

Oh no.... PRACTICE! What should I work on, how long do I do it, how do I know I am developing my playing skills rather than setting bad habits? How do I develop musicality, should I work on technique? Should I get a teacher, should I learn to read music, do I do a little bit often or a lot at one sitting and how do I make it interesting and not boring. Practising is a puzzle to be solved.

Playing live is feel good for everyone, an adrenaline rush for the performer and glamour and admiration for the audience, whether it is at the Dog & Duck or Wembley arena. This environment is far from the lonely practice room on a cold winter's morning. It is often difficult to correlate the two in your mind and believe that the work you put in there will really develop what you do live. It actually takes a long time for it to really show through in your playing and it is a process that cannot be rushed.

There are many ways to approach practising which suit different players but there are basic concepts, which hold good for everyone, from a punk thrash drummer to classical timpanist. The first and most important thing is planning and structure. If you can structure your time and plan beforehand what you are going to work on then the stress of sitting at the instrument without direction is lifted.

Before the session, break the time up into strict units, say thirty or forty minutes. Then plan out what you want to work on and how you want to fill these periods. The first thing to consider is that practice is not a performance so you don't need to stress yourself about being overly creative for the whole session. It could be approached in the way you might structure time at the gym. Lots of repetition to build up stamina in different length units focusing on different requirements of performance. Looking at the overall picture you might want to consider the stamina you would need to make it through a two hour demanding gig. This will be mental concentration as well as physical strength. Then you might want to focus on shorter bursts of material at a higher work rate as might be encountered in a solo or flamboyant or up-tempo track. Think through the last band rehearsal or gig. What felt strained or did not come off so great? What have you been listening to that you want to work towards? It is actually a lot easier than you think to come up with ideas and before you know it the whole session is rammed. It is important to stick to the exact time periods because you then get to work on many different things.

I like to prepare CD's of practice material and also play with a click a lot. Using any audio editing package, sample and loop grooves and

other stuff. A great thing is to loop the verse and chorus of a song and make a fifteen-minute track out of it, 'verse-chorus-verse-chorus-verse etc'. Put four similar things on the CD and you have an hour to work ideas into a very simple song structure and besides playing what is on the recording, find different ways to develop the transition between the two sections yourself. Also, by doing this from records that inspire you, you can feel like you are 'playing' rather than just practising. Alternatively you might want to put a 45min repeating loop at a demanding tempo which you just play note for note for the whole duration. To develop the discipline to play one thing for 45mins is really hard, even if the part is easy.

Play with a straight click as well. It is often what you get in a studio environment. Practice playing behind the beat, on top of the beat and ahead of the beat. Spend time developing new material, from books, CD's, your teacher, whatever. Take a few ideas and give them a specific amount of time. Then move on to the next one. Otherwise you can get bogged down on one thing for too long and that can be disillusioning.

One important factor is to chart your progress. Keep a practice diary, marking in it what you worked on, what tempos you got something up to, how long you kept a demanding pattern going etc. It is really good for you psychologically to look back six months and although you feel as though you have not improved you can realise that certain patterns have lifted by 10 bpm and your stamina has developed greatly. It will also give you an opportunity to evaluate which sessions were most productive. These were not necessarily the ones you enjoyed the most though! Get to enjoy the pain and after some time you feel your playing begin to open up.

You also need time to just 'play' and develop creative ideas. I prefer to do this towards the end of a session, after a number of routines and maybe a cup of tea. It is also important to work things out at home, listen in detail to what other players are doing and most importantly, the concepts they employ to shape a whole song. The inspiration from this will help motivate your next session and the structured routine will warm you up and make that session productive.

Without a doubt, if you practice you will get better. It is guaranteed, whether your internal gremlins try to knock you back or not. From the most rebellious to the most dainty of players, they have all practised. Finally, don't forget your individuality. We are all unique. We could all work on the same material and end up sounding entirely different from

one another. It is your individuality as a player that counts for most. It does not specifically matter in my mind if a player is self-taught or not. If they have worked and listened really hard, it will happen.

