

Huffines Podcast Transcript

Gerald Veasley

[music]

S1 00:17

o every time that we do this, we try to bring an athlete, a performer, a practitioner - someone who actually does the things that we talk about - to the stage to talk to you about their experience. And today we have just absolutely somebody that we're incredibly excited to have. This man has headlined concerts all around the world. He's fronted big bands. He has been in some of the biggest jazz bands in the last 30 years. And so I'm going to leave it at that and I would like for you to welcome Mr Gerald Veasley to the stage please.

[applause] [music] [applause]

S2 04:58

Thank you.

[applause]

S2 05:08

All right. Thank you so much. What a treat it is to be here at the Huffines Institute for Huffines Discussion four. When I was invited by my good friend Dr Lightfoot, he said, "You can do whatever you wanted to do." So I chose this topic. Kind of a lofty title for a musician - Overcoming Performance Anxiety. And I know about this first hand because it's something that I've had to deal with for years. And the real thing about it in performance is that it's very mysterious, right? All day we've been listening to metrics about performance but there's something about the aesthetic and the feeling of performance that still is kind of mysterious. So for example sometimes I can be very much in flow with the music. It's just effortless and it feels so natural. And other times not so much. I don't know if any of you have ever felt like that before where you just feel stagnant and stuck. I've encountered that before and one of the things I've been trying to decode just in my own personal performance is what makes the difference? And through the years I've discovered basically two things - you can either be creative or calculating. I have to acknowledge the work of people like Benjamin Zander and Barry Green who've talked a lot about this kind of duality of the mind. The mind that's very creative and open, and another mind that is always looking at itself and second guessing itself. So I've an opportunity to explore some of these ideas on a program that we run called Bass Bootcamp, which is really, really cool and it's actually how I met Dr Lightfoot a few years ago, and it's been a treat working on this program for a number of years. And it draws people of all levels, virtually all ages. It's cool because there's people from all walks of life, and we've had surgeons and pilots and therapists and even professors of kinesiology. Just about everybody walks through our door. And they have two things in common. First the love of music and the love of the bass. And they're all confronting their comfort zones on some level, which I find to be very, very courageous. So we have people that come to our program, some of whom have never played live in front of people before, and they get up and do it. How courageous is that? Or they've never taken an improvised solo and they get to do that for the first time. So I'm always thrilled watching them go through this process and overcoming that performance anxiety. Maybe the title that I have, Overcoming Performance Anxiety, is a little too lofty. Maybe you can put it like this - Making Peace with the Dragon. See the dragon is so big and it's so bad and it breathes fire, and we think we've slain it but we have to deal with it over and over again. And sometimes it

actually looks like this. I guarantee you this is not one of our participants. We're not that scary. Here's some of the physiological signs that I'm sure all of you guys recognize: rapid breathing or pulse - I've never experienced that - trembly hands or knees, sweaty or cold hands, dry mouth, tight throat, vomiting, cursing. I didn't add that but all those things happen. And then what normally accompanies stage fright is an internal dialogue. This is really a voice that's really hard to shut up. The dragon is very, very loud. Tells you things like, "I'm not prepared" or "People will realize I don't know what I'm doing. I'm an imposter" or "I'm not as good as the other folks. I'm not as great a speaker as the other speakers at The Huffines, Discussion Four" or "I'm going to make a mistake." How terrible is that, especially in music? I don't think anybody's ever died from a misplaced sixteenth note.

[chuckles]

S2 08:48

But we think of it as very, very horrible. Or I already make a mistake and therefore I hear you're saying, "I'm stupid." So I've thought all these things and more, and it's something that I still grapple with. So I shall tell you a little story that illustrates my struggle with this dialogue, and like most stories it includes three elements. It includes a villain. We'll call it the dragon. It includes someone in distress which is me, and it include a hero. This is my bass hero. Stanley Clarke is someone who really changed the nature of the bass, the role of the bass. Prior to Stanley, the bass was something that was better seen not heard or heard and not seen. The bass player stood way in the back in the shadows, and really his job mainly was to try not to get fired. And Stanley Clarke came along with all this charisma and showmanship and virtuosity and techniques that were truly astounding. So for most of my early years, I really tried to emulate him. So imagine my delight or chagrin when I happened to perform a concert and I come out on stage and at the first note of the first song, who's sitting in the middle center row, the front row? Stanley Clarke. And the dialogue starts right away. First, I'm elated, like, "Wow! It's Stanley Clarke." Then I hear a voice say, "Oh no! It's Stanley Clarke."

