

Inspiration, Intuition, Intellect and Improvisation

I've been having a discussion with some of my music students about improvisation and the way it's affected by intuition. Also, when we compose songs, what is the function of inspiration versus a skill set based on academic knowledge or Intellect?

For an in depth look at this particular subject, (Inspiration vs skills), there is a book I've been reading that I find interesting and helpful.

"In The Shadow, Glimpsing the Creative Unconscious" by Andrew Keeling

It's distributed by Digital Global Mobile as part of the DGM Diaries series, I'm reading Volume 1 now. DGM is an enterprise started by Robert Fripp of King Crimson. It and many other things are available at that website. www.dgmlive.com

Andrew Keeling is a musician/composer/educator and he has really documented some of the issues surrounding skill driven composition as, not necessarily opposed to intuition, but more accurately I think, how the two complement each other, but also how important intuition is to the process of creating art that really has a resonance of something real or true.

Inspiration- the process of being mentally stimulated to do or feel something, especially to do something creative, and also, the drawing in of breath.

The second part of that definition I find particularly interesting because in the story of the creation of man in Genesis (yes, a Biblical context) this concept of life being "Spirit Breathed" is there from the beginning. When God created man in His Image (Imago Dei) it is said that he breathed life into man and man became a living soul. That word in Greek was Pneumatikos, literally "Spirit Gifted or perhaps Spirit Breathed".

The point being, this idea of Inspiration in Creativity, has been around for a long time if nothing else, and this creative process is connected to the Divine. If this is true, perhaps we should treat it a bit more carefully. But, that's of course for the artist' to determine for themselves.

Intuition- the ability to understand something immediately, without the need for conscious reasoning.

For many improvising musicians, having an intuitive ability to create spontaneously is essential. But what if you don't have the ability to "intuit" the sounds for some reason? Are you blocking it yourself? or, can it be developed?

Intellect- the faculty of reasoning and understanding objectively, especially with regard to abstract or academic matters. Also, the capacity for understanding, apart from just feeling or wishing.

Improvisation- the art or act of composing without previous preparation, usually involving imagination and creativity.

For me, I simply say "spontaneous composition".

I'm not so sure about this idea of improvisation happening without previous preparation, because that assumes too many things.

If performing as a musician involves an instrument, which it certainly does even if it's the voice, you do have to have some measure of ability to use the instrument. That may require some level of preparation.

Also, when we get to "style" like, "hip-hop" or "jazz" or "neo-classical shred folk" (I just made that up I think), but maybe not, you could search it out and probably find an entire micro-niche genre of Neo-Classical shred folk artists. But, I digress. You may have to learn what musical elements define the style.

When I got my first guitar, I just picked it up, tuned it to something I thought sounded good and began to play. I didn't need any lessons to figure out how to enjoy making sounds with the guitar for myself. On some level, that is actual mastery. Because to me, the only real masters of anything are absolute beginners. If you have no knowledge other than pure intuition, then you are operating with mastery of your entire skill set in that moment, in a sense. (Innocence?)

Once we begin the process of collecting academic information about a subject we cease to have that type of intuitive mastery because there will be concepts and information we may be aware of but unable to fully accomplish. And the moment we think more about what we are doing rather than "intuit" what we are doing, it is part of an intellectual process. So, the only true masters are absolute beginners, because they don't have a clue what to think. :->

Some people move forward from there in an autodidactic process of self revelation. This is why there are many great guitarists for example, that are amazing to hear, but may not be able to explain what they do, or read music etc. They have simply developed on their own. But, I would say that they did not develop in a vacuum in most cases, because they had opportunity to hear or listen to artists in a particular style or genre, and they copied many things, then evolved into their own thing.

Just because there appeared to be no "traditional" academic process, does not mean something academic did not happen. It just happened differently.

There "own" thing is also a little presumptuous, because if they are operating within the confines of a codified style, much of what they do is not really their own. The way they do it, based on quirks of their individual humanity may be unique, but if we listen and say, "that's blues, or that's certainly "cowbop" (thanks Bruce Forman), then there have to be enough codified elements of style that we are defining it that way.

So, are you an artist who wants to create something new? If so, how do you do it? Chances are you have so many influences already it may be nearly impossible to use true improvisation, intuition, and inspiration to achieve it, because you literally can't get out of your own way. Because your intellect is already imbedded in the process as well as trained muscle memory, and conformity to style, even if it's sub-conscious.

So,.... there you have some ideas, certainly not many conclusions. If you have thoughts on the subject comment back to me with your ideas. It's a learning process. But, be careful because if you are trying to develop intuition, too much intellect may be the wrong path.

That being said, to quote myself, "inspired madness may not be the only path". cousinotes2017

