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HOW TO MAKE A LIVING AS A GUITARIST

Many guitarists want to make a living in the music business. You get an instrument and learn to play because it looks fun, exciting or cool—and off you go. After a while you're jamming, and making a career with music sounds like a good move. At some point this "good move" can become a fruitful career... or a disaster.

Record Industry vs Music-playing Business

The "music business" is composed of two main categories: the record industry and the "music-playing business." I introduce and define the term "music-playing business" as any paid musical work a musician does outside of record industry activities. Over the past few decades it seems like the term "music business" has grown to mean the record industry, and this has caused some confusion.

Musicians who confuse these categories generally have a hard time or fail. You can play too many stock licks in your original band—or be too original at a cover gig where people want to hear music that's familiar—not something they've never heard before. This is just a fact of life. Musicians who function according to the category they're involved with have the best chance for success. True, these categories can overlap and weave in and out of each other like a solo through chord changes, the common denominator being music itself. However, they are two different areas requiring two different sets of skills and abilities.

This article is about the music-playing business, and the working guitarist in it. The work-a-day musician is a highly skilled craftsman who gets paid for playing. Playing is your job, and the better you play, the better your chances of making a living. It's very simple. Most working musicians don't have record deals, though, of course, having a deal is something to aim for. Original music is where it's at for many, —but does that have to exclude everything else? Being a working musician is an art and a business rolled into one, which is perhaps why so many people don't understand musicians: there's more to it than meets the eye. There are different styles of music, personal preferences, day jobs, conflicts, rent and people's attitudes (some valid and some not). "I'll never play covers! (But I hate my day job)." "I only play lead! (But I can't find enough gigs)." These are comments heard daily nationwide. When you dig below the surface, there are many elements involved and many decisions to make.

When you want to play for a living... play! Play music. Any kind of music. I'd rather play a show of corny music for a few hundred bucks than work a job I don't like.

I'd rather play for a living while striving for the original thing.

It all depends on what you want to do.

Attitude

To be a full time musician you have to develop the right frame of mind. You need to firmly establish priorities and be willing to do what's needed without fussing or copping attitudes that could slow down your progress. You need to be self-motivating, develop confidence and be professional in all that you do. You have to replace the original-music viewpoint of "I'm going to do it my way" with "I'm going to play to make this gig a success!" A professional does what he needs to do without letting his or her personal emotions interfere, and adopts viewpoints that promote the growth of a career—not the collapse of one.

Versatility

Playing for a living demands versatility. A musician can focus on one style of playing or learn to do many. The narrower your playing style is, the better you have to be at it because your opportunities are more limited. The more versatile you are, the more opportunities you will have. The choice is yours.

Some people think your only options are to work clubs (which don't pay enough) or that you have to have a record deal to make money. Not true on both accounts. Yes we work clubs, and yes getting a record deal is fantastic—but clubs alone aren't enough and you can't guarantee a deal. To be really well-off you need to collect a lot of recording royalties—but the black and white of being rich or poor has a thousand shades of color between. The ones who are versatile make it, the ones who aren't, usually don't—and wind up with some day job they hate and go on hoping things will work out. (Of course if you like your day job, great.)

The bottom line for being a versatile working guitarist is to be well-educated, and this is where a large portion of musicians fall off the boat. You have to understand music, not just riffs and signature licks. Music is a language, and you need to be able to speak it. When you're good, and have original-music aspirations, you can have the music-playing business as your "day job," and pursue your original thing as well.

It's great if you have a rock party-band, create a regular scene and don't have to play another style in your life. But, when you want to guarantee making a good living playing music, you do whatever it takes. This doesn't mean that you compromise your personal integrity and play in a band that you hate, but until you have the freedom to only do the types of gigs you really want to do, you do the gigs you have the opportunity to do. Besides, playing different styles of music is fun, educational and expanding. You don't have to like "listening" to a certain type of music to be able to love "playing" it.

Ingredients for Success

To make a living as a freelance guitarist you need to:

1. *Play well and be versatile.* The better you play, the more you will be in demand. The more you are in demand the more income you can generate. In addition to how many business contacts you have (contractors, bandleaders, etc.), players refer other players for gigs. The better you are, the more you will be recommended, though the bandleader, contractor and musical director are the sources of hiring. The higher your musicianship level the more work opportunities there are. A high musicianship level includes both a

theoretical and improvisational knowledge of melody, harmony and rhythm and their relationships. Stylistic authenticity is necessary, and you need to be “educated” to do this well. Different styles of music incorporate different scales and harmonies and you have to know what they are in order to play. Faking only gets you so far.

