

# Things My Mother Never Told Me (About Vibes, Anyway)

By Jerry Tachoir

**M**y musical adventure started out simply enough. I was dragged along to a wedding with my parents. There was a traditional Polish wedding band playing, and I was fascinated with the drummer, who noticed my interest and sat me on his lap to get a true perspective of what he was doing. I was hooked at seven years old.

Without any hesitation, my loving and generous parents sought out the best teacher in the Pittsburgh area, Eugene “Babe” Fabrizi, and I started taking a one-hour lesson every Saturday. I loved it and started to develop some skills. Babe Fabrizi believed that students need to know all of percussion, not just the drumset, so he started me on mallets. When I first realized that I could take my rhythmical drum knowledge and also play a melody, there was no turning back. This is what I wanted to do.

Again, my parents were very supportive, and even though mallet-keyboard instruments were expensive, they got me my first marimba. I practiced all the time. I wanted to get good fast. I bought as many fake books as I could afford and tried to read any piece of music I could find. Things were going great until, one day, Babe said, “Let’s add a third mallet.” This felt awkward and became a challenge. I wasn’t sure what to do with that third mallet, so I used it to help play melodies when it was convenient, and I would sometimes grab a chord tone or root.

Reading came natural to me. I was now able to read any three-mallet music and even make some up from just reading melodies. Then, Babe did it again: “Let’s add another mallet.” Again, I felt as though I took five steps backward. For several weeks playing with four mallets was very clumsy, and I was having a difficult time holding the mallets and knowing which mallet to use to play the music I was given. In a few weeks, however, I got more comfortable holding four mallets, could read four-part music, and I really enjoyed the sound.



One Saturday at my regular lesson, I noticed a big box in the Fabrizi store with a Musser logo on it. It was a new vibraphone, and Babe convinced my parents that Jerry needed this. Again, my parents found a way and I took home a vibraphone. This was different; it had a pedal, and the notes would ring if you pushed down on the pedal. I remember asking Babe to explain the pedal to me, and he said, “Don’t worry about it; just play it like you play your marimba.” So I ignored the pedal or I would keep time with the pedal. I started to realize that I could use some of the ringing notes to create flowing melodies that were very musical, as long as the ringing wasn’t too much or had half-steps or whole steps ringing, which sounded bad.

I enrolled at Berklee College of Music after meeting Gary Burton, who told me about Berklee and that I could study with him. At this point, I felt comfortable as a percussionist and really wanted to develop my mallet and improvisational skills. I put away the drums and concentrated 100 percent on being a mallet player. I learned early on that mallet instruments were not in high demand in the real world of gigging musicians. So, as a mallet player, I discovered that it is necessary to be a leader and create one’s own work environment.

I also discovered that the general public was very accepting of a mallet player. Most people can recall having a toy xylophone as a child and understand that you use mallets to play these instruments—though they are fascinated to see a full-size vibraphone and marimba, and are dazzled by the use of four mallets. So even without playing a note, you have won over your audience. Now all you need is to play well.

## CHALLENGES

Keyboard percussion instruments are expensive, big, and heavy. The weight is not such an issue early on in one’s career, but as you start touring more and doing one-nighters, the weight becomes an issue. The mallets themselves wear out rather quickly if you play a lot, and they are expensive compared to drumsticks or reeds for a woodwind. Playing vibes and marimba requires standing, which takes away the comfort element, and standing on one foot to play the vibes while pedaling adds to the misery. As said before, the instruments take up a lot of room and require a large car or van to haul them around.

Then there is the issue of flying. Commercial airlines absolutely hate these instruments and charge an extremely unreasonable excess-baggage fee. This forces you to find or rent an instrument at your destination, which is a compromise from your regular instrument.

Now, let’s assume you are a contemporary mallet player and play with a four-mallet technique. You will discover that your hands will hurt, especially between the fingers where the mallets tend to rub. It is imperative to practice and get past the blister stage, at which point your hands will develop necessary calluses. These calluses act as support and cushion the mallets where they contact the skin on your fingers. These calluses need to be maintained. In the winter, when the air is dry, your skin will crack and so will the calluses unless you use a skin moisturizer on them when not playing. Then in the summer, especially during outdoor concerts in very humid conditions, the calluses become too soft and will blister, or worse, they can break and bleed.

