Chapter **seven**

# Practice

How IMPORTANT Is PRACTICE in the development of art? This chapter reviews Malcolm Gladwell's l0,000-hour rule that explains, in generic terms, the amount of practice time needed to attain a level of world-class mastery. Recent research suggests that this rule is subject to variation, being moderated by two key variables: (1) the structural stability of the discipline and (2) its level of cognitive complexity. This chapter looks at both. In examining artistic stability, it considers the rigour required by the Bolshoi Ballet and the craft of writing pop or rock music, as per the likes of Michael Jackson, Glenn Frey and Leonard Cohen. In examining cognitive complexity, it turns to jazz and the work of Abdullah Ibrahim, Bill Evans and Joni Mitchell.

> We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.
> WILL DURANT[1]

> *I make tens of mistakes, but I always said to myself I wouldn't forgive myself if I made the same mistake twice. You learn more when things go wrong than when they go right.*
> HESTON BLUMENTHAL[2]

> *I am always doing that which l cannot do in order that I may learn how to do it.*
> PABLO PICASSO[3]

Many great musicians of the last era appear to understand that the capacity to create artistic miracles is fashioned through focus, discipline and practice. Though Keith Richards had a lot of fun along the way, in his biography, Life, the rock-guitar legend states bluntly that short cuts are not possible. To get anywhere, says Richards, you have to put in the necessary hours of practice, starting with an acoustic guitar and then moving on to an electric. “If you want to get to the top, you've got to start at the bottom, same with anything,” he said, observing that lots of beginners erroneously believe that they can become Jimi Hendrixes just because they can make a flat-top go “wee wee wah wah”. Guitar greatness comes from getting to know the instrument

inside out, Richards maintains. “I would just play every spare moment I got. People describe me then as being oblivious to my surroundings - I'd sit in a corner of a room when a party was going and be playing. Some indication of my love of my new instrument is Aunt Marje telling me that when [my mother] Doris went to hospital and I stayed with [my grandfatherl Gus for a while, I was never parted from my guitar. I took it everywhere and I went to sleep with my arm laid across it.”[4]

For the freshly constituted Rolling Stones, the contribution of practice in their crafting of blues music was remarkable. By 1964, a mere five years after Richards had acquired his first guitar, the Stones were hitting America with a version of black-inspired blues so strong that no one thought they were white, let alone from the UK. The November 1964 release of their single “Little Red Rooster” proved a defining moment. With Mick Jagger's exaggerated vocal phrasing, Brian Jones' slide-guitar and Richards' ever-improving fret-work, “Rooster” entered the New Musical Express chart at number one, a feat more typical then of an Elvis Presley or The Beatles.

Such was their US impact that Motown giant Bobby Womack remarked that at first he'd thought the Stones were black guys. “Where did these motherfuckers come from?” he reportedly asked.[5] Given the hours spent absorbing and practising the blues, all traces of Englishness had been rinsed from their delivery and Richards was frankly not surprised by the degree of the Stones' uptake. While, as Richards recalled, their initial musical ambition had simply been to turn people on to blues music, “what actually happened was that we turned American people back on to their own music. We turned white America's brains and ears around.” He explained that back in the mid- to late '50s, “American black music was going like an express train”. But after the initial breakthrough of white rock 'n' roll acts there was a reversal in the fortunes of blues-driven rock. Buddy Holly and Eddie Cochran had both died in accidents. Presley had been enlisted and Jerry Lee Lewis had married his 13-year-old cousin. By the time the Stones arrived in the mid-'60s, white music had relapsed into the sugar-spun melodies of Bobby Vee and The Beach Boys. Richards commented that US music taste was “stuck in the past”. But when “Little Red Rooster” charted there, the blues floodgates burst. “[S]uddenly,” said Richards, “Muddy [Waters] and Howlin’
Wolf and Buddy Guy are getting gigs and working. It was a breakthrough. And the record got to number one. And I'm absolutely sure what we were doing made Berry Gordy at Motown capable of pushing his stuff elsewhere, and it certainly rejuvenated Chicago blues as well.”[6]

