

# THE Musician's Lifeline

Advice for All Musicians, Student to Professional



BY PETER ERSKINE  
& DAVE BLACK



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## About the Authors

**Peter Erskine** has played the drums for sixty years. He appears on over 700 albums and film scores, has written 12 books, has won 2 GRAMMY Awards, and is the recipient of an Honorary Doctorate from Berklee College of Music. Over 50 albums have been released under his own name or as co-leader. He's played with Stan Kenton, Maynard Ferguson, Weather Report, Steps Ahead, Joni Mitchell, Steely Dan, Diana Krall, among others, and has appeared as a soloist with the Los Angeles, Chicago, London, Oslo, Helsinki, BBC, and Berlin Philharmonic Orchestras. Peter graduated from the Interlochen Arts Academy and studied with George Gaber at Indiana University. He is currently the Director of Drumset Studies at the University of Southern California, and continues to maintain a very active playing and recording career.

**Dave Black** received his Bachelor of Music in percussion performance from California State University, Northridge. A prolific composer and arranger, more than 60 of his compositions/arrangements have been published/recorded by several of the major music publishers. Many have been used as source/background music on numerous TV shows and movies, including the film *Drumline*. He is the recipient of numerous awards and commissions, including 26 consecutive ASCAP Popular Composer Awards, two GRAMMY participation/nomination certificates, the Percussive Arts Society President's Industry Award, a Modern Drummer Readers Poll award, two Drum! Magazine Drummie! awards, and a certified Gold Record award for the sale of more than 500,000 copies of *Alfred's Drum Method, Book 1*. As one of the biggest-selling percussion authors in the world, he is the author and/or co-author of over 30 books with combined sales now totaling over two million units.

## Foreword

### Why *The Musician's Lifeline*?

The initial impulse for writing this book was to build upon the success of our previous collaboration, *The Drummer's Lifeline: Quick Fixes, Hacks, and Tips of the Trade*. This book would represent our combined knowledge and opinions formed by lives lived in music. Since Dave and I are both drummers, we naturally felt that, while much of our advice would be universal in scope and appeal, we needed to bring another voice into the authorial mix. But who?

Turns out that we both had the same inspired thought one morning, and our emails—like ships crossing in the morning sun—were semaphoring the same message: “What if we invited the best musicians we can think of to participate?”

So, that's what we did. To our everlasting gratitude, over 150 of the best musicians and educators we have the honor of knowing agreed to answer this simple set of questions:

- 1. What's the best advice you've ever received?**
- 2. What's the best advice you've ever given?**
- 3. What's the one thing you'd have done differently in your studies/career?**
- 4. Best travel advice?**
- 5. Best sight-reading advice?**
- 6. Do you have any business advice for a musician?**
- 7. Any advice relating to people skills?**

Plus, a bonus question for non-drummers—re: advice to a drummer, and a few more bon mots of wisdom regarding auditions, recording, etc.

The answers will surprise, inform, and confirm what you already know or completely contradict what you've been taught by others.

This is a book you can read straight through in one sitting or jump around willy-nilly if you like ... and always return to time and again. Our hope is that this book will become a trusted source and friend.

Herewith we give you *The Musician's Lifeline*.

## **Peter Erskine & Dave Black**

*Los Angeles, 2019*



## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank all of our contributing experts for their feedback and support. This book is so much the better because of your input.

## SECTION

## 1

## HOW TO PLAY BETTER

**PROBLEM:** How do I play better?

**TIP:** Listen to the music, and play what you'd like to hear...not what your hands, fingers, or lips know. Play what your ears and heart tell you to play. It's really that simple.

**RULE:** No licks! Compose when you play. Use your imagination, but always play for the song.

**REASON:** Job number one is to play in a way that makes all the other musicians play their best. Within this duty, there are an infinite number of choices we can make. Add to that the complicating factor or feeling of playing to someone else's expectations, ego satisfaction, audience response, and so on—this is when the muscles begin to take over the musical mind. The simplest solution? Just play what you'd like to hear, not necessarily what you'd like to play. Those can be two very different things. Experience brings the hearing and playing process together as one. And certainly don't play what you imagine someone *else* wants to hear. Not in jazz, at any rate.

That said, it's normally necessary to establish your credibility on the bandstand with the other musicians onstage, as well as those listening out front. Tone, musicality, time, and feel.

The correct playing of the melody is the “correct passcode” to gaining trust and acceptance when it comes to any style of music. If you fail at that, you'll have to claw your way back into that position of melodic and improvisational authority. It's not hard to do: it only takes the **commitment** and discipline to do it.

And, yes...  
**practice.**

**PROBLEM:** Closed eyes

**TIP:** Practice playing with your eyes open. Look at the source of the music around you, and do not close your eyes or stare off into space. Connect. We're trying to have a conversation up here.

**CONCEPT:** No moving before you begin to play. **Internalize** the tempo, and **know** the time and feel; you're not going to help yourself by nodding your head and tapping your toes.

## KNOW IT = OWN IT

We recommend telling your students to **stop moving their head** from side to side as if they're really digging what they're playing. Tell them to be more inscrutable, like the Sphinx. Not only do they look hipper and play better, they're also learning something about Greek mythology.

Or, as Clint Eastwood told me [Peter] (explaining his strong, silent type of character): "I hold a lot in, and let it out...a little at a time."

## Concentrate!

Think of the time, and not what you might play. And, listen!

With time, you can play anything. Without time, nothing you play will matter.

And *save* the hip stuff when improvising...too much too soon and it has no impact after a very short while.

Speaking of hip stuff and time: it's important that you take the time and interest to learn the lyrics of the songs you are playing whenever possible. This will not only help you understand the feeling of the song, but it will enable you to play with **clarity, intention, and specificity**.

Freedom is said to come from discipline. Imposing your own creative discipline or restrictions can help you achieve your desired artistic outcome—that is, more freedom!

It takes courage, discipline, and giving yourself permission to be musical.