Intermediacy

As the sun sets on the long, painful day of Donald Trump's second Inauguration, accompanied by his initial decrees undermining the rule of law, I finally turn away from the dispiriting news and drive less than a mile for some solace. I enter the Side Door music hall, guitar case in hand, and take a seat in one of the metal folding chairs set up for weekend concerts. On Monday nights, however, the venue is a make-shift classroom for aging amateurs, mostly Baby Boomers like me, hoping to improve their guitar skills through a mixture of music theory and technique. Usually, there are about six of us for these three-hour sessions, spread among the first few rows facing a low-rise, trapezoidal stage occupied by our venerated teacher, Steve R., one of the best guitarists in town. Aside from his inexpensive Recording King guitar, his tools are a small whiteboard and a large diagram of the "CAGED" system of fretboard note patterns. By contrast, most of the students wield high-end guitars that we value more than our cars and strive to live up to. Mine is a Taylor 412, a small-bodied rosewood model, which for the past few years has been my go-to among the four acoustic guitars that I own.

On this night, we practice soloing over the chords to "Ain't No Sunshine," the 1971 Bill Withers hit, and dissect the melody for "Summertime" from a lead sheet in a "Real Book" of jazz tunes. Distracted by updates on my phone of Day 1 of the maleficent king's reign, I botch playing the vocal melody of Withers' song in my 12-bar solo, and I do not immediately grasp the reason for a slur connecting two notes of the Gershwin classic (it represents a melisma, a syllable sung to more than one note). To their credit, neither Steve nor my fellow students utter a word about the day's dreadful events. They realize that part of the reason we gather each week is to set aside our problems and the problems of the world by exploring the magic of

music, including intervals, learning to play variations of familiar chords, and breaking down those chords into their constituent notes, like nerdy kids taking apart an analog clock to see how it works.

Steve, who bears a slight resemblance to Paul McCartney beneath his salt-and-pepper beard and Fender baseball cap, dazzles us with his guitar chops, his understanding of music theory, and an encyclopedic knowledge of songs—from the Great American Songbook to punk rock and everything in between. Our guru is articulate, cheerful, exuberant, and, above all, encouraging: every question he is asked is "a great one"; he claims to hear progress in our chord-playing exercises despite long stretches of silence; and after each round of spotty solos, he manages to identify and praise the small sections that managed to sound musical.

Owing mostly to seniority, I am one of the more "advanced" players in the group—"advanced" being a relative term, since I remain firmly in the intermediate camp. Despite thousands of hours of practicing and playing, I can't seem to master certain skills, such as "playing the changes," fingering chords that require the pinky to stretch above the ring finger, and maintaining a constant up-down-up-down motion with my picking hand. Locked into old habits, I remain a slave to chord grips and scale patterns, rather than having an intuitive grasp of their constituent parts. Instead, I would like to be able to play guitar the same way I can type: going from idea to execution without thinking about what my fingers are doing. But there is still too much mental gymnastics going on, and before I know it, I have lost track of the chord I'm supposed to be soloing over.

At age 67 and with the benefit of 10 years of guitar lessons—with two great teachers—I had hoped to become a truly advanced player by now. But

that status has eluded me, or perhaps I haven't wanted it badly enough to put in the rigorous practice to achieve it. Unlike the rainbow of nine belts in karate, there are only three basic skill levels in playing guitar—beginner, intermediate, and advanced. Guitar web sites offer no shortage of definitions for these categories, but here is how I think of them: You are a beginner if you can strum in time to a song's tempo while playing open chords (sometimes referred to as "cowboy chords"), which cover only the first three frets (and thus include no sharp or flat chords). You have reached the intermediate level when, among other things, you know how to play bar chords as well as the three types of seventh chords (dominant, minor, and major), and you know enough music theory to identify a song's key and play rudimentary solos by employing a few scales and arpeggios. And you have scaled to the highest peak when you know a wide variety of scales, and can shift smoothly between strumming and individual notes, even while singing. As one guitarist put it in an online forum: "To consider yourself advanced, you'll want to be able to play something just the way you hear it in your head, and play if flawlessly." To me, that means being able to hear a song for the first time and start playing it as if it's been in your repertoire for years. That's what Steve can do in his sleep. It's what studio musicians do.

