

HOW TO MAKE A LIVING PLAYING MUSIC (by Danny Barnes)

i hear so much complaining about this subject, i just wanted to lay my practical experience on you. free.

first, three pre-conditions:

1. if you are a very materialistic person, skip this article, i don't think you are going to like what it says.
2. if you don't have the music where you want it art-wise, you might want to go work on that, this article isn't going to help you much either. you will be better off by practicing and studying and working on your music instead. you will need to get the art pretty close to where you want it, before you should worry about making much of a living out of it.
3. determine if you are actually called to be a musician. if you aren't called, all the gyrations in the world, won't make it work. if you are called, no matter what you do, it's going to work. this determination will solve most of the problems you are going to encounter.

assuming these three conditions are met, you are financially workable and you have the music where you want it and you are surely called into the art, here goes, in no particular order as i am wont:

a. keep your expenses very low. read that one again. move someplace cheap. drive a good used car. do all the things it takes to be a secure un-monied person. you have to have health insurance. you have to have a reliable car [unless you live in nyc or something]. you have to have some money in savings. you have to pay your taxes. don't have a big expense of alcohol or drugs or any drag on your system like that. i wouldn't even smoke. use your head. spend very little, save as much as you can and don't get into any big expenditure until you can afford it, maybe never. buy your gear used. research as much as you can. think about it really hard before you part with a dollar.

learn how to honestly add and subtract without emotion. if you spend more than you take in, you lost money. i can't tell you how many folks that i run into that have trouble with this. if you bring in more that went out guess what? you just made money.

stick to this low-overhead model, if you end up making a bunch of dough, you already know how to deal with it. if not, you still get to keep working because you don't have a bunch of stuff that you have to dust and pay for.

the more overhead you tack on, the harder it's going to be. and the easier it is to get knocked off course.

b. however, don't be a cheapskate. tithe or donate faithfully whatever your heart tells you to do. pay your band as much as you can. never withhold a laborers wages. tip well. give street musicians money. become involved in charity work.

c. be totally square on your taxes. render unto caesar that which is caesar's. if you try to fudge on this, it will come back to bite you every time. get receipts for everything, 1099 everyone no matter what, unless they are a corporation. be totally on top of this or you are burning money in a pile on the lawn. claim every dollar you make and take every deduction. otherwise you are a drag on the system. keep perfect records.

d. your basic infrastructure will have to consist of these things: a good lawyer, bookkeeper, cpa, doctor, a mechanic, an instrument repair person, web person, and someone in your circle that will always tell you the truth. maybe a backup of each one. and do what they say. these are all musts, even for solo acts. then later you can add a good agent. then maybe a manager if you have lots of stuff to deal with like a label. you can grow from there. if you don't assemble a good team of the

first eight people on that list, you are likely to have problems every time you turn around and you might not have a way to fix them.

e. if you are going into a deal with any entity, seek two things:

1. the arrangement must be win/win. win/lose is ultimately lose/lose. avoid that.
2. make an agreement that either one of you can walk away at any time and everything is cool.

f. keep working on your art. keep taking lessons and studying and working. this is the main art strategy. research, learn, study, experiment, develop, edit.

g. don't be afraid to do other things to make money in the short term. this can be a very rewarding experience. historically musicians have been barbers and bartenders and all kinds of stuff to make ends meet. this is totally fine. don't worry about it. it's cool. do what you need to do. waiting tables will give you lots of stuff to write songs about. i used to call myself the king of the part time job, because i could get up out of my chair at any time and go get a job of some sort. not that it would be the greatest job of course, but i could go and get something going. i've cleaned pools, painted apartments, done maintenance work, taught music, worked in a factory, threw newspapers, drove a delivery truck, cooked, all kinds of stuff, and none of it killed me. through it all i was able to keep practicing and writing music and studying what i was doing. bills? hey no problem, go flip a few burgers and i can pay that and get back to playing the banjo. get a job in a dance band whatever i have to do. just live within your means and you can avoid so many hassles. hassles interrupt your practice routine.

h. keep your art the main focus. it isn't about you it's about your art. do what's good for your art and don't draw attention to yourself as much as the art. if your main focus is on the art, waiting tables is no big deal because you are doing it to support your art. if your main focus is you, you are not going to like waiting tables. you will feel like you are way too good for that.

