

How to Make it Small in the Music Business

The survival guide for the beginning band

Tony Basley

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guide for the beginning band.

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Introduction

In the 1850's, the King of Siam was said to have given the gift of a white elephant to courtiers who disappointed him. These albino elephants, considered sacred, could not be used to perform labor, and allowing one to die carried a severe penalty. The cost of the care and feeding of these gigantic animals doomed the recipient of such a gift to financial ruin. A useless gift has henceforth been referred to a "white elephant gift."

Many people say the ability to play an instrument is a gift. Anyone who has spent any time in the music business would say it is a white elephant gift - both a blessing and a curse. Performing can become a stronger addiction than any drug, but can lead to a life of poverty.

It is not uncommon for musicians to retire numerous times during a lifetime, only to come running back when the urge to play gets too strong to fight. The financial, emotional, and social hardship musicians have to endure drives them away from the business, but the uncontrollable urge to play brings them back again and again.

It is sort of like the story of the old man who worked for the circus shoveling elephant manure. Every day he would shovel and dispose of hundreds of pounds of elephant manure, and

every day he would complain about it. When asked why he didn't get another job, he said, "What, and give up show biz?"

Like the white elephant, the ability can't be given away, and being a musician can lead to financial ruin, holding off on taking a career seriously because, "I am only doing this until my music career takes off." All money that is made gigging or working is spent on the band and new gear (toys).

Remember, this is supposed to be fun. If you are playing in a weekend cover band, treat it as such: a hobby. Avoid wrapping your entire life around being a musician. Unlike fishing or scrap booking, this hobby can pay for itself, but don't let it ruin your life. When it stops being fun, move on!

So many people have the idea in their head that playing in a cover band in a local tavern can lead to a record deal, fame, and fortune. While you can play in a full time cover band, playing someone else's music is not going to land you a recording contract. Record companies are only interested in artists with original material and a proven track record of sales, promotion, and professional dedication. Like any other business, they are looking to partner with other businesses (artists), with the least amount of risk, and the greatest potential for success.

There have been recent arguments demonstrating how signing a recording contract is one of the worst things you can do for your musical career. Out of the hundreds, maybe thousands of artists signed every year, only a small percentage can actually make a living at it. The rest get stuck on a shelf, locked into a

contract, preventing them from pursuing other options. Independent artists can arguably make more money and live happier staying independent.

The days of playing one gig¹, signing a record deal and launching to the top are long gone. Technology has completely changed the music business. These days, anyone with a computer can record and distribute an independent record, regardless of talent. This has caused an exponential growth in the number of artists competing for market share in a shrinking market.

While this book is not about selling independent records, these basic ideas will apply to any band. There have been volumes of books written on how to make it big in the music business. The topics include writing, recording, managers, record deals, etc. Nobody seems to be addressing the other side of the business: the small time cover band. This book is for them.

There are those in the business who are not seeking fame and fortune. Their goal is to have fun playing music in the local bar, night club, bowling alley, or pizza joint. They just want to learn a few popular songs and drink a few beers. They have no intention of recording, but still take the cover band seriously.

The purpose of this book is to help those musicians new to the scene. It is a guide book to help the small time musician to start, book, maintain, and eventually dismantle a local cover band. The intent is to help educate fledgling musicians as to

¹ Gig: Any musical performance, show, concert, etc.

some of the common questions and pitfalls of the music business, and to help address some of the universal truths.

This is not a business book, but your band is a business. A lot of musicians play music to avoid getting a real job, and are not typically good business owners. If you run your band as a business, you will be more successful and happier, perhaps enjoying a long career doing the greatest job in the world.

This book is written as a start-to-finish guide. It begins with putting the band together and continues through to the inevitable break-up. While it is impossible to cover every possible situation, the topics discussed are universal to most bands. The idea is to get you on the right track and inform you of the common things, so that when something new comes along, you will be better prepared.

I have been a semi-professional musician for more than twenty six years, beginning my career in 1984 playing drums in a bar band at age fourteen. Over the years I have played with numerous bands covering most genres of music, including almost ten years hosting a weekly open mic night, and sharing the stage with a number of local, regional, and national acts.

I have also been part of a couple original bands, releasing several albums that have enjoyed success around the world. This included a self titled project where I put down the drum sticks, picked up the guitar, and headed to the front of the stage. These projects allowed me to write, arrange, produce, promote, and perform original music.

In addition to performing, I have almost the same number of years of experience as a sound and lighting engineer. This experience included owning a small production company and working as a house engineer for live music clubs. During that time I also worked as the manager of a music store.

I am sharing this experience with you to give you a leg up on the competition, and to put you out ahead of the other bands that have to learn these lessons the hard way.

A quick note about gender references in the book. It is a well know fact that most musicians are male. We are typically not very good in sports, so get into music to get chicks. This book boldly references things that appeal to the largest audience; males playing in bar bands. I don't waste a lot of white space with "he or she," but the reference is implied. Besides, if you can't handle the political incorrectness, get out of the music business now and read no further. This is no place for those with thin skin.