Recalling a conversation with Joe Walsh, lead guitarist on the Eagles' Hotel California album, Richards said that like Womack, Walsh had also confessed to the profound effect of first hearing the Stones. No one else was doing anything remotely like it at the time, declared Walsh. Up to that point, he'd been listening to doo-wop

and not much else and had never even heard of black Chicago blues-men like Muddy Waters. Such was his induction, via the Stones, into black Southern blues that Walsh decided, at that point, to commit seriously to music.[7]

From such tales of discipline and application, there is a growing appreciation of the extent to which experience and practice are critical to the artistic mindset. In his 2008 book, Talent Is Overrated, Geoff Colvin observes that to reach world-class greatness, a significant degree of "deliberate practice" is required. With deliberate practice, Colvin suggests that such mastery should be achieved within approximately 10 years[8] - a view restated by Gladwell in Outliers, in which he presents his so-called 10,000-hour rule.[9] Gladwell used a number of examples to illustrate his case, including Bill Gates and The Beatles. Gates began his career in computing as a teen while attending Lakeside School in Seattle, which taught a course in coding. Similarly, before The Beatles had even made it in Liverpool, they were laying down eight-hour gigs in Hamburg strip clubs. The same principle of practice applies to Leonard Cohen. Though he never received training in classical music, the wordsmith Cohen was a published writer and a poet long before he became a songwriter.[10] Simply put, he had done the hours.

According to Gladwell, this rule of thumb cuts across all disciplines, from golf, to chess, to philosophy. The road to greatness is not easily achieved without a consolidated period of deliberate practice, he says. A 2014 Princeton-led review of the topic has tested the 10,000-hour theory on 88 studies of deliberate practice across several domains. Its key finding is that, in the main, practice explains only 12 per cent of the variation in performance. This figure is found, however, to vary substantially across disciplines. In games such as chess, for example, practice explained 26 per cent of the success achieved. In music and in sports, this figure reduced to 21 and 18 per cent respectively. In education, practice accounted for just 4 per cent of the difference, and in business it was a negligible and statistically insignificant 1 per cent. Deliberate practice, the study concluded, is important but not as important as has been argued by Gladwell and company.[11]

One explanation for this variance lies in the structural stability of each discipline. Those with strong and stable structures, such as chess, ballet, golf or classical music, see little variation in the rules. So, with dedicated practice, participants can be fairly confident that their growing levels of expertise will endure and pay off. However, in disciplines where the rules can change and the orthodox is never permanent, the amount of practice is less likely to explain any subsequent success. This is typical of domains such as four-chord rock music, modern art and entrepreneurship, where the emphasis seems to lie on conceptual production rather than technical proficiency.

Certainly punk bands such as the Ramones and the Sex Pistols were never driven by any degree of finesse. In fact, in early 1977, the Pistols' bassist at the time, Glen Matlock, was fired, purportedly because of his musical ambitions. A big fan of The Beatles, Matlock had sought to style his fretboard technique on Paul McCartney. His 19-year-old replacement, Sid Vicious, barely knew how to hold his bass.[12] When starting out, even members of R.E.M. admitted that they knew very little about the instruments they were playing. The more contemporary Rufus Wainwright also appears to disavow practice. In 2010, he commented: "You know the question: 'How do you get to Carnegie Hall?' Answer: 'Practise'? Well, in my case, I got there by not practising. I didn't finish my music degree. And when I got into the pop world I decided not to conform because I figured that the point of being an artist was that you shouldn't be like anyone else.[13]

Around the same time that punk music was emerging to challenge the dominant soft rock of the period, conceptual art arrived at London's Tate Gallery in the form of 120 bricks. This installation was bought from US artist Carl Andre for an undisclosed fee and arranged in a 6 x 10 oblong configuration, two bricks thick. Unlike punk music, Minimalism took a while to be fully appreciated by the British art-loving public. Now, it is shunned no more; its exponents are widely celebrated and their conceptual offerings, such as discarded jackets, unmade beds, piles of toffees and stuffed sharks, sell for millions of dollars.

