Embracing The Trust Factor–
Self-Authorization At Work

article by Michael Smolens ©2011

Do you remember the first time you performed a new dance, tried out a comedy sketch, applied for a grant, collaborated with a new partner, or taught a class (or private student) for the first time? Chances are that you might have thought something along these lines: "I'm not ready for this," "I should have studied (*fill in the blank*) first," "I'm too spread out with other projects to make this work," or "People will just see right through this (or me)." And how many times are we grateful that we took the risk? More often than not!

Regardless of the medium or style of art that you do, you'll always be learning new techniques and new concepts. It is an inevitable by-product of the artistic process. This fact inspires some, and terrifies others. Not surprisingly, we often feel a combination of both qualities. And this combination of inspiration and terror doesn't magically disappear as soon as we begin to get established, or even well-known in an art. Talk with any master of an art and you might hear something like this: "*My duty is to struggle with the impossible on stage; that's why the singing and the crazy sounds and movements*." (famed pianist Keith Jarrett speaking about his solo concerts of entirely improvised music.*)

Every generation has its accounts of the challenges that faced the true pioneers in their art. Either:

1) the physical materials of the art didn't exist yet, OR
2) the techniques of the art didn't exist yet, OR
3) there was a complete lack of acceptance by the artist's peers, general public, or prevailing power structure (social, economic, religious, etc.), OR
4) all of the above forces came into play when a new work or performance technique was launched.

Recent examples of this are the riotous reaction to Stravinski's score to the ballet "The Rite Of Spring," the number of television studios that rejected the initial "Star Trek" series, and the legal battle that ensued from the publication of Allen Ginsberg's poem "Howl." All three of these projects are now considered indispensable to their respective fields, though at the time were met with indifference, or outright hostility.

Even when our goals are much more modest, it can feel as if we're creating everything from scratch and that no one will appreciate it. This is not to say that clarity and preparation aren't important in the arts; they obviously are. Yet, no matter how much preparation we do, artists frequently report hearing from their Internal Committee variations on "*This just isn't going to fly*..." just before they start a new project. For non-artists, probably the closest thing to that kind of uncertainty would be a job interview. Even when someone becomes very skilled at interviewing, there's still the *certainty of uncertainty*.

I'm going to illustrate the dynamics of 'throwing my hat over the wall' with my recollection of a recording session that I recently participated in. But first, let's set the groundwork for my story.

Some Recording Basics

There are two primary ways of recording a song in a studio setting. One is to record all of the instrumentalists and vocalists at the same time, either in one room or with each musician in a separate room to achieve sonic isolation and clarity in the mixing process. The second way is to have each musician come in separately for their own session, and this approach is called "tracking." The bass, drums/percussion, and simpler harmonic parts (usually guitar or keyboard) are typically done first and are called "basic tracks" or "rhythm section tracks," while the more complex accompanying parts, solos, and vocals are usually done later.

If after assembling the various tracks there is a sonic or artistic problem with a part, the person who is acting as the leader—either the main artist or producer—will decide whether that part needs to be re-recorded. This decision is never taken lightly, as it may involve considerable expense to re-do a track, or find a different musician to record the part, or duplicating the feel and/or tone color of the original track; (for example, the original musician may no longer have access to the specific instrument used on the recording). There's also the expense of re-mixing the whole piece, or missing a production deadline.

The dynamism that comes from recording everyone together is perennially balanced against the flexibility of tracking each musician separately, gaining the ability to quickly fix problem spots. The latter technique is generally favored, unless:

1) the music absolutely requires everyone to be recorded in the same room, OR
2) the group is exceptionally well-rehearsed, OR
3) the project is on an extremely tight budget.

Although a more complex part is more likely to be re-recorded, the leader may feel the need for an earlier rhythm section track to be replaced in order for it to interact more organically with one of the latter tracks, as is the case with an improvised solo. Under certain circumstances this can yield great results, and I have worked with some very highly-skilled bassists and percussionists who specialize in just that type of recording work.

