

THERE IS A GOD, BUT YOU AIN'T IT

The Quest for Perfection

We all want to play the guitar better. We have goals to be able to play certain pieces. We want to play our pieces well.

Unfortunately, there are some for whom perfection is the Holy Grail. They practice day in and day out to eliminate every mistake. Trying to eliminate mistakes is good, but only up to a certain point. An excessive quest for perfection has negative effects. Some players beat themselves up because they can't get through a piece without making at least one mistake. Something is always wrong. They say, "I fix one thing and something else goes wrong. Why can't I play the piece perfectly?"

My answer is, "**There IS a God, but you ain't it.** You are human, and you are always going to make mistakes."

One of my students tells me, "But on YouTube, player X performs *Leyenda* perfectly."

The truth is:

1. The player DOES make mistakes. They are small, and the student doesn't notice them.
2. Most higher-level guitarists on YouTube pre-record and edit out all the mistakes in the audio first. Then, they shoot the video, playing along with the audio. In other words, it is the instrumental equivalent of lip-synching. I think it is hilarious to watch a guitarist playing outdoors and hear studio reverb in the audio. Or, they are in an exotic location that must be full of ambient noise, but yet, the guitar audio is studio-quality pristine.
3. Again, on YouTube, less-talented guitarists add a ton of reverb to their audio. Nashville fingerpicking great, Chet Atkins, facetiously called it "Adding talent." Heavy reverb, editing, and other tricks can cover up a multitude of sins.



Recording Studio Magic

Then, the student says, "But Doug, the guitarists I hear on CDs play with no mistakes."

Once again, not true.

1. In the early days of audio recording, guitarists played a piece in one take—they played the piece once all the way through. Sometimes they would be allowed to play through the piece two or more times, and then the best performance of all the takes was used for the final recording. Such is the case with the early recordings of Barrios, Llobet, Segovia, and others. But are they perfect? No, far from it. There is smudged passagework, missed notes, and other errors.
2. Today, artists do multiple takes of a piece, just like the old days. But instead of two or three, players might do 10 or 20 takes. Or, the artists will attempt to play a particularly difficult passage thirty or more times before they get it right. Then, the recording producer heavily edits the recording. I was amazed to learn recently that many CDs by top-tier young (under forty

years old) guitarists contain *hundreds* of edits. I'm not saying they are bad guitarists. They are using modern technology to try to achieve perfection.

My point is that in the real world, not on YouTube or CDs, no one plays anything perfectly.

What is "Perfect?"

Even defining perfection is difficult. For one player, it means not playing any wrong notes. But it can also mean playing every rhythm mathematically precisely, playing with no squeaks or other finger noises, playing perfect crescendos and decrescendos, maintaining a rock-steady tempo, or not having any memory lapses.

Another problem is that as we improve, we constantly raise the bar. When we first learn a piece, we are happy when we play all the right notes. Then, we realize the rhythm in measure X is not quite right. Next, we hear that the balance between the melody and accompaniment is wrong. Then, we hear that a shift is rough, or the melody is not as legato as it should be. It goes on and on. As we improve, we notice more things that are wrong. It never ends! When you aim for perfection, you discover it's a moving target. Tolstoy (who was too busy writing very long novels to play the classical guitar) tells us, "If you look for perfection, you'll never be content."

Red Light Syndrome

Many guitarists suffer from RLS (not to be confused with Restless Leg Syndrome 😊). I first heard the term "Red Light Syndrome," from a former student and excellent guitarist, Bill Piburn, the editor of *Fingerstyle Guitar* magazine, has spent most of his life in Nashville. Bill also writes great arrangements and has worked a lot in Nashville recording studios.

In the recording studio, the producer or engineer hits the red "Record" button on the tape machine or digital audio workstation. Plus, a red "Recording" light may illuminate elsewhere inside or just outside the recording room.

The guitarist, usually quite talented and very well-prepared, sees the red light (or is aware of it) and immediately falls to pieces. The guitarist suddenly becomes aware he is under the microscope and feels as if every note is under scrutiny. A shadow of doubt descends, a voice inside him asking, "Why can't I do this? I did it perfectly over and over during rehearsal (or at home)." The player experiences nervousness, unsteady rhythm, and makes lots of mistakes he never made before.

You may never step foot inside a recording studio, but I'll bet you have felt RLS when you have played for your teacher, an audience, or even a friend or significant other. You prepare a piece and play it quite well when you are alone. But as soon as someone is watching and listening to you, you are struck by RLS.

Too much focus on the quest for perfection usually causes RLS. Fortunately, there is a way to fight it. By the way, to conquer raw stagefright, see [How to Control Stage Fright \(Performance Anxiety\)](#).

Don't Beat Yourself Up

Focusing too much on perfection can reach a point where you get frustrated and beat yourself up for not achieving your vision of perfection. I remind you again; you are not God. You will not be perfect. Ever.

Stop trying to be God, and next time maybe he'll go a little easier on you.

"Okay, Doug, enough already. I get it. I'm human. I'm not ever going to play the guitar perfectly. But even though I can't be a guitar god, can I at least be a king or queen of the guitar, and stop making so many mistakes?"

You must learn how to practice

There are obvious solutions such as how to practice, practice routines, step-practice, practice with speed-bursts, and many more—see my 20+ articles in the *Practicing Strategies* section of my technique tips: <https://douglasniedt.com/subscriberspage.php>.

As I point out in other technique tips, the successful guitarist uses many different types of practice strategies. In some types of practice, we focus on an individual, or sometimes a minute element. In other types of practice, we take a broader view.