In business, too, billionaires emerge in fields where they have little or no accreditation. With no formal university training, Richard Branson started out selling records through a student magazine and, later, in a high-street venture that morphed into Virgin Music. Today, Branson has interests in more than 400 companies, one of which even aims to send customers into space. Another serial entrepreneur, the engineer-trained Elon Musk, has similar ambitions and hopes to colonise Mars through his company SpaceX. Musk started out with Zip2, an online business marketing tool, which was sold to Compaq Computers – his share of profit amounting to $22 million. Next came X.com, which, in 2000, merged with Confinity to crack the online payments business through PayPal.

Musk also has business interests in a wide field of disciplines, including electric cars, solar electricity and an embryonic high-speed transcontinental transport called the Hyperloop.

So, across multiple fields where the rules are easily broken, it seems that the 10,000-hour rule has little or no application. However, across more formal fields of art, such as ballet for example, practice remains critical to explaining success. Ballet, we all know, is a discipline in which practice and technique are jointly required to reach any level of mastery. In 2013, the BBC reported on a talented British teenage

dancer, Daniel Dolan, who'd been accepted to study at Moscow's prestigious Bolshoi Ballet Academy. Getting into the Bolshoi as an outsider is virtually unheard of. Having negotiated the school's stringent entry requirements, outsiders have. to adapt to a gruelling routine of up to 10 hours of dance a day (with all instruction in Russian), and accept the institute's cramped and archaic training environment. They also have to weather the bitter Russian winter, when temperatures can plunge to -20° C. Dolan entered the Bolshoi at 16 and, after four years, became only the second Englishman to pass the academy's rigorous final examination, easily surpassing the 10,000 hours of practice en route. During his training, Dolan spoke of the Bolshoi's unyielding approach to achieving excellence. "At times you feel like you just want to give up and you don't want to go any further and you're very tired," he said. "And that's what I think makes the difference between some of the world's best ballet dancers and just average dancers. We're taught to go through and push the boundaries and go through our limits, go past when we're tired. Work harder and make ourselves stronger. And I think that's what I'm taught to do. And it works. I've never improved so much in my life." [14]

Moving from dance to popular music, we've noted already that Keith Richards practised for five years before achieving proficiency in the blues. And before launching into the big time, The Beatles probably logged twice that in playing time. As a serious Beatles fan, Steve Jobs was struck by the work put into one of the earlier takes of "Strawberry Fields" off the Sergeant Pepper's album (1967). "It's a complex song, and it's fascinating to watch the creative process as they went back and forth and finally created it over a few months," remarked Jobs. "You could actually imagine other people doing this, up to this version. Maybe not writing and conceiving it, but certainly playing it. Yet they just didn't stop. They were such perfectionists they kept it going and going. This made a big impression on me when I was in my thirties. You could just tell how much they worked at this. They did a bundle of work between each of these recordings. They kept sending it back to make it closer to perfect." Reflecting on these production values, Jobs observed how he'd used The Beatles' approach in much of his own work at Apple: starting off with one version and then refining continuously, doing detailed models of the design, or the buttons, or of a specific operational function. "It's a lot of work," he reflected, "but in the end it just gets better, and soon it's like, 'Wow, how did they do that?!? Where are the screws?'" [15]

Pop great Michael Jackson also believed in doing the hard yards. Asked in 2003 what he would have done differently given a second chance, Jackson replied without hesitation: "Practise more." [16] Pause here for a moment; for this was Micheal Jackson, who, singing aside, was possibly the greatest non-classic dancer since Fred

Astaire: the man who dazzled with his moonwalk and whose choreography made MTV renditions of songs off the Thriller album so unforgettable. The mind boggles at the notion of Jackson having to practise more. Putting the 10-year rule into perspective, by the age of four he was already fronting for the Jackson Five, spending 17 years with the band before going solo in 1979 with the band. His first solo bestselling album was Off the Wall (1979).

