

HEART STRINGS

**HOW TO USE THE LOVE OF MUSIC AS THE FOUNDATION
FOR YOUR KID TO LEARN ANY INSTRUMENT**

by Josh Atkins

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THE OPENING ACT

It's one of those things that I never grew out of.

Music. I can't remember life without it. My earliest memories are all piggybacked to it, whether it was a school play, singing in the car, or even piano recitals, there is usually an award-winning soundtrack playing in the background.

It's that soundtrack; those songs that have kept me involved in music my entire life. I've done it all: piano lessons, drum lessons, played drums in every school band imaginable, taught myself guitar when I went to college, was in a rap group during college, played drums in all sorts of bands and groups, led a student-band at the church I worked at, gave guitar and drum lessons, and even now, I play guitar and drums in the band at the church where my wife and I attend.

It's one of those things that I never grew out of.

That's the thing about music; you don't have to grow out of it. You don't get too old for it. Paul McCartney is STILL writing new music, not because of the pressure to perform or make money, but because he loves music, and he can. There's no age limit, no height requirement, no secret handshake; if you want to play music, you can.

And as a parent of a current or future musician, you get a front-row seat to watch the love of music grow and develop in the heart of your kid. I can only imagine the feelings of pride and fulfillment you feel when you see your kid perform or doing something he or she loves to do.

But what happens when it gets hard? What do you do when your kid wants to quit? What do you do when your kid's friend is getting better, faster? How do you encourage your kid to keep working, to keep practicing, to push through even when he or she feels like giving up? How do you help your kid practice when you don't know anything about music yourself?

In my years of giving guitar and drum lessons, these are the questions that I was asked and at the time, they caught me off guard and I honestly didn't know what to say. Music came easily for me, so most of the time, my parents didn't have to find the answers to those questions.

But you might be asking them. You might have been asking them for a while and your kid is on the brink of giving up and you don't know how to help.

This book is for you.

This book is not about guitar, it's not about drums; it's not about any particular instrument at all. This book is bigger than that. This book will seek to answer the tough questions that come with trying to raise and encourage a young musician. And while I might use guitar or drum terminology, the concepts will hopefully be used in any situation, with any instrument, and any kid.

Learning an instrument, growing as a musician; it's about more than lessons and practicing for exactly thirty minutes every day. It's about falling in love with music, it's about creating a personal soundtrack that will carry your kid through the ups and downs of developing a musical skill.

That's how it went for me. As I learned to play different instruments, I began to fall in love with music in a way that I never would have if I had just been a casual observer, a listener. And to this day, it's not the chords, it's not the notes, it's not the sticks or the strings. It's the love.

And that's one of those things that your kid will never grow out of.



WHAT'S LOVE (GOT TO DO WITH IT)

We used to go on family vacations as a kid. And wherever we went, regardless of distance, we would drive. This made for the collision of many miles and many hours in an Astro Van, which led to us looking for any method we could to pass the time.

My dad, the Beatles fan, used to always have an abundance of tapes in the car that we would listen to on our trips. And any normal family, when you would listen to music, you might talk about how much you like it, your favorite song, or maybe even where you were when you first heard that particular song.

Not us. Whenever The Beatles would come on, my dad would make me stop whatever I was doing at that exact moment and we (he) would play a game called, "Name That Beatle."

It was a simple game with simple rules: listen to the song and identify which "Beatle" was singing. For my dad, it seemed to be a chance for him to impart on me some sort of "timeless and priceless wisdom," but for me, it was mostly the opportunity to have a panic attack every 2 ½ minutes.

It is one of MANY musical memories that have contributed to my love of music.

I could never get it right and resorted to guessing as soon as the song would start to just get the anxiety over-with. But my dad wouldn't just say "Yes" or "No" and tell me who it was. That would have been too easy and even merciful. Instead, he would say something like, "*No, this is actually John singing. You see, John has more of a nasally, raspy voice than Paul, who has a cleaner, fuller voice. And this song is off of the, "Meet the Beatles" album, and John sang more of the early songs whereas Paul sang more of the songs off the later albums. Now... here's another one..."*

Over and over again I would try and figure out which Beatle was singing until something happened: I started to get them right. Against my will, I was actually learning each singer's distinct vocal qualities and to this day, can listen to any Beatles song and effectively, "Name That Beatle." Later on, while my friends were listening to whatever music was on the radio at the time, I found myself completely immersed in the Beatles. I would hijack my dad's cd's and make tapes of my favorite songs, the first song I learned to play on the drums was, "Drive My Car", and there was a time in junior high when I watched, "Help" (the movie), probably once a week.