Case Study: Vocal Section of "Lavalava"

A more typical need to re-do a rhythm section part lies in some fundamental sonic problem. And that was the initial reason for my mix/mastering engineer telling me, "Michael, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but I fear that your current bass part is not going to give us what our mix needs. I've tried every trick possible and you need to consider re-doing it."

After listening to the song and focusing on the bass, I agreed and said, “Actually, the part itself doesn’t seem to lock in with the rest of the percussion as much as it could.”

“You know, I’ve got a great plugin for any kind of bass sound you could possibly want.** Why don’t *you* consider playing it? After all, you’re very familiar with the song and you’ve written a fair number of bass parts on the CD already. I’m sure you’ll knock it out on the first take.”

“Sure, I’ll give it a try.”

Making Sense Of It At Home

After that session I set upon practicing the bass part on my keyboard at my studio in preparation. And that’s when the *real* work began. It turns out that I never actually wrote out all of the parts to this piece. I created my *balafon* (West-African marimba) part along with the horn unison line, and nothing else. The other percussion parts, electric bass, and lead vocal were all created by the players. Although this was atypical for my CD as a whole, that was the spirit I strived for in this section of the suite. In this context, band members tend to feel more autonomy and ownership of the music, even though they did not compose the piece. Some bands work entirely in this model where only a skeleton is provided by one band member or generated by the group. How each player creates their own part is really the trademark of such an ensemble. In my situation of being the sole composer and arranger, notating each player’s part would serve the same function as backing up a file on a computer—a very good investment of time.

Besides the combination of fast and slow parts, West-African music is especially noted for its complex meshing of duple and triple meter parts. The closer I listened, the more I heard these deep rhythmic overlays and I began to feel pretty intimidated. *What should I really be playing here?* I kept musing with each replay of the song. This was particularly true during one of the vocal solos when the vocalist was virtually hydroplaning between both rhythmic worlds! Finally, I just said to myself, *OK, you’re not Mr. Afro-Beat Studio Bassist, but you’ve played lots of traditional West-African music and have heard a fair amount of African fusion music. You’ve written plenty of convincing bass parts, and even sing vocal bass at gigs, so don’t pull the ‘I’m just a newbie’ nonsense. If it tanks, you can always bring in some heavy studio cat. JUST GO FOR IT!...*

So yes, I did practice creating a bass part before the recording session, *though I still felt unprepared* as I drove up to the session. Thankfully, calm did prevail. How? **I assessed which parts of the piece felt more comfortable and which still felt unsure. I committed to starting the recording session with what I felt were the more straightforward parts and building my confidence from there.** Here is the structure of the piece:

INTRO
HORN MELODY (1) **HORN MELODY (2)** **HORN MELODY (3)**
VOCAL SECTION (1) **VOCAL SECTION (2)**

Because the Horn Melody sections were so clear and rhythmically full, I planned to record the bass part for these first. I thought that I could gain further confidence by having the engineer simply digitally copying and pasting my part into the other two Horn Melody sections, if my playing was strong enough. I planned to next record the Intro because that was so similar to the Horn Melody, though it was more challenging because it did not have the busy melody to ground the complex rhythms. The third area was going to be the first Vocal Section. Even though it is somewhat adventurous, the rhythms were relatively clear for me and the background vocals helped in clarifying the phrasing. I left the second Vocal Section for last, which contained much more complex phrasing combinations and brilliant background parts.

"*Just strap on your parachute and you'll land on your feet somehow*," I told myself. Mind you, the pressure of recording today is much less intimidating than the earlier days of one or two complete 'takes' (versions of a track) per part using analog techonology (tape). Modern digital recording techniques allow not only for unlimited attempts (within one's budget), but also the capability of cleaning-up performance errors, changing dynamics or note durations, and even moving portions of a 'take' anywhere within the entire song.

At The Recording Session

Because I followed the above-mentioned plan, the recording session turned out remarkably similar to what I have just described. Due to the increasing difficulty of each section of the piece—the Horn Section, Intro, and Vocal Sections I and II—one might expect that Vocal Section II would take significantly more time than the Horn Section to record. **Surprisingly, each took roughly the same amount of time. What changed was the kind of energy and focus I brought to each section. The more risky the music, the more receptivity and sense of abandon I needed to bring to it.**

And where did this reservoir of abandon come from? From my commitment to fully surrender to the music. So much so, that whatever fear I might have around any musical situation becomes completely submerged, leaving it without a chance to disrupt what I'm about to do artistically. Fortunately, I did have an engineer that not only respected my plan of action, but also supported me when my playing needed to be at its freest.