i. avoid the performance mentality. i know this sounds ridiculous in a performance based industry. but think about this. here is a recipe for disaster.

my value = my performance + other people's opinions

the reason why, is that someday, you are going to have an off day and/or someone is going to criticize you. if you put your value in the world like that, you are going to have a bad time of it. i speak from experience. i only learned this at the age of 46. finding my true value fixed this for me. [write me if you want to know what it is.] but establish your value outside of how well you did on the gig and what the papers said about you. otherwise you are going to be miserable and you are going to make everyone else miserable. somedays you play better than others. this doesn't make you a great person. somedays you make lots of errors, this doesn't make you a bad person.

j. don't gossip. gossip means you aren't in the problem or the solution, you are just talking about someone and probably gaining pleasure from something bad not happening to you or envying something good that happened to someone else. spend your energy on getting better at your art.

k. record labels. they can help or they can drag you down. here's the scoop. if they expect you to be the primary distributor of the product, don't sign the deal. the typical deal is a 90/10 split, you get the ten minus every expense related to the project. thus you are paying for everything and giving the label 90 percent of the gross. read that sentence again.

if they aren't really really offering you something good in terms of promotion, or something....some tangible quantitized tie-in to something bigger, skip it. you can hire that stuff yourself easier. talk to other artists on the roster and ask them what they think. any more, if you are an emerging artist, it's going to be hard to find a label home. they are losing so much dough they only want for sure money makers or somewhat less money losers on the roster, and they are dropping folks right and left. this

is all good for you. take heart. it's a 90/10 deal and you get the 10 and they want you to be the primary distributor of the product plus pay for the whole deal, those are not very good terms. in addition they will charge you eight bucks plus shipping for your own cds that you can make for either zero or one dollar. and they might complain about every little detail. again if they really have an idea for a bang up thing they are thinking of, by all means have a go. if they are motivated and have a track record and have ideas and are workable, they can really help. however, you might want to have an out. have an out clause in there. shooting from the hip, i'd tell you to avoid the whole thing and do it yourself. it's very likely that the person that brings your act into the label fold will get fired. then you can get stuck with four years left on the deal and no one will return your calls. then they just hope you will get another deal and someone will buy out the rest of the contract. lots of bands close up shop at this point.

there are some labels that operate with different models. i have had very good success with them. they tend to be more punk rock style outfits. you might want to investigate that. the standard deal referred to in the preceding paragraph is pretty hard to profit from unless the contract is on your letterhead. the punk rock deal goes something like this, all the black ink goes in a list, all the red ink goes in a list, find the difference, split what's left if it's a positive number. fifty fifty. these are really the only deals i ever made money on. the point is, there are some other ways to look at stuff contractually. if the deal is win/win, great. if it's win/lose, skip it. if the label in question is locked into doing contractual things a certain way, this won't be for your benefit. you are creative, your business arrangements can be creative.

1. the main business strategy is to build your own audience. if you have a draw, agents, labels or investors [which i do not recommend] and stuff will come to you. if you skip this step and start trying to talk to industry people and you don't have a draw yet, you are going to be sorry [unless you are really hot looking or have a famous parent and/or willing to sign away the rights to the whole thing of course]. build your own audience. if you can sell your own records that you make yourself and do your own shows, you can attract the attention of industry folks and get your calls returned. then you probably won't need them unless you want them. that's a better bargaining position for you. work on your draw.

if you don't have a draw, these are some likely things to look at:
where you are playing isn't the right place
the music isn't there yet
the time isn't right

in any case, the answer is to forge ahead. keep doing it. always keep writing and practicing.

keep working on finding more and better places to play. and new contexts within which to place your work. if something feels right, it probably is right. if you are having to bang your head against the wall in regard to something, it may be better to drop it sooner. the longer you work on something that isn't going to work out job-wise, i think the more time we waste.

