



## Articles

### How To Develop Your Music Away From Your Instrument, Part II

By MICHAEL SMOLENS

In ["How To Develop Your Music Away From Instrument, Part I"](#) Michael created some new possibilities for creativity and musical expression. By examining how our listening tends to be filtered and biased, we can allow encounters with music throughout the day to be opportunities for artistic growth. Part II focuses on specific action you can take to further your music when you are away from home — whether on a business trip or family event. Find Michael Smolens' [offerings for classes and private lessons](#) under Music.



#### TRAVEL AND MORE TRAVEL

More and more people find themselves in a position to travel. For some it might be for business, either for a routine planning meeting or for an annual training program. For others it might be visiting or helping to take care of a family member. (In fact, I began this article at my Father's home in a different city). And for others it might be a part of their recreation commitment — either alone, with a partner, or with a group.

Getting out of town can be a very helpful break from routine and a chance to maintain key relationships. And yet, the majority of working adults who I have worked with find consistent practice to be a challenge, especially in the beginning.

#### ***Music Technology's Three Pillars:***

##### **PORTABILITY / FLEXIBILITY / AFFORDABILITY**

Nowadays there are many powerful tools that can facilitate musical creativity in virtually any setting, especially away from home. These tools all need to contain three features in order for them to be truly useful.

##### 1) Portability

Though it might not feel like your beloved Martin guitar, there are guitars that use a full-sized neck and a tiny body that keep your music moving forward. And while there might not be a grand piano at your disposal, miniature keyboards that have a 2.5 to 4-octave range (some with full-sized keys, none weighted as of this writing) are entering the market

with many features. Inexpensive models of standard acoustic instruments are handy for those who travel frequently, as are cut-down versions of items such as a drum set made up of a series of practice pads. Battery powered amps (especially Crate and Roland) feature clean, dependable sound that take up very little space if your trip needs amplification. Did I mention that the human voice is the ultimate in portability?

## 2) Flexibility

Many acoustic instruments can be played either with mutes or using various warm-up techniques (like 'whistle tones' on any flute) that are actually quieter than a television. Virtually every electronic instrument or device can be played with headphones if the environment demands it. Devices to listen to large quantities of music are approaching the size of a pack of gum and laptop computers can be equipped with enough software to produce finished recordings!

## 3) Affordability

Here is good news for both the player of acoustic instruments and the Techno Head. "Student" model instruments are becoming increasingly like their mid-grade counterparts (thanks in part to technology) and electronic instruments continue to offer more features at lower prices. Web-based technology, such as eBAY and Craig's List, makes the purchase of used instruments all the easier (and cheaper).

## **SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS**

When faced with the challenge of keeping in touch with one's music it is very easy to think, "Why bother, I'll only be there for a couple of days." A sure fire way to create excitement for art-on-the-road is to have a list of concrete possibilities at hand. Remember — many of these items do not require a private space and can be done on a plane or even while taking a walk.

### 1) Listening/Ear-Training/Analysis

- review recordings of private lessons or group classes
- listen to new artists — either ones you bring with you, some from your host, some you see live for the first time
- compare one or more elements from two different pieces
- clap melodic or percussion rhythms

### 2) Singing

- shoulder/neck/face self-massage
- floor stretches, including use of exercise ball
- breathing exercises
- sing melodies with just a drone such as a tamboura or open-tuned guitar
- sing chords from the bottom up or from top down
- sing "guide-tones" from a chord progression
- imitate and improvise with new environmental sounds, both natural and mechanical
- write out in detail every vowel in a song

—determine your points of breathing for a song

—investigate the character and motivation of a song

### 3) Instrumental

—work out the fingering of a difficult piece or passage

—memorize a new register, such as fingering for the top octave of a sax

—get familiar with a new effect, like harmonics on a cello

—explore a new distribution of parts on your instrument, like on a drumset

### 4) Composing

—create lyrics on a new theme

—create lyrics about something happening right now

—create a foundation for a new piece on a laptop

—create a melody that uses new shapes

### 5) General

—review notes from private lessons or group classes

—inventory the gains from a recent performance, recording, or workshop

—make music on a completely new instrument from the environment

—read a 'how to' column in a music magazine

—practice various forms of polyrhythms or signature rhythms, for instance bell patterns

—construct a performance set-list that reflects some major change in your approach — such as a new work or segueing unrelated works

—study a score and try to hear it in your mind

## **A NOTE TO SONGWRITERS AND COMPOSERS**

Creating continuity in your practicing and maintaining a sense of momentum is often a challenge for anyone away from home. Life's unpredictabilities can show-up with your flight being delayed, your business meeting's agenda being altered, or your family gathering receiving "unexpected guests."

Yet these very forces of instability can be very stimulating for the receptive songwriter or composer. Like many composers, new environments have prompted me to create new works when away from home, especially when the environment is significantly different from my home. I remember waking up once in a rural setting in New Mexico. As soon as my feet touched the stone floor I felt an overwhelming sense of rhythm reaching back thousands of years and I used this sensation to help write a new section of a piece. People also benefit from being out of their routine at home, which is often filled with many different ongoing commitments. Though both the change in environment and change in routine are important, I experience the greatest sense of creative freedom when my routine is changed and I'm able to put my other commitments farthest away.

## **BRINGING IT ALL HOME**

With the right technical aids and a set of exciting project possibilities, your next trip can be a rich and rewarding artistically. I encourage you to initiate a conversation right now with your music teacher, band mates, or your significant other about how to make practicing on the road something you can follow through on.

In Part III of this series, "How To Develop Your Music Away From Instrument", Michael will look closer at the parallel between working out and practicing music on the road. He'll also examine the most common reasons for musicians not to practice on the road and the impact these reasons might have on you, your guests, and your community back home.

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