

George Vance: Hero, Mentor and Friend

(My experience with George and the need for more independent Young Bass Studios)

By Johnny Hamil

Meeting George Vance at ISB Houston (1997) and then going to his workshop the following summer was the two most important events of my professional Life. It gave me my life long goal of teaching the littlest kids the biggest instrument. 97 I was almost done with my undergrad in Music Education ready to go teach in the public schools. I choose with George's urging to model my independent private studio after George's in my hometown of Kansas City and have done so very successfully since 98 (I've never had a boss). The reason I want to write this down is two fold. 1) I think my perspective on George's pedagogy is unique and it will be helpful to all of us bass teachers to know how it works for me. 2) I really want to continue George's work of inspiring more bass players to teach children at the youngest ages much like the other instruments. Ours is the best but not the most obvious choice. WE NEED MORE YOUNG BASS PRIVATE STUDIOS AND IT IS A VALID AND NOBLE PROFESSION NOT A DEFAULT ONE.

Three Important Lessons

A few stories to tell you because they are inspiring and I think you will learn more about George's message to me.

- 1) I would fly to Washington D.C. to study directly with George at his home studio. The first day I believe Ted Botsford came in to his weekly lesson. He was in middle school but, tall enough to have full sized bass. He played a Iberique Penninsulaire by Rabbath and was already finished with George's books. It was just an amazing thing to watch George work with him. I was in heaven and personally was thinking wow, I want to do that with my life, this is awesome. I'm so glad I'm spending my last dollar to fly here to learn to do this..... So then the next student comes in and they are on a tenth size bass (cute as can be) and George asks them to play. The sound that comes out of the bass is horrid and it doesn't sound like a song. It was the longest amount of time in my life. I was thinking how awful that this kid didn't practice, etc. George didn't have that response he leapt up and started clapping and smiling and said wow, you really worked hard on the bow arm. I was deeply puzzled and kind of thought maybe I had made the wrong choice in spending the time to come here..... So the rest of the lesson George works with the student I'm thinking maybe George is crazy.....At the end of the lesson George ask the student "Your song didn't quite sound like the recording did it? Student: no. How about trying to play it again but just make it sound like the recording. Student: Sure. That's when the greatest sounding version of Go Tell Aunt Rhody happened. It was a true miracle for me. Later George talked about what to focus the student on in practice vs. performance. The George Vance method was about the progress of the student and to teach them to work on one thing at a time in a logical fashion but, not to stop the artistic growth of the student. To me George's best idea was to find what the student is doing great at and point it out, and then tell them one thing to get better the next time. This formula works for all aspects of life and I consider it George's masterclass.
- 2) I had my first few young students (tenth size basses ages 5/6 range) and would call George as much as I could to ask more questions. I had one student that never practiced and it was moving painfully slow. I kept feeling like it was all my fault and I would ask him what could I do to make it work better? He would always say, "Is everyone having fun?" I of

course said yes. I have always taken the approach that I needed the correct motivation for them to want to practice and not force them to do so. He's always ask if they were coming to lessons and group classes? I'd say yes. He'd ask if they played solos for the others? I'd say yes. I point out the good things he's doing? I'd say yes. He'd talk to me about motivating the parents to try to practice at home more and then say you're doing a great job. He always went and listened to each one of my students with the same excitement, care, and love that he did all of my students. Asked about them regularly including this one and say good things about previous performances but he never told me directly what I should do about this particular student. He never played favorites with mine or his own students. I have to admit that student never got around to practicing like the others and eventually just went to playing the electric bass. I never solved that issue but he did keep playing music. I felt like I made some pretty bad teaching decisions such as demanding him to play classical and not just play electric. However, that would only be if I wanted every student of mine to become a professional orchestral bass player. I can still go hear that student play music and the gift of seeing them love something and others love it is staggering.

My favorite idea from George's interview we published is his comment about not doing this because he wants to fill up the music conservatories of the world with great bass players (he saw that part of his legacy as just a side effect of his main purpose). I believe he thought as I do that most of my students are going to do something else with their lives and have the bass as their lifelong friend. It's an amazing instrument in that it does call people back to it at various times of their lives. I'm old enough now to see that part and love hearing all of my students just as much as seeing them smile and tell me what they are doing now. Some have gone on to do great things in the world of bass, but, I'm more like George in that I love each of my students achievements. They are all unique. George was putting the bass into the hands of the young because he was competing with anyone or anything he was just teaching love of the instrument and the music and that is enough to make this world better. Please do not teach young bass players because you want to make the next generation of virtuosos. It's the wrong motivation and even though you may succeed in making a virtuoso you most likely will fail at making an artist and/or a great human being. I like to point out to people that bass players are usually a special type of person full of patience and care. What better way to make this world better than to fill it up with a large portion of these types of people?

