

Style Lens

Some guitar players know what style they will play soon after learning to walk, talk, and bend tones. Most of us, however, go through stages of growth which express themselves in various stylistic idioms, at different times, in ordinary and extraordinary ways.

With the understanding that there are exceptions, many style choices are determined by age (i.e. rock and punk), while others are based on region or location (i.e. bluegrass and Celtic). Even other style choices are made by accident (i.e. fusion, aleatoric, avant-garde).

Within broad style classifications are the individuals who've thread the stylistic experience into cohesive devices, such as melodic phrasing, harmonic rhythms, and reliable patterns.

Style is ultimately representation. How an artist represents him or herself – whether in image, import, lyrics, or musical expression – is their style. Any of these mediums of expression have been shaped by cultural heritage, exposure, and immediate experience, among many other factors. In whatever forms an artist's style emerges, there are conditions, limitations, and guideposts that envelope the entire display.

Over time, all artists, to some measured degree, evolve their style. So much so, in fact, that to consider an artist to stay the same over time can be an insult. Yet, exceptions to this evolutionary track seem to gather considerable respect for sticking with what worked early in their careers (i.e. Santana and Angus).

The style lens is the view you take on your own and other's styles. It colors the musical world you experience. It shades your intentions, your musical behaviors, and your outcomes. It can diffuse, focus, broaden, or diminish your view.

In a way, the lens is inescapable, and this isn't necessarily a bad thing. Yet, it does have its limitations. And, many of our institutions now find themselves teaching these limitations, while sometimes denying they even exist.

When you learn music by learning songs, you are joining the culture which created it (at the level of exchanging vibratory memories). All cultures pass along their rituals, values, and shared meanings (this is a working definition of what culture is). This includes music. Much of the world now has access to all other music cultures, for the first time in history.

We see as many forms of music fusion as descriptions and viewpoints on what is actually being created. And, concurrently, much remains the same.

There are multitudinous ways to look at style, its history, import/export, and its future. We can describe how the music elements (timbre, harmony, melody, rhythm) are being used to create a working definition of musical style. Or, we can speak of attitude and performance which shape an artist's ascent as a stylistic narrative.

We can also talk of style as a process. We can study styles from idiomatic, tonal, and elemental viewpoints as well. When we study, we absorb the ways past and present artists and teachers have maintained a style. We imitate or emulate these ways.

Each of us have a particular mix of reasons why we follow the path of previous and current mediums. Typically, we play what draws us. It makes a lot of sense to use the wheel of style, rather than try to reinvent what has worked for so many years.

Every style has a perimeter. Once you go outside of this line, it is no longer that style, and the inside of that limit becomes an influence on what now lies outside. Whether that new style gets a name is based on cultural, social, and individual factors.

Style development as a process also can be viewed as an 'emergent'. When we lift the limits of study by not adhering to traditional stylistic perimeters, but use a variety of other, potentially less invasive limits, style emerges as an organic, self-reflexive, and autonomous occasion.

These 'emergent' types of experiments with tonal material can yield equally, if not superior, meaningful development. They can get us into deep musical states, allowing us access to the core of who we are becoming as musicians.

There are limits on everything (no matter how fast you play, you will not levitate). The types of limits you set up for your guitar study will determine the types of experiences you have. Process based practice requires a commitment to using different sets of limits for different activities and charting your

progress along a number of very important musical paths. Some limits best serve certain types of endeavors (improvisation is best suited for melodic discovery, rather than note-reading).

This starts with understanding where you are focusing your energies, and determining the most effective means to move that focus into deeper and more comprehensive clarity of sight and ability.

Where stylistic patterns set limits which guide a group to steer together, we find unity with others. Where an open tuning and one technical device guides an individual in free exploration, he or she finds self-in-unity while spinning endless cycles of internally guided dialogue.

We get to know ourselves best by knowing which set of limits we are willing to hold in consciousness, while tapping on each side of the divide.

New styles will emerge.

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