

How good is good enough? - It's about commitment.

Let's assume that you play music at least several nights per week, most of the time. That indicates that you're committed, at least to the extent that you continue to play. But are you getting better, or are you simply playing what you've always played? And... Do you care?

Can you be deadly serious and still have fun?

Yes! Being a truly great musician requires one skill above all others... the ability to play your instrument as well as you can play it, while still listening to what's going on around you. Above all else, "good ears" are your most valuable asset. Your ears, connected to your brain and your hands, are what enables you to be responsive and interactive, without getting in the way.

Some people reach a certain level as musicians, and that's good enough for them. No one should be criticized for that alone. But, it is important that the members of a band have similar ideas about this, or there will probably have some tension. It's not easy for the perfectionist-type personality to work in a band with people that are "hobbyists". No matter how patient the perfectionist-type is, they will eventually tire of hearing what they consider to be "inferior" music. Likewise, the hobbyist-type will eventually tire of being pressured by the perfectionist. Whenever it's possible, work with like-minded people.

Many organizations suffer because of these mixed levels of commitment, and many arguments occur over the issues that surface. It's not always easy to find the kind of musical situation you're looking for, with all like-minded people. If you find yourself in a truly unified team, cherish it, because it's a rare privilege. When people feel that a musical situation is futile, they will then cease communicating, or will qualify their limited communication with reasons like these:

Some of them are friends, and don't want to irritate each other.

Some of them feel that the communication is futile, because some people are simply not "good enough" to play better.

Some of them fear that focusing on someone else's errors may place them

under scrutiny too. (probably true...That's life.)

Some of them want to keep the job for it's income alone, regardless of the quality.

Some of them would rather play "bad" music than play none at all.

(Typical) Some will think that they've reached the limits of their abilities. (probably wrong)

(Rare) Some will think that the music couldn't possibly be any better, because they're "the best". (always wrong)

Your level of commitment, compared to the others you work with, determines how the band sounds and evolves, and how mature it can become. Is the music's quality your priority, (something the audience can hear and see) or are the issues mentioned above more important? (something the audience can not hear or see) Sometimes, we all need a little "wake up call". Other times, the situation really is futile, and someone will have to go. Don't fool yourself into believing that the audience "doesn't know". Whether they can describe it in technical terms or not, the audience will know when you're unhappy, non-caring, or faking, and they won't appreciate your lack of effort. Always do your best, regardless, and do it with honest sincerity.

What are our limits?

Here's are some examples we've all seen proven:

Goals: What do you want? It might be fame, money, a big house, or it might be to create and play some great music. Just realize that these things are separate. If you make all your decisions based on income or fame, you are a commercial musician. If you make your decisions based on what you feel is art, then you must be willing to endure the financial suffering that often goes with that. Most "lifers" fall somewhere in the middle, and there a LOT of us there!

Depth: Bad actors just read the script, and perform the directed actions. We instinctively see this as "amateur", without knowing anything about acting. A great actor, on the other hand, first studies the character they're playing, to

give it some depth. Then, they use their knowledge of the character to amplify the directed actions. Even greater actors will discuss the perceived "emotion" of each character with the other actors, which adds even more depth and believability to their work. We see this as great acting. If you can communicate in similar ways with your fellow musicians, your music will have more depth and quality.

Confidence: Watch any modern documentary on athletic or military training, and you see that virtually everyone can be pushed beyond what they perceive as their limits, to achieve a new goal. A somewhat small percentage (say, 10%) can achieve even higher levels, because they not only have great training, but they have great skills and/or motivation. The common tool used by all these professionals is honest criticism and communication, based on reviewing factual evidence, such as audio and video recordings.

Priorities: Suppose that one of your original goals in music was to be able to play very fast, very complicated music. Later, you discover that as much as you like that, you're not really very good at it. What will you do? The audience will appreciate your efforts to play something extreme, but will tire of it quickly if it's sloppy. As you gain experience, your priorities will probably change. That's natural and appropriate, if you really care about quality.

Maturity: Being great at one aspect of music is not enough. A musician who has "the best technique you ever heard" is still "no good", if they're constantly out of tune, too loud, over playing, or sloppy rhythmically. There's always something you can improve, or at least experiment with. The love you have for this kind of exploration should never fade, if it's real. Most people are happiest when working with a team of people who all have a similar goal. It makes perfect sense, and so don't waste your time being unhappy... Make a change in the attitudes of the people you work with, and/or make a change in your personal habits, but don't sacrifice your personal standards. If you want to be great, then do everything you can to be great!

- Mike James