3) my last conversation with George was when he was passing away from Cancer. This conversation is so perfectly George I have to share it with you. He was very weak and told me it was the last time we we're going to talk. It was an emotional conversation of course and always makes me tear up every time I think of it. During this conversation he said "Looks like I won't be coming to the KCbassworkshop you keep talking about". I was shattered as I knew it right then that I had made another bad choice. I started my workshop the minute I hung up the phone in a time of my life that wasn't perfect to start it. This year marks the tenth year and it very well has been the best choice I've ever made. I'd like to say that putting your dreams into action is the lesson here but, I really think it was the overall big picture George was teaching.

I had setup my studio just like his. Teach 30 min lesson every week and hold group lessons as well. Have group bass orchestra concerts and solo bass concerts. This is more work for the private teacher. He was always happy that I did that and he explained that the students need to be listened to on a regular basis as well as learn to listen to themselves and others. I now feel it's nearly impossible to teach someone how to learn to listen in this manner if they are just being taught in a private lessons. Yes, information can be given and inspiration can be done but, the natural progress of the student's art form can be destructively non existent and/or self centered. Both of these are damaging to our bass family's overall progress. I have learned that with the workshop in my studio the students can progress as quickly without the mental and emotional struggle and or hit a ceiling (i.e. only get as good as those around them which can be woefully not very advanced). The Workshop provides this amazing catalyst that is

the final piece in the George Vance Bass Studio puzzle. To create a large family that supports themselves. Everyone that's been to ISB convention or George Vance Workshop knows the amazing amount of support that is given to each bass player. We need this time of inspiration and connection to remember why we are learning to listen to our selves and others in a deep and meaningful way. It does take work and there are many other distractions that can take us away from these things. The local workshop provides this feedback to those students that need the lifeline.

I had tried to take as many of my students to ISB and DC as I could. For now 20 plus years the most I've gotten is 5 students going. The same ones can't go every year. When you teach the age group I do it's even harder as the parents most likely have other children and it is the vacation time that the parent needs to take off as the hardest to overcome. The travel is tough as well once you deal with many kids.

That makes this my most important story that we need many bass studios in every city with a bass workshop in every town. I'm excited to see this happening. These need to be there and run by the young bass teachers with this philosophy intact as this will allow for this age group to have this in their lives on a regular basis. I hope George's last words will resonate and the bass family will realize that this should be the standard of a young bassists studio. It's not too hard to think that we could have young bassists studios with performances, and workshops in every city and town. That would be a game changer and what I think George was talking about to me all this time. It would benefit all of us in more than just cool bass things. The world needs us bass players because we are so good at listening to each other.

George wasn't alone

Now it must be stated that much of what George taught me is so intertwined with multiple pedagogical genius minds of Francois Rabbath, Dr. Suzuki (violin Method), and Paul Ellison. I didn't know who these three people were before I met George I just thought it was really cool that someone wanted to teach the big bass to the smallest kid. Like all things in music we are apart of a continuous stream of ideas and progress so I don't think it was just one person who should be championed as "the greatest" so it must be that I want to shine light on how special these four people are especially since I feel much of this history can be so helpful to any fellow young bass instructor.

I also feel like there are too many others to be mentioned but, these people are important: all the International Society of Bassists (the Young Bassist program peeps- Donovan Stokes, John Clayton, John Kennedy), The DC Family: faculty involved in George's annual workshops (Martha Vance, Tracy Rowel, Nick Walker, and Robert Peterson), and all the other young bass teachers that were developing more materials for young bassists: Inez Wyrick, Caroline Emery, Virginia Dixon, and Kansas City's amazing Suzuki teachers (Alice Joy Lewis, Jean Dexter, and Kristi Knecht). I'm sure I've left out many other names. All of these people to me have given me inspiration and I use their materials in my everyday teaching. Thus this paper is just about my perspective on teaching as well as how George influenced me the most out of all of them. I'm proud to say I take all of them to work with me everyday.

George's Advice

George first advice to me: Just start teaching. He later told me how impressed he was about my pedagogical conversations we had "John has lots of good questions". I'm not sure why he choose to give me confidence to just start. I had already had a small private studio thru College so I already had been teaching for five plus years (yeah I started in High School) and I loved teaching. I am not sure why I loved it but, I did as much as I did playing the bass. I wasn't qualified to teach at first but, learned very quickly how teach people in a different learning style than your own. I'd advise the same to anyone who loves to teach. Please know it's more important than you think. There are still too many bass players out there that need a good

teacher like you. The people who are gigging all the time should make time for some students and more bass players should just consider having their own bass studio as their main focus.

We are All Unique-The Love of Bass

George's message is one of teaching the love of bass to make the world a better place. It's very special and important message to give to the young student. "We are All Unique"- Francois Rabbath. George did everything to make sure the student learned this and his whole studio setup was made around making this set in. Yes it takes years not 30 min to build something special. At first I always thought George was just rooting for the underdog, the shy kid who always get over looked (much of the personality type of the typical bass players) but I was mistaken. He did champion our cause as bass players do deserve more recognition of the amazing feats we have to do on a daily basis but the main part is that we don't need anything but, the love of the bass to keep progressing, the rest will take care of itself.

