

## Who Cares About Your Musicianship, Anyway?

by [Dennis Winge](#)

Let's face it: non-musicians don't care about musicianship; they just want to be entertained. So why should you care about developing your musicianship?

### I. Who cares?

The average audience doesn't care how much technical prowess you have on your instrument. Only other musicians do. Even then, unless the musician listening plays that same instrument and in that same style, a respect for technique is not enough to sustain listening for any length of time on its own.

Going further, most serious musicians love music that has nothing to do with their particular instrument or even style. They appreciate music for music's sake, and they, on a deeper level, know that their 'instrument' is simply the vehicle through which can pass through their inner being and into the world. One's artistic vision is more important to a large extent than technical prowess.

So why bother developing musicianship?

### II. Broadening the scope of musicianship

If you're a musician, I'll bet you can think of a dozen famous musicians who don't happen to have as much technical prowess in area xyz as others you might know who are not nearly as famous. Sometimes it's obvious that a certain musician has become well-known because they are innovative on their instrument, but most of the time this is the exception, not the rule.

Music must connect emotionally with us in order for us to consider it great. There is an important aspect of musicianship that goes beyond the technical: it's the musician's personality. Have you ever meet a musician who is technically advanced yet has no engaging quality to their personality? The chances of that musician succeeding long-term depends solely on how amazingly innovative they are and if they are not exceptional, they have nothing else to go by.

In her book "The Singer's Ego," Lynn Eustis talks about the 'art' diva vs. 'showy' diva. I wrote [an article about this](#) but to summarize here: to succeed in music today, you need both attention to the technical nuances of performing and an overall attitude of connecting with an audience.

Sometimes the 'showiest' musicians get lots of attention but are resented by musicians who may be more introspective. In the jazz world, this can happen particularly with vocalists because the audience is always drawn to pay attention to him or her the most, and there's nothing wrong with that. If that singer is not trained but gets all the glory, you can see why musicians who have sunk thousands of dollars and countless hours into their musical development could be resentful. Thus, a lot of singer jokes tend to circulate among instrumentalists. [As a side note, I used to participate in these jokes for years until one night I did an evening called "Dennis Winge Sings." It went fairly well, but after that I never made singer jokes again. :)]

This brings us to main point # 1: **personality is an integral part of your musicianship.**

It's not like you can 'improve' your personality overnight, but what about addressing questions like this?

"What value can I add to my performance when I speak at the mic? What will make the audience, band members, and myself feel good and appreciate the experience more?"

"How can I interact with fellow musicians, management, fans, venue owners / promoters, etc. in a way that will enhance everyone's experience, including myself?"

These two questions could be a whole book unto themselves, and if you are aware of such a book please write it in the comments below, as I would like to read it.

### **III. One hand feeds the other**

The second main point is: just as personality is part of your musicianship, **having strong technical skills can help you on the 'showy' side of success.** In other words, the raw skills you have as a musician, which we previously separated from the skills of how to present yourself on- and off-stage, can also influence and inform how you present yourself!

On a practical level, higher musicianship helps you avoid pitfalls of organizing your set list with too many songs in the same tempo range and/or key, for example. It also helps you direct other musicians with more precision and gives you more realistic expectations for what other musicians can or cannot do in advance. I used to make the mistake of assuming musicians could play what was in my head accurately just because they were 'good.' This is not only frustrating to you but not fair to them. Not communicating an idea to them accurately and having them play it less than ideally, that's on you, not them.

Expanding your musicianship helps you know not only how to best present your ideas to them but also how much flexibility to allow them. Because you, the musician who is always expanding your musicianship, now have a better appreciation for what other musicians bring to table, you can allow to shine in doing 'their thing' with more trust and confidence. If you're not doing this, you may leaving a lot of talent by the wayside, and it's possible that the musicians you're working with may not stay with you as long as they otherwise might because you're not giving them opportunity to shine. They'll shine it somewhere else. Miles Davis, for example, was notorious for allowing exceptional musicians to do their thing with very little direction from him; perhaps it's no coincidence that few other bandleaders have ever achieved his level of success in the history of music.

For one, raw skills (as we'll call them here to distinguish between them and the 'showy' ones) give you more confidence. We've all heard singers who, in their nervousness, say curious or irrelevant things to an audience. Most likely you will end up saying quite a bit, either on the mic or during rehearsals to your fellow band members. Raw skills help you know what is relevant and useful to say, and helps you with timing when best to say it. The accumulation of raw skills can also help you relax with yourself, and this allows you to be more genuine in your verbal and non-verbal expressions. It helps prevent you from sounding phony or cheesy. It can help remove the fear that hinders pure self-expression.

There will be exceptions to this, but I put forth that having a high level of musicianship can make what you have to say generally more relevant and valuable rather than self-centered and risky. Yes, there are some colorful characters in the music-world who aren't afraid to speak their mind on controversial topics, but by and large most musicians have become successful because they have worked thousands of hours with hundreds or thousands of different people, and they know that getting along with everyone as much as possible is very important.

And, musicianship goes even beyond that: the sheer fact that you have seen how much work it takes to get where you are gives you deeper respect for all the other professionals you meet, both in the music industry and outside of it. You respect the manager, the venue owner, the recording engineer, the limo driver, the fan who wants a picture taken, etc. You are more likely to recognize the greatness in everyone simply because you are great. There is an old saying: from the bottom, all you see is assholes; from the top, all you see is brains.

#### **IV. Life Itself**

Thus, having stronger musicianship gives you a deeper appreciation for Life itself. Every day is a miracle, and every day you appreciate what you can do, musically and otherwise. Every day you are also given the opportunity to improve how you do things, again, both in music and in life. Sure, you can learn tips and tricks here and there for how to improve things, but everyone knows the only way to improve things in the outer world is to improve your inner core.

So get to work on your raw skills, your personal interactions, and whatever other aspects of your deeper self you think need nourishing. I welcome you to share your experiences in the comments. Here's to your future.

About the author: Dennis Winge is a guitarist, composer, and educator who lives in Ithaca, NY. He runs [Guitar Lessons Ithaca](#), has 6 albums as a leader, is in several bands and has a [YouTube channel](#).