Post-Recording Chat

As we were wrapping up after the session, the engineer and I spoke for a while about the relationship between self-authorization and trusting the creative process in-the-moment. He asked me, "Do the 'butterflies' ever go away when you take on something risky?"

I replied, "Well, there are two aspects involved here. The first has to do with what tangible skills get developed as I put myself in more and more unpredictable situations. It's rare that I don't come away from a performance or recording session without an item that needs attention—it might concern my playing or singing or bandleading, my logistical savvy, or my communication skills. These are things that I can pinpoint, write down, and discuss with a peer or mentor. When I take action on the item, the chances are very good that the next time something like that happens, I'll be able to respond to it more calmly and effectively. Sometimes the item is as simple as bringing a second music stand light for

long charts, or it may involve addressing some underdeveloped aspect of my playing for weeks or even months."

"Or even years. And what about the other aspect?" asked the engineer.

"The second aspect really revolves around my *emotional reaction* to being in an artistically risky situation. You know, all that chatter in your brain that can inhibit, or even stop, an action or idea dead in its tracks. People generally handle new circumstances better after they've amassed lots of skills in a given area. Obviously, it builds confidence. What I'm actually pointing to here is my ability to manage my emotional and physical reaction to an unpredictable circumstance, so that I can allow myself to come up with truly in-the-moment solutions. It's a skill that's based on receptivity and flexibility rather than 'having everything all figured out.' Yes, I know that I can generally handle a playing, logistical, or communication issue with enough time and focus. But I believe that this self-management skill is fundamentally different from amassing those tangible skills, though the common perception fostered by many teachers and more advanced artists is that once you handle the skills, then the attitudinal cooperation naturally catches up. I don't think that's necessarily the case for many artists."

"That's exactly what I do when I work on a mix problem," replied my engineer. "If I say to myself that I've exhausted all of my possibilities, then I'm much less likely to find an unexpected solution. Like trying a software program that's not even designed to address the problem that I'm dealing with."

"Can you give me an example when you're mixing a project?" I asked.

"Sure. In one of my projects I tried to reduce a certain frequency on an instrument, but I didn't want to lose its characteristic sweetness. Well, quite by accident, I found that using a plugin that was only designed for special effects added the rich harmonic texture that I was looking for. Mind you, the company only advertised this unit as an affect tool, for a very specific purpose. To my delight, this plugin got the job done fabulously even though it wasn't designed to deal with my mix issue. After a while, I noticed that there were many plugins and processors that had unintended effects that I could use to my advantage."

"Have you gotten more accustomed to this working to your advantage?" I asked.

"In the beginning, I thought that these were just flukes, totally random, and that I could never really depend on these for most of my mixes. When I heard this chatter in my mind, I noticed that I couldn't be as creative and purely intuitive about trying a totally new avenue." he explained.

"And then what changed?"

"My attitude about my own creativity. I simply got better at managing my 'doubting chatter' and trusting that with every new project, whenever some new technical challenge would emerge..."

"—you would then discover some unchartered solution, right?" I interrupted.

"Right." he retorted. "It was more than just having more 'tricks', though I certainly keep track of those and use them whenever possible. It became a game of The Bigger The Challenge, the more I have to think 'outside the box.'"

"Wouldn't you say that that is a learned skill?"

"No doubt about it, though it didn't come naturally at first. Now I just enjoy the ride, uh, for the most part," he confessed.

"Like my experience with this recording. Even though it was a bit nerve-wracking to throw my hat over the fence, I'm really glad I did," I said.

He smiled and said, "Me, too."

* Musician Magazine interview, p. 61, (year/issue unknown)

** 'plugin'—a piece of computer software; in this case, a sound module able to replicate a wide variety of electric and acoustic basses with remarkable accuracy.