



Awaken the jazzman within



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I think I'm going to write a self-help book. Is the title *All I Really Need To Know I Learned From Jazztaken? The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Jazz Players?*

My inspiration was the outpouring of wisdom from New York jazz pianist and educator [Garry Dial](#), who gave a masterclass to students in Ottawa on Tuesday. Dial, whom I wrote about [here](#), was still in New York, sitting at a Manhattan School of Music piano. However, thanks to some cutting-edge broadband videoconferencing gear, he was able to hear, observe and interact with the students as if he was in room with them at room at the National Arts Centre's Fourth Stage, and vice versa. Very cool. Over the last few years, I've been to a several of these jazz-masterclass collaborations between the MSM and NAC. Dial, however, really knocked me out with his friendly, constructive approach and mix of concrete tips, aesthetic grounding and been-there anecdotes. "He's about the best I've heard here," agreed trumpeter Charley Gordon, a masterclass regular.

Since jazz piano is my serious hobby, I naturally got a lot from Dial's insightful commentary, offered in response to the playing he heard from Ottawa pianists Anthony Jillions and Steve Boudreau and McGill jazz-piano student Dan Reynolds.

But you didn't have to be a musician to pan gold from what Dial had to say. I'd like to think that the knowledge he was sharing was very much transferable, so that it shed light on what it takes to make good art in general. One thing is for sure: Music writers should attend these kinds of events to understand how musicians criticize each other – constructively — and apply their own aesthetic criteria.

Casting the net wider, I'd even say that if one had self-improvement on one's mind, one could fruitfully apply some of Dial's musical lessons to life away from the piano. At least that's what I'll try to get away with in this blog entry, anyway.

So with much thanks to Garry Dial and no further ado, here are seven tips to living better – and more jazzily.

1. Play well with others

<http://ottawacitizen.com/entertainment/music/jazzblog/awaken-the-jazzman-within>

The first pianist who played for Dial was Jillions, an 18-year-old in his last year at Ashbury College who intends to study jazz piano this fall at the post-secondary level. Jillions is well on his way as a jazz musician, and I doubt there is a more accomplished jazz player of his age in Ottawa. In a few years, he could be jaw-droppingly good. Have a look (and listen) at this video, made at the masterclass by Citizen videographer Scott Parker:

You can hear why Dial asked Jillions: “How did you get so good so early in your high-school years?” You can also hear that Jillions still has things to learn — otherwise, he’d be giving the masterclass, right?

“I felt you were in your own space,” Dial told Jillions. It seemed to me as well that Jillions tended to play over his bandmates (Tom Denison on bass and drummer Don Johnson), even crowding them out. Frankly, at more than a few Ottawa jazz gigs, I hear soloists treating rhythm sections like the pre-recorded accompaniment on Jamie Aebersold practice records. And conversely, I hear rhythm section players defaulting to that role too. The result is music that feels flat and two-dimensional, while that whole aspect of interactivity remains unexplored. Ottawa drummer Mike Essoudry proposes a remedy — groups should spend some time playing free improvisations together, even if they perform bebop staples on their gigs. I agree completely, and in fact a Art Blakey-ish sextet I played in many years ago always began rehearsals by playing free, to focus on developing musical lines of communication.

Dial advised Jillions to maximize the rapport he had with the other musicians on the bandstand, increasing their common understanding using any means at his disposal. He could tell the band that the song should start with a half-time feel or with a more energetic walking feel. He could direct the group verbally or with his body language.

The crucial point was that the everyone in the band needs to be on the same page. And yet, in my off-the-band experience to this day, this simple piece of advice is too often skipped in many a group endeavour.

2. Tell a simple, flowing story

Dial also asked Jillions: “What do you need to work on?” Self-awareness, after all, is key — and not just for jazz players.

“I get carried away with lines and stuff,” Jillions said, adding that he needed to simplify his playing. Jillions has no problem playing lots of improvised melodic lines — but it is possible to play too many, as he himself acknowledged. Dial offered an analogy — playing a succession of disconnected lines is like writing a batch of sentences that don’t connect into a paragraph.

Dial elaborated: “A great solo has one idea and it is developed in many different ways,” he said. Using *Solar*, the Miles Davis tune that Jillions had played, Dial demonstrated how he could take one musical motif through the tune’s entirety using transpositions and variations. A jazz player can also consider his solo in the big-picture sense — giving thought to how it can arc over a pre-determined number of choruses, Dial added.

