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THE ART OF ACCOMPANIMENT

THE PROS AND CONS OF BEING A FREELANCE MUSICIAN

*Don't make music for some vast, unseen audience
or market or ratings share or even for something as
tangible as money. Though it's crucial to make a living
that shouldn't be your inspiration. Do it for yourself.*

—Billy Joel

Like most musicians who started out during my era, I spent a lot of time in cover bands playing the top hit songs of the day. I also spent plenty of time playing “casuals,” a West Coast term for weddings, parties, and corporate gigs.

Like most other musicians who dreamed of making it big, I put forth significant effort into playing in original bands—nobody has ever made it big playing cover tunes or doing casuals. I assumed that being a member of some kind of original band would be my ticket to fame and fortune. All the musicians in those bands had high hopes for success; we spent hours talking about what it would be like when we made it big.

Unfortunately, I learned early on that I had very little control over the destinies of the other people in a band, and that I was only one voice in the decision-making process. Being in a band can be very frustrating. You invest all your time, energy, and money in the group and then all of a sudden someone less ambitious decides to up and quit and you find yourself having to start all over again with another musician. It happens so frequently that you soon find yourself standing on shaky ground and your dream of making it big goes up in flames.

There are a zillion and one reasons why bands break up before they ever get off the ground, most of



which are completely out of your hands. Things like band morale, camaraderie and chemistry, record label support and politics, radio airplay, tour support, management, public appeal, marketing savvy, originality, talent, and a plethora of other critical concerns determine if you “make it.” After years of hard work, many groups break up just when they finally start to experience a little taste of success—all because of greed, ego, and jealousy. Being in a band can be like one big soap opera. Before you know it, years of your life have gone right out the window.

I learned early on that I had very little control over the destinies of the other people in a band, and that I was only one voice in the decision-making process.

Eventually, the drama of being in a band became way too much for me, and I realized I was wasting my time with groups that clearly didn’t have what it took to make it. I learned that the only thing I could control was how hard I was willing to work

for my own success, and I decided to put my efforts into becoming a freelance musician. I knew that changing my direction required a focused and deliberate course of action, and I was willing to take the next step.

With so many critical success factors to contend with, making it in a band seemed to be the equivalent of hitting the Lotto. Not that making it as an independent musician was any easier, but at least there were far fewer variables completely out of my hands. If I didn’t make it, there could be no finger pointing on my part—I would only have myself to blame, and I could live with that. Besides, I figured I could always be in a band again if the right situation presented itself.

LIFE AS A SIDEMAN: A CLOSER LOOK AT THE WORLD OF THE FREELANCE MUSICIAN

YOU DON’T HAVE TO BE A STAR (TO BE IN MY SHOW)

Now, before I can give you some reasons for becoming a sideman, I should first explain exactly what sidemen are and describe their role in the music industry. “Sideman” is a music industry term for a musician or vocalist who performs behind recording artists. There are

A QUICK GLANCE AT THE DISADVANTAGES OF BEING A SIDEMAN

YOU CAN'T ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU WANT

The situations described below can vary greatly depending on whether most of your work is from recording or touring, and how successful you become at either. If it's something I feel can apply to both the studio and the touring musician, I simply put the word "both" in parentheses. If it's a disadvantage commonly associated more with one than the other, I simply put the word "studio" or "touring" in parentheses.

In addition to the cons I have already stated, there are some other disadvantages you should keep in mind when thinking about becoming a sideman.

- **FINANCIAL HARDSHIP:** Inconsistent money flow, particularly because of waiting on previously earned money to come in. Vacation pay is also a rarity, as are job perks that would come with most forms of corporate employment (both).
- **INCONSISTENCY:** Frequently unpredictable work schedule (both).
- **PERSONAL CHALLENGES:** A large amount of time is spent away from home, often putting a strain on personal relationships (touring).
- **SCHEDULING CHALLENGES:** Your time is not your own, and you are often at the beck and call of whomever is employing you. Making personal plans can often be difficult (both).
- **INFREQUENT PROMOTIONS:** Advancement is extremely rare. Usually the only possible promotion is to go from being a sideman in a band to being the musical director on tour. After that, you reach a financial plateau unless you produce or write songs for the artist or are invited to be a part of the recording contract (touring).
- **ADVERSE CHALLENGES:** Little to no room to call in sick. You have to learn to function even in the worst of physical conditions (both).
- **HOLIDAY OBLIGATIONS:** Holiday gigs can be lucrative for the recording artist, so having to forgo spending time with family or friends on those special occasions is a common occurrence (touring).
- **SUDDEN CANCELATIONS:** It's not uncommon for live dates or sessions to be canceled with little notice. In many cases, there is no compensation for the cancelation (both).