

It's The Guitar's Fault

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Some people learn quickly; some the hard way. It took me three times before I learned my lesson.

My first club gig was arranged by my guitar teacher, Tommy Crook. He generously allowed me to substitute for him in his band, consisting of guitar, pedal steel and drums. These were the top guys in Tulsa. Of course they were playing at a topless/bottomless bar, but even at the age of 16 I barely noticed this, being so wrapped up in trying to fit in musically with these awesome musicians. It could have been Carnegie Hall to me.

There were no rehearsals or charts, I just caught what I could by ear as it went by. I did a pretty decent job of not drawing attention to myself, playing defensively and quietly. Of course I knew I had a long way to go as a guitarist (I had played less than two years), but I also thought part of the weakness of the sound was my guitar (a Mosrite Ventures model). Its strings were too close together, its action was too low, its frets were too small and flat, its pickups were weak.

Along about the third set Tommy Crook came in to see how I was doing, then sat in with his own band on my guitar. It was as if Godzilla had wandered through the club swishing his tail. I realized for the first time that it had nothing at all to do with the guitar. It had everything to do with the guy playing the guitar. He sounded just as overwhelming as when he played his own vintage Gibson archtop. Yet his hands looked just like mine. Lesson #1.

A few years later I was out of high school and alternating between going to Stanford in California and playing with the Gap Band back in Tulsa. The other members were seasoned professionals. I could never figure out why they invited me to play with them. When they first called me I was playing rock at high school dances and dabbling with jazz. One of the band members had heard my high school stage band. The Gap Band was terrifying and I was completely out of my league, but I knew a good musical opportunity when I saw one. There were no rehearsals or charts, and I played the only chording instrument (it was before Charlie Wilson finished college and joined the band on keyboards). None of the music was familiar. Definitely a cold plunge under pressure. Fortunately I had a good ear, was smart, asked questions, exhibited humility and worked like a dog. We most commonly played at the Gallery Club, where on Sundays we'd play for eight hours straight (6-10 jazz set, then 10-2 blues night), or at J. D.'s International Cafe across the street, where we'd play from midnight until 5 am.

After I had played with the band for a while, Odell Stokes rejoined the band. I had been looking forward to this. He would play with the Gap Band whenever he was off the road from playing with Ike and Tina Turner, Bobby Blue Bland, Johnny Taylor and other famous soul bands. All of a sudden I had a titan standing next to me on the bandstand (he even knew the songs). To me he was Wes Montgomery and Jimi Hendrix rolled into one, and he was the sweetest, most supportive guy in the world. His nonchalant rhythm parts were the stuff musicologists could analyze forever yet still not explain the beauty of. But he would never talk about his playing, which he considered insignificant. He would always dismiss my questions with statements like "You're the man." If there was anything that his presence in my life illustrated, it was that I definitely was not the man. He was the most humble person I ever met.

At this time I was playing a very nice old Telecaster through a Fender Twin with JBL speakers. But I soon bought the same guitar (Gibson ES-175) and amp (Acoustic) that Odell used, and copied his knob settings, strings and pick choices. I just loved his sound, as well as his playing. Guess what! I still sounded just like me. He still sounded just like him. Lesson #2.

So I very seriously began to observe and dissect his playing and technique. Figuring out the notes came much faster than figuring out his technique, which was inscrutable. It was like asking a lion in mid-pounce, "How do you do that?". So it was years later before I began to understand what was at work, and longer before I was able to imitate it. Much of my analysis of how to use the body to support a pick came from watching this giant play instinctively.

Another three years later, I was back in town playing with the Gap Band when Leon Russell sat in. On guitar. On my guitar (a beautiful Les Paul custom). Leon was producing the band's first album. He was a brilliant pianist in all styles; I knew his playing well. He was a Tulsa success story, plus I had worked with a number of the musicians from the Joe Cocker Mad Dogs and Englishmen band in LA. I had studied this band and knew that Leon was a man of few notes on the guitar. On this night I found out why. He only played on one song, and during that song he only used two or three notes. But he played with such authority and with such a stinging tone that the audience of hundreds of drinkers and dancers literally gasped and fell silent when he played them. I noticed that they did not do this later when I played my usual thousands of notes (including the ones he played) and chord variations. Lesson #3. At least this time I did not have to buy another guitar and amp to learn the lesson.

At that point I decided to move on to new lessons. Finally understanding clearly that assertiveness was not a key element in my personality and therefore my playing, I realized that I would have to train myself musically to compensate for this. Otherwise I would be lost blending into the background for the rest of my life, not playing the music it was given to me to play. It had been gently proven to me that incredibly powerful music was coming out of regular hands on ordinary instruments. During the next couple of years of woodshedding I simply taught myself to play as if I had the authority to play. Through the process I even began to feel that I had the authority to play. It is somewhat like a shy person acting non-shy long enough that he even fools himself. (I know because I practiced this, too.) And I vowed never to forget Tommy's generosity, Odell's humility or Leon's simplicity and clarity of purpose.

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