

# Make No Mistake(s)

by Tom Swan

Perhaps one of the biggest mistakes common among musicians is thinking that performance mistakes are always bad. But how can mistakes be good? Wrong can't be right, can it?

Yes, it can. In this article, I explain how viewing mistakes as opportunities can help you to improve your playing. I also show three practical tricks of the trade for dealing with mistakes that when they occur, can help you turn dirt into gold.

## You Mean That Mistakes Are Desirable?

Not exactly. But *recognizing* that you just hit an out-of-place note can be good news because it proves that there is nothing wrong with your musical ability. In fact, recognizing that something isn't right means that your abilities are probably very good. How otherwise would you know?

Are you concerned about making mistakes? If so, first congratulate yourself for your objectivity, and then slow down (by half or more!) when you practice the material. Think of mistakes not as problems, but as sign posts that show you exactly where more and, more careful, practice is needed.



Mistakes are not faults. They are opportunities for improvement!

## Never Make Mistakes: 3 Tips

What if you do hit a wrong note during a performance? What can you do? You can't undo a sour note — it's already too late for that. But, if you react quickly, here are three little-used and, most important, *practical* ways to deal with mistakes in the heat of performance battle:

1. Half-step mistakes away
2. Laugh don't cry
3. Stay in the pocket

### 1. Half-Step Mistakes Away

Imagine you hit a bad note in a solo, is there anything you can do? Yes! Treat the note as a passing tone *and keep playing!*

In other words, after striking a clam, *immediately* play the next note a half step above or a half step below the note in question. This *guarantees* that the new note will be in harmony with the current scale (or chord, which for this purpose is the same thing). By simply pretending that an off note is just a leading tone to a good note, you literally turn dirt into gold.

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### *Music Theory Corner*



There is a simple technical reason why good notes are always a half step away from bad notes. Because scales and modes (and thus just about every harmony in Western music) are composed of whole-step and half-step tonal intervals, it stands to reason that an off-color or *outside* note must necessarily fall between two other good or *inside* notes. This is true even for pentatonic and similar scales where some notes might be separated by more than a single half step. Such scales are typically subsets of other scales with more common intervals, and therefore a good note is always the next note up or down.



**ONE:** A good note is always a half step away!

## **2. Laugh Don't Cry**

If you barrel into a real derailing and completely lose your place, you will probably have no choice but to endure the resulting train wreck and start over — or play something else.

When that happens in performance, above all, keep smiling! Remember: The audience is on your side. So, rather than wear a frown, when you mess up, put on a happy face and chuckle and your listeners are likely to respond with good vibrations.



**TWO:** When things go wrong, remember: *Laugh Don't Cry!*

## **3. Stay in the Pocket**

This final piece of advice may be hard to believe but there is one amazingly effective method that can completely eliminate performance mistakes:

- Always make all mistakes *in perfect time*

If that seems ridiculous, consider the mirror opposite. Even if you play an entire piece absolutely correctly, if it's not in time — if you play haltingly and without rhythm — the results will probably not sound very good even though you played all the right notes.

But you can make all the mistakes you want as long as you make them in perfect time. Can't remember the next chord? Play some muted percussion or do a chromatic bass walk up to a note from which you can get back into the groove. If you do all that in time, who is to say that your playing wasn't intentional?

Now, don't get me wrong. I don't mean to say that you can play randomly and if it's in time, it will sound great. (It might though!) It is, of course, always best to play correct scales and chords.

But you can get away with just about anything as long as you do it with good rhythm and in perfect time. This isn't, however, as easy to accomplish as it might seem. Perfect time means *perfect* time — not just close — and that itself is an accomplishment that eludes many performers.



**THREE:** If you play with metronomic perfection, any mistakes that you do make are likely to be unnoticed by your audience who may very well go home and remark to their friends about your *perfect* concert!

## The Sun Also Rises

I like to keep one other piece of advice in mind during my performances. Even when a string breaks during an important audition, or when that loose bridge screw throws your axe horribly out of tune, when the stage lights blind you, you can't hear anything but noise, and when it's so cold your fingers, if they can move at all, seem in danger of snapping like popsicle sticks — all sad but true personal tales — repeat this sage advice aloud:



**BONUS:** *The Sun Will Rise in the Morning*

It's only music. Enjoy performing, and over time, you will make fewer and fewer mistakes. Try my tips and keep this article's advice in mind, and you will surely benefit from viewing mistakes, not as faults, but as opportunities for improving your playing.

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