

# DAVE LIEBMAN

# The Art of Skill

Establishing the Mindset For Unleashing the Music Inside You



Edited and Designed by Michael Lake

Foreword by Steve Swallow

# The Art of Skill

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# Foreword

This book is a resource. You might approach it as you would a book about chord scales or odd time signatures, but what you'll gain from it is not so specific, because this book addresses making music as a state of mind; it focuses on the location of music in the world, and within you. This might sound a bit vague, but if you know Dave Liebman you'll rightly expect that what he offers here is blunt, direct, and practical.

Engaging in music every day to develop technique is of course immensely important, and also its own reward, but it can dull your passion and your sense of amazement. Nobody knows his G7 better than Mr. Liebman, and I'll put his fluent, fast eighth notes up against anybody's. He's put in those necessary hours, and he's used the analytical skills he might have inherited from his schoolteacher parents to produce a steely proficiency in every aspect of music performance.

We should all do the same. But there's another aspect to making art of any sort that's of equal importance, which has to do with defining its place and its aim. To do this it helps to look at your own history, as Dave does in this book, and to clarify your intentions. Gil Evans once called his music "a party with a purpose."

"The Art of Skill" demands that you explain yourself to yourself. If you intend to make music for the rest of your life, you'll need to ask why. The answer will change from day to day and over time, and that will be a source of wonder. Years down the road you'll find yourself still engaged wholeheartedly in playing music, still marveling at how it makes things right.

**Steve Swallow**

*October, 2020*

# Introduction

In searching for a topic or theme for a book that Dave and I could create, the idea of skill development quickly came to mind. There's little doubt that to have achieved the musical heights Dave has reached, his understanding of the mental, psychological, and spiritual requirements of musical skill mastery is significant. In other words, the Mindset required for playing jazz at your highest potential.

To navigate your life toward attaining great skill in music is itself an art. Hence, the *Art of Skill*. Sure, you'll have teachers and perhaps a mentor, but the responsibility falls squarely on you to find the rhythm of your practicing, the harmony or dissonance of your professional relationships, and the ability to improvise well through the opportunities and challenges of your life.

This is not a book on musical rhythm, harmony, or improvisation, but rather one on the art of the inner skills required for the foundation of a competent, successful, and contented jazz musician.

This book is collected into five chapters, each focused on an important element of attaining competence in playing jazz.

Chapter 1 *Seeing the Light* is an edited transcription of Dave's important university talk in which he shares his experience of discovering his life's true purpose.

Chapter 2 *Find Your voice* is an edited transcription of a conversation between Dave and me recorded live on Facebook outlining the process of finding one's own unique musical voice.

Chapter 3 *The Quest for Competence* comes from a private conversation with Dave on a wide variety of considerations having to do with how to get good.

Chapter 4 *Finding Oneself: The Road to Self Discovery* originates from an article written by Dave several years ago enumerating the key elements of discovering one's musical voice.

Chapter 5 *Traits of a jazz musician* is an expansion and edit of an earlier article written by Dave.

The astute reader will recognize certain key topics repeated throughout the book. Repetition is the mother of skill and by Dave making these points in different forms and within different contexts we hope they will resonate with the greatest number of musicians.

**Michael Lake**

**L**et me share with you some of the more important attributes of working and living toward becoming the best player you can possibly be.

### **When is your result good enough?**

To excel means to have worked hard and be deserving of the accolades and whatever rewards are due, ranging from possibly financial to trophies and certificates. Proficiency and excellence are not achieved without hard work.

Somebody who is a master knows the quest never ends. I think of Sonny Rollins. At different periods of his career he went back to the woodshed because he wanted to improve. It's a solitary task, but a master is ready to confront change at its source. The rest of the world recognized Sonny's greatness, but there was more for him to do. I think if you'd asked him what it means to play at a world-class level, he'd say, I don't know, I haven't gotten there yet.

Michael Brecker was also like that. He was never satisfied and he would complain about the way he sounded but didn't talk about anybody else. I'd say: "You know Mike, you played your ass off!" But not for him, at least not in terms of meeting his high standards. There's an adage that the older you get, the more you know, meaning there's a lot more that you didn't do even though you did a lot. That is very humbling. Also with maturity you appreciate the music more than you ever did in the sense of its perfection and beauty.

