc.? Assuming you're in a position to dictate your own context - ie., you have your own band - how can you change the composition, the

instrumentation, the arranging, etc. so it doesn't constantly evoke the name of another?

Take your lines / chords apart. Could they stand to be more / less be-boppy, or fusiony, or rocky, or funky ? Examine the balances between the elements of your playing. It's a reactionary process: you're looking to see what you have in common with your influences and you're giving up as much of it as you can, keeping only what you must. NOTHING IS A GIVEN. The only thing the listener needs from you is that you sound good, not that you sound like somebody else. That's hard to remember sometimes.

Okay, so now you've managed to get rid of just about everything you thought was cool and all you've got left are the notes c, e and an old wah-wah pedal. Now what? Painful Step Number Three: turn inward, look inside yourself and try to find something you can call your own. For me, it was my rhythmic imagination. But it could be anything, any small or big thing: a harmony, an emotional state, a color, a melody - anything. Once you have it clearly in your mind, then try to express it as musically as you can with that c, that e and that wah-wah pedal. Work with it. Develop it. Expand it. There's no telling where it could go.

If these measures seem extreme, you may want to temper them somewhat to fit with your own ideas and goals. One thing you can do: instead of just copping a lick from somebody that you like and trying to cram it into a solo somewhere, try to figure out WHY you liked the lick in the first place - what is it about its melodic, rhythmic or harmonic content that appeals to you - and then try to improvise with that concept in mind. That's a good way to learn from people without necessarily sounding like them; a way to disguise your influences, thereby making it easier for people to enjoy your music without constantly being reminded of something else.

It doesn't bother me to evoke "the Blues" or "Jazz" or "Rock" with my playing. These idioms have fallen into common domain now; nobody owns them, they belong to everyone. But it does bother me to hear myself playing with the voice of another specific individual. It interferes with my search for the truth, which is basically what I'm about with this stuff of music. Of course, there are other perspectives.