

Rick's Place

Notes, Thoughts, and Random Musings on the Online Experience

by Rick Hein, AMIS web master

You don't get taken with the colors of paints that you've got. You've got to narrow it down. It's great to have all the possibilities, but it all starts with an idea.

To sit there and hope something will happen is like dumping 400 gallons of paint on the floor and hoping a picture is going to emerge. It doesn't work that way.

Michael Nesmith
Wired News

Who is this visionary popular artist, some of you might be saying. Those of you who have studied American popular culture or were teenagers between 1966 and 1969 will recognise him immediately. He was the Monkee with the woolly hat. Since those early days, he has been credited with inventing MTV, spearheading the country rock genre, and writing one of the first online novels.

The genesis of this inventing spirit may become a little clearer when you learn that his mother invented Liquid Paper™. She was divorced, down to her last dime and mortgaged the house to go into production. Little Michael and his friends packed the boxes and delivered the product on their bicycles. He came from a family of innovators and people willing to risk everything on what they believe.

Daniel Barenboim, in the Reith Lectures for the BBC, claims that the musical journey is not the result of the movement from A to G. Rather it is the journey from silence to A that is the heart of the musical journey. You've heard it before in this space: great art is born of restraint. Here are two musicians from wildly different genres adding their voices to the argument.

One of my composition teachers gave the assignment to write a piece, less than three minutes, using only one note. It could be used in any octave, but only that one note. By constraining the melodic and harmonic content, we were forced to explore rhythm, repetition, variation and dynamics. This stretched our compositions into a new path. We had to "think different" to solve the problem. Whilst the pieces weren't masterworks, when we played them at the next lesson we were all amazed at the variety of compositions that appeared.

When we are using our new sequencers, whether they be Garageband, Logic, Amadeus, or whatever the newest latest tool is, we must remember that in order to learn to use the tool, we must structure the approach with appropriate restraints in order to allow invention to take place. In using today's loop based sequencers, one of the key skills is editing. How can you take the material presented and modify it to fit your needs? Add notes? Subtract notes? Transpose? The wise teacher amongst us then asks the student to explain why they made that choice. The answers may in the first instance be, "Because it sounds better." The educator in you won't let that answer stand. You'll look for a way in to see what the student is thinking.

As you follow the curve of the year keep thinking differently and looking for new creative approaches for your students. Look for the ways of getting them to own the music and the music making process. If you have the access to technology, create some "wacky" composition projects. Who knows – great beauty and a deeper understanding of music may be born from your constraints.

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(By the way, no one has guessed it yet, the Smooth FM Secret song is up to £150,000!)