

In the Zone – and Out of It

What is “the zone,” an expression often used by performers in various fields of competitive or personal endeavor? Clearly, it has something to do with consummate functioning, with a kind of inner serenity or a unique coordination of mental and physical attributes leading to superb and unanticipated achievement. *Where* the zone is another question. It is depicted as a place, yet it is nowhere, a metaphor for a condition in which the normally impossible becomes possible.

Many years back when I used to play soccer, I was the lousiest member of the team, completely invisible on the pitch. Until one day, it seemed I had been gifted with an unerring foot, potting six goals to the amazement of my team mates. I never scored another goal thereafter, but on that day I was in the zone. My experience as a hockey goaltender was rather different—at first. Though I was a pretty good netminder and logged a fair number of shutouts, I will never forget the game, the last one I played, when pucks whizzed by me like I was hitch-hiking. The net behind me felt a hundred feet wide and we lost 10 to 1. I was so far out of the zone I may as well have been living in another sector of the universe.

The greatest obstacle to the capacity for transcending oneself is, usually, oneself, but the zone is that mystical mode of being in which the warts and deficiencies of one's nature are stripped away for reasons that elude analysis. We might say that the zone is like a religious sanctuary where one cannot be touched by hostile elements, *including one's own inadequacies*. There is something almost supernatural about being in the zone, as if one had entered a state of grace or been consecrated by a higher power.

Every artist, teacher and athlete knows what I'm getting at. There are those mysterious intervals in life when one can do no wrong and the unpredictable gods collaborate with one's

every effort. I have had teaching days when I never needed to look at a note, and writing days when I covered page after page without the need to revise. But these were (and are) rare instances; reality seldom conspires with one's intentions. Generally one stumbles along, either acquitting oneself in an orgy of incompetence or merely being ordinary. For the most part, we find ourselves in that desultory, in-between sphere where we habitually linger, perpetually hoping for something better, perpetually fearing something worse.

Such has been my staple experience playing the guitar. There are moments, admittedly few and far between, when I feel as if I'm playing like a pro, every note ringing cleanly as a tuning fork, chord progressions smooth as Bechamel. Sometimes an indifferent guitarist can get "there," too. The sense of exhilaration is inexpressible. At other times, all too frequent, I am ready to give it up, the guitar bucking like a jack drill, the strings like sodden spaghetti under my fingers. The sense of despair is equally inexpressible. I begin to worry that the first couplet of Belfast poet Adam Crothers' "Blues for Kaki King" from his debut collection [Several Deer](#) applies specifically to me:

If I could get these six strings working they still wouldn't work on you.

I'm entitled to exit at any point and everybody's glad when I do.

I recall a desperate week when, for some inscrutable psychological reason, I was simply unable to form the piece-of-cake b-minor finger configuration, though it never before or since gave me any trouble. How to explain these uncanny vicissitudes?

Occasionally the fault may lie with the instrument and its contingencies: climate-related expansion or contraction, a slightly bent neck, frets that require to be dressed. The

guitar might simply be out of whack. But far more likely it is the guitarist who is out of whack.

My studio engineer [Matt Baetz](#) of Longshot Records in Kingston, Ontario, recalls a recording session with a celebrated, top-tier guitarist that went absolutely nowhere. After innumerable takes, the victim of his own inexplicable ineptitude decided to pack it in and slumped on the studio couch. He was in a dead zone, as if he were driving on a remote country road between cell towers when one's mobile goes silent. He sat around disconsolately for some time, abstractedly picking away at his guitar. And suddenly he was "on." The next take was a glittering success. Sometimes, one can be in and out, or out and in, of the zone in a matter of hours.

We have no way of knowing when the angel of perfection will descend into our world—as it did on the day, for example, when the L.A. Dodgers' [Kirk Gibson](#) limped to the plate on two gimp legs and hit a two-out, 3 and 2 count, ninth inning home run to win the first game of the 1988 World Series. Or on March 21, 1991, in a hockey game between the Quebec Nordiques, the worst team in the NHL, and the second-best Boston Bruins, when the Quebec goaltender, the "leaky," vertically challenged [Ron Tugnutt](#), stopped 70 of 73 shots, a modern record, to backstop his team to a 3-3 tie. So utterly zonal was his performance that, after the game, the Boston players broke protocol and skated over to congratulate him.

When the sacred space opens, magic happens. Even adversity is no match for the zone or its peripheries. In the music realm one thinks of [Tony Iommi](#) of Black Sabbath, one of the great guitarists, who played brilliantly with plastic fingertips after suffering a serious accident, or of [Django Reinhardt](#), who could catch "three fingered" lightning in a bottle despite playing with fingers badly burned in a caravan fire. For sublimely talented musicians such as these, the zone is far more accessible than it is for many, or most, of us, who can only gape in exiled wonderment.

Everyone will have his or her own examples of performers who have entered that rarefied domain, that one-off moment when one “transposes” into another key or register of accomplishment. Many believe that Jimi Hendrix took up residence in the zone, but I’m not so sure, unless being able to [play with your teeth](#) counts as superlative achievement. Such transcendentalism is more appropriate for a cartoon character like Stuart Van Halen in the film [Minions](#). Leonard Cohen was in the zone, musically and rhetorically, during his [2008 London concert](#) at the O2 arena. [James Cohen](#) and [Steven Hancoff](#) are familiar with its precincts: one need only listen to some of Cohen’s flamenco flourishes or Hancoff’s acoustic Bach to gain a vicarious experience of that numinous meridian.

[Eddie Van Halen](#) was a regular visitor; discussing his substance-enhanced practice [in a Billboard interview](#), Van Halen said “I’m sure there were musical things I would not have attempted were I not in that mental state. You just play by yourself with a tape running, and after about an hour, your mind goes to a place where you’re not thinking about anything.” It just comes to be. I confess that I’m not partial to ear-splitting amplification (cf. Jim Hendrix above) or eutectic glissandos, but Van Halen is the real thing. Naturally, like all such prodigies, they are good or extraordinary musicians, with that extra special something that enables them to unlock the zone far more often than the rest of us plebs—however they manage to do it.

It’s obvious that a good guitarist can make even a defective guitar sound good, and a defective guitarist can make a good guitar sound bad. It’s because of this latter probability that I didn’t buy a high-end Takamine that I had coveted for some time. I knew I wouldn’t be able to coax it to sound any better than my Ibanezes, which were more than adequate for a wannabe musician of my caliber. I’m not in the zone often enough to presume upon the annunciation. Being out of the zone is a 10 to 1 bet.

My pianist wife Janice tells me that my technique has markedly improved over the last year, but I still feel like a kid spinning a yoyo while riding up an escalator. There are more “down” fluctuations than I am happy with, when the disc sleeps at the end of the string, but the journey is gradually upward, or so I would like to believe. Practice, of course, is a necessary condition for mastery but it is not a sufficient condition for miracle, for the arcane cannot be purchased. Yet there is no alternative but to keep plugging away, riding the escalator.

No doubt many of us amateurs, dilettantes, probationers and aspirants, and even some virtuosos, would concur. For along the way to the next level, who knows, one may enter that fabled region where everything works precisely as it would in an ideal dimension. True, one cannot aim for the zone any more than one can aim for the empyrean, but the prospect keeps us going.

First published in