



February 11, 2023

An Open Letter to Students Who Didn't Make All State This Year.

Hi there.

I heard that your all state audition didn't go the way you wanted it to. Sorry about that. I have been on both sides of the audition thing, and it's hard to invest all that time into something and not have it pay off. Anyone who has made a career out of music knows what that feels like, and if they act like they don't, then I wouldn't trust them to begin with.

It is normal to be disappointed when things don't go our way. It took me a long time to make an honor band when I was in school, and I remember not really having a way of dealing with feelings of "not being good enough," which was tough. Later in my life, even after succeeding at All State and auditions for college, there were many more professional auditions, more than I can count, where I didn't advance—even when I did my very best. Sometimes I felt like I was as good as or better than the ones who won. I felt betrayed and bitter. As I have grown, I have realized that this is an important part of being in the performing arts: dealing with disappointment, doing our best, and trying to turn pain and frustration into something beautiful, in this case music. Jazz musicians have been doing this since the beginning.

Give it time, your feelings will settle, and you will feel like making music again. And before too long, if you have that creative spark inside you that compels you to make music, you will feel like trying again, and I hope you will. I did, and I am so glad that people in my life have always been there to encourage me to start over or try again.

Studying jazz is a beautiful way to spend time and intellectual energy. It allows us to be creative individually and as a group, and there aren't many artforms that allow us that much freedom and responsibility. There are many things you can do to grow as a jazz musician. Some of these ideas also apply to classical music, or more generally, to anything in which you want to develop more skill. Here are some suggestions for when you feel like taking that leap again.

1. **Listen.** Listening to jazz is the most important thing you can do to advance your appreciation and understanding of the music. Hearing how the great masters of the music played—the subtle nuances and the style—is how we learn to do it. In a play, the line may read: "Yes, that would be great," but the actor delivers the line "Yeah, tha'd

be great.” That’s the difference understanding style can make! Live jazz happens all over—look for it and support it! Making friends with your local jazz musicians is a great way to learn. You may even learn some lingo, and before long, you’ll be “blowing changes on a chart with the hip cats.”

Jamey Aebersold has been giving free copies of his jazz handbook for decades. It’s overwhelming, but on page 8 and 9 of this pdf, there are suggestions for listening. It’s a fantastic place to start. If you don’t like something, skip to another name. Maybe some day you will go back and revisit...tastes change with time! Here is a link to that document: <https://www.jazzbooks.com/mm5/download/FQBK-handbook.pdf>

2. **Develop and practice (with a metronome!) a counting method that works for you.** Time and rhythm are integral to playing jazz. Many jazz musicians struggle to count, but sightreading is one of the most common skills that gets people hired. I am fortunate to teach All-Region jazz bands all over the state, and the biggest problem students have in clinics is they cannot count the music. I have experienced this problem myself. Early on, I remember thinking the problem was me—I just couldn’t “do” rhythm. The real problem was I didn’t practice it! I wanted to spend my time playing, so why practice counting!? Well, once I started to practice counting rhythms (because my private teacher demanded it—everything I could get my hands on!) I started to feel confident, and then I started to make honor bands. Start with simple music and challenge yourself to do harder stuff each week. ALWAYS use a metronome. Rhythm is meaningless without a steady beat. There are lots of books you can use, but I bet your band director would let you get random stuff from the music library to try, too. Do it with a friend to keep you honest and make it more fun.
  
3. **Play by ear.** Have a favorite song of any style? Learn the melody on your instrument without sheet music and play along with the recording. Learn a simple melody like Mary Had a Little Lamb in all 12 keys. Play along with a jazz recording and learn a simple solo alongside Miles Davis. He was making it up as he went, but developing your ear will help you to play the ideas that come into your head. Few of us are naturally good at this, but the more you do it, the easier it will become and the more it will start to seem like magic to everyone else!
  
4. **Work on intonation and range.** (For drum set, work on time and rudiments spread across the whole set). These two elements have to do with operating the machine that is your instrument. Learn your chromatic scale the full range of your instrument. Fall in love with your metronome! If you have the money, consult with an expert on your instrument to make sure you are doing this in a healthy and efficient way. Make sure you are using the best and most ergonomic fingerings. If you don’t have the money, ask

an expert anyway. Maybe they will still help! If there are notes on your instrument you can't play, those parts of the instrument are going to intimidate you. Strive to make it where there are no "dark, shadowy places" that intimidate you on your instrument. Your instrument should be an extension of yourself! Start slow, and build your tempo up over a long time. It should never feel frantic or unhinged.

For tuning, use the Tuning CD or play 5-note patterns with drones. Develop your ear so you can hear when you are out of tune and can identify if you are sharp or flat. Can't tell? That's normal at first. My advice is to make your instrument flat, then work your way up to pitch. That's how our string player friends do it, and it works great for them.

Some band directors recommend putting a tuner on the stand and watching it. That's a great place to start. Try to transition to just using your ears as soon as you can. Playing in tune is one thing—learning to match others is also a valuable skill. Intonation is a mathematical construct, but it's also an agreement among musicians!

5. **Surround yourself with people who are supportive and have the same priorities.** This is a tricky one. Are your friends encouraging you to invest in the things that are important to you—like practicing, listening to music, and learning to express yourself? I try to spend my time with people who want to see me be successful, and who I can support through thick and thin. I have no time for folks who are catty, always negative, or who pick at me and put me down. Over the years, that has cost me some friendships, but the ones who I spend time with now are people I know I can depend on. And when I get to make music with them? Wow—that's the best feeling in the world.
6. **Play as much as you can.** I started playing gigs when I was in high school, and that increased as I got to college. There are lots of opportunities to make music. Find a group of friends and jam on the weekends or in the evenings. In Little Rock, Dave's Place hosts a jam session on Sunday nights from time to time. Call Dave and ask when the next one is happening and go and listen. Then, next time, bring your instrument and try "sitting in"—playing a tune or two. Things like this exist all over the state. Ask the local university if something like that exists locally and check it out. You'll be scared. So what? Do it anyway, and keep in mind that the more "scary" things you do, the more you will grow. Go as a group if that will give you more courage and make it more fun.
7. **Do your best to remember—music is supposed to be fun.** If you are not having fun, find a way to make it fun. Being in an honor band is not everything, but feeling free when you play music is one of the great joys in life. The more positive time you have with music, the more you are tapping into that special thing that attracts all of us to it. I think

that feeling is “togetherness,” but maybe it is different for different people. Maybe you will figure that out and tell me someday.

I hope these suggestions help you. Music can be very difficult, but it is also fascinating and joyful. In my life, the time I have spent making music accounts for many of my happiest moments, but it also accounts for some of my hardest. The highs are high, and the lows are low. When you are successful, celebrate! When you are not, don’t punish yourself. Keep moving forward, stay curious, be kind, and as Rogers and Hart said, always notice when things are beautiful – be a “fool for beauty.”

Hang in there. Explore. Try. Repeat. The best is yet to come – you’ll see.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Matt Taylor', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

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