Singer-songwriter Bob Seger also believed in practice. When he and Eagles founder Glenn Frey were youngsters-on-the-make in their hometown Detroit, the slightly older Seger agreed to mentor Frey in the craft of songwriting. As Frey recollected: "Bob was the first guy who wrote his own songs and recorded them that I ever met. He said, you know, if you want to make it you have to write your own songs. And I said, well, what if they're bad? And be said, well they're going to be bad; so just keep writing and eventually you'll write a good song." [17]

Frey also shed light on the songwriting craft of the prolifically talented Jackson Browne. When he relocated out west from Motor City, Browne invited Frev to move in with him in L.A.'s cheap and hip Echo Park neighbourhood, along with another future Eagles member, J.D. Southern. Frey and Souther ended up renting an apartment for $35 a month, with Jackson Browne shifting to the basement. "That was it," affirmed Browne. "There was a stereo, a piano, and bed and guitar and a teapot." Looking back on those pre-Eagles days, Frey recalled how he and Southern would wake at around 9am with a kettle-whistle going off beneath the floorboards, followed by the sound of Browne tinkering on his piano. "l didn't really know how to write songs," confessed Frey, believing up till then that you simply waited around for inspiration, "and that was the deal," as he put it. Looking back, Frey reflected on how his understanding of his songwriting craft had emerged "through Jackson's ceiling and my floor". Continued Frey:

> Jackson would get up and play the first verse and the first chorus and he'd play it 20 times. He'd play it just the way he wanted. And then there's silence and then I hear the teapot going off and there'd be quiet for IO or 20 minutes. Then I'd hear him start to play again; and there was the second verse. So then he'd work on the second verse and he'd play it 20 times, and then he'd go back to the top of the song and then he'd play the first verse, the first chorus and the second verse another 20 times until he was really comfortable with it - you know and change a word here and there. And I'm up there going: So that's how you do it! Elbow grease, you know! Time. Thought. Persistence. [18]

Leonard Cohen was equally convinced of the primacy of practice over talent, describing the slow and painful process by which most of his songs developed, even when they were good. “There are people who work out of a sense of great abundance,” he said in 2012. “I'd love to be one of them but I am not. You know, you just work with what you've got.”[19] Cohen acknowledged that most of the time songwriting was a hard slog. “Hallelujah” was refined out of an eye-watering 80 potential verses, taking approximately five years to finish.[20] “My tiny trouble - and can I just say tiny in comparison to all the troubles in the world – is that before I can discard anything I have to write it and polish it and finish it. Only then can I throw it away. I wrote a lot of songs on the last tour,” he remarked without any apparent irony. Grappling with his songwriting limitations, Cohen recalled sharing his frustrations with the Canadian poet Irving Layton, explaining to him what his aspirations were and what he was trying to do. “Leonard,” Layton is quoted as saying, “are you sure you're doing the wrong thing?”[21] Ever the philosopher, Cohen offered this as self consolation: “Well, you know, we're talking in a world where guys go down into the mines, chewing coca and spending all day in backbreaking labour. We're in a world where there's famine and hunger and people are dodging bullets and having their nails pulled out in dungeons so it's very hard for me to place any high value on the work that I do to write a song. Yeah, I work hard but compared to what?”[22]

Sting is another who agrees that success relies mostly on perseverance. Asked if there were any compositions that came out of nowhere, he said yes, but only a few. “Some do come already wrapped up in ribbon, probably the most successful ones: ‘Every Breath You Take’, for example, or ‘Roxanne’.” The remaining songs, he said, took a lot of time and effort.[23] On receiving his Nobel Prize, Dylan, too, was forthright about the practice required. “Everything worth doing takes time,” he said. “You have to write a hundred bad songs before you write a good one. And you have to sacrifice a lot of things that you might not be prepared for. Like it or not you have to follow your own star.”[24]

