

## The Need to Play

Musicians are a strange breed. We hate extended weekends and holidays. We don't look forward to time off. We want to work. The average 9 – 5 working class person tends to offer the minimum required for the job. They look forward to 5 O'clock, weekends, holidays and vacations. At 5 O'clock, they are off and don't have to think work again until the next day. Most serious, aggressive musicians work all day on the business of music; getting bookings, contracts and logistics, then we write and practice our music, perhaps give a lesson or two, give interviews to the press to promote the evening concert, and then when the average person is home having their 2<sup>nd</sup> beer, it's time for the musician to perform. I didn't even mention, getting to the engagement, sound check and having a bite to eat. As you can see, this can be a rather long and demanding day.

During one of those demanding days, a fellow musician and I were discussing the dollar value of our time and the work put into the average concert engagement. We come to the conclusion that we are seriously underpaid. When you consider the time put into developing a career which actually begins for most in childhood taking those Saturday morning lessons through College plus our individual practice time, we put more actual hours into our craft than a medical doctor. Why do we do this? The burning need to play is the only answer we came up with. The deep down need to perfect our instrumental skills and perform without which our lives would have a serious void.

No, it's not easy being a musician. Because of those before us, those who abused the privilege and partied too hard and were users of drugs and alcohol, musicians have obtained a less than professional and credible reputation. Try getting a mortgage at a bank and put musician under the employment category. We have more dedication to our careers than most, have put in enormous time and equipment purchases yet loose credibility as a musician. Why do we put ourselves through this? Again, that burning need to play without which our lives would be empty and unfulfilled.

Early on in my professional career, I even had members of my family ask me when I was going to get a job. I make more money than my brother, however I was always the joke when we got together; Hey Jerry, are you ever going to quit goofing around and get a real job. This lasted for several years until he came to one of my concerts and actually saw a performance. His comment later was, wow, you performed for an hour and a half, got all that money and accolades from the audience and you are doing what you want and like and totally enjoy. That is incredible. I should preface this by saying this is a guy who never listens to music. Until recently, his state of the art music system was a portable battery powered AM radio which he never really ever listened to. It is a totally different world we live in and I can understand his confusion about my career choice. The average worker's success is based totally on financial worth and the concept of creativity is very foreign. How is your 401K and your retirement accounts? I hope I never retire. I want to perform and play my instrument until somebody finally says, Jerry, it's time to put your pants back on and stay off the stage. It might take a hook.

There are major frustrations in attempting to be a professional musician, some of which causes us to beat up on ourselves. For instance, the displeasure associated with

giving a bad performance or hitting a wrong note or not playing a great solo. These self-induced frustrations exist at every level. Hopefully most full time professional musicians achieve a level of consistent stability and occasionally have those performances where God is whispering in your ear and your performance rises to new heights. These magical moments where you can do no wrong is what really makes it worth while and what we strive for knowing and fearing that we will fall back to our usual stable plateau. The other frustrations we experience are usually out of our total control such as; promoter who didn't do his or her job, a bad piano or noisy PA system, a less than sympathetic audience, or even not feeling well, etc. Even though we can rationalize and say that these events are out of our control, they still distract from our ability to perform to our best. Why do we do this? That need to create and play our instruments without which our lives would not be the same.

I frequently question my sense of worth and contribution to humanity compared to say a doctor who can help heal and save lives. A doctor friend assure me that my music has just as much healing power to not only the sick but to the pleasures of the healthy to sooth and bring a positive feeling to ones life as his medical techniques. If anything my recorded music has longevity and can add pleasure for generations. Music has been played forever and appears will continue indefinitely though the business and vehicle of distribution will change. This doctor friend sincerely told me that he wishes he could play an instrument and was really in awe of the dexterity, creativity and our overall musical ability.

In a nutshell, the business of music sucks! The concept of putting a dollar value on your performance is difficult. More so than ever, the music business is controlled by lawyers and investment companies whose corporate bottom line and reason is profit. The days of the music lover who runs a record label and really enjoys the music, the artist, and the entire idea of offering a quality musical recording that can be enjoyed by the music listener and supporter is pretty much gone. Some small independent labels exist on this premise however usually don't have the clout to make a very big showing in the commercial world, hence there artists usually remain obscure until a major label shows an interest. A catch 22 exists in that so many units of a recording have to be sold in order to show a profit to allow the label to continue in business and invest back into the artist to allow the artist more exposure in order to sell more records. The bills have to be paid.

The artist's responsibility today needs to be more than just performing. In order to generate the sells necessary to keep the label happy, artists need to develop a business head and invest some effort into shameless self promotion and what ever it takes to help get the word out on you as the artist and the recording in question. Having my own label for several years, I realize the expense associated with any release. There is the cost of the actual recording, the manufacturing cost of CD's and cassettes, advertisement, postage to radio stations, calls and promotion to radio, etc. It really takes a lot to break even on a recording.

What I never understood is how major commercial labels would give artists huge budgets to record a project and it could take up to a year. Most of mine and most great jazz projects were recorded in perhaps 2 days and mixed in another 2 days. If you start with great talent and incredibly musicians, it shouldn't take very long at all to record a project. Why throw all that money at less than qualified acts that are a major financial

risk. Musicians need to have their acts together, as do the music business executives that approve those astronomical budgets.

Yeah, music is tough and consumes a great deal of hours and major frustration. You better have that burning desire and excitement in performance to justify your effort. There is nothing like a great performance in which it all clicked and came together as we expected and hoped. Can't wait till the next gig.