

PLAYING WITH PAIN

By Steve Carter and Laura Koplewitz

GUITAR PLAYER/SEPTEMBER 1988

"Good posture, hand position, and technique can prevent most afflictions."

Aimed at helping you feel your best to play your best, our exclusive Musicians Health Series is authored by Steve Carter, Associate Professor of Guitar at Boston's Berklee College of Music. Dr. Richard Norris, Director of the Performing Arts Medicine Clinic in Braintree, Massachusetts, serves as Carter's consultant, checking the medical details for accuracy. Upcoming installments deal with tendinitis and carpal tunnel syndrome.

"PRACTICE UNTIL IT HURTS!" How many guitarists and bassists have followed this advice, thinking that the pain of practicing would lead to better playing? And how many players do you know (perhaps including yourself) who complain of pain, numbness, or tingling in their fingers, arm, shoulder, or back?

The most common playing-related physical problems among guitarists and bassists include muscle strain (sometimes mistaken for tendinitis—a painful inflammation of tendons, which connect muscle to bone), carpal tunnel syndrome (numbness or tingling in the hand or arm, caused by compression of the median nerve that passes through the wrist), and various neck and back problems. These are frequently due to improper posture or to the continual wear and tear of overly prolonged practice.

A musician with tendinitis or another practice-related injury may not notice any problems in the first 10 or 15 minutes of practicing, but a half-hour or an hour later persistent pain may begin. Players often try to accommodate the pain by simply re-fingering passages, changing their sitting or standing positions, or even immersing their hands and arms into hot or cold water or applying ice packs.

The pain, numbness, or tingling ("pins and needles" sensation) may even persist or recur long after practicing has ended. Carpal tunnel syndrome, for example, may cause you to wake up in the middle of the night with a tingling sensation in your hand.

All too often, unfortunately, the player decides to just ignore the pain. This can cause the condition to worsen, perhaps preventing playing altogether. Performance-related medical problems can put an end to your career, so if a problem persists, see a professional help.

The good news is that practicing and playing guitar or bass does not have to be physically painful. Today, musicians are discovering that the occupational hazards of playing an instrument are being taken seriously by the health professions. The field of "arts medicine" is steadily growing. Physicians, physical therapists, chiropractors, and other medical personnel have begun to pay close attention to musicians' physical complaints. There are now clinics to go to and physicians who offer their expertise to help you treat your music-related injuries and get back to the enjoyment of playing.

The emerging field of music medicine has its roots in sports medicine, a specialty that developed in the United States in response to the dedicated training regime of Olympic athletes, and also to cater to a growing number of sports enthusiasts who have suffered "tennis elbow," "jogger's knee," and other common sports injuries. Music medicine has adopted many methods of diagnosis and treatment from sports medicine, as well as from occupational medicine, which examines the relation of the worker to the workplace and to his tools.

Conferences have sprung up all over the country to deal with performance-related medical problems. For example, last September the Minnesota Orchestra and the University of Minnesota co-sponsored Playing Hurt: A Conference On The Identification, Prevention, And Treatment Of The Medical Problems Of Musicians. Professional and amateur musicians, teachers, and students attending the conference got an overview of causes of music-related medical problems and strategies for prevention from medical experts and nationally known performing artists. There is even a scientific journal on the subject, *Medical Problems Of Performing Musicians*.

If you are suffering from a performance-related medical problem, you'll be glad to know that arts medicine clinics are opening all over the United States. Contact your local hospital and inquire about artists clinics in your area. The American Federation of Musicians may also be able to help.

For example, New York City's Local 802 AFM has established a Musicians' Assistance Program as part of its Health Benefits Plan, through which members may apply for treatment at the Miller Health Care Institute for Performing Artists in the St. Luke's/Roosevelt Hospital Center.