Bruce Springsteen is also renowned for his unrelenting work ethic. His documentary on the making of Darkness on the Edge of Toum (1978) recounts the effort he put into this album, with historical footage showcasing Springsteen both alone with his composition notebooks and together with the E Street Band as it ground out a raft of songs in a collaborative slow-heave. Even when he joined his first band, The Castiles, at the age of 13, his work ethic was never in dispute. Recalls fellow Castiles band member, Frank Marziotti: “Bruce was always a fast learner. You showed him one thing, and he came back the next day and showed you three.” Springsteen fondly confirmed: “I guarantee you that once I had the job, I went

home and started to woodshed like a mad dog. I was in a band ... Oh yeah, after I got into the band, I just listened and played all night. Every available hour and minute." 25 In his autobiography, Springsteen owned to the gunslinger lore that, while he was fast, there was inevitably going to be someone faster. This was not his prime concern, however. What he was chiefly afraid of was not maximising his abilities and not possessing a clear understanding of where he was going and how he was going to get there. "I was all I had," he said of himself in his start-up band, Steel Mill, in 1970. "I had only one talent. I was not a natural genius. I would have to use every ounce of what was in me - my cunning, my musical skills, my showmanship, my intellect, my heart, my willingness - night after night, to push myself harder, to work with more intensity than the next guy just to survive untended in the world I lived in." [26]

Novelist Earnest Hemingway also spent years honing his craft. Believing that the religious and moral foundations of the post-war society were corrupt and should be replaced by an expression of truth that could be verified through the five senses, Hemingway was especially taken with Joseph Conrad's perspective on writing, which he described as "scrupulous fidelity to the truth of my own sensations".[27] Conrad's style contrasted with the exhaustive use of cliche and elaboration characteristic of writing at that time. Hemingway was particularly scathing of professional journalists, whose reporting he considered ponderous and superficial. Trained as a reporter at the Kansas City Star, which applied a no-nonsense template of 110 rules of writing, Hemingway was convinced that ornate language could be replaced by a tauter economy of expression. He would later describe the template as "the best rules I ever learned for the business of writing".[28] Some of these were:

1. Use short sentences. Use short first paragraphs. Use vigorous English. Be positive, not negative.
2. Never use old slang. Slang to be enjoyable must be fresh.
3. Be careful of the word only. "He only had $10," means he alone was the possessor of such wealth; "He had only $10," means the ten was all the cash he possessed.
4. Avoid the use of adjectives, especially such extravagant ones as splendid, gorgeous, grand, magnificent, etc.[29]

In his seven novels published between 1924 and 1951, Hemingway proceeded to lay the foundations of a sparseness of language that writers such as J.M. Coetzee would subsequently adopt. Certainly, his early training as a cub journalist was critical to his development, and Hemingway was forthright about the discipline required: "I like to write standing up to reduce the old belly and because you have more vitality on your feet," said the Nobel Laureate. "Who ever went ten rounds sitting on his ass? I write description in longhand because that's hardest for me and you're closer to the paper

when you work by hand, but I use the typewriter for dialogue because people speak like a typewriter works." 30 Like Browne and Springsteen, he also had a fixed routine, starting early and rereading and editing everything he'd written to the point where he'd left off. "That way I go through a book I'm writing several hundred times," he explained. "Then I go right on, no pissing around, crumpling up paper, pacing, because I always stop at a point where I know precisely what's going to happen next. So I don't have to crank up every day." Hemingway was adamant that the toughest but most important part of writing lay in the editing: refining the language until it acquired a sharpness "like the bullfighter's estoque, the killing sword", as he put it. He cited the instance where his son, Patrick, had brought him a story to edit for him. "I went over it carefully and changed one word," he recalled. When his son then complained that he'd changed only one word, he replied: "If it's the right word, that's a lot."[31]

Having looked at how hours of practice tend to correlate with increasingly stable art structures, let's turn now to a second factor explaining practice required across different artistic disciplines: namely cognitive complexity, using jazz as an example.