Although I remain frustrated at being unable to hoist myself to a new ledge above the intermediate plateau I've occupied for the past decade or so, I do not take for granted the immense pleasure I get from playing, especially with others. Since I retired in 2021, I have become a regular presence at a few monthly acoustics jams, and I've been invited to a few dinner-guitar parties featuring some excellent players. Jamming can be an uplifting, and even sublime, experience: locking eyes with another guitarist or singer who is with you note for note (or word for word) can establish more of a connection

than a two-hour lunch. And when the song is one that I particularly like and have played before, it can be heavenly. During the past year, I have even performed at some open mics, usually with a friend and fellow Monday night student named Kevin, with whom I practice almost every week.

I suppose I should just accept that I am, and probably always will be, intermediate-level player—just as I have resigned myself to the fact that I no longer have hair on top of my head and will never again be able to hit a 15-foot jump shot. After all, who am I trying to impress? Probably myself, which is why I am also now trying once again to learn to read music (i.e., standard notation), rather than tablature, even though many of the most talented guitarists—including Eric Clapton, George Harrison, Jimi Hendrix, and Tommy Emanuel—never felt the need. (For the unversed, tablature, or "tabs" as it is commonly known, refers to a musical notation system in which numbers representing frets to be fingered, written over a "staff" of six lines, one for each string. Compared to learning to read music in the classic sense, it is like taking a scenic drive up a mountain rather than free soloing.)

At least I have progressed well beyond the beginning stage of my college years. I arrived in my dorm at State University of New York at Buffalo with a parlor-sized Guild guitar, a bar mitzvah present to my dad which he bequeathed to me in my adolescence. (I never heard him play it, though I later discovered that he took a few lessons when I was a baby. His instrument was the trumpet, which he sometimes played along to his modest collection of jazz records or from a compact horizontal songbook containing staff music in his handwriting.) Nearly every student on my dorm's floor had an acoustic or electric guitar as an accessory to stereo systems with speakers as large as suitcases. In that marijuana-infused milieu, I learned to play all the cowboy chords, as well as a few bar chords. Then came the minor

pentatonic scale (1, b3, 4, 5, b7), which seemed to unlock the secret to playing like a rock star, but turned out to be an unreliable crutch. My addiction was such that, in my sophomore year, I withdrew $275 from my savings account (a large sum back then) and purchased a new Yamaha, returning to my dad his bar mitzvah present in disrepair. (It was probably no coincidence that at around the same time, I switched my major from engineering to English with the dream of becoming a writer.)

I could rarely resist the temptation to set aside my course work and carry my new axe into the dorm's stairwell to experience the built-in reverb effect. I also remember participating in a talent show in the cafeteria, playing Neil Young's "Down by The River" with my then-best friend, Ellen, a fellow English major with whom I often confided but never kissed. Since most of Neil's solo consists of machine-gun playing of the same high E note, I managed to approximate parts of it. Then, as Ellen sang and played the chords to Fleetwood Mac's "Landslide" fingerstyle, I could only softly strum them. In time, however, I learned to play a few fingerstyle songs myself, including Paul McCartney's "Blackbird," the pinnacle of my college education.

I continued playing guitar after college, but with far less frequency, particularly after diving into my work as a newspaper reporter, then raising a family, then going to law school at night, and then switching careers. I recall taking my Yamaha on a family camping trip and realizing that the neck had warped so badly that you could slide a match book across the fretboard without touching the strings. During my law school days, Jill surprised me with an electric guitar and amplifier she bought from a music store after she had seen me playing it while our younger daughter Faith was taking violin lessons there. Between briefing cases and studying for exams, I would pick up that Fender Squire and play along with The Beatles' "Let It Be

Naked" album (with songs from their 1969 rooftop concert) or a few iconic Rolling Stones songs. Not that I could duplicate a single George Harrison or Keith Richards lick; I was still just a beginner. But it was great fun pretending to be the fifth Beatle (with apologies to Billy Preston).