Personally, I've made peace with my inadequacies and of fulfilling my own personal redemption. For example, I knew that I wasn't going to be a great funk player. Considering the fusion movement during the seventies that I was part of, everybody was

confronted with this new language which they had to play one way or the other.

Another example is the really big personal battle I went through because of Coltrane. I loved his music and admired him so much, truly appreciating how astounding he really was. That was looming in front of me for my first 10 to 15 years of playing. I even thought about taking up to the trombone as a means of a departure from Trane's influence and sound. It seemed there was room for development on that instrument.

I spoke once with Anthony Braxton about this situation. He and I were teaching in Banff, Canada. Anthony asked me if I could show him some things on the Coltrane signature tune "Impressions." After we played he said, "You know Lieb, we both have the same problem." I asked him what that was. He said, "John Coltrane!" This was exactly what I was feeling at this point in my own search. He said that I went further into Trane while he delved into 20th century classical, which was a very accurate observation.

Our generation, much like the be-boppers in the 50s when they heard Charlie Parker, feel Coltrane is from another world. But more than that, you start to take it personally.

Can I ever be that good? Is there room for me playing like that? How did he get so great? I use Coltrane and Bird, singling them out from almost everybody else in jazz. They accomplished so much with Bird passing on at 35 and Trane passing at 40, which is even more unbelievable. My Coltrane problem was that feeling that I was never going to be good enough to get near his playing. Ridiculous but true!!

**H**ow exactly does one find a unique and individual style? Is it as inexplicable as it appears? Do you either have it or not? What happens after the transcription and style stages?

The answer to those questions comes from realizing that many great artists were not prodigies but slow, methodical workers.

Surely there is some talent in great artists from the outset but most important, a burning desire to express him or herself. As the cliché goes, great works of art involve 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration.

Certain individuals rise above the pack through their hard work, vision, and other characteristics. We have highlighted some of these characteristics throughout different stages of our own development which had a positive impact on us.

### 1. Admit the possibility

You have to imagine that you can find your voice, that you have something unique to offer, and that anything is possible. This is a matter of good old-fashioned positive thinking and looking at the glass as half full rather than half empty. You can find something if you work hard enough.

### 2. Be clinical, objective, and disciplined

Finding oneself should not become too much of an emotional challenge, although there are overtones of personality and psychology embedded in this or any deep process. Save the emotion and subjectivity for performance.

When you pursue music, treat it as a business with order and consistency. Be hard on yourself. This is not a “walk in the park.” You must be vigilant and demanding of yourself and the people with whom you play and communicate with.

### 3. Strip away obvious influences

This is the hard part. At first you must admit that you are playing someone else’s ideas. By concentrating while playing, trying to not let yourself play the same familiar patterns, you create a space for new material to evolve.

We are all a product of our influences, but the best artists find ways to submerge their influences beyond recognition, except to a few experts. With nothing to replace the old material for the time being, your level of playing may appear to oneself and others to be faltering. Don’t let that throw you. It’s part of the process.



*Go ahead and be brave. Take the plunge to discover your musical voice.*

# Appendix

Developing one's skill as a jazz musician requires a critical additional activity to everything already mentioned throughout this book. You must listen to a wide variety of music in order to gain an understanding of the masters who have musically evolved throughout these past few hundred years.

The following 10 albums are those that have most significantly influenced my musical development and that I believe to be essential listening for any serious jazz musician.

Following this list of albums is a second list of individual tracks that shaped my musical life. This track listing includes not only jazz, but classical, pop, and world music that deserves serious attention.

## 1. John Coltrane – Crescent

I have heard many musicians choose this as one of their favorite Trane recordings. For me it is as if the solos were written out. They are perfect in form, logic, and full of passion. The stellar rhythm section has a feel that is unique to them and among the most relaxed and swinging ever recorded.

## 2. John Coltrane – Live at Birdland

Until the many bootlegs were released, this recording along with *Live at The Village Vanguard* captured at least a bit of what it was like to see the group live, which I did many times. Even though the LP was limited in duration, the soprano sax tracks (The Promise and Afro Blue) are incredible in their intensity.

