

## Working At Your Craft

By [Reggie Hamilton](#)

The words stuck with me after I walked away from my friend and adopted dad, Al McKibbon: "You're working at your craft. Don't worry about what anybody says. I'm proud of you." I had heard him say it to me so many times, but it always took on a new meaning. That last time was the most haunting.

I recall first hearing the phrase about 15 years ago. I was at McKibbon's house complaining about a gig that I thought was below my standards of musicianship. "You're working at your craft," he said, and without chastising me, he pulled my coat and let me know that I should be thankful for having a job—that there are many bass players who would love to work at any gig. It was a great lesson from the man who had played on Birth of the Cool with Miles, Manteca with Dizzy Gillespie, and the '60s TV series Batman. Surely, McKibbon had a right to be a bit of a snob—yet he reminded me of the need to work and subsidize what I really enjoyed doing. Note to self: Shut it and play the gig.

The next time, it was an issue about being able to practice while also juggling my work schedule and my family life. Again, McKibbon said, "You're working at your craft." He spoke of applying what I do in one style of music to another style—for example, walking and playing solos only on the A and E strings to strengthen my hands, using extended fingerings for the day, or using the thumb on the fingerboard in the lower register. Surely, someone who had grooved with Thelonious Monk, Sammy Davis, and the NBC Orchestra had the right to be a bit of a know-it-all. Instead, McKibbon spoke of starting lessons while in his 40s and the difficulty of being prepared for lessons while making a living. This time, "You're working at your craft" meant that I could find a good music lesson in everything that I do. Note to self: There is always an opportunity to grow from your surroundings.

Over the years, I would hear that phrase occasionally from McKibbon, and in my head constantly. It came to mean that whether you're working with your favorite artist or simply paying the bills, you're making a musical contribution and developing skill on your instrument. It is a great lesson to remember.

In 2005 McKibbon was diagnosed with a disease called amyloidosis, which eventually hospitalized him. He would have many visitors to the hospital—but I was busy as hell and couldn't always be there for him. My mom had just passed, and the possibility of losing my "dad" was smacking me in the face. One day while cutting his hair, I tried to apologize for not being around enough. He stopped me mid-sentence and laid it out for me: "You're working at your craft." That explanation is my gift to keep, but I'll try to paraphrase, as I am still learning this lesson.

As we go through life, our job is to take care of the responsibilities that we create. That can mean taking care of a family, maintaining friendships, being an artist or a sideman, or simply living. We should try to perform these tasks without looking back or having regret. (It's like reading a chart at a session and continuing on if you make a mistake. Bad to stop!) He said that I was taking care of my business and my family—I was working at my craft—and he appreciated our time together.

Surely, someone who had raised a daughter to be a fantastic human being, loved his wife fully, maintained lifelong friendships with so many, and played enough bass to fill volumes of big books could be a little selfish at this point in his life. Instead, to the very end he showed me how to navigate through my future with five little words.

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