George truly gave me the same outlook on my students and I like to say "we are all our worst critics" it's a great thing when it motivates us to go to practice room and push ourselves to greater heights but, I do believe that voice (sometimes unreasonable self doubt) that keeps us from making progress both on our instrument and in life. Before I met George I never thought I was good enough to do any of what my life is today. To me it is the most important aspect to teaching any child any subject. Of course you need good materials and George's are really exceptional ways to make lots of progress without as much torment (especially with the old methods which are not intended to hand to a child to grow the love of playing the bass). George's Method is progressively growing the bow arm, then the posture, and lastly the left hand. The traditional methods are very rational for the opposite order and not bad for someone who already has the other two concepts under their control. They also are primarily reading and counting methods for baselines and not the solo repertoire that is represented by the Suzuki and Rabbath methods. George's materials are more intuitive and intrinsic to most beginners natural musical backgrounds thus fostering the love of Listening to oneself instead of the cringing at the sound. This is very true in regards to parents (or other listening audiences including friends) who can unknowingly crush the love of the child by simply expecting a great sound the first time. That is not how every child learned how to speak their own language.

Francois is just as responsible for this message of love of playing and making progress. I also believe as George does that Francois is one of the walking Saints of this world. His bass playing, Technique, and compositions are amazing of course but, his ability to convey love and this message is his most lasting legacy. I'm sure George would tell you he didn't come up with this idea as it's both what Dr. Suzuki and Francois speak about many times in many different ways.

George's Genius

I do believe George was the person wise enough to make a method that all levels of beginners could experience. This was George's genius in my mind: To weave many converging ideas of bass pedagogy into something that a 3 year old can perform and experience the joy of connection to other people. George combined the methods of Dr. Suzuki violin and Francois and put them on the bass in ways that were not the way George himself learned to play. George had to learn the Suzuki method and the Rabbath Method and it took many years of trying to figure out how and why he made his method. To me that takes a lot of great amount of work and personal courage to do something that is so different than your personal background. Not only to try to master a different learning style but, to unlock your own biases and that sometimes breaks with social norms is not taking the easy path. This part of George is only known by the people close to him, much of it I learned thru many conversations with

Martha Vance, Francois, Paul, and of course conversations with him (however, he didn't really talk about his personal history that much unless it help him convey the teaching point to me.).

So many ground breaking ideas in George's method are tied to Rabbath's, Dr. Suzuki's and others. George just wove them together in a pretty amazing way. Not one lesson that I took from George did he not talk about Dr. Suzuki's violin book 1 and/or Rabbath's concepts of Speed, Weight, Placement for bow hand, or movement space and time for left.

The five rhythms of the Suzuki variations are genius and George was smart enough to present it as shorten bread at the block position instead of first. Then. Move it to thumb position very soon after. I had no clue why he was doing that until I thought about the bow control and natural learning of that each note takes a different amount of speed weight and placement. The concept of pushing the note down vs. the open string and/or harmonic is very important to Dr. Suzuki and Rabbath Method and George put that in the second song Scotland's burning. One of the best songs to move around the bass because it has so many open strings vs. stopped notes. Suzuki called it tonalization, Rabbath calls it La Sonare primer, and George named it Tone Research. The concept of every child learns their own language of Dr. Suzuki and that Francois was self taught thinking outside the box was always on George's mind. Sometimes George would say the strangest (*at least at the time) things to me that would just consume the way I thought about my own students progress. He was like the turtle on Kung Panda for me but, he always knew what he was doing because he was truly a master teacher. The best teacher I have ever had because he was teaching me to learn to listen to myself and others.

The World needs Young Bass Teachers

There are so many ways to go about learning to teach young bassists. We have much better access to the amazing pedagogy that exists today. I can't say enough about the young teachers that come to me to learn what George taught me. This paper isn't enough to cover the detail and too me only scratches the surface of George Vance Progressive Method. It's not just George of course but I do feel like his Method is the best for any beginner which is why it's used the most right now. It's not perfect but, no method is as I constantly add other materials into my bass studio and love seeing anything for this age group. I'm sure he would be editing it and changing it if he were still alive. George ask me to make an improv book that goes along with his book and I'm going to keep working on making it perfect til I can't anymore. Francois is constantly working on pedagogical concepts because he knows it will help the next generation get further. I didn't state that much about Paul Ellisons role in all this because I've learned in hindsight how much behind the scenes he's done for all of the young bassist movement. I'd urge all of you to listen to and seek out both Francois, Paul, and anyone connected to George Vance like myself. They all get what George taught me.

I'm here to help anyone learn and you should be able to easily find my contact info. I know I'm inspired for life and I hope what George left us works for you the same way. George never seemed to want any of these accolades and such as he just kept to the bass-ic idea that more kids need to play the bass. I felt he never gave himself the credit he deserved in our personal conversations. I'd call him my greatest hero even over Francois and Paul (they are on my mount Rushmore of bass heroes) because of his main motivation was the kids and made it his life's work. Thanks for Everything George!

Johnny Hamil 5-26-19

