



## BASS

### Going for Broke

by Tom Pieper

One strength to work on as you continue to develop your marketability as a musician is your ability to build relationships with people. This needs to happen in informal settings such as in school and other institutions, and formal settings when you are hanging out with other musicians, watching performances, or hustling to obtain more playing gigs for your band or yourself. Networking is a key component of promoting yourself and integral if you want to work with people beyond your skill level. You will need to use all your playing skills in tandem with your interpersonal skills to make people comfortable enough to have your name pop up when they are considering putting projects together. The more you make people at ease with you as a player and person, the more likely you are to have more opportunities to play your instrument and have many rich experiences on your career path. Once given an opening, you must be ready and prepared to act to reach your goals.

This summer I went on an adventure to Holden Village in Washington State. Without a formal agreement, except for an email invitation, I went out to participate in a three-day event; it was really that loose a commitment on both ends. While I felt unsettled about the details, I ventured out to present a discussion on sacred music featuring my jazz arrangements, and to perform a concert of an undetermined format. I was fortunate to be at a conference the week before I left and spoke with a colleague whose roommate had been to HV the week before. He immediately texted him and I found out that HV had a playable bass on site. He did mention however that they did not have a bow. Any bass was preferable to carrying my instrument on the train, bus, and boat for 1500 miles so I was relieved. Just to be safe I took along my Fender Jazz Bass, a German and a French bow, some solo music, and some arrangements of a wide variety of styles used for my jazz church gig. The week before I had also had begun toying with the idea of playing a solo concert, and had begun to

practice. Although this was not my idea of a great time, I thought it best to have some options ready when I arrived 36 hours after my departure.

Most people would not consider the bass as first choice for an instrument for an unaccompanied solo concert. I had a number of conversations with professional colleagues the week before who would comment about a solo bass concert saying, “Don’t they know that this is not done.” Or, “I once saw Dave Holland do a solo concert.” One colleague said, “I do that.” Earlier this spring I was at the Francois Rabbath concert at MacPhail Center for Music in Minneapolis, and I would say he, Edgar Meyer, and a few others are the exception. Most other bassists on the planet use their talents in a group format, and I would clearly put myself into this category. As a bassist when you play in a group situation you bring people together by constantly listening and adjusting to what others are playing and making decisions that help or hinder the outcome. One thing may work in one context, but not in all, so you must learn how to work with people to establish trust. Not a “my way or the highway” scenario.

I arrived at Holden Village and was given a registration card that identified me as teaching staff. Moments later I was introduced to the educational director and on that first day the plan seemed even less formulated than I suspected. No itinerary here to work with. It was completely up to me to conceive and make a proposal to program and perform a concert in the next 72 hours. After lunch I ventured out into the community to assess the situation and to try to insert myself into their busy schedule of events.

I was shown to my room and then went to find the performing area, which I was told, had a bass that I was welcome to use. The bass was a solid plywood instrument that had a pretty nice sound with the French bow. What worried me was the  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  crack along the base of the neck. At first I thought the scroll might pull toward the tailpiece as I tuned the strings to pitch.

The beauty of the unconventional repair was that it looked as it had been done with epoxy and as long as it held this long it probably would out live me and be good for the next fifty years—not pretty but functional. I continued to watch it over the next 48 hours out of habit but it remained solid. A man was rehearsing a song for a service later that evening, so I played along and he asked if I would be playing that night. I said I would be happy to play and on my next step out the door I overheard someone remark that there was supposed to be some bass player for tonight’s service; upon hearing this I introduced myself and shared some of my story.

At the first rehearsal the village musician realized I was capable and that we both had similar expectations as leaders. She played accordion, as well as piano, so I took note of this for future planning. I mentioned that I was asked to do a forum and concert and she mentioned that there was a young jazz pianist in the village who she would introduce me to later that evening. After that first service I met him and we played for an extended postlude of about 45 minutes. Since we had a shared repertoire and understanding of playing jazz, I knew that I was getting closer to a workable concert goal.

The next day the educational leader said he thought that I could play in the talent show in two nights, or perhaps I could sit in with some people on the deck after lunch. Both these options were not ideal, but clearer than at our first meeting, and demonstrated some openness and acceptance. I practiced in the music hall, and went to several educational seminars. While I still was not able to find a suitable place for a lecture on jazz church music styles I was observing the culture and trying to check out all the possibilities.

Before dinner I played on a ramp-way for a transient audience as mine mitigation workers, truck drivers and guests walked past on their way to the dining hall. As the jazz pianist I met the previous night was unavailable for the day, I decided to compose a song dedicated to the village to

present in case the concert became a reality. I also played some Bach, Dragonetti, and Scarlatti that I thought could fit into a demonstration, concert, or lecture, and also thought I should write a composition dedicated to the village. It was important for me to help focus on a possible program, while further implanting me into the community. How could they turn down this opportunity?

On the morning of the final day the educational director said it was decided that I was to have a concert that evening in the hall after the main worship—not in the talent show downstairs, but the main venue. I continued to network to build the audience by noticing a bluegrass mandolin player walking by and asking him to play. We were joined by a guitarist/singer and jammed for the next few hours. I joined in a rehearsal with the mountain music ensemble and we rehearsed for the evening service. At 8:00 the pianist and I had about thirty minutes to rehearse for the concert. Hipster Mose Allison once told a friend, “If we have to rehearse, it’s already too late.” Since the concert and situation was casual

I chose about eight selections to play and interjected commentary to give more background and context to my arranging process, thus making the event a concert/lecture. The playing and commentary during the concert went well and I heard many positive comments the next morning.

By first adhering to the group and building relationships with village musicians, guests, and staff I was able to earn credibility in a very short period of time. I went to work on being seen as a musician and also responded to any request to play when asked. I used both my interpersonal skills and my musical skills to demonstrate my competence leading to acceptance. They could also sense that I was there for the greater good of the music and not just my own personal gain. This journey and concert was a success because everything came together quickly and I was adaptable to any situation.

If I were trapped on a desert island with only five picks of jazz recordings I would take along: Dexter Gordon, *Go*; Sonny Rollins, *Saxophone Colossus*; John Coltrane, *Africa/Brass*; *The Genius Of Charlie Parker*,

#4—*Bird And Diz*; and Bill Evans, *You Must Believe in Spring*. If however I was in a new city or location like this I would find as many playing situations that I could and build a network to play with as many musicians that I encountered. Back in Minneapolis I find this to be a current norm for musicians on the scene. Orchestras program Jazz series, Chamber ensembles groups are organizing new music concert series, bassists are “curating” rooms and booking clubs and music of many styles is being performed with urgency and enthusiasm. While the financial opportunities and options to play are challenging, musicians continue building a dynamic and creative environment. Always be on the lookout for them and you will be rewarded by the music that they are producing.

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