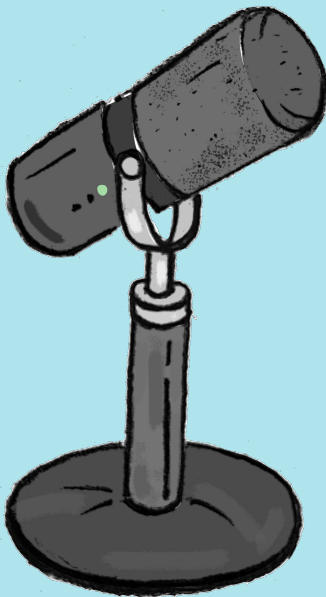


COMMUNION

MAVEN LEADERSHIP COLLECTIVE 2025 IMPACT REPORT



CHAPTER 1. ESSAY 2

Maven Spotlight.
Improvisation: Meditations on
Rule-breaking, Recovery &
Finding a Collective Groove

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maven.
Maven Leadership Collective

Improvisation: Meditations on Rule-breaking, Recovery & Finding a Collective Groove

Maven Diego Melgar

COMMUNION 2025 Maven Impact Report

Chapter 1 | Essay 2

Diego ([00:01](#)):

I am here to talk about improvisation, which is something that's at the core of everything I do. Even the things I do that are composed have deep elements of improvisation in the process of creation and the times in the performance. You use improvisation as another color on your palette, and it's something that I find is more mystified than it needs to be. I want to start with a little, just a listening exercise just to get us in the right head space before we dive in. I'm going to take one minute. You don't have to close your eyes, but you can, and just really let yourself observe every sound that is happening. We do a lot of filtering out of external noise. Our brains are doing a lot of behind the scenes processing. Try to bypass that and try to really listen to every little sound. Try to make almost like a little list of everything you can hear in your head as you're noticing these sounds. See if you let your breathing slow down a little bit.

Diego ([01:49](#)):

Now, slowly come back into your full senses instead of just focusing on the sound. Yeah, just like to start this, just kind of get acquainted with the room. Every room has a different sound, and usually when we step into it, it's not even something we're truly thinking about, but I like exercises like these that just kind of give us awareness about what's around us and let us kind of really inhabit the space a little more intentionally. But the reason I'm here talking to y'all, it's not just how music can improve our own music making, but what we can learn from music to apply to really anything we're doing in life, whether it's a project we're working on or even things in our personal life. I have found in my life that reflecting on music, it's what guides me to the right decisions or the right movements to go with. I decided to become a maven because everyone I met connected to that community seemed to have a joyful sense of discipline that is hard to come by.

Diego ([03:06](#)):

Swap Lily is my latest project, which began as a band. It's kind of expanded into a multimedia collective of the artists in my life who inspire me deeply throughout all my life, and we come together and we make new works that are difficult to

describe. It's new music, it's new choreography. It's blending them in ways that feel fresh and moving to us. I think the artists I work with are criminally underpaid, and I so value their genius and what they bring to my projects that I just want to create an alternative ecosystem where they can pay their bills by shining as their full selves, which is not often sometimes as artists, we have to make compromises to just pay things off, and I hate that. I want to create a community where people, if you're in there, it's because you are who you are and you just be yourself to the fullest extent, and you should be rewarded for that. I'm often put in musical situations where I don't know where I'm showing up to, and I think that's what's let me really survive and thrive in my own way is a willingness to be thrown in these types of situations and a trust that the work I've put in prior will let me. If I tumble, I'm going to tumble with style.

Diego ([04:46](#)):

If someone starts playing a song and I don't know it, we're going to. I'm about to learn it. The thing that I come back to is just this three-word phrase that I think describes the process of how I've learned improvisation. It is emulate, assimilate, and innovate. The reason I keep coming back to this kind of three-part structure is that it emulates how children learn, and when you see a little baby, they hear adults talk. They're just uttering. They're just grunting and trying to, they're like, that's cool. Wait. and you communicate. How do I do that? And you just try it, and they keep fucking up, and we don't judge them for that. We know that. It's like, yeah, you sound dumb because you don't know shit yet. You're figuring it out, and I really think, I look at myself that way. In my work.

Diego ([05:41](#)):

I really treat myself like a child, especially when I'm taking on something new. So for example, if you were to scold a child for not speaking correctly immediately, they would never speak correctly. And, we so often do that to ourselves in our process. That first step in learning anything is just being okay with not knowing. I feel like one of the things I wish I had learned to do when I was younger was just to be like, "I don't know that." The most embarrassing part of my early twenties was just being like, someone would be like, "you know this thing," and I'd be like, "yeah," and then I don't learn from them. If I just said, no, I don't know what you're talking about. Suddenly it's an opportunity to grow instead of a shutting off. What that looked like when I was learning jazz guitar was a lot of finding my favorite musicians and just staring at videos of how are they holding the guitar?

Diego ([06:42](#)):

What angle is their thumb at? Again, this first phase should feel like you're a baby. It should really feel like there's no judgment. You're just observing, you're trying, and you are constantly failing. That is just part of that process. The second step is assimilating, right? It's when it starts becoming a little bit more natural. So for example, I might've learned a couple of guitar solos by West Montgomery. At first, I'm just figuring out the notes. I'm plunking out the one by one, what it's like. That next step to me is when I start to embody the artist, I'm emulating and you're putting yourself in their mindset, and if you're going there, you also start thinking about historically, what is the context that this piece is happening in? Where did this person grow up? What are their social situations? And all of that is happening in your head as you're just playing along with the song on the track, but that's the assimilation.

