

Creativity vs. Copying

Musical snobbery and other musings

By Nick Layton

I have to admit I've never been much of a cover band guy. The idea of playing someone else's music has never been as compelling to me as creating my own. And yet I see so many others who seem to be perfectly content playing cover songs of the famous bands they try to emulate. Some even go so far as to dress up like said famous band and pretend that they *are* the famous band. The whole idea of doing this seems ludicrous to me. Or at least, it used to. Let me explain.

See, I grew up learning to play guitar in an era where wanting to become a virtuoso musician was the norm. It was 1987 and guitarists like Yngwie Malmsteen, Eddie Van Halen, Joe Satriani, George Lynch, Paul Gilbert and many others of similar virtuosity were all the rage. Every guitar magazine had one of these long haired guitar wizards on the cover each month and I dutifully devoured each and every issue, reading the interviews, studying the transcriptions and then of course listening to their music and hoping maybe someday I could play like that. But the fact is that I, as a 16 year old who had just started playing, was nowhere close to having the skill, talent and ability to play the music I loved. Even as I practiced furiously to try and close the gap, sometimes playing 10 hours a day, I still became frustrated at my inability to play like my heroes. So what did I do? I still kept listening to their music, I still bought all the magazines, but I started to develop my own licks and ideas...things that came naturally to me.

Before long I had a whole vocabulary of things I could play, and I was having a ball improvising and expressing myself. They weren't as fast or flashy as my heroes but at least I was playing music. Even though I couldn't play an Yngwie Malmsteen solo, for example, I'd take little ideas I liked from him and other players and try to incorporate them into my own style. So as a result my whole approach to developing as a musician and guitarist became more about studying ideas and concepts, rather than trying to copy others

note for note, and then making my own music using what I'd learned. I think that even early on I was drawn to having my own voice on the instrument and felt unsatisfied simply copying others.

Flash forward 25 years. I stuck with my passion for music and guitar and have made music my career as a guitar teacher, recording artist and performer. My metal band [FireWolfe](#) has released two well-received albums and I also released a mostly instrumental solo album in 2008. The thing I get most excited about these days is writing and recording new music. It's my drug of choice to get me high (along with my coffee addiction). I'm most satisfied when I'm using my creative abilities to craft musical ideas into finished products, and I love to collaborate with others to make this happen. I'm constantly working on new ideas and plan on releasing more new music as long as I'm alive and able.

But something funny has happened in the last couple years. Opportunities to play cover songs with others have been cropping up quite often. I had wanted to get out and play live more regularly especially after doing so much studio work and teaching. But the only opportunities involved playing other peoples music. Although I was resistant to the idea at first I decided to bite the bullet and go for it. And here's what I discovered: It's fun! Many of the songs and solos leave little room for improvisation...you gotta play them note for note for the most part. But it's still music, and people enjoy watching it, singing along with it and shelling out their hard earned money to come out for an evening to rock out with the band. All of the musicians I've played with during this time have been good to great, and many of them don't do any original music, just covers and tribute bands.

Now, to be totally honest I've always felt a little judgmental towards musicians who never play anything original. They usually aren't very good at improvising on the spot and they don't have any original music to show for themselves. It's always seemed odd to me that it could be satisfying to get really good at your instrument but be content to mimic others instead of expressing your own ideas. So how have I reconciled my own attitudes and prejudices towards other musicians now that I have a foot in both worlds?

I think I've come to a new place of respect for all musicians and levels of players. The older I get the less I see music as a competition. And playing original music or being a virtuoso/high level musician is not necessarily better than being in a cover band playing other people's tunes and having modest skills. It's just different. Not better or worse. As a guitar teacher many of my students simply want to have fun learning their favorite riffs and songs. Most don't ever want anything more than that from music. A small handful of these students go on to write their own music, form original bands and develop their skills to a professional level, but most do not. Is that a bad thing? If I remember back to when I started I just wanted to play like my heroes. The other stuff came later and I believe a lot of that is because of the way I'm wired. For me self-expression and creativity is the most important thing in music, but that doesn't mean it is the same for everyone. I think of all the brilliant classical musicians who make careers by playing the music of the masters like Bach, Vivaldi, Beethoven and the rest. Are they to be looked down upon because they don't write their own music or improvise on a regular basis? Hardly!

Through it all I've learned there is great skill and dedication necessary to be able to learn songs and solos note for note and have the ability to authentically reproduce them in front of an audience. I have a new respect for the time and talent it takes to be able to do this convincingly. This weekend I have an opportunity to pay tribute to two of the guitarists whom I have most admired—Michael Schenker (Scorpions, UFO, MSG) and Randy Rhoads (Ozzy Osbourne). It's been a cool lesson diving into their songs and solos. I've learned a lot from them. I also realize that I've developed my own style over the years and don't play like either of them! So, it's been a challenge preparing for this. That's a good thing.

My takeaway from all of this is that I think there are different facets to being a musician, and there are endless ways in which we can continue to grow and challenge ourselves. Opening oneself up to the possibilities can lead to growth not only as a musician but also as a person. Don't be so quick to shut the door on new opportunities. For me playing in cover bands has been a new and

surprising challenge. It's improved my playing and my musical vocabulary. It's helped me to be a better performer onstage. Even better yet I've met some great new people and count many of them as friends. Whether it's composing my own music, playing Schenker and Rhoads solos in a cover band or teaching others how to play the opening riff to "Iron Man" I've come to realize there is room for all of it in my musical life. No need for snobbery.

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