Was there something magical in the words that The Beatles were singing? While some would argue "Yes", I would say that it wasn't about The Beatles at all. Instead of John Lennon, it could have been John Denver, John Mellencamp, or Johnny Cash. Instead of Paul McCartney, it could have been Paul Simon, Paul Stanley, or even Paul Anka.

But it was the time spent in the car listening to the music and talking about it with my dad that attached that particular group, those particular songs to my heart and they remain there to this day. It is one of MANY musical memories that have contributed to my love of music.

If you're reading this, you are more than likely in one of two places in life when it comes to your kid and learning to play music: you're kid has expressed some interest and you're thinking about getting him started, or he has already started and you're wanting to help him improve as a musician. Wherever you are on that spectrum, there is something that is essential to the growth and development of your young musician: he needs a tether. He needs something that is going to bring him back, sometimes against his will, when he feels like he wants to quit.

He needs the love of music.



Just like learning anything, there will be good days and bad. And when it comes to your kids, they tend to live in the two extremes of the love/hate relationship with their instrument. Your kid might love the guitar, love to practice, and disappear for hours in his room working on chords, songs, and loving every minute of it. But the next day, he might not want to play it at all and even talk about how he doesn't really want to play anymore. As a parent, you might wonder which feeling is the real one. Does he love it or does he hate it? Well, I'm sure you know the answer is both. Some days he loves it and some days he hates it. It's the natural highs and lows of learning something new.

For him, when he's in a "high", he's on top of a mountain; he can see for miles and miles in every direction and somewhere inside his heart, he hopes and believes that it will always be like this. But when he's in a "low", he's in the darkest valley and everywhere he looks is up and from this vantage point, it seems better to give up and quit than to try and climb back up the mountain again.

But the love of music becomes the bridge between mountaintops that is about halfway down the mountain. It doesn't take away the "low", it just doesn't let him go down as far. He might be down for a day, but he can still see the summit of the next mountain and because of how close he is to it, he is more inclined to work to get back up. But if every time he gets discouraged, he plummets to the valley and has to work himself up back into climbing his way back up, there will be a point where he says, "I'm done."




But if music is in his heart and has been growing for a while, then it will be hard to keep him away. He might take breaks, he might have off-days, he might even switch instruments, but if he is in love with music, he'll won't be able to stay away for long. With the love of music calling him back and building that bridge, he'll be more likely to stick it out when it gets hard AND not get discouraged as easily.



2 LEGIT 2 QUIT

I "used to" do a lot of things: baseball, basketball, football (for a day), collect sports cards, eat cereal at night (Okay, I still do that last one). But somewhere along the line, things got in the way and pushed those things out of my life. At some point, the priority of continuing to do those things, fell behind new, more pressing priorities.

I'm sure if you think about it, there were many things that you used to do, also. So before we go any further, I want you to stop reading (at the end of this paragraph), get out a piece of paper and a pen and I want you to write down as many things as you can that you "used to" do. But I want you to set a timer (or estimate) for ninety seconds. It's not meant to be a taxing exercise, but we will be revisiting this list as we move forward and in a little bit, I will share something from my own list, as well. Ready? A piece of paper, a pen, and 90 seconds. **What were the things you "used to" do?**



"USED TO" DO

Now, think about those things, maybe even just one of them; the one that you wish the most that you still did. Why did you stop? What got between you and that thing? If you could go back to that point in your life and give yourself one of those, "Don't Quit!" pep talks, what would you say?

I used to draw. I used to draw cartoons, cartoon characters, sports figures; anything that happened to cross my path, I tried to draw. I was pretty good at it, too. At least, I *thought* I was pretty good until I started to draw things with my cousin. Our favorite things to draw at the time were Ninja Turtles and we would pick one to draw, and then compare them. And by itself, my rendering of Raphael seemed realistic, almost lifelike, as if he were beckoning me to join him in his crusade against Krang and The Shredder. But as I placed my masterpiece next to my cousin's, my picture all of a sudden looked like I drew it blindfolded on the back of a bucking bronco.