i wouldn't get too hung up about opening slots. they are okay and you can increase your draw, but as far as that being the principle strategy you are using, it may not work. the old model of thinking that if you open for someone and do a good job you can get some of their audience interested in your work is not really that reliable. find a new model. if you meet someone who wants to work on your team, and you are thinking of hiring them and they offer this as the main strategy, this is not a creative workable person. they are working on business models that are decades old. this ploy will work sometimes, but it should be part of an overall deal, not the main thing. just like if you went to interview a financial advisor and he said, "what we are going to try to do is to buy low and sell high," and behaves as though he has just isolated the plutonium isotope. you might need a little

more horsepower upstairs than that if you get my drift.

i work for free when it's kind of my idea to do so. if someone else suggests it, i tend to pass. i also pass on a job where they say they aren't going to pay you but you'll sell lots of cds. and when i did not adhere to this, i was sorry.

i'm not really a self promotion person, and find that sort of distasteful. in my experience the strong self promotion vibe alienates people or attracts folks that you don't want to work with. maybe i just didn't do it right but this did not work for me. i've had much better results endeavoring to let the art speak for itself.

m. don't expect to get paid more than you can bring in. if you draw ten people, and the cover is ten bucks a head, you gross one hundred dollars. not five hundred. don't get mad at the agent, club owner or whatever because of simple math. you drew ten folks. guess what? that's better than nine. if you want a raise, figure out how to draw more folks. this is not as mysterious as some would suggest. but you can't ask for more than you bring in the door.

if you don't believe this, try producing some concerts of your own.

n. you may not want to hire sidemen that get too worked up about money, it can be hard to make these folks happy. also when it comes to hiring musicians, you may have to live with them at arm's length for a long time and be involved with them about emotional issues like money and life problems and stuff. you may want a person that's easy to get along with even if they are a little less sharp musically. of course getting both is best, but if you have to take one or the other, take the one you get along with a little better. if you are in a place where you don't have a lot of choice, you may be forced into hiring someone that's tough to be around. replace them when you can. really the best players i know are also the nicest folks. except for one or two. many times, in that world of

musicians that are struggling to make a living, but haven't really gotten there yet with the music or with the people skills or what have you, they will be the most difficult to deal with. they over-compensate by talking too much, or acting like they know everything, or showing up drunk or being really critical or whatever. when folks have it together, they are at ease and play great, and know when to lay out and stuff. they are also more expensive.

it's totally fine and many times necessary to use different players on the recordings than in the shows. if you are a leader, do this with no guilt. if you are a sideman, get ready for it and don't complain. it has to be this way. if you don't believe it, try putting out your own record. you'll soon see why when you go to record. sidemen, you can always practice and take lessons and get your tuning and timing together.

leaders again, get their tax id and report every dollar that transacts. if someone is upset about this, you can't use them. period. never fudge on taxes.

o. you really won't be able to work that much in the town where you live. and there will probably be a morass of musicians in your hometown that aren't really committed to the lifestyle that haven't really developed their art that will be complaining loudly about how hard it is to make a living and whatnot and you can easily get sucked into their trip. you'll be better off traveling to various places and developing that. use local shows to try out new stuff, play with different folks, have fun, play for the home town crowd, etc. but typically you won't be able to work that often at home. maybe twice a year or something. don't worry about that. your market is the whole world, not your hometown. negativity is a sign to alter the course.

p. don't let anyone tell you that you can't make money playing music. six of my pretty good musician friends are millionaires. three of them multi. three of them play music that most folks would surely comment, "you can't make any money playing that." don't tell those guys. five of them are the nicest people you would ever want to meet. one of them is as mean as a snake. there you go.

q. i would suggest being able to do different things. if you write songs, maybe you can sing on other folk's demos. maybe play guitar in someone else's band. for years i taught music lessons in a music store. many folks i work with have a little studio and also play in someone's band. or they are a chef or tax person on the side. this is all very healthy. i know several folks that are sidemen but have their own writing deal or what have you. this is a good course to take. that way you can take a hit and keep moving. the world doesn't grind to a halt because your label went under.

r. be wary of someone that talks about gear a lot. also be wary of folks that tell you how great they are. stay away from complainers and folks that don't have their lives somewhat together. sometimes folks need some ministering, which is certainly what we are called to do, but if you take someone out on the road with a big jones, you are going to be sorry... or otherwise get involved financially, look out. don't make your own problems or agree to be in a messed up deal. drama is always bad. never make a financial agreement with someone that has no problem getting paid for not working.

