



with Kevin Downing

## Escaping Mediocrity

**M**any music teachers will have students coming in who say they want to be great players, but have no idea how to be great, or how to even get there. Many students cite the popular research showing that if you study something for 15 minutes a day you can become an expert after a certain time frame, or the research that states you can become an expert after only 10,000 hours of training. Those types of stats might work in other areas of life, but not in music.

Most guitarists play for enjoyment, i.e. they play for fun after work and on the weekends. That shouldn't stop you from trying to be the best you can possibly be with the time you have available. So what might be stopping you from achieving things at a high level? I believe it comes from two areas.

1. Many people have never achieved anything of a significantly high level in their lives so don't know the path to get there. By a significantly high level, I mean in school, work, sport, music or arts etc., preferably at an international level. Likewise many who have achieved at such high levels don't know how to pass the knowledge on to others.

2. Parents these days often involve their children in too many extra curricular activities. They might have music after school on Monday followed by karate, then on Tuesday it is swimming followed by dancing, etc. When a kid or teenager's whole week is swallowed up like this, it teaches them to be mediocre at everything, while not allowing them to achieve any single activity at a high level.

After work or school activities normally include either a sport or an art, but you can't hope to achieve both at a high level simply because both are very time consuming activities.

Now you might well argue that because you have a job, family, mortgage, etc., you don't need to have a 'let's achieve at the highest level' mindset. But many of my students who play for fun do play at a top level. What many guitar students don't realise is that it doesn't take that much extra effort to play like a professional, or to even play with the world's top professionals. You have most probably heard how sports people play in pro am tournaments? Well musicians do to, but in a slightly different way.

If you want to be a great guitarist playing at high levels then I suggest you get rid of some of the other activities that consume your time and concentrate on one area that you are truly passionate about. I often use a triangle to demonstrate this idea, which I call the Bermuda Triangle.

As you know there are three sides to every triangle and if one side is missing, then there is no triangle. It is the same if you want to be a high achiever at anything. To begin you need to have a passion to do something. Something that really gets you going, that you can't stop thinking about, or put down for very long. That passion must generate a desire to learn all you can and to be able to perform it at a high level.

Commitment is the other side of the triangle. Commitment means that you will stick to whatever it is you need to do to achieve whatever it is you want to do, through good and bad times. This is the stuff that all the top bands have had to get them through the hard times i.e. The Beatles, Rolling Stones, etc.

Having a great teacher/mentor completes the triangle. By having a great teacher/mentor means you can get a long the path a lot quicker than you could by yourself, and means you don't have to reinvent the wheel along the way. Just like the All Blacks have coaches, musicians can have their coaches to.

If one of the pieces that make the triangle is missing, then you will go down the middle of it into the depths of the unknown, never to be heard of again – just like the real Bermuda Triangle.

There are many average guitar players in New Zealand, but you don't have to be as you already have the potential to get to the next level if you want it bad enough. Just remember that if you focus on one thing with passion (in our case, guitar), make the commitment, and find a great teacher/mentor, you will do very well in your musical endeavours.

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don't know if other Philipinos agree but they're quite vocal about their feelings. That's how I grew up, and I love that about my country and the people there. It's not just exclusive to us of course. But the whole 'home' idea – embracing that side of me – I don't want to hide who I am because that's not being honest."

Having just completed her final semester at University of Auckland, Shana happily looks back on where her music started.

"I listen to a lot of RnB," she admits, lighting up as we bond over Jo-Jo and various other 2000's RnB artists. "It's hard to name all the artists who have influenced me, because my sound has changed over the years and I listened to many different people. But I would say my go-to has been Lauryn Hill, just for her authenticity and consciousness when it comes to her writing, her flow, and her heart."

"I listened to a lot of pop too – I was a pop kid. I wanted to be Britney Spears, like straight up! But the Philipinos – we're a ballad country – we really put our hearts on our sleeves. I listened to a lot of that stuff from my parents."

While her listening game was strong as

a 00's kid, her songwriting took force as she soaked up the sounds around her.

"I wrote bits and pieces when I was 12, but wrote my first full song when I was 16 on the ukulele."

That partnership continued until the singer/songwriter came to explore electronic mediums. The last four years have been a time for experimentation in style and sound aesthetic. Proof positive that she has by now developed her own artistic sound, she was named winner of this year's University of Auckland Songwriter of the Year award. In what's been a big year she identifies it as being her proudest moment.

"There have been heaps of things, but winning Songwriter of the Year this year would probably take the cake. Not because of the competition itself, but because it felt like I had come full circle, since the competition was what inspired me to do the degree in the first place."

It's difficult to comprehend that I'm talking to the same person I saw on stage that night at the Songwriter of the Year competition. She is polite, down to earth, humble and quietly reserved – when performing, her presence

becomes the size of the room she is filling. Her voice in falsetto creates soul-stirring chills, especially when she closes her eyes and lets it go. Ruby Walsh and Elena Šilji, both artists in their own right, perform as her bodyguard-esque wing women, and together they create a powerful sound and statement.

*Skin and Bone* (which will be on the EP) has already seen support from Philipino stations, along with an eerily stunning video clip directed by Miguel Efono, with help from Stefanee Chua. The song itself was inspired by Shana's favourite comic book couple, Nightwing and Oracle, and dances around the thought process of "feeling unworthy to be loved and closing off from people, but being loved and pursued anyway."

That may just prove to be a suitably apt metaphor for the kind of situation an internationally successful music artist named Valere might find herself in in the future, sometime after the April release of her 'Blue' EP perhaps.

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