

The Four Agreements and Music, Part 4

by Dennis Winge

The Four Agreements by Don Miguel Ruiz is a bit of ancient wisdom boiled down to four steps that are very simple but very profound in their implications and can transform your life if practiced consciously. It's not a book about music at all, but each one pertains greatly to being a successful musician or learning an instrument.

The four agreements are: 1. Be Impeccable with your Word; 2. Don't Take Anything Personally; 3. Don't Make Assumptions; 4. Always Do Your Best. Today we will focus on number 4: **Always Do your Best.**

In the music world especially, it is important to know that "doing your best" doesn't mean "be perfect," it simply means prepare beforehand, practice continually, let go during and just after a performance, and celebrate your successes. Even if you are just learning an instrument and are only 'performing for a few friends or family in your living room, these can and do apply. Let's take each of these in turn.

1. **Practice.** This one is obvious, but needs a bit of clarification with respect to "always do your best." I defer to the book "Winning with Integrity" by Joe Montana:
 - Enjoy the drills that improve your skills
 - Practice is a privilege and an opportunity that has a finite beginning & end time
 - Maximize your time by avoiding too many areas of focus
 - Exercise, rest, and nutrition are important
 - Don't say "I have to practice;" say "I WANT to practice"
 - Keep a performance journal that can include both technical & emotional entries
 - Maintain your efficiency – sometimes less is more
 - Repetition is key
2. **Prepare.** Another obvious one, but prepare as much as is necessary and prudent for each gig, but don't over-prepare either. Over-preparing could be, for example, staying up late the night before to practice, instead of showing up refreshed on the big day.
3. **Let go during a performance.** Charlie Parker once said "learn the changes, then forget them." What he meant was prepare well, but then on the big day, let go and have fun. Or, as Todd Coolman from the Conservatory at Purchase College in NY put it (paraphrasing): the most successful musicians are the best prepared, consistent, and aware of the overall architecture of the entire performance as well as in a constant state of readiness for both the expected and the unexpected.
4. **Let go after a performance.** Have you ever seen a musician get positive feedback but not take it in because they were obsessing about all the details that went wrong in their opinion? When a performance is over, take both positive and negative feedback in stride and with a professional attitude, no matter how good or bad you thought your performance was. The best is to record your gigs and listen to them a month later when you no longer have the same emotional investment in the performance. Then you can wear your critic hat. But right after a show, don't invite the inner critic to sit at your table or even be in the same room.
5. **Celebrate successes and plan long-term.** Celebrate each gig that goes well.

Learn from each gig that does not. Have a plan for where you want to be in 5 years (and 10, 20 etc) and look at it often. Go above “good gig/ bad gig” syndrome as Kenny Werner puts it in his essential book “Effortless Mastery.”

In short, “always do your best” means being in for the long-haul and enjoying the process as it comes. Break a leg!