

Lesson 16: Proper Practicing

Chapter 1: (00:34) Introduction Music

Jim kicks off another fine Phase 1 lesson with some introductory fingerstyle music. Make a careful note of some of the techniques Jim uses. He frequently uses the nail of his index finger to strum chords. These chords are played in conjunction with a low melody line. Then, he momentarily shifts the melody to the upper voice. When this occurs, he plays a low, palm-muted bass line.

Chapter 2: (04:34) Proper Practicing

Earlier in this lesson series, Jim stressed the importance of setting some long-term goals. For instance, what guitarist do you want to emulate? What styles do you want to do play? Do you want to give professional, public performances or just play for your own enjoyment? These long-term goals help give you a sense of what you should work towards. Now, Jim discusses the importance of setting some short-term goals. The best way to reach your short and long-term goals is by establishing a daily practice routine. Within this practice routine, you must know the proper way to practice something in order to receive the most benefit. In this lesson, Jim provides some tips that will help you get the most out your valuable practice time.

Consistency Is Key!

Always remember that you will receive the most benefit from short, frequent practice sessions opposed to long marathon sessions. There are several reasons for this. First, the average human being can only retain mental focus for a span of roughly two hours at a time. If you practice for longer than two hours at a time, your practicing will become much less focused, and you won't get as much out of it. Frequently, practicing a musical instrument is compared to training for an athletic event. If you don't maintain a consistent training schedule, your muscular and cardiovascular systems will not receive the maximum benefit of this training. The same statement can easily be applied to playing any musical instrument.

Practice Your Mistakes and Weaknesses

Jim explains a very problematic scenario that is quite common. When learning a new piece of music, many students have the mentality that they must blast through the piece from beginning to end. When these students hit a difficult spot in the song or piece, they simply plow through it in hopes of reaching the end. This is a prime example of what you *should not* do when practicing. Practicing in this way causes you to reinforce your mistakes and bad habits. Instead, spend your practice time working on problematic sections. Practice them slowly and carefully. However, you want to make sure that you don't spend all of your time working on just one section of the piece. Many beginners make the mistake of practicing the beginning portion of a song until they master it. As a result, the quality of the second half of the song pales in comparison. The problem with developing a good practice routine is finding a good balance between learning new things and perfecting things that you already know.

The Buster B. Jones Philosophy

Guitarist Buster B. Jones argues that you shouldn't ever practice. Instead, you should simply play the guitar. This philosophy does have its merits. You should spend a significant time noodling and having fun with the guitar. However, this philosophy really only works for advanced guitarists that already possess a wide base of guitar knowledge. As a beginner, most of your time playing the instrument should be devoted to structured practice.

Chapter 3: (09:54) Ideal Practice Session

In this scene, Jim provides an example of a practice session built around a specific short-term goal. Prior to each practice session, you must determine what you need to work on, so you are not simply noodling and wasting time.

Hypothetically, you may be working on playing a I vi IV V progression in the key of G major. The chords involved in this progression are G, Em, C, and D. Watch closely while Jim demonstrates this basic progression. Notice how the C and D chords are only played for two beats each.

For the sake of this lesson, let's pretend that you are having a difficult time switching from C to D in a short period of time. What's the best way to practice such a transition? If you keep repeating this awkward chord change the same way over and over, you are only rehearsing and reinforcing your mistakes. Instead, you must practice this chord change by analyzing it and breaking it down into its most basic components. For instance, analyze where each finger needs to move. The third finger must jump from the 3rd fret of the fifth string down to the 3rd fret of the second string. Isolate and slowly practice this finger movement. Repeat this process with the other two fingers involved in these chords. Go as slow as you need to. Focus on accuracy. Don't worry about proper rhythm at this point. This practice method will effectively program your fingers with the proper muscle memory. Finally, set the metronome to a slow tempo in order to play this chord change in proper rhythm. Start as slow as you need to. Then, gradually increase the tempo as you feel more comfortable.

After you master this chord change, you must insert it back into the context of the piece or exercise that you are working on. Start by adding the chords to the progression that occur before and after this difficult switch. Loop and practice these chord changes. Then, loop and practice the entire section.

Being Your Own Critic

The most important skill to possess as a musician is the ability to recognize when you are playing something incorrectly or something that doesn't sound quite as good as it should. This will alert you of areas that you need to work on.

Chapter 4: (07:41) Using a Metronome The metronome is the single most important resource available to you when practicing. Rhythm is by far the most important aspect of any musical performance. For this reason, it should come to you as no surprise that the metronome is such a valuable tool. Constant practice with a metronome will improve your playing ability by leaps and bounds within a relatively short period of time.

