

A WORKING MALLET PLAYER

By Jerry Tachoir

Work opportunities for mallet players are frequent topics of conversation and concern that arises at most of my mallet clinics. This article is not intended to come off with a negative impression but a realistic appraisal of this topic. Granted that each individual will have different experiences, and will achieve different plateaus in career development; this article tries to suggest directions in work opportunities.

As a music student enters the real world of the freelancing mallet artist, whether on marimba, vibes, or both, an age of uncertainty exists. This uncertainty is primarily on the part of the hiring parties for not knowing the capabilities of mallet instruments and also of the shortages of good contemporary mallet players. It is therefore the responsibility of the mallet artist to educate as to the possibilities and diversities of the mallet instruments in addition to supporting other mallet players that are also helping to get the word out. By educate, I mean to literally discuss with your peers the novelty of the mallet instruments and also the diversity and usefulness of these instruments. Sometime it means being pushy and taking these mallet instruments into a situation, whether a band or an engagement, and giving it a try. Usually it is apparent that the vibes and marimba work and create a visual and as mentioned previously, novel, approach that generates excitement and hopefully continued working relationships.

Certain stereotypes exist with both instruments. The vibes is understood to be predominately a jazz instrument and the marimba is for classical or Mexican music. These stereotypes have been around almost as long as the instruments and are going to be hard to break. Yet, with the right open-mindedness and the determination to force ones instrument into various situations, perhaps these mallet instruments will gain acceptance and be used more.

Being personally involved in performing in a variety of venues, I have felt at times that by playing these mallet instruments and especially with my 4 mallet technique, to be just slightly on the right side of the novelty acts and freak shows in a circus. People will look at you and question, How do you manage to control 4 mallets at once on that xylophone (I've never played a xylophone except in the symphony)? This can be trying at times. First, they don't even know that you are performing on a vibraphone, and second, they are not concerned with the music, just in your technique and incredible dexterity. It becomes a joy when a spectator comments on your last vibes solo.

At the same time, the novelty of the instrument and the 4 mallet technique wins the audience over even before a note is played. This can be a plus for a player that doesn't have his act totally together.

As a professional mallet player, a certain amount of self induced creative work opportunities will be inevitable as is the case with most leaders of ensembles. One has to exploit the possibilities and constantly think ahead and anticipate musical needs in the job arena. This brings me into another observation of mallet players; most mallet players involved with ensembles tend to be the leaders. Perhaps there is a certain ego associated with mallet instruments, but more realistically, in order to work, a mallet player has to create an ensemble and generate work at the same time.

So how does one generate work using the mallet instruments? This is the 24 million dollar question. Depending on your instrument selection, choice of popular or classical music, choice of areas to live; these are all determining factors. Still, the key seems to be determination and commitment. Being based out of Nashville, which is my case, poses a certain set of stereotypes and assumptions totally unrelated to the mallet instruments. At the same time, being centrally located within the US. makes it very conducive for economical touring. Statistics say that 2/3 of the population of the U.S. lives within a 600 mile radius of Nashville. 600 miles is one driving day by car and opens several markets. The down side is that Nashville is not considered the mecca of creative contemporary jazz, however the music industry is here, the studios are state of the art, and in general it is affordable at least compared to the other music centers of New York and LA.

After home base has been established, it is essential to meet THE MUSICIANS, not just the ones that you always perform with but those that are established and have a positive musical track record. Try to be optimistic and cordial, (nobody wants to be around a loser). Your first impression is generally what will stick with you, so work on your social skills and come off professional, not caulky, friendly, not sticky, and most of all, when your first playing situation comes around, BE PREPARED. Your first chance is the most important and can determine success or failure in that area.

Seek out those that are doing what you want to do and offer support. Be open to suggestions yet be strong in your beliefs and don't let anyone talk you out of them, you'll regret it later.

My biggest observation as a clinician at universities and when I was a student at Berklee, college is the time to practice and get it together. Sure beer blasts and socializing have its place, but foremost, develop your musical skills and connections as a student, when you have the time. Later, upon graduation, you will be busy with the business side of music such as, making contacts, sending resumes and press information to potential hiring parties or record labels, rehearsing with groups, auditioning, sending contracts, doing interviews, traveling etc., etc. This doesn't leave much time for individual practicing. Get it together in college. College is a fantasy land of creativity where everybody seems to have the same interest and enthusiasm toward music

that hardly ever exists in the real world. It is hard to find sidemen with the same enthusiasm and educational background and that you can be compatible. Believe me, this last comment on compatibility is of the utmost importance in dealing with the rigors associated with the traveling musician and engagements on the road.

As a mallet player leader, you have to be able to deal with just about any situation in traveling with musicians as a mother deals with her children. Anything from where is the bathroom to what's for dinner and never, never let the money get funny. Meaning, be straight with the money when it comes to your sidemen. Preferably, document everything in writing prior to a road trip to avoid the hassles that money can cause on the road. Money on the road becomes a necessity yet seems to have no value and disappears faster than ice in a desert if you are not careful. Those 3 beers you have every night, even at a discount for musicians, really adds up at the end of the tour. Be frugal and take care. The hostilities associated with money from sidemen really make it hard to have a positive musical performance and generate some serious BAD VIBES (Pun intended).

If the role of a leader isn't in your blood, other employment possibilities for mallet players could include being a sideman, if lucky, or getting involved with education and teaching privately or in the school system. Requirements placed by the highbrows of the academia world dictate that a masters degree is entrance level for a teaching position at most of your better colleges. If teaching is your main objective, consider putting in the classroom time as soon as possible for that graduate degree for it gets harder later as your career begins to develop or a family way is in your cards. Again, the masters degree is generally considered a basic entrance level requirement even before you apply and have the opportunity to send in your resumé.

On an optimistic note, things tend to fall in place and your niche will get carved out if you are persistent and a good player with a decent personality. Don't expect to obtain financial security within your first few years in the professional market unless you are very, very lucky. However, if the determination is there and you put in the time, musical employment will be obtained and hopefully it will be enough to keep away the bill collectors for another month.

On a realistic note, several musicians, even good musicians live from month to month and gig to gig and if you don't have the patience or your personality type won't permit paying some dues and having that type of life style, consider a side line that will keep you financially secure and permit you to maintain your music on a part-time basis. This scenario might offer you more happiness in your music knowing that you have a steady check, but, I find that the determination and commitment necessary for an artist level musical career is full-time one. Again, you do what you have to do depending on your situation and financial needs. Do what's right for you and hopefully that will make you happy and content in your life.

Best of Luck,

Jerry Tachoir