

Five Essentials of Music Career Success

Written by Peter Spellman
Courtesy of Dave Feder

Music is too big a world for a one-size-fits-all model of music career success. Musicians' career paths are as unique as their individual fingerprints. Nevertheless, there are a few guidelines that I believe apply to anyone trying to make a living career out of their love of music. Here are five:

1. Hone your talent and realize there is a place for you. Not everyone is a Quincy Jones, a Beatles, or a Bruce Springsteen, but if an artist like Tom Waits is a vocalist, then there is definitely room for you too. Do the work necessary to excel in your niche, whether it's writing a chart, engineering a session, providing backup vocals, or teaching kids the basics of music.

Your goal, to use marketing lingo, is to "position" yourself in your market as the go-to person for that particular skill or talent. Don't worry too much about industry rejection. Every record label in Britain initially passed on the Beatles and The Rolling Stones. The key is believing in yourself and persevering beyond others' opinions (even those of "the industry").

2. Connect with as many people as you can because relationships drive music careers more than

anything else, even talent. Music is a "who-you-know/who-knows-you" kind of business. The quality and quantity of your relationships will be the primary engines of your progress. Try developing creative projects with fellow-musicians. Perhaps you can combine your live show with two other acts and present the package to a local promoter. There is strength in numbers. Finding the right combinations takes experimentation.

If you're interested in working in the business side of music, then interning at a music company is the best way to both learn how the biz works and connect with those who can help move your career forward.

3. Accept the new powers in your corner and take responsibility for creating your own success. The last twenty years has given you the means to both produce and distribute your own music on a global scale. New models of business are emerging in the world of music. A "record deal" is not necessarily the goal any longer. The Internet has clearly become your "open mic" to the world, and desktop technologies provide you with ways to have the look, reach and efficiency of larger companies. Dare to be different.

Remember, new power also means new responsibilities. Global reach means a potentially far-flung audience. You need to be ready for the incoming messages and questions from this new market. Have you created the best business structures to hold and express your work? Are you setting up effective systems to communicate with your audience? It's up to you to create your own success and not merely rely on a record company or agent to do the work of making you visible in the marketplace.

4. Understand that every business is becoming a "music business" and so musical opportunities are multiplying. It took a coffee company and a computer manufacturer to teach the music industry how to sell music in the digital age. Non-music businesses everywhere are seeking creative ways to add music-related services to their mix. This means that you needn't be dependent on the traditional "music industrial complex" for music career success.

Think of companies you already resonate with and try brainstorming ways you can link up. Start on a local scale. It might be a gift shop, bookstore or arts organization. It may even evolve into a full-fledged

sponsorship for a tour or recording project. Find ways to add value to what these businesses are doing with what you have to offer. Forging creative alliances is key to building a multi-dimensional music career.

5. Prepare to be versatile and to wear several hats initially, until your "brand" is established. Most musicians I know have had to cobble together several revenue streams in the early stages of their careers in order to make enough money to support themselves. Many have also had to take on a non-music "lifeline careers" just to make ends meet, pay down debt, or supplement what they earn from music.

I tell musicians to not so much look for "a job," but to seek out the work that needs to be done. It might be arranging a song, playing a wedding gig, helping organize a concert series, doing a jingle session, offering private music instruction, or writing a review of your favorite band's new CD. Eventually, all the different experiences merge together into the roaring river that will be your music career. At that point you'll be visible, in demand and able to name your price. And that's career success.



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Bartender of the Month D.J. Geffrard



at The Big Chill and Pilot House

The Coconut Telegraph's Bartender of the Month for April has come a long way in more ways than one. D.J. Geffrard immigrated to America from Port au Prince, Haiti at age 18. His father is a U.S. citizen and sent for Geffrard, who didn't speak a bit of English upon first arrival. From his family home in Homestead he took the bus to Key Largo and applied for work at the Pilot House Restaurant.

"D.J. was hired on the spot and he went from busboy to waiter to barback to bartender in a very short time," says Bush, a former Coconut Telegraph Bartender of the Year and Geffrard's mentor.

The two continue to be the best team of bartenders in the Keys. When Bush left the Pilot House to work at Jimmy Johnson's Big Chill he brought in Geffrard to work part-time.

"After the earthquake in Haiti Geffrard didn't hear from his family for over a week, but he kept right on working. He works seven days a week now and still continues to send his family money," says Bush.

Geffrard 's co-worker at the Pilot House now is Ed Carboni and he tells us, "D.J. is one of the best bartenders I've ever worked with. The customers love him so much that they scream his name and applaud when he starts his shift."

"D.J. is so fast that your drink is on the bar before you are able to sit down," says Larry Calvano, owner of the Big Chill. "And it is a pleasure having him part of our team."

Shirlee Alcock, the manager of the Pilot House also sings his praises saying, "I am so proud of D.J. He has worked so hard to get where he's at. He is fast, honest, dependable and a really nice person."

I couldn't have said it any better myself Shirlee. When I asked Geffrard what he likes to do in his spare time he said he really likes soccer but what is spare time when you work seven days a week?

Do stop in the Pilot House Restaurant or the Big Chill and congratulate Geffrard. You know you can always find him at one place or the other.

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