

The Nature of Music: A Week in the Wilds of Listening

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By Melissa R. Weidman

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I'm in the middle of the woods, blindfolded. In the distance, a drum is being sounded, one slow beat after another. I've been assigned to find my way back to the drum through a tangle of roots, rocks, ditches, trees, and branches. Freezing rain starts to fall. I'm shivering, my footing is slippery, and I can't see a thing. I begin to seriously wonder: what in the world am I doing in Tennessee in early spring, groping my way blindly through the wilderness? What does this have to do with music, specifically bass playing, which is what I came here to study for a week? Ouch! Hit my head! Can't think about anything else right now; gotta pay attention...my only choice is to rely on my other senses and hope I don't fall into a ravine or break a leg.

Somehow, miraculously, I find myself slowly making progress, sweeping my arms before me and lifting my feet high to make it over obstacles. The drum sounds a little closer. I trip, but don't fall. I tune my ears to hone my direction. I can smell the rain on the leaves. My breathing slows down to match the drum. After what seems like forever, a hand gently takes mine, then a voice asks me to sit down and remove my blindfold. I am startled to find the drum right there and everyone in my group sitting with me. We have successfully completed the "Drum Stalk." I realize with a sigh of relief that I can trust my senses beyond sight to find my way.

So begins Bass and Nature Camp, a five-day intensive session for musicians held in the wilderness west of Nashville. Bass players of all ages and places gather there twice a year to consider new ways of experiencing music. The camp was founded and is led by Victor Wooten, the Nashville-based bass player for the renowned jazz-fusion group Bela Fleck and the Flecktones, who can be heard at the Cape Cod Melody Tent most summers.

Vic, as he's commonly known, is considered by many to be the greatest bass player alive today, having won five Grammy awards and being the only musician ever named Bass Player of The Year by Bass Player Magazine three years in a row. He plays regularly with his own Victor Wooten Band, as well as with well-known musicians like Chick Corea, Stanley Clarke, Prince, and Dave Matthews. He's the originator of the double-thumbing technique, which revolutionized the effect of the bass as a rhythmic instrument. As a master animal tracker, juggler, skateboarder, magician, novelist, and martial arts expert, Vic has developed a wide range of concepts and exercises designed to broaden thinking about music. Key to his model is the use of nature as a learning metaphor.

The camp's faculty includes both nature and music experts. The nature group has

trained under Tom Brown Jr., a leader in animal tracking and wilderness skills. The music faculty includes Steve Bailey and Chuck Rainey, both venerated session players who've played on endless hits from Aretha Franklin and Quincy Jones to Steely Dan and Metallica. The official faculty is greatly enhanced by the presence of Vic's wife Holly, who handles many of the camp's logistics, their four beautiful children, Vic's mother, Dorothy, and his talented musician brothers; they include Joseph, keyboardist with the Steve Miller Band, Regi, a sought-after Nashville guitarist, and Roy, the drummer in the Flecktones known as Future Man. Special guests for this camp include young upright prodigy/ Berklee faculty member Esperanza Spalding and wilderness master Eustace Conway, subject of the bestseller *The Last American Man* by Elizabeth Gilbert.

The overall atmosphere is welcoming and openhearted, supportive of taking risks and exploring new approaches. During camp, music and nature exercises are woven together into a unique synthesis that can have a deeply transformational effect on those experiencing it. On April 1, Penguin Books published Victor Wooten's novel, *The Music Lesson*, which illustrates many camp principles worked into an imaginative storyline. As a Falmouth-based bass player, songwriter, and singer, I have been very fortunate to attend three of these camps over the past four years, the most recent during the week of April 12 to 18.

On opening night of the first camp, the group is asked to compile a list of the most important attributes of music. Common responses include notes, technique, pitch, tone, tempo, phrasing, emotion, dynamics, rhythm, space, and, especially for bass players, groove. Then Vic asks us to list attributes of nature. Responses have included: power, mystery, fear, life, death, energy, growth, source, creativity, danger, and love. We then swap the headings to explore the many levels of intersection between the two categories. Over the course of camp, we discover how the items numbered "2 through 10" of the music list matter as much, if not more, than just "the notes," which many of us have been conditioned to think of as most important.

"There is no such thing as a wrong note," Vic says. "It's how you use the notes that make all the difference." This is an astounding concept to anyone who has put in years of practicing scales and getting reprimanded for mistakes by well-meaning teachers. Of course, notes do matter, but a lot less than we have been led to believe. A narrow focus on their accuracy as most important limits us in all the other skills that can make music come alive for listener and player alike.

Another exercise I found memorable involved playing a solo using just one note. Yes, just one note for the entire solo, but employing all the possibilities of "2 through 10." I was given different scenarios to use in my head as stories to try telling through my playing. One such imaginary scenario was "Your first night ever been kissed." The next was "Your first night in jail." It was surprising to realize the difference in the way my playing sounded using different mental images, letting variations in tone, rhythm, and intensity tell the story. This drove home Vic's point that music is a language. If we learn to play it the way children learn to speak, by listening and continually trying, it can open new levels of awareness in our playing.

This most recent camp was a reunion camp of 75 campers—everyone had attended at least one camp before. There were many old friends, as well as new ones from camps other than mine. We were from almost every state in the US, as well as Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Austria, Italy, and Turkey. There were six teenagers, including a blind 14-year-old

boy and a jazz-playing 18-year-old girl. We were of many ethnic and musical backgrounds. Eight of us were women. Some of us played four-string funk, blues or rock, others five- or six-string fretless jazz, some upright acoustic. But we were all bass players, enjoying a rare opportunity to join in our devotion to the deep sound that anchors “the bottom” through rhythm and harmony.

We shivered together in unheated quarters through the unseasonably chilly weather, but were warmed with huge Southern meals of fried pork chops, grits and shrimp, biscuits and gravy, country ham and sweet tea. While we ate, we shared war stories of our lives as gigging musicians in our various communities. We endured a grueling schedule of both nature and music activities from before breakfast to late at night, hauling our basses from one cabin to another to study theory, sight-reading, performance, or improvisation, then putting them away to make primitive fires, shoot bows and arrows, or build a debris hut. We agreed that, as bass players, we were well-suited to the level of collaboration needed for such a camp. We wondered how lead guitarists might handle it differently. On the last night we were asked to improvise a group performance incorporating an assigned bird call and many of the concepts we had learned. Like all good campers, we came up with scathingly funny spoofs on our counselors, accentuated by our bird calls as the basis of intricately rhythmic bass lines that got the audience on its feet cheering.

By the end of the week, we emerged exhausted and elated, with a deeper understanding of what it means to listen and pay attention. We’d sat out in the woods surrounded by a wild symphony of birds, and suddenly understood how to listen not just to sound itself, but to the space around sound, the silence between notes. We’d walked blindfolded through the woods and realized how to use all our senses to overcome challenges in new ways. We’d studied musical theory and structure from an open-minded and playful perspective. We’d gotten up on stage to play with some of the hottest performers in the business and learned how to live fully in the moment, seeing how mistakes can become priceless opportunities for discovery, surprise, and joy. And we felt enormous gratitude for the planting of this seed of experience to bring to our communities back home—may it flower in our music for years to come.

For more information on the camp, visit www.victorwooten.com.

Melissa Weidman plays with Flipside, a local jazzy-blues group appearing at Liam Maguire’s Irish Pub on Main Street in Falmouth from 7:30 to 10:30 PM on the first and third Wednesdays of May and June. Visit www.flipsideduo.com or e-mail her at buzzback@gmail.com.

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