

Smile, Soft, Simple, Swing, Space, Shape

Not too long ago, a student was in my studio looking at the bulletin board in the office portion of the room, where I have my own personal reminder to myself about performing in big, bold letters. "Smile, Soft, Simple, Swing, Space, Shape" is the summary of the reminder. She asked if she could take a picture of it, and I was a bit shy about it, but agreed. Then I realized that there is nothing to be secretive about in regards to this, and that if I share my own personal experience about why and how these have become my simple performance mantra, it may be helpful to people on several different levels.

This following list is not meant to serve as a definitive guide to performing. It's simply an illustration showing a method for one performer, namely myself, who has been performing in public since he was 16 years old (over 30 years, for those who are counting) to remember what he needs to every time he hits the stage. These six things did not occur to me overnight, and I did not read them in a book. They were discovered after many years of playing, recording myself, listening to the recordings, reflecting on what I liked and didn't like, and what I needed to work on.

They may seem obvious to you, or they may seem completely new to you. Either way, I would say the most important thing about these is that I simply know what I need to remember. They may not be what you need to remember when you perform, but having your own personal list of what you need to remember is half the battle.

Also, it's a teaching in and of itself that we are always a work in progress, and that with a bit of focus and reflection, we can speed up that progress quite a bit, while at the same time feeling okay that it's a work in progress, and not feeling frustration about where we are, as opposed to where we would like to go. We will get into the specific six things in a minute. But this is a point that I learned in a book called "Scootch" by Jaya the Trust Coach, which simply says that if you get off course and forget the things that you are supposed to remember, then simply note it, and make a note to yourself to do better next time, without beating yourself up.

Smile

I talked about this one before in a previous article called "Elevate Your Performance Consciousness." and many people told me how much they enjoyed it. So let me expound a little further on this. My sheet simply says, "literally smile and love the audience." What it really means is that you are taking stock of the fact that you are not performing for people, you're performing with people. You are engaging them on a journey of exploration into different musical moods and emotions together. It totally changes the dynamic in thinking this way, from feeling like you are being judged, or thinking that you need to impress, to feeling like you have a wonderful opportunity and responsibility to be sensitive and to be light and fun and also to be prepared, all at the same time. It takes the pressure off you. Music is a communal, collective way to deepen our consciousness, and all that can be summarized in a simple word: Smile.

Soft

I used to pick very hard. I used to think that I had to play hard in order to sound good, in the same way that I used to think I had to work hard in life in order to get ahead. What I've learned in the last 40 years of my life is that working harder, not smarter, is not a way to succeed. And so it is with music. My sheet says, "Relax. Play with a soft touch. Sing inside. Listen, then play." The "sing inside" portion refers to the fact that I used to sing along with my lines out loud, ala Keith Jarrett. It's a very good idea in general to "hear" melodies as they come through you, as you improvise or compose. But singing outwardly, for me, was a symptom of the stress that I would feel on stage, and I felt like I had to force the notes out. It took me many years to be able to play the lines I hear in my head without singing them out loud. It took quite a bit of discipline, and in the end, it's much nicer for me, and it comes out much more relaxed.

Simple

My sheet says, "Motifs are key. Take the audience with you. Develop slowly." I have a whole audio series on building a solo, and I not only talk about how to build solos from a scientific (and artistic) point of view, but I also demonstrate how to do it over a rock tune, or a jazz tune, for five whole minutes, and in one case, even ten minutes. Music is a time art, so take your time. We always tend to feel rushed, that we have to pack it all in during a short space of time in order to impress the listener, but the truth is, we have all the time in the world. Remember, when you are playing, you are the best soloist for that moment, because no one else is soloing.

Swinging

My sheet says, "Rhythm is key." This could be a whole article unto itself. But as Duke Ellington says, "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing." Keep in mind this does not mean that you should be playing jazz, and it's not to promote jazz as a genre, or anything like that. It applies to all styles of music. If you are not rhythmically locked in to whatever style you are playing, no matter how good your note choices are, people will not respond to it. It's that simple. I have many other audio programs about rhythm, and so I will leave this one be for now, but just remember, rhythm is king.

Space

My sheet says, "Silence is the nearest thing to God on Earth. Form is emptiness, emptiness is form." This is certainly one that I have grappled with for quite some time, and I still haven't quite mastered, but when I am feeling super relaxed and the band is gelling, and people are listening, there is a whole element of spaciousness that is just indescribably beautiful. I'm sure you've had a taste of this from a performance by your favorite performer, artist, or band. I had this experience when I went to hear the Fred Hersch Trio. There is just so much spaciousness in the way they play. I felt like even eight bars of music was way more expansive than almost anything I have experienced

before. It's a subtle one, and certainly beyond the scope of this article, as to how to begin to listen between the notes, but as a starting place, I would suggest to take a favorite piece of music and simply try to analyze why it feels so good to you. I'm sure you'll agree that it's not just the notes, it's how and where the notes are played. In other words, the space between the notes is just as important, if not more important, than the notes themselves.

Shape

My sheet says, "Sculpt the overall architecture of every solo, every gig." Jazz educator Todd Coolman says in the book "Rhythms of the Game" by Tony Williams, "The most successful...musicians...are not necessarily the most talented, but are always the most prepared, consistent, and aware of the big picture of the game. They are simultaneously in the moment, and also aware of the architecture of the entire game from the first pitch or beat until the last. They must be in a constant state of readiness for both the expected and the unexpected." This is one of my favorite quotes because it helps me prepare a set of music: Does it have a nice balance between slow and fast, different keys, different moods, different feels? Does it also help me sculpt the architecture of each individual solo? Does it have a definite beginning, middle, and end? Does it build?

I hope this helps, and if you should find it helpful to share with me some of your personal performance reminders, I look forward to hearing about them from you. Have fun with these things, and I will see you on the bandstand.