## 3. Miles Davis – Kind of Blue

Getting a lot of attention now as it should, this album sums up the recent history of jazz to that time plus it looks ahead. Using the basic root of jazz which is the blues, it sets a homogeneous mood throughout and features some of the greatest soloists ever at their peak. This deserves to be the “milestone” album it is.

## 4. Miles Davis – Sketches of Spain

This is my favorite all time recording across all idioms of music, beyond category. For me, music achieves its greatest success when it captures and portrays a vivid picture and feeling. Gil and Miles hit the mother lode here in an almost non-jazz way using their own vernacular and language to paint a picture of a rich and varied culture.



## **5. Miles Davis – Four and More**

Miles and in particular the young and burning rhythm section made up of Tony Williams, Herbie Hancock and Ron Carter excels. The live feeling is well captured throughout the album. Miles was the quintessence of the spontaneous player who encouraged his bands to let things happen. They also played some of the fastest tempos you will ever hear!!

## **6. Wayne Shorter – Speak No Evil**

Wayne is for me THE composer of our recent period as these compositions demonstrate. They are melodic, intensely harmonic, and challenging. The group of Freddie Hubbard, Elvin Jones, Ron Carter, Herbie Hancock and Wayne play seamlessly with great interest while swinging ever so hard.

## **7. Bill Evans – Sunday at the Village Vanguard**

The group portrays a mood so strong that it is almost unnerving on this live recording. Delicacy, spontaneity, incredible group communication, and some of the most gorgeous harmony ever played by this classic example of the modern piano trio.

## **8. Sonny Rollins – A Night at the Village Vanguard**

Once again at the Village Vanguard, which obviously brought out the best in musicians like Elvin Jones and Wilbur Ware, the sheer power and creativity of probably the greatest all-round saxophonist is astounding on this recording. You can just feel the spontaneity.

## **9. Herbie Hancock – Maiden Voyage**

Without being consciously programmatic, *Maiden Voyage*, like *Sketches of Spain*, creates a strong image through the highly sophisticated compositions and group approach. For different reasons, *Dolphin Dance* and *Maiden Voyage* are classic compositions. In essence, this is pure Herbie clearly demonstrating his unique sense of harmony.

## **10. McCoy Tyner – The Real McCoy**

Yet another recording with Elvin Jones from this list, with Ron Carter and Joe Henderson. This is a burning real jazz album. The compositions are built for out and out blowing and is swings. McCoy's revolutionary approach to harmony and melody comes through strongly on every track.

## “Eat this book”

“Dave Liebman’s appetite for knowledge is voracious. He wakes up hungry every morning. I’ve spent time touring with him and have watched in horror as he ripped the pages he’d just read from the book he was carrying. (On the road, every ounce counts.) Lieb never stops. He provides an insistent reminder there’s more to know. Eat this book.”

- Steve Swallow

“The Art of Skill is a beautifully-designed book that chronicles and showcases Dave Liebman’s pursuit and attainment of living life as art. Lieb harnesses the mystery of the creative life-force and rides it to the truth that we all have something to say. Lieb is as elegant and eloquent as he is wise. He also plays like no one else. Read him and listen to him ... you’ll be the better for it.”

- Peter Erskine

“This is a great book. Dave reaches deep into the spiritual aspect of what we do and he spells it out. I think that it will be great for all musicians young and old to read the thoughts and ideas on how he views the life of an original creative musician.”

- George Garzone

“A valuable summing up of the psychological mind set required for any artist in any medium. Dave’s trust in his intuition to guide him through the self-teaching process is an object lesson in itself.”

- Hal Galper

“Art of Skill is a jewel of Dave’s inner thoughts from the forefront of jazz education. I highly recommend this wonderful book.”

- Jamey Aebersold

David Liebman’s career has spanned nearly five decades, first as the saxophone/flautist in both the Elvin Jones and Miles Davis Groups, then continuing as a bandleader since.

He has played on over five hundred recordings, two hundred under his keen leadership and co-leadership.

Lieb is an NEA Jazz Master, world-renowned lecturer, and the author of several milestone books: *Self Portrait Of A Jazz Artist*, *A Chromatic Approach To Jazz Harmony And Melody*, and *Developing A Personal Saxophone Sound*.