3. To go deep, slow things down

Jillions certainly has plenty of facility. However, to get deeper into the music, he and other improving players can benefit by slowing everything down when they practice. “Practice

slowly... can you connect the dots?" Dial asked. "If you go really slowly, you're going to give yourself a chance to really improvise. You want to really get inside the changes, not play on top of the changes."

Seems to me that the lesson here regarding any activity – perhaps uptempo jazz soloing especially — is that slow, deliberate practice leads to greater profundity and more meaningful results.

4. Posture makes perfect

Although Dial and Jillions were more than 700 kilometres apart, Dial observed: "I did get that you're uncomfortable." He meant that in a physical way, although Jillions also said he was – understandably – feeling nervous. Dial commented that it might help Jillions if he avoided reaching for keys at the piano's extremities, instead moving "the sitting bones" on the bench so that his shoulders remained squared to the piano and his elbows remained bent.

Dial cited the striking example of Chick Corea standing up, playing a piano that was practically mounted on stilts. When Corea needed to play high notes, he simply walked over to them, keeping himself well-positioned in relation to the piano.

Dial warned that poor posture at the piano not only affects how well one can play – it can be debilitating too, leading to back problems or carpal tunnel syndrome. For me and all the cubicle dwellers near by, this is an ergonomics warning definitely worth heeding.

5. Small changes can make big differences

After hearing Reynolds play a solo rendition of *Round Midnight*, Dial observed that the student fell back on playing the same left-hand chords to accompany his right-hand melodies. However, it would not have taken much to vary the accompaniment, Dial said. For example, instead of hitting all the notes of a chord at once, Reynolds could have

created a continually varying left-hand accompaniment — a kind of counterpoint — by striking the notes of the chords one at a time in varying sequences. There are, Dial pointed out, "different ways to wiggle your fingers with the voicings that you have."

Hopefully this isn't too arcane for non-pianists. For me, a light bulb went on. I'm almost embarrassed to say that after many years of playing piano, I hadn't stumbled on such a simple measure that could have such great impact.

6. Anticipation is better than delay

"You were doing a lot of delay," Dial told Jillions. "Try anticipating. Try to get your mind ahead of the barline." At the risk of getting arcane again, I want to delve into this a bit.

In rock, country, even polkas, you'll hear musicians more often than not hitting the first beat of most bars, particularly at key structural points in a song. But in jazz, you will often hear rhythm sections hitting the upbeat that anticipates that downbeat — in a word, anticipating. Dial cited the example of the pianist Red Garland, a Miles Davis sideman who habitually jabbed key upbeats with his left hand — the and-of-two and the and-of-four, if you're keeping track with staff paper. That continual feeling of anticipation helps propel swinging jazz, giving it forward motion and a feeling of pushing.

Dial also said that improvised lines can benefit from anticipatory thinking, that they can sound good if they are a beat or so ahead of the song's related harmonic markers. He demonstrated, and he was right — trust me, non-musicians, it did sound good. There was more excitement to the melodies that were ahead of the harmonies, as opposed to melodies that came after the chord was played.

OK, it's a bit of a stretch to take a life lesson from this, but maybe Dial's point can be read as some kind of carpe diem exhortation. Or, it's an urging that you get out in front of events rather than let them dictate your response.

7. Play from the heart

Dial said that one problem for many students is that they spend so much time gaining new information and learning how to apply it that they miss on playing music for the pure joy of it.

He urged the students in Ottawa to ensure that they made time to remain emotionally connected to music, even to keep journals about their practicing which would help keep the question, "Am I making music from my heart today?" in the the forefront.

Dial told the students that some time ago, he was in a New York club to hear Keith Jarrett play. At one point, Dial found himself tearing up — and all Jarrett had done was play a simple F triad. "He could get an audience to sob over a triad a two-year-old could play," Dial said.

For all the complexities that can enter into jazz playing, Jarrett could move someone like Dial to tears with not only the most basic material, but with the huge personal commitment he invested in it. Musical artistry, it seems to me, is not just the notes chosen, but the intention and spirit behind them.

The lesson from that story: above all, play from the heart.