As I settled into my job as a deputy state attorney general and our daughters became more independent as teenagers, I found myself listening mostly to acoustic guitar music. Jill and Faith responded with a birthday gift of a new Yamaha L6 to replace my sclerotic college Yamaha. A few years later, and with Jill's encouragement, I began taking lessons at The Guitar Workshop in a tiny strip mall in East Sacramento. Once a week, I would leave work early, drive down J Street, and enter the store through a door on which was mounted a device that "played" the jangly opening chord to Hard Day's Night when it opened.

My teacher there was an amiable jazz guitarist named Ken, who introduced me to the blues through Robert Johnson, and thus my first exposure to the standard 12-bar, I-IV-V progression. I vividly recall the excitement I felt upon playing the chord sequence to Jimi Hendrix's "Little Wing" (written out for me by Ken) and realizing that the right blend of major and minor chords could be as enticing as a beautiful melody. Music Theory 101. Over the next few years, Ken would show me different ways to play seventh (dominant) chords up and down the neck and even stranger grips for making diminished and augmented chords. He'd also write out the tabs for solos I wanted to learn. Because of his background, Ken steered me toward jazz, and I felt like I was really moving up in the music world when I heard myself playing stuff like "Girl from Ipanema" (Carlos Jobin) and "It Don't Mean a Thing" (Duke Ellington).

But as cool as it was to play some jazz tunes, the genre didn't particularly excite me. Instead I wanted to play the kind of music that makes you want to move your body beyond tapping your toes and snapping your fingers. And the albums that I kept loading onto my iPod were those with elements of folk, blues, country and R&B, and played on acoustic instruments—in other words, roots music, a.k.a. Americana. And so, in late 2014, I began talking weekly lessons with Steve at The Fifth String, a music school then located in East Sacramento. Steve taught me the basics of fingerstyle technique through Clapton's version of Big Bill Broonzy's "Hey, Hey" (from his "Unplugged" album) and Credence Clearwater's "Suzy Q." He studied my right-hand like a batting coach analyzes a baseball player's swing, suggesting tweaks and exercises to achieving more precision and cleaner notes. He also worked with me on improving my rhythm, which a metronome reminded me was often uneven. I was allowed to set the agenda, including songs I wanted to learn. To my amazement, Steve was not only familiar with each one, but also knew how to play them, note for note.

After a few months, Steve invited me to join the Monday night group lessons, which began immediately after my individual half-hour lesson ended at 6:30. I was warmly welcomed into the circle. I found it comforting to learn songs in a group setting, rather than on my own, and to see that I wasn't the only one struggling to finger certain chords or plays riffs with the proper syncopation. During my first few years in the group, Steve would hand out single-page (Nashville-style) chord charts he had written for the one or two songs we would play that night. Those sheets now fill two thick binders on my guitar bookshelf in rough alphabetical order, a musician's OED. They are among the dozen or so binders I have filled in my ten years of lessons. Others

bear such labels as: “Fingerstyle & Flatpicking,” “Electric Guitar,” “Theory & Scales,” “Jam Songs” (two volumes), and “BOPS” (Book of Playable Songs).

Flipping through those thick binders when I have occasion to add new plastic-sheathed pages, it is hard to believe that I once knew how to play all of those songs, as well as the solos, licks, and picking exercises that Steve provided us over the years. Maybe with a bit of practice, I could once again play them, or at least most of them. But it also occurs to me that my learning curve may have peaked, and that my intermediate-level skills are slipping.

Ironically, part of this is due to having ventured into the realm of performing during the past couple years. As I’ve concentrated more on my singing (including trying to harmonize, which comes as naturally to me as changing out spark plugs), I have relied on songs that are relatively easy to play in order to minimize mistakes. Also, although I’m now comfortable playing in public, my fingers sometimes get stage fright: on more than one occasion, I have aborted a Chris Smither song because the fingers of my right hand went on strike. This is one of the reasons why I recently resumed individual lessons with Steve, after a two-year hiatus. (Another reason is that I have more time to practice now that the law school class on legal writing that I teach in the fall has ended.)

