

# Nudge

by Clint Goss, [clint@goss.com](mailto:clint@goss.com), August 3, 2008

It's happened to us all ... we go to a flute circle, festival, or workshop and get inspired. We listen and learn and play and play and play. Our playing improves and we come away from the event with new inspiration and with the conviction to practice more, write down our songs, and start recording our CD ...

Then we return from the event. Work intrudes, projects pile up. Life happens. Four weeks later, we've barely picked up the flute. That intense feeling of wholeness we had when we were expressing our music is replaced by a hollow feeling of failure and inability to play. Our promise to practice an hour a day feels like a failed New Year's resolution to lose weight.

After I had many of these roller-coaster cycles of "workshop love" and "homeplace draught", I began to take aim at the problem. One solution, go to a flute festival every week, was deemed impractical by the very practical Vera, my wife of 26 years. I had to agree with her.

Then she pointed out that my playing wasn't the problem, it was my practicing. Her advice: don't play for a solid month. Instead, spend the time focusing on how to structure my life to fit the music in.

One month of not playing seemed severe. But I had to admit I probably would not have played much that month, and the exercise of restructuring my life to fit in the music began to be fun. I did not need to "set aside time" for this exercise, I could do it anywhere!

So I started thinking about it while driving to work. The first realization was that if I could think about restructuring my life toward music while driving, why couldn't I just do music while driving? The next day I had a stack of CDs in the car, and within a week I had a huge list of CDs and iPod music that I had wanted to listen to ... enough for a year's worth of commuting.

W. A. Mathieu, the famous jazz pianist and music educator, advises musicians to spend ¼ of their time listening to other people's music, so I was already 25% of the way to my goal.

Then I happened to listen to a recording of the great jazz flutist Yusef Lateef, where he was scat singing at the same time as improvising on his flute. So I tried singing along with some simpler NAF melodies. At first it was difficult to even find the first note, but once I was able to match pitch with a few long-tones, singing became easier and easier.

Then something magic happened: I began playing flute without a flute! I could develop NAF melodies just by humming, and I found I could immediately play them on a flute along with my humming. I was running home after parking the car and playing for an hour while humming melodies.

Vera was not impressed with my “success”. I had not, after all, spent one full month thinking about music in my life, but had simply found one quick (but admittedly awesome) way to focus on music. Knowing that she is usually right about these things, I returned in earnest to the mental task. I came up with many ideas and tried them over the years ... here is a list of some of the successful ones:

**Create a safe space for your music.** This is a place and a time where you can be yourself musically – to do whatever strikes your fancy, including vocalizing, playing your flute loudly, doing physical warmups, and playing other people’s music. The physical space could be as little as a shelf with your favorite flute(s) and some sheet music.

The time aspect is often more challenging ... creating a half hour where others in your life acknowledge that this is “your time”. Getting a switch where I could send my telephone calls directly to the answering machine without having it ring was a key step here.

**Sprinkle flutes around your living space.** If you happen to have more than one flute, try placing them in places that invite you to play. It just might encourage you to pick it up if the time is right. For me, playing flute 5 times a day for 5 minutes was much more valuable than playing for a straight half hour.

**Loop pedal.** I am lucky to have a loop pedal attached to my microphone and speaker setup. I found that if I lay down a simple rhythmic loop and leave it running, then I am drawn back to my music space over and over throughout the day to jam with that background.

**Keep the music going.** I organized my iPod by creating a playlist of background listening music, and play it a low volume all day. It’s so low that a person on the other end of a phone call will not hear it, but for me it’s there. This was a huge inducement to play.

**Create a goal.** Every time I had a concert scheduled, I practiced like mad. In the weeks leading up to a workshop that we would lead, my music came to the forefront. When I got serious about doing a CD, I played like mad. Eventually, I realized that if I had a series of nicely spaced events, that I would be encouraged to play all the time.

**Reading.** I found that the more I read about music, the more I wanted to play. After reading VOW I would play for days. The great books on music and improvising spurred me on: The Listening Book by W. A. Mathieu, Effortless Mastery by Kenny Werner, and The Music Lesson by Victor L. Wooten all spurred periods of intense music making.

I used these tricks and techniques over time to nudge me into playing. But as I settled into playing more regularly, something amazing happened. I found that the positive feeling I got from playing each day exceeded the effort of getting started. Was I getting addicted to playing flute? So be it!