

The Forgotten Art of Listening

Actively listening to music is one part of practising that many guitar players miss, in fact almost all musicians miss this point. This skill is necessary if you want to be a good musician but is neglected by learners through to advanced players in most of their practice sessions that I come across.

The opposite to active listening is passive listening where you can hear a radio, television, or stereo playing in the background. That is not listening, it is hearing. Hearing music is not active listening or even close.

Although many people get active listening muddled up with ear training exercises, I am not talking about ear training. I am talking about having a good stereo player, putting some good quality headphones on, closing your eyes while sitting in a comfortable chair, and really listening to your favourite artists. Doing this not only speeds up the learning process, but can also make you aware of what others are doing in relation to what interests you at the time, whether it is soloing, rhythm chops, song writing, dynamics, form, etc.

I hear a lot of students complain about not being to master certain aspects of their guitar playing, but most of the time it comes back to not knowing what to listen for. And not knowing what to listen for stems back to not listening very much, or very deeply, in the first place.

You can't learn to listen by visiting websites. People who visit YouTube tend to listen with their eyes, as their eyes are taking up most of the sensual space, not their ears. And you won't learn to listen on any other website either as this can only be done with you sitting comfortably in a chair, eyes shut, good stereo player, and with a good pair of headphones on.

Many guitar players get carried away with technical exercises, chord progressions, playing with backing tracks, etc., in their practice sessions but listening tends to be a secondary or soft activity. If it is done it is more of an afterthought than a high priority activity. Active listening needs to be a high priority activity, but of course not at the expense of practising. You need to balance the two.

It is surprising how many guitar players can't hear a simple 12 bar blues progression, or a jazz 12 bar blues when they hear one, let alone hearing other complicated chord progressions, melodies, arrangements, orchestrations, and the like.

When you are actively listening to music it is best to listen and write some things down that you can hear in the present time like the form of the song, what the instrumentation is, what instrument plays the solo, and things like that. You will need to listen to a song more than once, in fact many times.

Later, when your listening skills get a bit better, and you have learnt a lot more guitar skills and music theory from your teacher, then you will be able to listen on a much deeper level.

Things to listen for at this level might include, what scale(s) the player is using for the solo, what is the key major or minor, how are the guitars complimenting each other, or how is the guitar interacting with the piano. Again, it would be beneficial to write down what you are listening to and discovering.

When you get to even more advanced levels you could be listening to how the writer wrote the score, how the writer is creating emotion within the song, the different types of vibrato a singer or instrumentalist is using, how a solo compliments the vocal arrangement, or how a guitar solo builds in intensity and emotion.

Another thing I like about actively listening is learning the history of music through your favourite genre. For example, if you are into rock then a good place to begin is with your favourite artists then work back through time to their favourite artists, then their favourite artists, etc., until you get back to where rock music (or any other genre) all started with Elvis Presley, Bill Hayley, Chuck Berry, etc.

Now you will start to hear the lineage of how many players learn their craft. For example, Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones started playing Chuck Berry licks and rhythms, then many from the 1970s copied Keith, then players from the 80s copied ones from the 70s, and so on until you get to Joe Bonamassa who today you can clearly hear his influences like Hendrix, Clapton, Page, Beck, etc.

You can now see how much you can learn just by actively listening to your favourite artists.

Also, it is always interesting keeping your notes of your listening experiences and seeing how you much better you are getting at recognising certain things you are listening to over the years.

Conclusion, if you really want to be a great musician I suggest you get into putting some time aside each day for some active listening to your favourite artists now and watch your playing and knowledge base improve quickly.

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