

Music Education: Music Comes First

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Try to imagine the very first musician. He was not playing for an audience, or a market, or working on his next recording, touring with his show, or working on his image. He was playing out of his need, out of his need for the music. Every year the number of musicians who remember why they play music in the first place grows smaller... - - - Keith Jarrett¹

Last summer I became acquainted with Bob, a music teacher from New Jersey who had recently enrolled in the Master's degree program at William Paterson University. As is customary, I sat down with him and discussed his reasons for returning to school and what specific needs he wanted to address in our weekly sessions. A familiar theme emerged: Bob's reasons for pursuing an advanced degree favored performance while his public school administrators favored pedagogy. Considering Bob will likely spend his whole life teaching, these few years honing his musical skills are precious and mustn't be squandered.

Musical discovery is not accompanied with the immediate intent to instruct but an inherent desire to *share*—there's a big difference! Bob already had an undergraduate degree in music education as well as a few years of public school teaching under his belt. And, from what I could gather, he really cared about his students and about doing a good job nurturing their creative aspirations. However, Bob had creative aspirations of his own, as yet unrealized. His training as saxophonist, pianist, composer and arranger had brought him within the grasp of an elusive goal: while Bob had been performing professionally for some time, he knew he didn't always *sound* professional. To focus on classroom management and developmental child psychology at this stage in Bob's own maturation and self-realization of professionalism in music performance would mean his dreams would remain elusive. *How does a life without fulfillment affect those we are supposedly teaching?*

Prior to recorded music, synthesizers and digital sampling, opportunities to perform were abundant. All activities requiring music tapped into the pool of live musicians, ensuring a lifetime of performing opportunities for professionals and amateurs alike. If you taught music, chances were you were one of the first to be contacted for a local playing engagement—but, not anymore. Except for those with a rare ability and a single-minded passion for the pursuit of performance, our opportunities to join together with others for the purpose of music-making enter a period of steep decline after college. This is why college is where an education in performance (no matter what the degree) must remain the top priority.

To become good at anything takes practice. Bob will practice teaching on a near daily basis for the rest of his life. At age 35 he will be an excellent teacher, dare I say *a professional*. At age 45 he will be a seasoned veteran. But, the window of opportunity for intensive study, practice and direct engagement of performing skills is for many limited to a mere four to eight years of post-secondary education, hardly enough time for most to become bona fide music-men and -women. We mustn't limit it any further. Every music educator learns from their years of experience how best to teach their students; those who have enjoyed the satisfaction of creative fulfillment through music performance will, just by this fact alone, learn to *share* these values. Remember? That's why we play music in the first place!

¹ *New York Times* Interview (date unknown).