[laughter]

S2 10:16

It's amazing how your mind can go from jubilation to distress in just a few seconds. So meanwhile while all of this is going on, you know what's going on also - the music. But my fingers are barely moving, and if they're moving I don't know if I'm playing the right notes or wrong notes or anything. So I realize I have to get a grip. I don't have a lot of strategies but I have a few that I can think of to try to ease my nerves and get into the music. So the first one I came up with in talking back to this voice was, "Just relax." So I don't know how many of you guys have to make presentations when you perform but that's one of the first things they tell you: "Just relax. Don't think about who it is. Just relax." I closed my eyes. I opened my eyes. He was still there.

[laughter]

S2 11:02

That didn't work. Second strategy - denial. Denial is a great strategy.

[laughter]

S2 11:08

Like, "How do I know that it's actually Stanley Clarke? It could be anybody. There's 10,000 people here." And then you hear a voice say, "You know it's Stanley."

[laughter]

S2 11:16

Not only that, he can see right through me. Like he can see all my inadequacies - how I don't compare favorably with him. He can see all my mistakes that I've made since

childhood."

[laughter]

S2 11:31

And then finally my strategy was to minimize. Now we often do this when we're given tips on public speaking. They say, "Imagine that the audience is naked." So what you're doing is you're really minimizing the audience so you can bring yourself up a notch. So my version of this was to think, "Okay. It's only Stanley Clarke. He's a mortal. And I got it. He puts his pants on one leg at a time, just like anybody else." That felt like truth - "He puts his pants on one leg at a time like anybody else." And so I'm able to perform now. This is feeling good. Until the voice comes back. It says, "But what if he doesn't?" [laughter]

S2 12:15

"What if he has this super Stanley way of putting his legs in both at the same time?" So I realized I was really overmatched with this whole internal dialogue. The dragon just continued to get the better of me, but I was determined to have a better understanding of how all of this works. And this is what I realize. Here's somebody that you take with you almost everywhere, especially in performance situations. Always ready to judge. He's not very good at giving you any creative ideas but he can tell you how horrible you are. And mostly it comes in two categories - either criticism or comparison. I made this little chart. If you look on the left side, you can see the kind of criticism that we have. Basically we criticize ourselves, which can be very real. And then to make it even better, we imagine that the audience is criticizing us, which is totally illusionary. We have no idea if they're criticizing us. I'll give you a great example. If you don't get anything else from this little talk, remember this for those of you who are performers or speakers. Remember this - this is absolute truth and it's free. Everybody wants you to do well. People want you to do well. Like when I came out here. You left your comfortable homes and your dorms and wherever to hear speakers. You want them to do well. So we imagine that folks are criticizing us. That's what? That's projection. That's us imagining and giving them the thoughts and the words that we really want to put on ourselves. And then we get so good at criticizing. Look at the last one. We start to criticize others. We're really good at it. Now we want to export it to the world. We're such great critics. Only I'll just add this one little thing. We're really not that good at it. You're usually either good at creating or criticizing. And if you're in performance mode and your mind is going back and forth between producing a musical note and criticizing it, and you're going back and forth and the music is happening in real time, you can't do either well. And here's the other little secret. There are people who do the criticism for a living. You know what they're called? Critics. Anyway, all right. So then comparison. That's another mode that we get into, and I call this part of it the self esteem stock market. Your self esteem is going up and down. For example, in my case with Stanley Clarke, when it's Stanley Clarke out there and I'm comparing myself unfavorably to him, my self esteem market is going really low. And then I play another concert and it's my student I feel superior that's in the audience, now my stock market is high. What a horrible way to judge your own self worth or to measure your self worth where it's based totally externally on what other people think or what you imagine they think or how you think you compare to other people. Then it has a temporal aspect to it too, this comparison. One of the most difficult things as a performer is to stay in the moment. The mind is like a little five year old that is just distracted by everything, and sometimes it's distracted by the past. It wants to go and rummage through the ruins of all your old mistakes. And even pulling out snapshots of your old glories that really don't matter in the moment. Because when you're going back in the past, you're totally missing the moment. You're missing this opportunity to perform at your highest level. And then