The mastery of jazz requires significant thought and usually some prior training in standard musical formats. While in South Africa with his New York six-piece band, Ekaya, jazz legend Abdullah Ibrahim (formerly known as Dollar Brand) met with a group of children and teachers from Cape Town's South Peninsula High School. One of the children asked if sight-reading music was necessary in order to play jazz. Ibrahim asked members of his band to respond. Keith Loftis, his tenor saxophonist, replied that if you want to work as a session musician, you'd better be able to read music. "If you don't read, you don't eat," he said. "That's it. Don't let anyone else tell you any different." His baritone saxophonist, Jason Marshall, agreed: "Jazz is a language. So if you can't read it, you'll be very limited in what you can do, you know."

"What about singers?" asked one of the children. "Must they also sight-read?" The band members could barely contain their amusement. Loftis, who was also a composer, recounted the tale of a "damn fool" diva who wanted him to write the score to a tune she wished to record. When he asked what key it should be in, she didn't know what he was talking about. "So yes," replied Loftis, "singers have got to know what key they're singing in. And they should be able to play the piano. And yeah, learn how to read and write music."

Thereafter followed further questions on the importance of practising scales, a form of musical discipline most children hate. Loftis told his audience that scale training was a lifetime's rehearsal and absolutely necessary. "Practising has become a

form of therapy. It clears my head," he said. Commenting later on the children's lazy attitude, Ibrahim lamented that many kids see jazz as something requiring neither teaching nor practice, and observed how most of them were ignorant of even basic standards such as "I Got Rhythm". Knowledge of such pieces, he insisted, is a basic requirement to enter jazz. You have to pay your dues, do the hard work, get to know such tunes and know how to play them. "But you look at those youngsters and they've never heard of it! So you really have to start from the ground up here. Also, the other thing is that they hardly have the basic skills. You have to have those skills. Twenty-five hours a day, every day, for a lifetime."[32]

Fellow jazz pianist Bill Evans is another who understood that technical proficiency preceded any form of creative lyricism. From the age of six, until thirteen, he learnt to sight-read and play classical music to the point where he could perform pieces by Mozart and Beethoven. Thereafter followed jazz training at the Southeastern Louisiana University. By all accounts Evans was not an orthodox student and did not take to rote practice, exasperating his teachers with improvised off-beat versions of the requisite arpeggios and scales. "Everything I've learned, I've learned with feeling being the generating force," asserted Evans. "I've never approached the piano as a thing in itself, but as a gateway to music."[33] By the end of these studies, however, Evans had developed a high degree of technique and an ear for tone-colour, emotion, mood and harmony. Technically proficient by his mid-twenties, he was finally free to hone the musical voice inside him. He said: "Technique gave you the ability to translate your ideas into sound through your instrument," which went beyond scales to "a feeling for the keyboard that will allow you to transfer any emotional utterance into it".[34] "You have to spend a lot of years at the keyboard before what's inside can get through your hands and into the piano," said Evans. "For years and years that was constant frustration for me. I wanted to get that expressive thing in, but somehow it didn't happen. When I was about twenty-six - about a year before I went to Miles [Davis] - that was the first time I attained a certain degree of expressiveness in my playing. Believe me I had played a lot of jazz before then."[35]

Running the numbers on the hours the 26-year-old Evans must have practised to get to this point of virtuosity is revealing. Starting at age six, he would have logged two decades of piano training – 13 years just in jazz. During his jazz training, at two-and-a-half (to three) hours' practice daily for six days a week, the left-handed

