[Make No Mistakes: 3 Ways To Move From Sloppy To Solid In Your Musicianship]

The night was *seamless*. On the stage were 4 of Nashville's most respected songwriters, and an acoustic house band made up of musicians in their 20s or 30s. They were doing an intimate concert for television. From the first note played it was clear – all musicians on the stage were fantastic in their own right. It was also clear that not *one audible mistake was going to occur* over the course of 15-20 songs. Here's the kicker – *the house band just received the charts and songs at midnight the night before.* How did they do it? For one thing, they had to nail the music. There were no second chances. *Mistakes were not an option*.



Sure, they brought some gifting and skills to the table that put them on that stage in the first place. Professionals? Yes. Gifted from birth? To some degree. Musical perfectionists? To a person. Yet the music was magical, musical, fluid, and playful.

Training Ourselves To Make No Mistakes

Musicians who make no mistakes are *trained* to make no mistakes. More specifically, in my experience, they are *self-trained* to not make *public* musical mistakes.

The brilliance of musicianship I saw on that stage was, in some cases, from years of self-teaching and mimicking other musicians (now we have YouTube). For others, that brilliance walked into Berkeley and came out more refined.

But after watching pro musicians do their thing for decades, *I believe they have some hidden belief that doesn't allow for mistakes to be made – at least not publicly.* For a solid musician, a mistake is what happens when you're *alone*. In public, you just don't make them. You train yourself not to.

Professional musicians won't get work if they are sloppy and have a low bar for their performance. They put in their Gladwellian 10,000 hours, and when they show up, that are ready to play to the standard needed.

What sets these musicians apart from me, you, or many who play in our local worship teams? After 25 years of making music, I think a few factors are at play: valuing musical perfection, natural gifting, consistent personal practice, repetition of trouble spots, and more.

But the first factor above is what I'd like to hit for we who serve as worship musicians in our local churches.

They *value musical perfection*.

A Parentheses: The Baloney Of "Performance In Worship Is Bad"

Before we look at our 3 ways, let me say this. I hear the rumblings everywhere. "But worship music is different. We're there to enjoy it, to get lost in God, to really *go for it*. Too much focus on excellence or performance is a bad thing – we'll miss the real point of worship."

My short answer, spoken in love: *Baloney.*

You can be a solid musician, internally require tightness in your playing, and enter deeply into worship. In fact, others will enter more readily into worship the more solid your musicianship is. In fact, other musicians will raise their personal bar when playing with you the more you demand of yourself musically. The tide can rise, both in heart and skill, if we tend to the details.

Good music facilitates worship. Bad music distracts and hinders worship. Full stop.

3 Ways To Move From Sloppy To Solid In Your Musicianship

Here are 3 quick ideas to help you move from sloppy (or low level) playing to solid playing – and to keep your habits of good musicianship growing over time.

1. Prioritize Flawless Playing – And Imagine You Are In A Studio

Here's what I've learned, and I'm still a "weaker" musician in my view. Don't hack around hoping that one day, magically, you'll be better. Learn good habits on your instrument. Always imagine you are playing in a studio. Play to clicks, demand perfection in your picking, hold your strings down to avoid buzz, work your keyboard or drum chops, fight for clear sounds through your gear, and get your hands on your instrument at least 10 minutes every day.

Oh, and practice with mp3s in headphones. You're getting lessons from professionals when you do.

Then in public, which is a rehearsal, event, or service, work very hard to *not make mistakes*. It's not a jam session, and if it was, still work hard to *not make mistakes*. Yes, even in rehearsal. Heads up. Pay attention to the charts. Engage your musical skills for an hour or two till they become second nature over years.

Let mistakes be the things you make in private that enable you to flawlessly play in public.

2. Ask, Watch, And Learn – Making Advances Each Week

We're not all called to the kind of greatness on an instrument (or as a songwriter/lyricist) as those I mentioned above, but most of us can get very, very good. The truth is, in my experience, there are worship musicians who don't care to get very good – they're happy to just be okay. I'm actually good with that (to some degree) in a local church setting– it's all about calling, availability, and servanthood. So let's assume hearts are good.

To grow on your instrument:

- ask others you respect how they got better,
- watch videos and live musicians (that is unbeatable), and
- learn a little something new every week.

3. Get Lessons – In Creative Ways That Work For Your Time And Budget

Goals are good, but systems are better. Getting lessons from a source you respect is a system – you will grow incrementally over time. Systems help you reach a goal.

But I choose not to put our current 3-kids-through-college budget into lessons. So I go to good friends who are great musicians and say, "Hey, could you come over for an hour or two tonight to watch me play and then give me a ton of feedback and help?"

(For example, one of my favorite electric guitar players, Mike Gustin, kindly did that with me one night related to recording quick demos. I got smart, really fast. Now I know what to get better at. He played coach, and we recorded something simple to make it practical.)

The Music Must Become Second Nature

I'm still learning this, and may never achieve the greatness I'd like to on my instruments. I'd like to reach a day where I am playing my instrument – it's not playing me. At the very least, I'd like to be very good on my select instruments, and achieve a level of musicianship that *matches the calling on my life*. You have a calling. Match it with your commitments – *it won't just happen*.

Again, what I am *not* saying is that all worship musicians must be flawless in their playing in order to play. What I am saying is that we should all be working on making no mistakes as we rehearse and play publicly.

Over time the music becomes truly second nature, and learning songs for a TV taping at midnight the night before is not the rocket science or voodoo magic we think it must be.

Work to make no mistakes, at least in public, and keep honing your craft to serve your team, your leaders, your community, yourself, and the God who still makes the most beautiful music we know.

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Question: What are you doing right now to up your level of personal musicianship?

Resource: The 7 Steps To Awesome Series addresses these ideas for each instrumentalist in the band.

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