sometimes it likes to visit the future. How cool is that? You're performing but you're already anticipating the mistake you're bound to make, the fact that everybody's going to hear it and oh, by the way, you're a very bad person. But all of it's illusory because it hasn't happened yet. We get into a lot of trouble by not staying in the moment. But there's a way out. I think that one of the things I've discovered that there's a way out and it's all in our heads. It's very much conceptual and it requires a shift in focus. A lot of these things that have us really afraid and judging ourselves, it's really that we're focused on how people will accept us. It's all about acceptance. There's a better way. Instead of thinking about making an impression, how about making a contribution. The difference between the two is making an impression is something you have no control over. I have no control over whether I'm making an impression on you right now but I know that there may be a word that I've spoken today that may make a contribution, a small contribution, a ripple. And even with music, I was telling someone earlier, before I go on stage I often pray that God would just have me centered on the people before me who may be going through all sorts of unimaginable things. There are people that come to the concerts that are going through divorces, they have problems with their children, who are losing their homes, who have cancer, and sometimes the music is just a small contribution to make life better just for a few minutes. That's one way to get out of our anxiety, to get out of ourselves. Next shift in focus we can do is get out of this whole world of measurement. I'm not talking about the great metrics that you've seen all day that help us become better performers. I'm talking about the measurements where we're measuring ourselves against the past or the future, against other people. And instead focus on the meaning of what we do because this is something that is unlimited. The world of measurement is very, very finite. The world of meaning is unlimited. You have unlimited power to dig into the meaning of whatever it is you're doing. I'll give you a great example. I've encouraged students to not just play the notes but maybe to think a little deeper about what the song means. Is it a love song? Think about your first kiss. Is it a sad song? Think about the day you realized your father was old. We can bring meaning into this music and really enrich the music by being more of ourselves. Actors do it all the time. They call it Method acting, where they call upon their own life experiences and emotions to imbue and breathe life into the characters that they're portraying. Then the last shift in focus is going from evaluation to enjoyment. We've become very adept at knowing what's good and what's bad, who's first, who's taller, who's prettier, what song has soul, what is sterile. And while you're doing that you're missing the performance and also you're missing - as they say in Star Trek, the prime directive - you're missing the important mission, which is enjoyment. Out of the all years that I've been working with students and other players and I've asked the question, "What drew you to music?" I've never once heard somebody say, "Well, I wanted to be better at evaluating music." No, they all have stories that sound like, "I fell in love with the guitar." "The piano made me feel so good." "When I picked up my saxophone, I felt like I was home." I even had one student say, "It's my happy spot." How nice is that? But we lose track of the first mission in trying to impress others and trying to fool ourselves and trick ourselves into thinking that we're better than another person or that we're better in the future or the past. So I'll leave you with this in closing, once again this could have easily been called Making Peace with the Dragon. And I believe the way to do it is to not focus on the power of this dragon, this overwhelming power that it has over us and instead focus on our own power. The power that's unlimited and is without judgement and is accessible to us at any time. That's the power to make a contribution, to have meaning and to find the sheer enjoyment of what you do. So I invite all of you to take part in that with me. And

thank you for listening today.

[applause]

S1 20:46

Don't go away.

S2 20:48

Okay.

S1 20:50

Thank you, Gerald. A great presentation. I have a quick question for you. So there's a controversy in the performing arts world about people who can't overcome stage fright taking beta blockers and other pharmacological aids to get through that. What do you think about that? What's your opinion on that?

S2 21:06

Good. I don't know anything about the topic in terms of taking beta blockers or pharmaceuticals. I always say that if someone has something that's of a clinical nature and they need other things because I'm talking in layman's terms about performance anxiety, but there may be all sorts of reasons why people have anxiety. I would just say in a general sense, if it were me and I didn't have some sort of clinical issue, I would try to deal with some other strategies first.

S1 21:40

Of the musicians that you've played with, including vocalists, what percentage would you guess have had some form of performance anxiety?

S2 21:48

That's a great question. I would say it's probably far more than we would realize, and unfortunately - and I was talking with a couple of your presenters earlier about this - is unfortunately sometimes we self-medicate in the performing arts with these things, so a lot of times they will mask the real issue by taking drugs and alcohol unfortunately. And then they'll need to take a drink to take the edge off and then take another drink to focus and then take another. And it just goes on and on. But I think a lot more people than we realize have this issue.

S1 22:20

Vicious cycle.

S2 22:21

Yeah.

S1 22:22

Thank you so much for being here with us being here with us today.

S2 22:23

Thank you for inviting me.

[applause]

[music]