

Hurry Up and Relax

by Dennis Winge

This is something I was never taught by any guitar teacher in all my years of taking lessons. It is so simple yet so profound: Relax!

I. Relax with your instrument

Sit up straight. Notice your posture (are you slouching or do you have one knee backward like you are about to sprint, etc?) Notice your picking hand. If you took it away from the guitar exactly in the same position as it was while it was next to the strings, does it look all stressed out and uncomfortable? Do you use a guitar strap to keep the instrument in its proper place without having to hold it in place with the fretting hand? All these things really add up to introduce stress into your playing. On the other hand, mastering them can be really freeing.

II. Relax in your improvisation

This is not to say you should only play whole notes and nothing exciting. It means that you should keep relaxed while improvising. I once heard a bicyclist who had repeatedly won many races tell his secret. While everyone else at the starting line was breathing short, rapid breaths, he was breathing long, deep and slow. So, breathe.

Keep your body relaxed while you are playing. You may have already discovered that some things you can't even play at all if you're not relaxed. Keep your thoughts relaxed as well. Have you ever had negative thoughts on the bandstand or in a jam session? Like "I can't do this" or "I don't know what I'm doing." I certainly have. Well, how about this affirmation from Kenny Werner's wonderful book *Effortless Mastery*: "Every note I play is the most beautiful sound I have ever heard." Yes, even the mistakes. As Miles Davis famously said "there are no mistakes."

III. Relax with your progress

And what about learning an instrument? Certainly that can be frustrating at times. It can even get so frustrating that students quit because of it. How about an affirmation for that as well? Like "I am now learning well and enjoying the process of making great music on my instrument." Or "I am now becoming a great guitarist, in an easy and relaxed manner, with perfect timing, and in a healthy and positive way." (These last phrases were taken from Marc Allen's books.)

IV. Relax with other musicians

What if someone messes up on the bandstand and a 'train wreck' ensues. First of all, there's a chance the audience didn't even notice or care. Second, you don't know what kind of circumstances the musician(s) are in and getting angry is not going to help. What if they just lost a loved one or just discovered that their partner has been unfaithful, etc? You may be a similarly stressful situation some day.

V. Relax with yourself

I remember I once played a B natural instead of the tonic Bb at the end of a beautiful ballad on an off-Broadway show. I felt so bad about it, but no one said anything and I didn't bring it up with the conductor or anything. The next night that same tune came around and I played a Bb at the end. I sheepishly looked up and saw the musician next to me smiling at me, and that's all that happened. Nothing was said, but it was a learning experience. Don't be hard on yourself.