

Ensemble Skills: Learning to Listen

Playing a song shouldn't be like flying on auto-pilot. Even if you have played the same song hundreds of times, there should always be active listening happening within the ensemble. You should have an internal dialogue asking what you want to hear next, what the ensemble needs from you, and what you can do to shape the song or make it better. Here are some questions to ask yourself while you are playing.

- 1. Can I hear everything? Can I hear the important parts?** Don't play too loud if you are in a supporting role. If you are louder than the lead singer or the soloist, you need to play quieter so you can hear them.
- 2. Am I feeling the groove?** Groove is more important than anything else in a band. Chord progressions, melodies, lyrics are all laid on-top of a bed of groove. It's not enough to just play in time, you need to feel the music, internalize it, and bring that feeling forward.
- 3. Am I telling the story?** Songs have arcs. Verses and choruses have arcs. Phrases have arcs. Am I building in intensity when the song calls for it? Am I laying out when the song calls for it? What can I do to help tell this story?
- 4. Is what I'm playing matching the "energy" in the room?** Does my song choice match how the audience is feeling? Does my groove match what the audience is feeling? Sometimes you can feel the energy in the air from the audience. Think about how you are feeling, listen for how the crowd responds to your songs and adjust your set list if you need, or try a new groove for a song (within limits).
- 5. Is everything working?** Sometimes things are just off. Sometimes there are issues with the sound and certain keys don't work. Sometimes a room is too live for overly rhythmic playing to work. Sometimes there is slap-back from the back wall of a venue. You have to listen and adapt to the room, to technical problems, and to any other number of things that can happen.