Evans would have logged 10,172 hours, fitting neatly within Gladwell's rule. Years later Evans did some teaching himself. His friend Warren Bernhardt recalled his sessions under Evans, remarking, too, on his incredible proficiency:

> We continued our lessons, which were not lessons at all, but consisted of Bill sitting across from me at the couch listening to me play, quietly offering suggestions from time to time. He would never show me anything, like his voicings, which everybody wanted to steal from him. He did show me an approach to harmonic textures which I use to this day, and I spent many hours looking over his shoulder or sitting next to him while he practised... I never heard him make a mistake. Never. He organized his material and chose his harmonic palette with complete mastery. He could play any of the tunes in his books in any of the twelve keys... Sometimes he would search for weeks, even months, for the right keys to use with the trio. More than anything else, his concentration and unswerving focus on his art were the most amazing and inspiring phenomena to me.[36]

Reading the above perspectives on Bill Evans and Abdullah Ibrahim should illustrate some of the cognitive and technical demands of jazz and help explain just how difficult it is to become proficient within the discipline, let alone creative. This is simply not so for less demanding music genres. Punk music, for example, was never going to impose high barriers of entry: witness the Sex Pistols and its incompetent bassist, Sid Vicious. Yet despite (or possibly because of) their deficiencies, their output is still critically regarded, with the authoritative Virgin Encyclopedia of Seventies Music awarding Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols (1977) a top score of five stars, thereby equating it with some truly accomplished offerings of the same period. Consider, for example, Bob Dylan's Desire (1976), David Bowie's Heroes (1977), Kraftwerk's Trans-Europe Express (1977) and Talking Heads' Remain in the Light (1980). Placing “low art” such as Never Mind the Bollocks in the same category as these pieces is not easy and, arguably, the same criticism applies to rap music, where technical proficiency and practice is less an explicator of success than is perhaps straightforward marketing and, possibly, luck. While there are those who argue that rap artists such as Eminem, Dr. Dre and Kendrick Lamar have elevated their rhyming couplets to the level of art - the receipt of Grammy awards proves this - others would counter that their genre pitches no higher than other “well-managed” art forms such as Tracey Emin's unmade bed, Dennis Oppenheim's hubcaps and Damien Hirst's stuffed animals.

In less demanding fields, therefore, it would seem that “novelty” and “originality” are equated with “art” and typically employed interchangeably. For while there is certainly novelty in fields such as punk music, rap and contemporary art, whether these novelties transcend into art is debatable. The paying market hotly asserts that any determination of art remains fixedly in the eye of the beholder and

there are economies driven by auction houses such as Christie's and Sotheby's to maintain the faith structures necessary for sustaining the sham-aesthetics of wealthy patrons. Quite how long these bubble economies will last, we don't know. At some point the music does stop. The 1637 Dutch tulip mania proved to be a Ponzi scheme, some bulbs selling for 10 times the annual income of a skilled craftsman. And, within South Africa, the current craze for colour variants of certain antelope, supposedly bred for hunting purposes, is one too. Asset bubbles do not last long, however.

With what may indisputably be classified as art (as opposed to just craft), the question of practice and technique will continue to remain of paramount importance. While a lot of contemporary art has arguably "dumbed down" and diminished the importance of technical proficiency, this is not so in an art form such as jazz, which requires a fluidity of expression to permit the entry of creativity and imagination. Speculating on the future of jazz, the composer George Russell predicted, in 1971, that jazz techniques were "going to get more complex", making it harder for "the composer to master the techniques and yet preserve his intuitive approach". Similarly, for the jazz improviser, the anticipated complexity would prove challenging to master while preserving what he called "the intuitive earthy dignity of jazz".[37]