Getting back to Monday night, for the past year or so Steve’s lessons have focused more on music theory than learning a bunch of songs. We will sometimes spend several weeks examining different aspects of the same song or exploring how the same chord can be played in different ways. (In recent weeks, we have dissected “All of Me” to the point where the song’s title could be applied to our treatment of it.) It is often a slog, but Steve tells us that in the long run, this is the best way to improve our skills, and he has assured us

that, at some miraculous point, the light will suddenly switch on, as it did for him. I cling to the hope that it will for me too. After all, I have too much of my life invested in it at this point to just give up.

One of the things that hasn't changed about Monday nights is the opportunity to perform a song on The Side Door stage. During these "open mic" sessions, Steve acts as the sound man, setting up mics and adjusting the levels on the slim column speakers that flank the stage like foul poles. Over the years, I have worked up the courage to play several songs (probably more than any other student), boosting my confidence and helping me to make my peace with my sometimes-pitchy singing voice. Some I did justice to; others I wrongly convicted. More recently, Kevin and I treated the class to a few Beatles' songs we have worked into our set, including "Ticket to Ride," "Don't Let Me Down," and "Dear Prudence." The other students listen attentively, and Steve is always complimentary, even when we deserve to be treated like Dylan when he went electric at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival.

By contrast, one guy in our class, Tom, dazzles us with his open mic performances. He is an accomplished fingerstyle player with a resonant baritone voice that reminds me of Gordon Lightfoot. And yet, Tom struggles as much as anyone to play chord inversions and smooth solos. To my mind, all the theory Tom needs to know is already in his fingers. But like the rest of us, he wants to improve. So my envy is mixed with admiration.

In December, I reached a performance milestone. I was invited to play for two hours on the outdoor patio of a restaurant on the edge of midtown Sacramento. (I have Jill to thank: she was among the artists whose works were displayed at an adjacent gallery, and she suggested to the gallerist, whose brother runs the restaurant, that I could perform on the patio during

the art show.) I decided to claim the first hour as a solo act and invite Kevin to join me for the second half. With one exception, I stuck to fairly simply songs that I have been playing for years—that exception being "Free Fallin'" by Tom Petty, which Steve had taught us a few weeks earlier. The distinctive chords are easy to play, but singing the chorus is a challenge because Petty's voice rises into Neil Young territory. I strained my vocal cords to belt out the chorus and thought I had pulled it off.

By the time Kevin joined me on the stage, the audience had grown to more than a dozen people, most of whom seemed to be enjoying our set, which ran long. When it was over, my fingers were aching, but the adrenaline was still pumping, enough to counter any effect from the IPA I sipped sloppily between songs. More amazingly, my wool cap, which I had tossed upside down on the floor for tips, contained $66, and the gallery owner handed me an envelope stuffed with ten $20 bills, despite my telling her earlier that the experience of performing would be sufficient payment. I split the proceeds with Kevin, and as I counted out the cash, I felt like we had just held up a bank. Although the experience was exhilarating, I also had the thought that I would look back years later at it being the high point of my performance career. A paid gig for our mediocre talent?

About a week later, my friend Paul, who plays in a jazz band and came to hear me play that night, gently told me that I looked like I was suffering while singing "Free Fallin'." But he apparently did not find my entire set dreadful because he also agreed to team up with me for a future performance. Since then, we have gotten together a few times to practice a set list that accommodates our somewhat different tastes. (He doesn't like Neil Young and is not familiar with the music of Lucinda Williams or Gillian Welch). Although Paul plays stand-up bass in his band, he also is a very good guitar

player—far better than me—and when we practice, he does quite a bit of coaching, which can be rather humbling. On the one hand, I realize that this is probably the best way for me to up my game. But at the same time, I resent his occasional frowning and dismissive hand-waving. It's not that Paul is condescending; he's a very thoughtful and kind person. It's just that he takes great pride in his craft and doesn't want to lower his standards just because he'll be playing with someone with less skill than him. Someone who, like me, has not yet risen above the intermediate level.

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