Did I all of a sudden become a poor artist? No. Did I all of a sudden forget how to draw? No. But the thing that got between me and my dream of becoming an artist was when I started comparing myself to my incredibly gifted and talented cousin. I let the comparison between him and myself discourage me and I didn't really do much drawing after that. I used to draw, but I quit.

Sadly, from the second your kid decided to learn an instrument, quitting has been on her mind. She has been looking for an escape, a way out. The newness of learning to play will wear off right about the time that she doesn't get something immediately and it's at that moment where the desire to quit will slyly pop his head in and introduce himself.

Don't be afraid. Instead of worrying and simply hoping that your kid doesn't quit, talk to her about it; get it out in the open. Create an open dialogue where your kid can come to you with frustrations that she is having or things that she doesn't understand and she knows that you aren't going to be angry with her or disappointed in her.

If you openly talk about these things with your kid, you might find that her desire to quit might be stemming from not wanting to fail. But perhaps the best thing you can do is let her fail. Not quit, but fail. Help her see the difference between the two and that fear will be taken away. To help you do this better, I've included three things for your kid to remember when it comes to failure:

FAILURE IS A DETOUR – When it gets hard and she gets frustrated, help her talk through some of her options. Maybe she needs to: take a break for awhile or try a different song/lesson. Help her see that failing at something isn't a reason to take the exit ramp, but a chance to take a detour; that she'll get there eventually. Encourage her through the "scenic routes" of learning to play and you both can celebrate when she reaches her "destination."

FAILURE IS FREEDOM - When your kid knows that she's free to fail, the stress of learning to play will diminish dramatically and she'll be more apt to try things that are challenging. First of all, make sure she knows that she's free to fail. Tell her that she's free to try to learn hard songs, to start a band and practice in the basement, to try and get backstage at a concert. Let her know that WHEN she fails, you'll be there to help her come up with another crazy idea and not to tell her, "I told you so." Free her to fail, then stand back and watch when she succeeds.

FAILURE IS A BETTER STORY - All the best stories have failure in them. Tell your kid about failures from your own life and how they shaped who you've become. Show her that her own story will be so much more interesting with some adversity, something to overcome, some failure. Help her see how failure adds to her story instead of takes away from it. It's not boring, it's interesting. It's not worse, it's better.

Get out your "Used To Do" list and read over those things that you wrote down. What do you wish wasn't on that list? What do you wish was on your "Still Do" list?

Help your kid learn the difference between failure and quitting and you can help her keep "Playing an Instrument" off of her "Used to do" list. Give her the chance to try, give her the chance to fail, and she'll be less likely to quit and more likely to pursue things that are not only fun for her, but challenging as well.



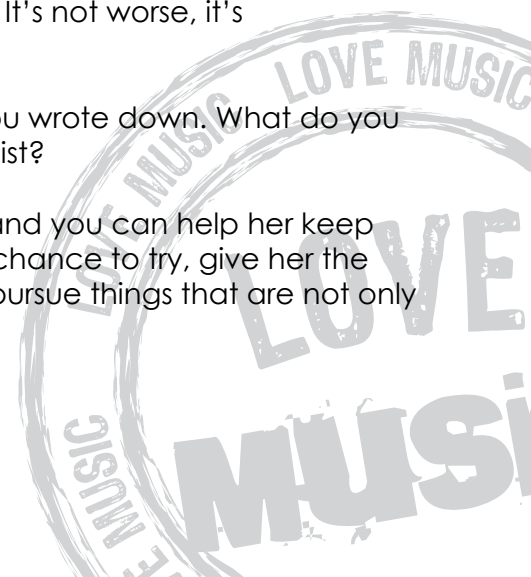
THINGS TO REMEMBER WHEN IT COMES TO FAILURE

FAILURE IS...

A DETOUR

FREEDOM

A BETTER STORY





(YOU WANT TO) MAKE A MEMORY

I didn't start playing the guitar until I was a freshman in college. My dad had tried to teach me before, when I was twelve, and I lasted all of two weeks before I quit. At that time, I had already started taking drum lessons and was much more excited about hitting things with sticks than I was pressing metal strings into the tips of my fingers.

But once I got to college, I had some friends that played and with my dad loaning me one of his guitars, I gave the guitar another shot. Slowly, chord by chord, song by song, I began to learn how to play the guitar and in contrast to my drums that I had to leave at home, I was able to play this instrument in my dorm room. So I played and I played and I got good enough that my dad actually let me keep the guitar he had leant me as my own.