2. Read fluidly. For most high paying gigs this is a must unless you fall into, or create, the perfect situation where you are just so good that you land accounts that keep you working without having to read. These situations are rare. (Rare in the work-a-day world, but common when involved in certain types of recording for original artists.) When a player starts out it's usually in club bands where you just learn tunes and go play. But as time moves on you have to learn to read, or be happy with a limited income.
3. Know a lot of tunes in the styles you play unless you're exclusively doing reading gigs. In the casual and club worlds, the more tunes you can lead sing the better. If two equally good players audition for a gig, chances are the one who sings the most will get it.
4. Be able to play by ear. The better you can do this the more you'll work.
5. Sound good. Have your gear be able to produce the needed sounds at the appropriate volume according to the situation. In the lower echelons of the business, young guitar players have a notorious reputation for playing too loud. At a rock gig you might need to burn people's faces off—but not at a first set at a restaurant gig, please! Many guitarists don't work enough simply because they're too loud at the wrong time. You have to play for the situation you're in—or find another career where being unaware and selfish is OK.
6. Show up on time and be dressed appropriately.
7. Have your manners, behavior, and social rapport be appropriate to the circumstances. The better you get along with people, the better your chances of repeat business are, and the easier it will be to make new contacts.
8. Know what the client, bandleader, contractor or musical director wants from you and provide it without giving him a hard time. Never give the person hiring you a hard time. Whether he's right or wrong about something, he is the one putting money in your pocket.
9. Be into what you're doing. The more you like what you're doing, the easier it will be to do. The more you like what you do—the more others will like what you do.
10. Play for the group sound. Contribute to the communication and message of the music whether live or recorded. This is why you are there—music is more than notes. For example, if you constantly overplay at casuals you'll probably get fired. You are not alone on the bandstand: groove, solo, fill, lay out, use dynamics— contribute to the gig.
11. Be a professional. Have an answering machine or service with an appropriate outgoing announcement. Stay on top of things. Call when you say you will call and be on time for appointments. Pay attention to details and know how to play the game. Be responsible, reliable and business-like—while having fun of course.
12. Create relationships. Create a network of people whom you like and who like you. Have your own identity and nurture your contacts.

When you can do the above twelve points you'll work. You just have to decide how important it is to you to play music full time—then adjust your life to pull off what you want. It's actually quite straight-ahead.

Types of Gigs

Solo gigs are a strong source of employment. You can play background music or concerts in jazz, classical, Spanish and almost any style. Solo guitar is commonly used at restaurants, wedding receptions and dinner parties (whether classical or pop). One-man-show type work where the guitarist also sings and has a drum machine and sometimes bass pedals is occasionally heard. Happy Hour gigs (especially at restaurants, hotels and bars near major airports) will sometimes use guitar, though keyboard is more common. Many a guitarist has told me, "A complete solo guitarist can always find work."

Duos can be easy to book because there are only two people to pay. You can be an accompanist for singers or various melody instruments, especially in the styles of classical and jazz. Two guitarists often sing and play pop tunes at clubs, restaurants and sometimes casuals. If you get good enough you can also play classical and/or Spanish duets. Flute and guitar duets are often used and are a great source of income.

You can obviously play with any size ensemble that uses guitar, from a rock trio to a big band. Though some guitarists predominantly play rhythm or lead, to successfully support yourself as a freelance musician you need to do both. Outside of the few who specialize in one or the other, in the work-a-day world there is usually no such thing as a "rhythm guitarist" or a "lead guitarist." You play the guitar, and either play rhythm or lead (or both) according to the tune you're playing at the time. Whereas a pianist can play left-hand accompaniment/right-hand melody, the guitar shines the best doing one or the other. This is why a guitarist needs to have both skills down well. The great jazz and classical players can do both simultaneously—and play a bass part at the same time! The complete solo guitarist.

Word-of-mouth is an institution for getting work—it's referrals that open the door. You can cold-call contractors and bandleaders all day and get zip (without an impressive demo and resume), but all it takes is the contractor to ask the bass player if he knows of a good guitarist for the date, and have him say yeah... YOU, and you're on the gig. Know as many guitar players and musicians as you can. When digging up work, call everyone you've ever worked with first, then other guitar players, then everyone else. The more "accounts" you have, the fewer phone calls you have to make.