

## Shamanic Practice in Musical Performance

Melissa Rosenberger

For the Jazz of Leadership conference, Seattle, WA. April 2014

First, we need to define what we mean by the word “shamanic”. In this context I would recommend taking it out of the context of “a shaman’s behavior”, which has preconceived and misunderstood associations that can get in the way of exploring the underlying principles, which are useful to anyone, especially artists and musicians. Shamanism is not about rattling, or drumming, or using feathers and sage to clear energy, just like being a musician is not about playing a particular instrument and keeping time per se. Playing an instrument, keeping time, are things a musician might do, but they do not define musicianship, just as any particular behavior does not define shamanistic practice, and in fact shamanistic practice can be done without overt action.

A shamanic practitioner is someone who has learned how to put aside any personal agenda or control, a practice called “getting out of the way”, and become a vessel for the expression of Spirit for healing work. This is a place of alignment with all of the components of the moment-- physical and non-physical-- in a sacred container, guided by Spirit and an intention for the work. The shamanic practitioner sources what happens in the moment from the moment itself, and works through the sacred container created by prayer and intention. The sacred container, also aptly called a containment system, serves as a filter, reinforcing the intention of the prayer and keeping out anything that would interfere with the intention of the prayer.

Shamanic practice is not a random, chaotic, anything-goes practice. It is not acting blindly, impulsively, or without care. The spontaneous aspect of the work is still a guided process; even though the practitioner is not controlling what happens, what happens is directed by the containment system, which practitioners spend years developing and strengthening. The containment system provides the rules or constraints through which the work happens. Examples of containment system rules are that only the highest good is done for all individuals present, and that only the most compassionate aspects of Spirit do the work. Then, even within the containment system, practitioners are trained to apply methods of discrimination and discernment within the process as additional levels of safeguarding and filtering.

Shamanic practice includes both structure and flow. Within the structure of the ceremony and the containment system the work is allowed to flow and be an authentic expression of the moment. As this applies to music, the structure is the song and the technical preparation to perform the song, then to include a “shamanic element” there would need to be room for the performer to stop consciously attending to the structure and instead source what he or she

does from the moment itself. In jazz this can happen during solos, in pop songs performers sometimes do this on the bridge. The underlying structure of the song is held by the band while the soloist sources from the moment for a certain length of time. The performer in these cases could have developed a relationship to Spirit and be intentionally connecting to Spirit, or they could be connecting with and authentically expressing their own heart and passionate nature and in that sense be “in Spirit”. And of course the two scenarios are related and occur together.

Why add a shamanic element? Because it makes the moment come alive, it creates a vitality of experience, a unique moment that will never be replicated, and that is what makes people wake up and engage. Listening to something that may as well be a replica of a recording can be nice, listening to a unique, vital performance sourced in the moment can be sublime. Most musicians have a sense of how music can come alive, how it can be unpredictable and different every time it is performed. In this case when the music has a life of its own, we can call that “Spirit”, and the musician, if he or she allows the music to come through as it is authentically in the moment, is the practitioner who has gotten out of the way and become a vessel of Spirit. Many musicians are probably aware of the difference between letting the moment take the music and controlling the music. When we let the moment take the music, the experience can become transcendent. When we control the music entirely, probably not.

And this, perhaps, is the rub. To add a shamanic element you sacrifice control and predictability. In adding a shamanic element you are upping the ante, so it can feel like taking a substantial risk. You open the door to transcendence and you never know what is going to happen. On the other hand, using a shamanic element is a skill that can be practiced and developed to build stamina and trust. Everyone can do it, the concepts can be applied at any level of experience, and with more development the practice can become refined. What the musician/practitioner develops is really just trust in the process and the willingness to let go of control, so that he or she can get out the way even more, for longer periods of time.

When we surrender to Spirit, allowing the greater life force and the wisdom of the great mystery to participate in an event, what transpires can be beyond the realm of the ordinary. We allow ourselves to be co-creators in a process beyond control and constraints. In this place, major transformation can occur. For lasting change to occur people need experiences that are out of the ordinary, because the ordinary reinforces the status quo.

### **Why have a shamanic element instead of just routine, lessons?**

*When we source from the moment we create a truly authentic experience.* Experiences sourced in the moment can often inspire and move people in ways that routines and lessons cannot. When the experience “gets real” in this way, people wake up and engage. When music is done in this way, the audience knows that what they are hearing is unique and is *specifically for them*, because they are co-creating that moment with the musicians and it will never happen that same way again.

*With shamanic elements there is no passive audience, everyone present is contributing to the expression of the moment and is an integral and valuable part of the process.* It is not a consumer-product experience. A person acting from a shamanic place is sourcing from the moment and the moment is largely created by the people there. In shamanic ceremonies everyone has a purpose. Participants come to ceremony to experience and contribute to the effect of synergy – the whole of the experience transcending the sum of its parts. Participants serve as support and as objective witnesses to an individual’s process.

*When anything is done with spontaneity in the flow of the moment it becomes a right-brain-oriented experience, which by nature is a space of transformational potential.* Lessons, words, ideas, are left-brain-oriented. Right-brain-oriented experiences induce brain wave and energetic state changes that increase our access to creativity, plasticity – the ability to change, and mystical/transcendent experiences. The right-brain-oriented, alpha-theta brain wave state is by its nature transformational. Beta waves, which characterize linear thinking and processing, are not.

Melissa is a shamanic practitioner, sound healer, and teacher. Her work is strongly informed by core shamanism, Tibetan Buddhism, and research into ancient mythology and spiritual practices. She is owner of Golden Lyre Healing Arts and The Well and The Tree Wisdom and Mystery School, and co-founder of the Seattle Seidr organization. More at <http://www.melissarosenberger.com/>