s. all the trouble in the world is going to come for you in two ways. the things you say, and the things you agree to do. be very careful about these items.

t. build alliances. let's say you play some weird kind of music, make contact with someone in another city that does something similar and offer to set up a concert for them in your town. maybe they will later help you to play their city or something. work it out with them. if you can't get into a particular festival, why not have your own festival? get some like minded bands together, the venues would love to turn over the night to you to produce your own gig, and do it yourself. sometimes you can do stuff like that yourself easier than you can talk someone else into doing it for you and then paying you, think about that. going to that big music conference is out of the question for some reason? why not have your own conference? it might be cheaper to fly the guy in you are wanting to have see your band. that way you only have to put one guy up, rather than having the expense of flying a six piece band to los angeles and have one guy come out out to the show that lives there. he may blow you off anyway. it would probably be cheaper to fly in six a and r guys to where you are and put them up and have them come to the show, than it would be to take the band out to them because of the gear and salary. you also could have their undivided attention, within reason.

don't keep saying "well if i had a label or agent or manager, then i could be happy." forget that. forge ahead with your music. keep working. develop the music. come up with different ways to do an end run around conventional wisdom. if you are really called to be in music, the right people will present themselves at the right time. build those alliances of simpatico musicians, writers, studio guys, label guys, radio guys. be nice and help others.

i have been fortunate enough to be close friends with lots of folks that are way better at music than i am. i take constant inspiration and encouragement from these folks. i think this has been really good for my work.

u. if for one second you think you aren't getting the recognition your talent deserves, banish this thought immediately. if others tell you this, ignore it. just keep working on the music. you are probably right where you are supposed to be, learning and doing what you are supposed to be learning and doing.

v. if there's no social context for the music you are making, don't be mad if no one comes to the shows or buys the music. or if only very few people do. in that case the reward has to be the music. hey that's a great deal. also you have lots of freedom to do different stuff. there's no one to alienate. let's face it, sometimes having no one at the show is a great indicator that you are onto something. i'm serious.

w. robert keen told me he never regretted firing anybody, and i agree. if someone is a problem, and they won't fix it, get rid of them. it's okay. you both will be happier.

x. don't waste materials and time giving a cd to someone unless you are fairly sure they will actually listen.

y. avoid folks that make your job harder. sometimes people gum up the works, even when they have a smile on their face. you'll get more done the less of this type you deal with. when you ask someone a direct question and they go into a convoluted story about something else, get ready for the hassle.

z. we are all blessed with different talents. this is as it should be. don't be upset with someone that doesn't have your talent for something, and don't feel bad because someone else got some talent that you think you want. move towards grace.

aa. i have a system, where if i sense that the gig is going to get weird before i even get there, I cancel the show and walk away. in my experience, if something goes awry before you even get there, it won't magically get better if you commit a bunch of dollars and time towards it. because of this, i can't remember the last bad gig i've had. example, let's say i've booked a show next year with a person that i don't really know that well. and as time goes by, he keeps wanting to chisel away at our arrangement, or add stuff for me to do, or whine or complain about the situation, i would cancel the show. time and time again i learned that it only gets weirder and more difficult when you get there. this is better for the buyer too because then he or she doesn't have to worry about my show anymore.

if the buyer isn't really into it, or at least somewhat into it, seriously consider passing on the show.

bb. have interests outside of your art. especially if you can do this on a non-performance basis, where you can just enjoy the activity and not analyze it to death and be real critical of your own work and stuff. it's so easy to burn out if you do one overwhelming thing for about twenty or thirty years. sometimes, i just don't play at all and don't think about work and mess around with my sailboat, or work in the yard, or something. ride the motorcycle. giving myself a break from the pass/fail mentality. i like just being a regular person.

cc. think of your art as a work in progress. that takes the heat off of it having to be perfect all the time.

keep working on your art, your vision, your catalog. dedicate your work life to that, and things will work out.

okay i'm running out of letters. [these are all just ideas, and you may have your own way. good. also these are different components and you have to make a sort of stew of them. maybe you have a little more of one, use a little less of the other or whatever it takes to make it come out right. i've made all these mistakes myself in the trial and error process, which is a fine way of doing things except for the error part.]

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