That winter, I went home for Christmas break and my dad had the idea of bringing some guitars to see if we could talk my grandpa into playing with us. My dad told me that he (my grandpa) hadn't played (publicly) in over twenty years and it was a long-shot that he would even want to do it at all. So after dinner and the presents had been ripped open and strewn about like the socks in my dorm room, my dad grabbed his Les Paul, offered it to my grandpa and asked him if he would like to play with us.

It took some convincing, but he went for it. He couldn't hold the strings down as long, and his strumming wasn't as crisp as it used to be, but it didn't take him long to settle into the music and that night, family history was made. At no time had three generations ever played guitar together and since that night, it hasn't happened again. My grandpa passed away a few years ago, and that night, playing guitar with him and my dad in my uncle's basement is one of my favorite musical memories that I have.

WHAT ARE "MUSICAL MEMORIES?"

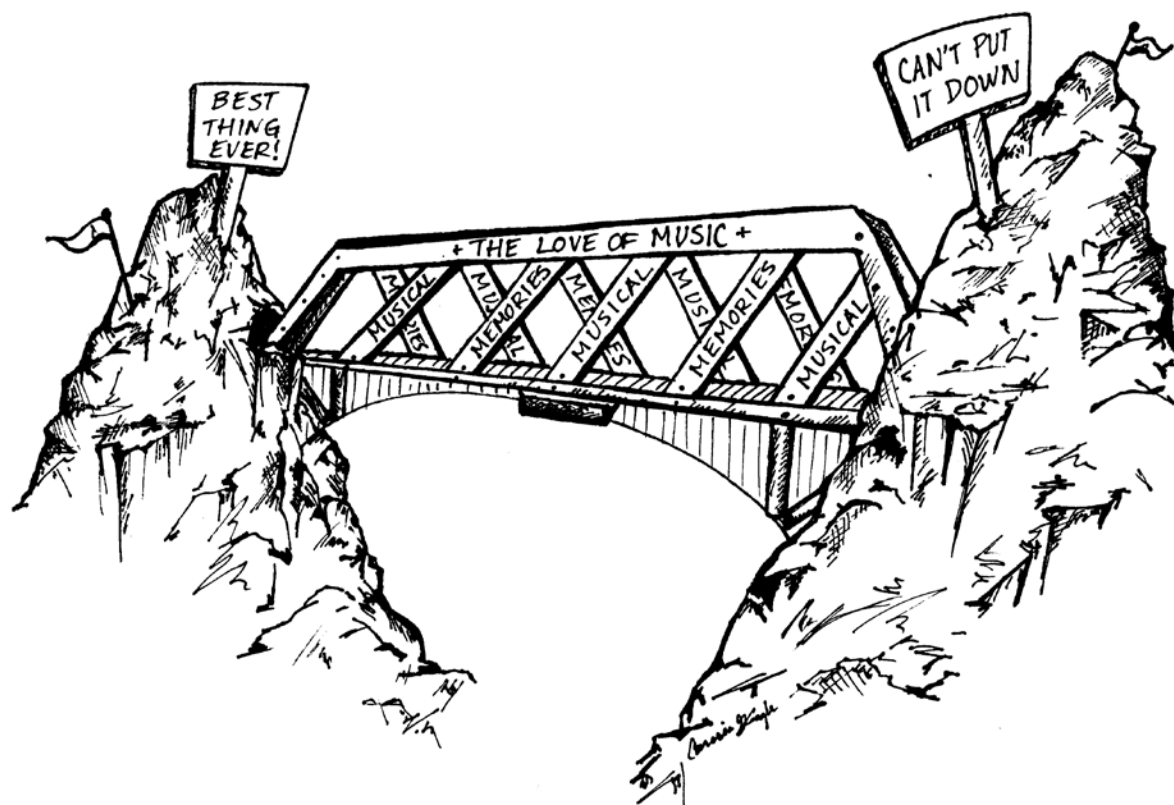
First of all, musical memories are the memories that you have that are attached to music in some way. You probably can think of some of your own right now. Whether you were making music in seventh grade band, or simply listening to it while you helped your dad work on the car in the garage, the connection between music and those memories is more than likely one of the main reasons why many of them are not only cherished, but extremely vivid.



