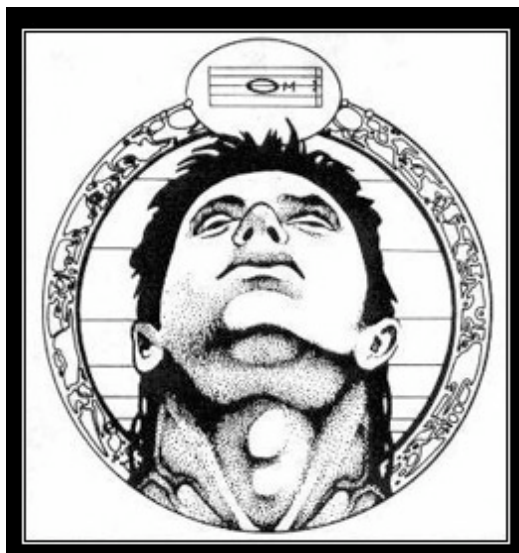




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U.R. That

by Steve Vai

(Part 1 of 7, originally published February 1989).

Uniqueness. Individuality. These are traits that ambitious musicians aspire to. When these qualities are recognized in others, trends are set and fashions are established. Everyone has the ability to be unique, because no two personalities are exactly the same.

Individuality is developed by the mind. The first step is to believe that we're unique, and that if it's not blatantly apparent in our art form (music, taste, or whatever), it can be developed. In this series, I will take an unorthodox approach to helping you develop your own personal style and expression. Some of the methods may seem a little 'out there', but stick with it.

I will not be dealing much with music theory, finger exercises, and 'hot licks'. You can get all that stuff from a billion other sources. I don't frown on those things at all; on the contrary, a certain prerequisite is always helpful. But uniqueness is not always a reflection of what you know or how fast you can play. I believe that individuality is defined, for the most part, by how well you exercise your imagination with the proper blend of emotion and physical, technical, and mental ability. It sounds like a lot, but what it really boils down to is 'just playing'.

To make the best use of these columns, I feel it's important to have a good amount of theory and chops under your belt. It's not absolutely necessary, but you will find it beneficial. Although these columns deal more with discipline of the mind than of the fingers, you should be well educated in the following:

SCALES:

All major scales and modes and the theory behind how they relate to each other; Pentatonics; Melodic and harmonic minor scales; Whole-tone and diminished scales. You should know these scales in every position on the neck, and also starting from the low E string and climbing to the highest available note. You should have the sound of these scales memorized. Practice them with melodic patterns based on seconds, thirds, fourths etc.

CHORDS:

Know how chord scales work. Know at least 5 ways to play every major, minor, major 7th, minor 7th, and other chords. Know how to identify a chord by its notes. Memorize the sound of these chords.

THEORY AND IMPROVISATION:

Know every note on the guitar 'cold'. Memorize the circle of fifths and know basic harmonic theory. Understand the basics of improvising over chord changes.

READING AND WRITING:

Understand basic music reading and notation. Be able to read down a song just given the chord chart and melody. Know how to read tablature, and how to read and write chord tablature. Be able to write an idea down in manuscript form (in other words, be able to notate a melody). You should also develop technical exercises to help you in areas in which you feel you lack ability (such as arpeggios, double-picking, hammers, and two-handed playing).

This is all basic stuff. It's been covered in enough books and columns to sink a battleship, so I will spare you these things in this series. You can find this information in any music store or library with a music section, or ask a teacher.

MARTIAN LOVE SECRETS:

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While a thorough understanding of all these basic theory points is very useful, it's not a necessity, because music is an art form. No one has the right to say, "Our noise is better than their noise". It's totally relative. However, if you are a connoisseur of fine theory, here's a list of some books that I found very helpful when I was a student:

Ted Greene's "Chord Chemistry"

(Dale Zdenek, dist. by Columbia Pictures Pub., 15800 NW 48th Ave, Miami FL 33014).

All of the **Bill Levitt Berklee** series books
(Berklee Guitar Series, dist. by G. Schirmer, 886 3rd Ave., New York NY 10022)

A good [fake book](#).

Nicholas Slonimsky's "Thesaurus Of Scales And Melodic Patterns"

(dist. by G. Schirmer, 886 3rd Ave., New York NY 10022)

"Rhythms 1 & 2" by Gary Chaffe.

Violin or saxophone books for reading practice.

Gardner Reed's "Music Notation"

(dist. by Crescendo, 48-50 Melrose St., Boston, MA)

[Most or all of these books are available from [amazon.com](#).]

...and of course, all columns appearing in "Guitar Player" magazine. These preliminary music theory concerns may take some people a while to sort out, so save those columns!

Remember, our approach will be more mental, emotional, and imaginative than theoretical. Our goal is to develop the individuality in your guitar playing. And as in any avenue of study, attitude is the most important element.

Have you ever heard the phrase "I am that"? I believe it means that you are what you think you are. The way you perceive yourself is what you will ultimately become. The problem is that many of us aren't always aware of how we perceive ourselves. This gets into realms of psychology that probably exceed our comprehension, but I believe it's possible to give yourself a conscious message that will incorporate itself into your psyche and lifestyle. Here's a simple example: Imagine that you're trying to kick a bad personal habit of some sort. If you tell yourself over and over all of the reasons for doing so (even if you don't quite believe them), you'll eventually find that you really dislike the habit and sincerely want to quit. The same phenomenon can be applied to any goal. It's sort of self-hypnosis, or self-induced brainwashing. (Wash the dirty part, though).

I believe it's a law of nature that every person is different, with a unique capacity for self-expression. As a result, we all have the ability to be unique in the way we express ourselves musically. A lot of people don't believe this, and find themselves copying others and sounding like someone else. They end up frustrated with themselves because they feel they can't "slack up" with the competition. But how can you compete with individuality? The only one you're competing with is yourself. When you can identify with your individuality and accept and respect it, peace of mind comes in. The first falsehood to shoot down is the fear or belief that you lack uniqueness.

So this month's first lesson (besides memorizing all the theory and such outlined earlier) is to realize there is a total uniqueness and individuality about yourself, and that it will make itself more and more apparent each day. You must believe it. Dwell on it every day, and it will become part of your thinking. You will be what you think you are. "I am that".

But remember, it's important to keep your ego in check. It's easy to get carried away with yourself, and that's guaranteed fire damage to the soul. If you're unique, then everyone else is, too. You must appreciate and respect the uniqueness of others. Think about this every day — even without reading or studying a word or note of music — and you will feel your "uniqueness muscle" getting stronger.

Even though this month's "sermon" doesn't have hands-on guitar playing in it, I believe it's the most valuable advice I can give anybody.

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