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t h e m e t a l e d g e

The Practice of Practicing

The questions I'm most often asked by fellow guitarists (besides "Why did you leave Testament?") are "How often do you practice?", "What do you practice?" and "Do you have any practice tips or advice?" This month, let's stray from the usual music examples and address these questions with my 10 tips for a more effective practice.

1. Budget your time.

It's not how much time you spend, it's how you spend your time. While most serious musicians put a fair amount of time into their craft, there are some who play all day but never make any progress. There are others who only have a limited time to practice each day but are constantly improving. What's their secret? One is budgeting time. Try spending a certain amount of time (maybe a half hour or an hour) focusing on one specific area, whether it's chords, scales, licks, riffs, songs, songwriting, composition, or whatever it is you're working on. Afterwards, switch to something else. Remember that there is so much to learn that nobody can cover all the bases in just one practice session.

2. Recognize the difference between "playing" and "practicing."

It helps to think of "playing" as either performing for somebody else or just playing the guitar at random and not thinking too much about what requires work. "Practicing" can be thought of as zeroing in on your weak spots and improving them. You shouldn't put in hours of vigorous study without giving yourself some time to relax and enjoy your instrument by just having fun playing. By the same token, your practice time is put to waste if all you do is aimlessly noodle on the same old licks. Playing and practicing are both important, and to quote "Love and Marriage," the theme from *Married With Children*, "You can't have one without the other!"

3. Whenever possible, practice alone.

When we're around other people we have a tendency to "play" rather than "practice." For example, if you pick up a guitar in a music store and there's a crowd of people within earshot, that's probably not the best time to practice something you need a lot of work on. This is also true when you're at home and others are in the same room. You'll make the most progress when you're

not worried about other people hearing your mistakes.

4. Don't answer the phone.

Let's say you're making serious progress, and you have only a limited time in the day to practice. A phone call, especially a long one, can ruin your concentration and deplete your practice time. Your friends can wait, and any true friend will understand that you have to practice if you want to make something out of your guitar playing. There are days when my phone constantly rings, and I wouldn't get a minute of practice in if I answered every single call. Besides, it's the '90s—get an answering machine!

5. There is more to music than guitar solos.

Hendrix and Van Halen probably would be relatively unknown if they didn't have great songs and great music to support their phenomenal solos. That's why it's important to study the entire scope of an artist's music. When you do this, you get to appreciate (and when you can, learn) the rhythm guitar, bass, drum and vocal parts of your favorite music. You'll get much more out of it this way than if you just learn the lead guitar parts, and you'll have a better understanding of the other parts when you work on your own music. Learning and creating songs and parts is "practicing" as much as learning fast licks is "practicing," which brings up this myth that alternative guitarists don't practice. Don't think Billy Corgan and Kurt Cobain (R.I.P.) haven't spent time honing their craft the same way Joe Satriani has, even though the results are different.

6. There is more to guitar playing than just guitars.

Your guitar playing will be severely limited if you're unable to make a good recording and get a good sound. For this reason, amplifiers, effects, preamps, multitrack recorders, drum machines and other tools of the trade play an important role as you develop your style and sound. Inevitably, time must be spent with the guitar put down and the instruction manuals open. These activities (along with other menial tasks like changing strings) are important and productive. Don't feel like they're a waste of time, because they benefit your playing in the long run.

7. Avoid the trends.

The music business is constantly affected by ever-changing trends. This is especially true with guitar playing. One minute it's cool to play fast, the next minute it's not; one

minute it's cool to use effects, the next minute it's not; one minute it's cool to like classical, the next minute it's not; one minute it's cool to like Neil Young, etc. These trends don't have to—and shouldn't—affect you. Most breakthrough players (Hendrix, Van Halen, Beck, et al.) were going against the flow when they first appeared. Play and listen to whatever it is you're into because you *like* it, not because it's the flavor of the month.

8. Remember that music is meant to be listened to.

Sometimes it's easy to get so caught up in trying to be a better guitarist that you forget you're supposed to be playing for the enjoyment of others (as well as yourself). Take some time to listen to albums, go to concerts and nightclubs, rent videos or do whatever you can to hear other musicians. This often can inspire you to break out of those ruts. Also, don't play just in your room. Seek out other people to play with and play for. Music is about communication and it has to work both ways.

9. Be the best that YOU can be.

Don't worry about what everybody else is doing. Eddie Van Halen doesn't do what Adrian Belew does. Adrian Belew doesn't do what George Benson does. George Benson doesn't do what Eddie Van Halen does. So what? If these artists had spent too much time dwelling on what everybody else was doing, they wouldn't have their own styles and sounds. Try to find your own style and sound. It is a product of your musical influences, your personality, and years of experience. You can have your own guitar sound and still venture into different styles of music. For example, Kevin Eubanks can go from playing Led Zeppelin to John Coltrane to Garth Brooks on any given night on the *Tonight Show*, yet it all still sounds like Kevin.

10. Get a life.

Even though most serious musicians spend a seemingly inhuman amount of time with their instruments, the most successful ones balance it by taking time out to enjoy the many but oh-so-important non-musical sources of inspiration. To name a few: family, friends, lovers, pets, nature, art, games, hobbies, books, movies, beaches, long walks, parties, restaurants, amusement parks, coffee, favorite TV shows, etc.—the list is endless. ☒