By way of one final example, Joni Mitchell is a contemporary singer-songwriter who has successfully mastered the technical requirements of jazz. At the start of her career, while still in her "folk" phase, a weakness in her left hand- due to mild polio as a child - saw Mitchell struggling to master the guitar's F-chord. However, she soon overcame this difficulty by open-tuning her guitar to the chord of F. Though this further required the adaptation of the remaining chords into this new tuning format, Mitchell soon mastered this. Indeed, her work ethic is well known in the industry. "The writers that I aspire to, like Joni Mitchell and Randy Newman, they'll tell you that the work gets harder, not easier," said singer-songwriter Christopher Cross.38 Her discovery and increasing appreciation of open-tuning principles meant that she could compose in non-conventional keys, using a so-called indicated arrangement, which incorporated nuances of the baseline, together with vocal and instrumental counterpoints. And so, as a singer-songwriter who'd recorded some of the telling notes in the West Coast folk genre - the stark Blue and Court and Spark being prime examples - her mid-'70s shift away from the confines of folk tunes marked something of a Dylanesque departure into the hitherto unknown. As early as 1973, Mitchell had felt increasingly stifled by the confines of contemporary melody making. "For a long time, I've been playing in straight rhythms," she told a friend at the time. "But now, in order to sophisticate my music to my own taste, I push it into odd places that feel a little unusual to me, so I feel that I'm stretching out."[39] The real stretch-out began in earnest with her 1975 album The Hissing of Summer Lawns - a

favourite of both Morrissey and the late Prince - and then, with more intensity, Hejira, the following year. Collaborating with jazz luminaries, including Jaco Pastorius, Wayne Shorter, Pat Metheny and Charles Mingus, further albums would follow - Don Juan's Reckless Daughter (1977), Mingus (1979) and the live double-set Shadows and Light (1980) - leaving many of her earlier ardent fans and critics jilted and bemused. "I've spent more time at jazz clubs, and I'm not a rock fan," said the unrepentant Mitchell in 2000. "White rock 'n' roll, generally speaking, was never appealing to me. The stances of the little white boys never did it for me." And thus the reclusive Mitchell has continued producing songs that do not conform to the tastes of "little white boys".

For the uninitiated, sample her "Song for Sharon", off Hejira, which is all of eight-and- a-half minutes and was composed in a stream of consciousness while she was high on cocaine, following a daytrip to New York to buy a mandolin. Using Garden-of-Eden imagery, Mitchell's lyrics contrast Sharon's conventional lifestyle with her own, which flirts with the "apple of temptation". In a recent concert, Mitchell commented that playing such songs with their different tuning requirements was a bit like typing on a keyboard where the letters kept shifting about. She was inducted into the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame as recently as 1997 (a ceremony she did not attend) and was listed in Rolling Stone magazine's list of the 100 greatest artists of all time as low down as No 62- just after Metallica (61) and the Sex Pistols (60). Nonetheless, when the revised history of 20th-century music is finally completed, it will reveal that, while Dylan's hallmark was his transition into the electric, Mitchell's was her transition into jazz. As David Crosby remarked: "Match her and Bob Dylan up as poets, and they are in the same ballpark. But she was a much more sophisticated musician."[40] The jazz pianist Herbie Hancock, who covered her work on River: The Joni Letters (2007), once recounted that one of the greatest experiences he'd ever had was listening to a conversation between Mitchell and saxophonist Wayne Shorter. "Just to hear them talking, my mouth was open. They understand each other perfectly, and they make these leaps and jumps because they don't have to explain anything."[41]

Blessed by the twin engines of composition - a profound connection to the muse and a restlessness to explore and master the technical constraints of the art within her - there is little doubt that Mitchell will ultimately be acknowledged as a towering musical genius of her time.

**Chapter Summary**

1. Within the realms of art, beginners tend to tire and give up, either because they don't understand the complexity of the task or because they think they can't conquer it clue to lack of ability.
2. Alternatively, they are so impatient to reach mastery that they don't have the perseverance to see it through.
3. Practice, however, is the salve in all these respects.
4. For as early 20th-century philosopher and psychologist John Dewey once put it: "The self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action." [42]

CHAPTER SEVEN – **Practice**

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