

## **4 Tips for Handling Criticism as a Jazz Musician**

When I was 15 I sang at the Kemah Jazz Festival in Houston TX with my father's band. James Moody was the headliner that year, and I was very excited to meet him and hear his set. We performed in the late afternoon, and the stage was set up so that the performers looked out over a plaza and the hotel. I remember being very nervous to go on stage (which was pretty normal for me back then) and being even more nervous when I realized that James Moody was sitting directly in front of me on his balcony at the hotel. I sang "Yardbird Suite" and "Out of Nowhere". I was just starting out back then, but even with that in mind it wasn't my best performance, and right in the middle of "Out of Nowhere" Moody got up, went inside, and shut the balcony door. I remember feeling crushed, but I rationalized the situation with the (likely) truth that he just wanted to get dressed for his own set, which was in just an hour or two.

After his set I stood in line to get his autograph and ask for a picture, and he asked me if I had been singing that afternoon. I said yes, and he said, "You were flat. You need to hit your pitches." He wasn't unkind or anything like that, it was just a very straight forward and totally correct assessment of my performance. I thanked him, told him I would work on it, and promptly ran off to cry in my room. My friends and family in the interest of making me feel better were quick to say he was "mean" or just "wrong", but I knew he was right. I didn't cry because he was "mean", I cried because he was right and I was disappointed in myself for having performed so poorly in front of one of my heroes. But even more than feeling disappointed or sad, I was so thankful that he had taken the time to say something important and valuable to me, instead of just patting me on the head and saying "Great job baby."

I went home from that trip and typed "Hit Your Pitches" on the computer, printed it out, and hung it on my wall where I would see it everyday.

Learning to accept criticism is a very valuable tool for any person, not to mention a Jazz musician or artist. I was lucky to have encountered so much of it in my early life, and I was lucky that a good deal of it was helpful and correct. Not all criticism is helpful, or even meant to be helpful, but when an elder, boss / bandleader, or even a peer whom you admire and respect offers their opinion, it can be very beneficial to consider it. Here are some things I try to keep in mind in those situations.

1) **Set aside your ego and listen.** Don't become immediately defensive / angry / sad. If you want to grow as a person and artist, take this opportunity to control your emotions and listen rationally to what is being said.

2) **Acknowledge their words.** Sometimes it's as easy as, "I'll look into that. Thank you." Don't petulantly say, "I don't care!" and run off. If they're genuinely offering you advice on how to improve, they are showing they care about you (or at least your work), and ultimately that is a positive thing.

3) **Evaluate whether it's good advice and be honest with yourself.** To really judge whether someone's criticism can be of value, you have to be honest with yourself about your skills and shortcomings. We all have things we are working on, and that is OK. Knowing your weaknesses is an advantage, don't be afraid to admit them to yourself.

Sometimes this process of evaluation can take weeks of rumination; however, if you decide the criticism is not applicable or unfounded, don't feel bad about completely dismissing it and moving on.

4) If the criticism IS applicable and you want to get better, don't be afraid to **Ask them how to improve.** This is especially important if the person criticizing you is your boss or bandleader. If they don't like the way you're doing something and you want the job, ask them how they want you to do it differently.

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