

Spark #1.02 - The Flow

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The Flow. You KNOW the Flow. It's what we all strive for — as musicians, artists, writers, dancers, potters, calligraphers, anyone involved with the creative arts- we're all looking for that Flow. In some ways, it's better than sex. Sometimes.

Not everyone reading SPARK may understand the Flow, so allow me to digress a bit. What is the Flow? It's a mental/spiritual/psychological state, characterized by a sense of complete involvement in the moment, a heightened and transformed awareness of the task one is immediately involved in. Time ceases to exist- all you are doing is what you are doing and it feels like it can go on for hours, days, months. In actuality, it's usually much shorter than that- but you'd never notice or care- because when you're in the Flow, you are inside your activity, and there is no separation.

Robert Fripp talks about how music can take you into her confidence, like a good fairy might come down and grant a special moment to a particular performance. I'm not a supernaturalist, so I don't really go for his external spirit imagery, but it is useful, and I "know what he means" when he talks of that peak experience in performance. It's a "magical" thing that is as rare and evanescent as it is essential for human happiness and required for creative constructive engagement with one's art. Once experienced, it is nearly impossible to forget. I call that experience "The Flow".

I've been in that flow countless times- it's something I actively court in my work. In fact, if I didn't experience it, I wouldn't get any work done at all! I'd spend endless hours criticizing every move, every nuance, every gesture, every rhetorical flourish, and in the end have nothing to show for my efforts. Instead, I let my senses and inner sensibility guide me in my work. With enough practice, the mechanics of creating cease to eat much of my bandwidth, and I can let my hands work their way around the keyboards, machines, brushes, pens, and whatever instrument that is presenting itself at that moment to my "Muse", thusly releasing some significant creativity. But this all happens only when I am in The Flow. When I am not worried about the external apparatus of my working world, and I am completely involved with my actions, The Flow can come to me, and guide me.

I first became aware of The Flow when I was quite young, perhaps nine or ten years old. I don't remember where, or when, or which one came first, but I remember several things happening, and I found it fascinating then and worth some reflection now. One early Flow experience happened when my devoutly Catholic parents had dragged me off to Church. I didn't much care for the Ritual - it seemed boring and pointless. But I noticed that if I concentrated, focused my breath and mind, I found that suddenly the whole thing was over within moments and we were on our way back to the car. If I fell asleep during the services, my parents would wake me up and I knew that I'd get a world of static when we got back home — so sleep was not an option. This was, on reflection, basic meditative practice. I remember that if I focused closely enough, everything "disappeared" and I was left with only

my noticing that everything was disappearing, except the Bach or Buxtehude or whatever the organist was playing. And with more concentration, the music itself seemed equally disconnected, each note following the other, but not in any logical pattern- I wasn't listening for a melody, so there was no melody to notice- just sound and a shimmering golden fading light of vague un-reality swirled about me. And suddenly- it was time to go. As I look back on those times, I can see that it was The Flow, only applied to my circumstance of being bored out of my skull, and by focusing into what was around me, what was around me was transformed in a way that was illuminating and decidedly more interesting than what obversely seemed to obtain at that moment.

Another was when I was doing pencil drawings at the dining table. I noticed that if I really wound myself into the drawing, I didn't notice the five other kids in our family running around and arguing, and the TV blaring its nonsense, and my parents trying to keep it all to a dull roar. It all faded away as I focused in on my drawing. And suddenly- it was time for bed.

Since then, how many times have I been awake to all hours of the night coaxing my machines to make the noize the "Music Fairy" required of me? How many endless hours did I not even notice the clock spinning its petty pace, ticking out the millions of moments of my life? And isn't that time- that Flow- what we all create for? To be in that state where you and your instrument are not different, but where you uniquely meld at that instant with the sound you are making? And if you work in a group situation, when everyone in the band is on that very same wavelength, and the music flows effortlessly, so clearly, and so completely with you and your friends that you all feel that the moment of creation is Now? And this Now is all you are doing, so you don't even notice its "now-ness" - there is just the music- and then even the music disappears and you with it! You're just doing what you do, and everything is perfect.

That, to me, makes art worth making, and art made that way is the art I find is worth most. Everything else seems like an intellectual exercise. It may be interesting, informative, and worthwhile, but not as meaningful and important to me as it otherwise could be.

I also notice The Flow after I've been doing gold leaf work on my paintings. For those who don't know- gold leaf is a ROYAL PAIN IN THE ASS. It's expensive, and very hard to work with. It takes enormous concentration and a steady hand. I don't drink coffee before a leafing session. Copper leaf is a good bit easier, as is aluminum. But gold silver, and palladium leaf are monstrously difficult. Each 3-inch square costs about \$1.25, and is thinner than a human hair. If you touch it, it sticks to your finger, and tears. But once applied, the effect is like none other. The "glue" (gold size) used to hold the stuff down is actually a kind of varnish, and has an optimal "stickiness" period of a few hours at most. This causes me to have to place the gold size in specific areas at specific times, and work at a deliberate speed. It sets up a rhythm of applying size on one place, and then leaf in the other, size somewhere else, and then leaf in another place. Suddenly the day is gone, and I have covered a part of the work with this shimmering gold beauty. Several sessions like that, and the painting is complete, and a kind of being, an object of great cathectic involvement is brought into existence in this universe.

Another time that is Flow inducing is when I am at my synthesizer, and I am designing new sounds and making music with the results. Because of Serious and Expensive Electrical Problems in the house wiring that I have yet to work out in the Warwick Electronic Music Studio, I work in candlelight. Late at night, while fluttering candles play dancing shapes and forms on the wall, The Flow might come, and take me into the synthesizer - and for a few moments that seem to last hours, something comes into being. I record those times, these "beings", as often as possible. Hours pass by, and it seems that only a moment ago I had fired up the synths and computers and had set forth with some vague notion of "making something" tonight. Those are the times, those precious, delicate times when some great beauty, some glinting glimpse of the sublime comes to sit on my weary shoulder, that make this horrible trial and endless tribulation of meaningless Day Jobs, implacable Bills, extortionate Mortgages, and all the other pressures, compromises, and galling insults of indoor living worth the bother. I think it's been that way for a long time for a lot of people.