This is a well-known issue for mallet players, yet something we are never taught about or made aware of in the beginning. Most mallet players who play a lot have huge calluses between the fingers to the point of almost a deformity or

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at least an unsightly lump. These calluses are a necessity and must be maintained in order to play for long times. During tours, my calluses get a good workout and seem to do well; it is the off time that I have issues. When I relax or I'm on vacation, I always have a set of mallets with me to hold and move around in my hands so I can maintain these calluses when I'm not actually playing my instrument. These are but a few of the issues mallet players must deal with.

### MALLETS

We always struggle to get the perfect set of mallets that aren't too whippy and not too stiff and straight. I prefer rattan mallets somewhat on the thin but stiff side. Rattan gives me the feel I want and just enough flex to really be able to pop the notes. I am very fussy about my mallets and very fortunate to have the support of a great company, Innovative Percussion, who makes the Jerry Tachoir JT 23 mallet. These mallets are consistent and have the highest grade of rattan in the industry. I spent a long time developing these mallets to meet my specific sound and feel.

As good as these mallets are, rattan is a natural product and is not always the same in flex, size, and straightness. Once I get a perfect set of mallets, I hoard them and try to keep them in my mallet bag when not in use. I can always tell when other people have touched my mallets because their hand oils tends to make the mallets feel different, which I can't really explain, except that for a while they tend to slip in my hands.

### THE VIBRAPHONE

Here we have a very mechanical instrument in which the standard for quite some time has been three octaves starting and ending on F. I don't know who decided the vibes' range should be F-F, but honestly, it makes no sense. At the very least give me an E at the bottom to be able to play guitar music. I personally feel the instrument would be complete if it went down to a C. I don't need any more on the upper end, as these notes tend to get rather useless anyway. But going down to a C would make total sense and make me a happy camper. A few companies have extended-range vibraphones, and the extended lower range gives unaccompanied soloing more depth and the ability to harmonically add better bass lines and a thicker, fuller sound.

Vibraphones are not very loud, especially when compared to amplified instruments such as electric guitar, electric bass, and keyboards. At times, depending on the drummer, competing to be heard is another challenge. I have experimented with mics and pickups, and each has its disadvantages. With pickups you can get loud, and feedback tends to not be an issue, but all pickups alter the acoustic sound of mallet instruments. With pickups, you tend to hear a lot of the attack of the mallet on the bars more so than the actual warm, acoustic sound. These pickups are actually glued to the bottom of the bars and are very fragile. It is necessary to carry extra contacts and glue if you travel and use these pickup systems.

Mics allow for a more natural sound of the instrument; however, they can get in the way of one's playing. The more you move them away from the instrument to avoid bumping them, the more they tend to pick up other instruments as well. Mics are definitely the preferred way to record mallet instruments but vary in efficiency depending on the type of live performance. If I'm in a nice concert hall, I will definitely use a pair of good mics—usually condenser mics. If the

performance is outdoors, and I need to be louder, then I'll opt for pickups. When using pickups, I also usually add some reverb or a little light chorus effect, to enhance the sound and try to disguise the sound of the mallets hitting the bars. For me, pickups are a compromise but a necessity at times.

### PROFESSIONALISM

I'm often asked, "How long does it take to become a pro?" Not to sound facetious, but it is a constant pursuit. There is a saying, "You don't know what you don't know" and I add, "Most don't know that they don't know it." Essentially, when you first start playing, you have total freedom and are unaware of wrong chords, scales, notes, rhythms, etc. The more you study, you realize there is more to be aware of and learn.

At that point, music can become intimidating because you realize that *you can hit a wrong note!* Once you realize that the world doesn't stop when you hit a wrong note, and that you are aware of it and can control the resolution, then you can relax and play. Those wrong notes are nothing more than an unresolved creative opportunity. Music is a series of dissonance/resolution events, and that is the beauty.

Our constant strive for perfection in the arts is a very aloof and possibly a lifelong journey to try to achieve. If we play it safe and easy, our music is uneventful, whereas if we take chances, and go out on the edge of our comfort zone, our music and performance will grow and we as artists will begin our journey of self-awareness and artistic development. This is where the fun starts! Trust your ears and your musical knowledge and strive for a clean performance with varying dynamics and tasteful dissonants/resolutions. Enjoy!

**Jerry Tachoir** is the author of *Contemporary Mallet Method – an approach to the Vibraphone and Marimba*, published by Riohcat Music. The Jerry Tachoir Group has performed at many major jazz festivals and concert halls throughout the U.S., Canada, and Europe. Jerry has been the featured artist/clinician at numerous Jazz Educator Network conventions as well as PASIC. **PN**