

Some thoughts on "Influence" by Eric T. Johnson

Many student level musicians fear influence. They are afraid that if they delve into a particular player's style that it will obliterate their own unique voice. To me this line of thought is faulty.

The fact is that it is difficult to predict the emergence of a personal voice, from oneself or another person. We all like to think that we have a brilliant, unique artist within us. Perhaps you have seen signs of this voice. Perhaps your family or friends have tried to instill a belief in your own voice. Perhaps they have tried to discourage you from looking for your voice. This discouragement may even be a significant part of your motivation to pursue it.

But whether or not we have genius within us is a moot point. If it is there and you have the persistence to actually find it then great for you. The important fact is that a personal voice of any merit should not be so fragile that exploring another musician's ideas obliterates it. All great painters studied and copied the works of earlier masters. All great athletes emulated their idols. All great architects studied the designs of others.

Why should music be any different? Some may say that improvisation enters the realm of intuition, and that conscious study, especially of another artist's solos, can get in the way of one's natural extemporaneous flow. While this may have some merit, I don't believe the answer is to hide from influence. It is the responsibility of the improviser to clear his or her head from anything but the intuitive inner logic of building a solo.

Did you know that Miles Davis and many other Jazz greats earned side income by transcribing recordings for publishing companies? Perhaps they weren't transcribing "solos" of their peers or contemporaries, but they had transcription skills nonetheless. Transcribing on any level is valuable unto itself. The process is intimate - helping one internalize the logic of the language of music.

The truth is that finding one's own voice takes time and desire. It also takes a lot of work. There are certainly more than a few musicians who transcribe all the time because coming up with their own ideas actually takes more work. But the answer for them is not to give up transcriptions but to discipline themselves to try to come up with their own ideas.