Some large cities have more than one such clinic. In Boston, for example, the Massachusetts General Hospital has for many years run its Musicians Clinic, where more than 2,000 musicians have been treated. Recently another clinic has opened in the area, the Performing Arts Medicine Clinic at Braintree Hospital, which bills itself as a "comprehensive rehabilitation clinic for dancers, instrumentalists, and vocalists." Director Richard Norris says that the clinic provides more than rehabilitation, however. In fact, Dr. Norris (who has played guitar for 25 years) stresses prevention, as well as cure. The clinic offers conferences, workshops, and courses in such topics as injury prevention, anatomy, kinesiology (the study of the principles of mechanics and anatomy in body movement), nutrition, and physical education. The clinic also provides referrals to community-based professionals in such areas as Alexander technique (for postural alignment, especially of the back and neck), nutritional consultations, and instrument modifications.

Prevention through education is stressed at many clinics, but detection and treatment are also important. The source of performance-related problems can often be detected by biofeedback, which involves electronic monitoring of the muscles. Biofeedback can allow a player to adjust his playing for maximum performance with minimum exertion. Video taping, often in conjunction with biofeedback, can provide a player with objective evidence that may reveal the cause of pain. A trained instructor can then suggest alternative playing techniques that can relieve it.

Researchers have developed a wide variety of treatments for performance-related injuries. These range from the most extreme medical intervention—surgery—to non-invasive treatments such as hydrotherapy (whirl-pool and other fluid-submersion therapies), anti-inflammatory drugs to reduce swelling, massage, and various forms of physical therapy.

The best preventative medicine, say many doctors and music teachers, is to avoid "practicing until it hurts." Stress-reduction techniques such as biofeedback and meditation are especially important for musicians. Good posture, correct hand position, and proper technique can prevent most of the pain guitarists and bassists are afflicted with. So if it hurts to play, don't despair. Many musicians share your worries and feel similar pains, and help is available. Seek professional aid to find out the specific source of your pain. And take the evaluations and treatments seriously, instead of squaring your shoulders and deciding that you'll just have to live with the pain. Playing guitar or bass should be—and can be—a pleasure.

Performing Arts Clinics

ACCORDING TO AN OCTOBER '86 list originally appeared in *Art & Hard News*, study of the International Arts Medicine Association, these are the arts medicine clinics based in the United States. The

Performing Arts Medicine Clinic
Braintree Hospital
250 Pond St.
Braintree, MA 02184
(617) 848-5353, ext. 2493
Director: Dr. Richard Norris

Medical program for Performing Artists
Northwestern Memorial Hospital
303 E Superior St.
Chicago, IL 60611;
(312) 908-ARTS
Director: Dr. Alice Brandfonbrener

Kathryn and Gilbert Miller
Health Care Institute for Performing Artists
St. Luke's/Roosevelt Hospital
428 West SOth St
New York, NY 10019
(212) 554-6314
Director Dr. Emil Pascarelli

Musical Medicine Clinic
Massachusetts General Hospital
Neurology Service
Boston, MA 02114
(617) 726-8657
Director: Dr. Fred Hochberg

The Arts Medicine Center
Thomas Jefferson University Hospital

11th and Walnut Streets
Philadelphia, PA 19107
(215) 928-8300
Director Dr. Robert Sataloff

Cleveland Clinic Foundation
Medical Center For Performing Artists
9500 Euclid Ave.
Cleveland, OH 44106
(216) 444-5545
Director: Dr. Richard Lederman
(The Cleveland Clinic sponsors a yearly
conference on arts medicine in Aspen,
Colorado. Contact the clinic for dates and
registration material.)
Colorado Clinic for Performing Artists
1515 E. Ninth Ave., t314
Denver, CO 80218
(303) 837-0907
Director Dr. Mary Poole

Health Program for Performing Artists
San Francisco Medical Center
University of California
400 Parnassus Ave., 5th Floor
San Francisco, CA 94143
(415) 476-7373
Director Dr. Peter F. Ostwald

The Medical Center for Performing Artists
Suburban General Hospital
Norristown, PA 19401
(215)279-1060
Director Dr. David Rosenfeld

Clinic for the Performing Arts
2651 Highland Ave.
Cincinnati, OH 45219
(513) 281-3224
Director G. James Sammarco, MD

Performing Arts Medicine Program
Indiana University School of Medicine
541 Clinical Dr.
Indianapolis, IN 46223
(317) 274-4225
Director Kenneth D. Brandt, MD