And when it comes to helping your kid fall in love with music, these memories are the things that build into that love and help it develop. By giving your kid positive interactions with music, you are making music bigger to him than just an instrument, lessons, and practice sheets. The musical foundation will be stronger and the roots will run deeper in a kid that has many different and unique musical memories in his memory bank.

TRUSSES

A few pages ago, we saw that as your kid is learning an instrument, he will go through many ups and downs, ("mountains" and the "valleys") but the love of music can provide a bridge from peak to peak that will keep him from getting so deep in a valley that he'll want to give up and quit. And if the love of music is the bridge, then musical memories are the trusses, the support that holds the bridge up, gives it its strength, and keeps it in place.



If you think about it this way, you begin to see how each musical memory is making the bridge stronger, the love for music deeper. That time when you took your kid to a concert and you both ended up backstage talking to the band; that time that you sang along to your kid's music as you were taking him and his friends to the mall; these are both musical memories. Granted, for a teenager, one is rather horrifying, but nevertheless, it's a memory that is somehow attached to music and is helping that affection, that love for music grow and develop in his heart.

Without these trusses holding up the bridge, your kid will not be able to make it safely across to the next peak and could find himself in a valley that seems more desirable than the work it would take to get back to the top of the mountain. But if that support is there, the trusses are in place, and the bridge is stable and strong, your kid will be more likely to stay out of the valleys all together, his frustrations will be shorter and less intense, and he will have a better chance of sticking with that instrument until he becomes really good at it.

THE BEST PART

You don't have to be able to play an instrument or even know anything about music to make a musical memory with your kid. It could be as easy as taking your kid to a concert, letting him pick the music in the car, or even letting him "perform" for you after his lesson or when he's done practicing.

Remember, bridges aren't built with one, long truss. If they were, they wouldn't be able to give and adjust to the wind and the natural movements of everything around them. It's the same with the love of music and the musical memories that support that love. It's not about one, magical event that your kid looks to as the single greatest musical event in his life. It's about you trying to play his recorder when he brought it home from school and it sounded like a sick cat. It's about you being excited every time your kid wants to show you something new he can play on his instrument.

The strength of any bridge is judged on how much weight it can support; how much pressure can it take. So as you help your kid build his bridge, make sure that it's supported with many musical memories that when his frustration level is at its highest, his love of music will be at its strongest and that bridge will carry him to the next peak.



THE ENCORE

Recently, my wife and I took a trip to Colorado and one day we decided that it might be a cool experience to go to the top of Pikes Peak. And rather than drive up and down the mountain, we opted to take the train or the "Cog Railway." I wasn't sure I wanted to do it because I heard how long the trip was just to get to the top and while my brain knew that the railway was safe, there was still that voice in my head telling me that I should just drive; it would be faster AND safer!

But as our train departed and proceeded to climb to the 14,115-foot summit, I was quickly convinced that we made the right decision. The cogs on the tracks actually kept the train moving forward at a steady pace and with how steep the mountain is, I also realized that faster isn't always better. We got to see wild animals, tremendous views, and when we stopped worrying about simply getting to the peak, we were able to enjoy the journey along the way.

When you and your kid decide to scale the mountain of learning an instrument, the climb might seem too steep or too high and early on, it might seem better to just not climb it at all. You might look at the forecast and see that there might be a storm coming. You might look at your watch and wonder if you have room for a mountain climb in your busy schedule. You might just look up to see the top, see where you and your kid want to go and realize that you can't even see it at all.

This book is not supposed to get you to the top. There are many ways to do that. This book is supposed to keep you and your kid moving upward. This book is the cog railway of learning an instrument. And while the mountain roads can be treacherous and dangerous for a car, the railway plods along and because of the cogs themselves, the train pushes forward, upward.

The love of music is the railway. Musical memories are the cogs. And from peak to peak, the love of music becomes the bridge that the railway can use, supported by more musical memories that keep the train from going all the way back down to the bottom. If you can keep your kid on the train, moving forward and upward, eventually he or she will reach the summit. And rather than collapsing at the top from exhaustion, you and your kid will be able to enjoy the well-earned view and share stories about how he or she got there.

Do not be discouraged by the height of the mountain. Don't be afraid if you don't know how to play an instrument yourself. If you take the time to make musical memories with your kid and develop the love of music in his or her life, no instrument will be too hard, no instrument teacher too demanding, no mountain too steep.

Don't just build the skill, build the love, and don't forget to climb together.