Diego ([07:52](#)):

That's the stepping into the shoes and feeling what it's like to improvise in that way. How does it feel physically to move in rhythm in this way? If you don't do it, it's never going to express itself. So that's the second step is assimilating. Really getting to know it like it's the back of your hand when you go to brush your teeth. You just brush your teeth. You're not here overthinking it. You're not going like, wait, what's that first step? What's that second step? You've assimilated that you've done it every day. That's where the discipline really comes in, is you're building muscle memory on the guitar or you're building your sense of intuition that you trust. That's when you're cultivating that. And then the final step in this process is innovation, right? I look at music as a language, and that means it has vocabulary. And so going back to a child learning, first they're trying to say some words and they don't know what they're saying.

Diego ([09:04](#)):

Then that assimilation is like, okay, I get it. When I say mama, she comes up. Okay, cool. And then when I say bottle, I get the bottle. So you start assimilating. Innovation is once you start coming up with your own sentences or you start naming things. You start coming up with your own words. Once you've assimilated that language, there's something very inherent in us that wants to make it our own, wants to put our own stamp on it. And so going back to the jazz guitar analogy, once I figured out what West Montgomery is doing, it's like, well, what if it was like

this instead? And there's a lot of ways you can do that. A big one is just thinking about your own context. So West Montgomery was a jazz guitarist in the 1960s, so he sounded the way the 1960s do, and just by learning what his stuff was and his systems and how he thought about the guitar, once I assimilated all of that, I start going, well, what do I have available to me now?

Diego ([10:09](#)):

I've got pedals. I've got laptops that make music. I've got a wider system. Things aren't as conservative as they were at the time for a pop artist. There's a lot of recontextualizing that lets you take everything you've assimilated into a new context, and that breeds the innovation. Suddenly you take what you've learned, you've put deep into your bones, and it just comes out as new things that are needed in that moment. This process is like what I've used to learn improvisation and what I still use to further my practice. I've been thinking a lot about composition, and so what my life has looked like for the past month or so is a lot of morning walks, listening to music for an hour and just being like, oh, that was beautiful. Why was that beautiful? And I get curious, let the childlike curiosity go and just be like, oh, whoa, whoa.

Diego ([11:13](#)):

I need to pull that apart and see how did these things come together to create the effect I felt? Then I'll start doing that in my improvisations. Selfishly, if I'm out on a gig in the back of my head, I'll be like, lemme try out that. One day I heard Billy Strayhorn do this crazy harmonic movement. What if I tried it out on this little thing that's me assimilating it, bringing it into my day-to-day life so it becomes a part of me. And then through that process of assimilation, those things just start coming out naturally. So maybe that little harmonic movement I learned from Billy Strayhorn suddenly just a curse without me thinking it's no longer something I have to tell myself to express. It just becomes a part of me. And then once it's deep in there, it just becomes a tool in the tool bag.

Diego ([12:10](#)):

So as I'm composing this piece, I go like, oh, I need to modulate a lot. There's a part in the middle of the piece where I need to switch keys very often, and I went on this tirade of going through every song that I love that has a key modulation and being like, oh God, that's crazy how that one does it. And then this church song just never stops going up. And then this one has a surprise key change. And I feel like I've hacked my brain to not feel like it's discipline or rigor. I genuinely have fun finding

problems, and when a problem comes up, it's like, Ooh, okay, now we get to look for a solution. Before I was just kind of hanging out, now there's something to do. I feel like I have a extensive toolbox to draw upon because of this rigor and because of this fostered curiosity, I really try to foster my curiosity and not let it, it's very important to me if I am not feeling curious, I know something's off. Growth in music is just becoming more aware of more parameters, and I think that's a parallel to living. I think as we keep living, at least growth for me has felt just more awareness. Awareness of the people around me. Awareness of how the room is feeling. Awareness of the energy I bring. The awareness of the social climate around me. That has been growth. I think looking at everything in this lens of emulating, assimilating, and innovating, it just makes everything feel not scary to me, honestly.

Diego ([14:11](#)):

It's very stubborn sounding, but I feel like I could do anything if I dedicate enough brain power and time to it, because I've seen the results of it. I think we so often underestimate our own capabilities. By far, by far. I share this with you all because I think it's something you could take to anything you're dealing with. And if you have an artistic practice, you're taking singing lessons, you're already probably doing it. You're thinking about who your favorite singers are, and you're probably in the car. I do this all the time. I hear Charlie Wilson go for a run, and they're like, they're alongside with them, and that's that childlike, emulating. You take that further. How do you assimilate that? You just do it daily. You make it a part of your life to where you're just singing everywhere all the time without question, and then you start innovating. You start going like, Ooh, what if that one Charlie Wilson riff? But I'll end on a different note. It doesn't take much. This process, I think, breeds innovation in a very unforced manner.

Diego ([12:10](#)):

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Diego ([15:27](#)):

What sometimes kills innovation is when you're looking for it, right? If you go into something and you're like, I'm going to innovate music, you're like, what? Who? Name one person who's innovated music who has the mentality? It's usually accidental discoveries and just following your passion, following your curiosity, a lot of failure and a lot of getting up and doing it again. And that mentality is what I bring when I'm improvising in any situation, if I'm improvising with other musicians; when I'm improvising with dancers; when I'm here talking to y'all. Every conversation is an improvisation. We do it all the time. We think it's so scary. Life is improvised.