

Under the Influence of Greatness **By Stockton Helbing**

If I have said it once, then I have said it a million times: “Go listen to _____.” It is really one of my most central teaching themes: if you want to learn more about music and drumming then you need to listen to and play-a-long with great music and drummers. Greatness is contagious, yet just like most contagions the signs and symptoms of infection appear gradually, slowly over time until you are eventually in the grip of a fever. Usually, greatness is mistaken for one central concept that a player does well that is thought of as their key musical characteristic; “Trane plays a lot of notes, Miles plays few notes, Elvin plays triplets all the time, Monk plays dissonantly,” but this is a gross oversimplification used by humans to place hard to understand art into a neat little box. Greatness is much different. Greatness is not doing one thing extraordinarily well, no, it’s much harder than that. Greatness is doing lots and lots of little, seemingly easy, and insignificant things, with a very high level of excellence and consistency.

So where do we go for examples of musical greatness? We go to the rich recorded history of music. There are no recordings of Bach or Beethoven performing their masterpieces, oh, but there are recordings of our American Jazz masters. Hallelujah! We can hear Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, our Bachs, our Beethovens, performing their music exactly as they intended it. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a recording of Count Basie’s “old testament” band featuring Jonathan “Jo” Jones on drums is worth a billion words. Yet you may only obtain those words and add them to the lexicon of your artistic mind by, you guessed it, listening to and playing along with Count Basie and Papa Jo. As my mother has always said to me since I was a child, “Garbage in, garbage out.” I believe that mantra to be very true and thereby the opposite of it holds true as well: “Excellence in, Excellence out.”



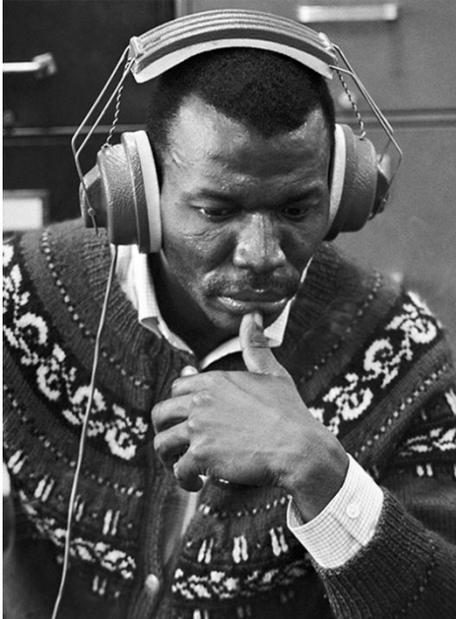
Duke Ellington with Bach's wig (and not digging it)

Before I get a nosebleed up here on my high and holy perch, let’s get confirmation of the vital importance of listening to music to gain positive influence from a musician far more credentialed to speak on the matter. Here are some words from the great Elvin Jones in a 1982 *Modern Drummer* magazine interview conducted by Rick Mattingly:

To me, "influenced" means "encouraged" in some way. It doesn't necessarily follow that you have to adapt that person's style, or that person's habits, or whatever. It's simply that this particular individual-or those people or that group-inspired you. They gave you that extra push of an intangible something that we all need to keep going; to take another step. And it doesn't have to be a musician-it can be your mother. In my case it certainly is.

Also my father. Certainly no one could influence me more than he did because I thought he was an exceptional man. I like to believe that I've got at least a little bit of his strength. So I'm influenced by him as far as my character is concerned.

Of course, when you're talking about musicians and music, people tend to think that your influences have to be people whom you should play like or emulate in some



Elvin Jones listening to music

way. But that isn't the way I choose to take influences. The great psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan had a theory that we are all part of our environment in the way that our interpersonal relationships affect the molding of our characters. So as far as music is concerned, you have to be influenced by a little bit of everything. We hope that when our final musical character is mature, it will be individual, but part of that gigantic whole.

I suppose you can pin it down more specifically as to say, "Who do you like?" or "Who did you listen to the closest?" That's another approach to it. So in that sense, I listened to Duke Ellington, Jo Jones, Max Roach, Art Blakey, Buddy Rich, Gene Krupa, and everybody who played in a band and who I thought was a master of the

instrument. There are a lot of people whose names I can't even recall right now but who probably had a great deal to do with molding my musical character. And it's not just drummers. My brother Hank, for instance, gave me a great lesson one day when he made me play along with an Art Tatum record. You see, there are lessons all around us. If someone really wants to learn how to function on an instrument; how to understand and get some insight into the instrument's capabilities and into one's own approach to the instrument, then influences can come from any source. I don't think it necessarily has to follow that it has to come from someone who has mastered that instrument per se. I think it can be from any source. Usually it's a musical source, because that's the environment.

It's time to make a plan that includes daily listening to and playing along with music and drummers that you 1) know a lot about and desire to learn even more about, 2) know nothing about but you keep being encouraged to check them out, and 3) are assigned by your teacher/mentor to check out because they see a gap in your playing and musical knowledge. Greatness is contagious, so start exposing yourself to all the greatest music and drummers that you can find. Once you get sick from it, you will never want to be cured! -**SH**