Change your mindset

When we play through an entire piece for ourselves, our teacher, or a performance, we must use a different mindset. We must focus on the big picture, not the difficult technical problems. As world-class horn player Erik Ralske pointed out in a [recent interview](#), it's hard not to think about that difficult spot coming up in the song you are playing. It's like being told, "Whatever you do, don't think about pink elephants." What happens? You can't help but think about pink elephants.

When you focus on technique, you become tense, distracted, and more prone to accidents. Trying to avoid mistakes can also lead to careful, timid playing that lacks energy and spontaneity.

You will play better if you "blow through" the piece. You will be on more solid ground and less prone to making mistakes if you focus on the music, the melody, the expression, or what the piece makes you feel. In other words, think musically, not technically.

Give Yourself Permission to Make Mistakes

Another very important part of your mindset is to give yourself permission to make mistakes. If you are constantly on edge about making mistakes, believe me, you will make even more! Don't think about the negative. Think about the things that will help you—again, the musical expression, or the rhythmic drive or rhythmic freedom. Those are the really important things anyway.

The Power of Positive Thinking

Focus on the Present

When you begin to play a piece, if you are thinking you are about to jump out of an airplane and hope your parachute is going to open, you are inviting disaster. As you play, focus on the present. Anxiety lives in the past ("Uggh, I can't believe I just screwed that up") and future ("Oh no, here comes that chord change I've practiced 2037 times"). Focus on the present, focus on the moment; focus on the joy of making music.

Let Go, Just Play

LET GO. When you focus on the positive things—the musical elements, giving yourself permission to fail, and stay in the present, you will increase your confidence. Fewer things will go wrong.

One of my students was always very hard on herself during our lessons. In one lesson, she did a running commentary on how terrible she was playing and made faces at every error. I told her, "Don't react to anything, good or bad. JUST PLAY." She came back the following week with the words "JUST PLAY" on a piece of paper that she kept in her guitar case. She told me, "Every time I practice, I see that paper. It changes my attitude. I play better and enjoy practicing more too."

Your Listener(s) Want You to Succeed

You must realize that when someone listens to you play, *they want you to succeed*. They want you to play well. Your friend or significant other is listening to you to enjoy hearing your music, and they want to see you enjoy playing it. If someone has paid money to buy a ticket to hear you play, they *absolutely* want you to play great.

Be Proud of Yourself

Remind yourself how far you have come as a player. Even if you are a beginner, here you are, about to play a real song for someone. You are now able to do something you have always wanted to achieve. Feel good about that, and don't ruin the excitement or joy of the experience just because you might make a few mistakes.

You are a "Giver"

[Tom Hess](#), a world-class player, and teacher of rock, metal, and shred guitar styles, writes this:

"When you play for others, you are a 'giver.' When was the last time you ever felt nervous or afraid of doing something nice for someone else? If you hold the door open for a little old lady, do you feel nervous or afraid? When you donate money to a charity, do you experience fear or self-doubt about that? When you give your time to someone who needs help, do you feel nervous about that? Playing music should be no different.

Don't think of yourself as an Olympic competitor that must perform perfectly to win a gold medal. Don't think you have disappointed the entire human race if you make a mistake or if the crowd doesn't like your concert. If you think of your performance as "giving to others," you won't feel nervous or afraid. Stage fright will melt away.

When you perform, you add value to people's experience when they hear you. Some may like it and some may not, it's their choice or preference. Even if you play perfectly, not everyone will love what you are doing. That comes with the territory. But you will have given of yourself either way. You came to share what you do with the audience. Feel good about that because when you feel good, the chances of making mistakes in a performance diminish."

The Goal is Not Perfection

There are many parallels between musicians and professional athletes in terms of performance. One of the commonalities is that we never achieve perfection. We have good days and bad days. We have a string of great performances but sometimes a slump. But a crucial difference between amateur

musicians and athletes and professionals is that the professionals maintain a high level of performance beneath which they do not fall.

In other words, the professional maintains a performance level of say, 80% success. The pro will practice, work out, and maintain a positive mental attitude so that their level of execution in any performance or game (even in a slump) never falls below that 80% level. But the amateur will execute at 90% one day, 55% another day, 87% the following week, and 40% another day.

Your goal should not be perfection, but rather, to maintain the level of your playing at a realistic 70, 80, or 90%, whatever you feel is attainable for you.

God, Persian Carpets, and Guitarists

Followers of Islam believe only Allah makes things perfectly, and therefore to weave a perfect rug or carpet would be an offense to Allah. Deliberate mistakes in Persian rugs and carpets may be very difficult to spot and can be as subtle as a different color used in a flower petal.

Admittedly, there is a certain ironic arrogance here because the artist is telling us he indeed made a perfect rug until he added his intentional imperfect stitch! The reality is that the rug was not perfect before he consciously added the "mistake." Imperfections or mistakes are always present in handmade Persian rugs because humans make the rugs.

We guitarists certainly don't need to *add* mistakes to our playing to avoid offending God! But again, the point is that perfection does not exist. The closest a person ever comes to perfection is when they fill out a job application form.

Summary

1. Only God is perfect.
2. You are not God.
3. Perfect classical guitar playing does not exist.
4. Don't beat yourself up. Give yourself permission to make mistakes.
5. Focusing too much on perfection produces negative results. Focus on the music instead of avoidance of mistakes.
6. Use the power of positive thinking.
7. Strive to maintain a generally high level of performance rather than perfection.