Like Jim mentions, many musicians dislike playing with a metronome. There are several reasons for this widespread aversion. The constant clicking or beeping sound can become quite annoying after only a few minutes. This problem is avoidable. Many

metronomes are built with a wide variety of sounds pre-installed. This allows you to choose the sound that is most pleasing to you. Many beginners are simply not use to the metric rigidity that the metronome provides. As a result, trying to play along with a metronome can be a very frustrating experience. The only way around this problem is through frequent, focused practice.

Whether you like to play with a metronome or not is totally irrelevant. If you want to progress on your instrument and improve your rhythm, you absolutely must spend a large amount of practice time playing along with a non-human timekeeping device. Remember this simple rule: If you can't play a song or piece of music along with a metronome, you can't play it. There are no ifs, ands, or buts. Many inexperienced musicians consider practicing with a good drummer an acceptable substitution for playing with a metronome. Practicing with a good drummer is not enough. Playing with a drummer will improve your rhythm. However, regardless of how good the drummer is, he or she is still a human being. NO ONE can keep a perfect, metronomic beat over the course of more than about thirty or forty seconds.

Recording Music

Rhythmic problems will rear their ugly heads in the context of any musical performance. However, they are most noticeable on any sort of recording. Jim shares a personal story that illustrates this point perfectly. When music is recorded, the musicians play along with a "click track." A click track is essentially the same thing as a metronome. Usually when music is recorded, all of the tracks or parts that appear on the recording are not recorded simultaneously. Rather, they are usually recorded individually or in small groups. For example, the bassist, guitarist, and drummer typically will lay down the basic groove together. Then, additional guitar, bass, percussion, and vocal parts are added on top. The click track ensures that all of the musicians are rhythmically on the same page. The click track also enables you to record sequenced sounds such as a programmed drumbeat.

Practicing with a Metronome

Many of you may be wondering what to practice with a metronome. The answer is simple: everything! Practice everything that you are currently working on with a metronome as much as you can possibly stand it. It may be hard and frustrating at first, but it gets much easier the more you do it. Eventually, you'll become so accustomed to

playing with a timekeeping device that you'll feel totally lost if you don't have it.

If you haven't previously used a metronome, start back at the beginning of this lesson series. Play everything that Jim has taught you thus far. Chord progressions that feature an alternating bass line are a great place to start, because the rhythm retains a constant quarter note pulse. Remember to start the metronome at a very slow tempo. Once you completely master a chord progression at a slow tempo, move the metronome up one notch. Then, repeat the same process.

Chapter 5: (06:45) Practicing and Moving OnThe JamPlay Philosophy

The entire JamPlay website is built around the multi-instructor approach. This enables you to learn a wide variety of topics from a wide variety of teachers. Also, this approach allows you to learn the same topic from a fresh new perspective. For example, Jim, Aaron Foltz, and Steve Eulberg primarily gear their lessons toward students that are interested in learning bluegrass music. As you explore the site, you will notice that multiple instructors have taught lessons regarding the same topic. If for example you have completed Jim's lessons regarding "A shaped" chords, do not skip over other teachers' lessons that pertain to the same topic. You may discover information that another instructor didn't mention. Or, another instructor might explain a topic in a way that makes more sense to you. Finally, if you notice that more than one teacher has taught a particular subject, you can safely assume that it is a topic of great importance. Consequently, extra time should be spent watching these lessons.

How Long Should I Practice?

The answer to this question depends entirely upon the individual. Everyone is different. Some people have more time available than others. In addition, some people have longer attention spans than others. However, almost all music teachers agree that a minimum amount of half an hour must be spent every day in order to make any noticeable improvement. On the other extreme, most professional musicians spend about four or five hours a day playing or practicing. Saxophonist Charlie Parker practiced close to twelve hours everyday seven days a week. Guitarist Steve Vai also maintained the exact same routine for a number of years.



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If you're a beginner, start with thirty minutes each day. After a couple of weeks, reflect on how this practice schedule works for you. From this point, you can make any necessary adjustments. If you find that you experience cramps or pain by the end of a thirty minute session, you may need to temporarily decrease the length of your practice sessions. However, you may just be playing with poor technique. Regardless, playing the guitar should never be painful. Once you advance to a fairly intermediate level, playing the guitar should not even feel uncomfortable. If it is, you are definitely doing something wrong. Lastly, keep in mind that playing a steel string acoustic is much more demanding on the finger muscles and calluses than an electric or classical guitar. This factor may cause you to make some adjustments to the length of your practice routine.

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