



RESOURCES FOR STUDENT MUSICIANS

How to make it as a music graduate II: Thinking about the future

Graduation dilemmas and possibilities

Unlike students pursuing careers in the professions of engineering, finance, law or medicine, graduates in liberal arts fields (such as philosophy, history or English literature) rarely have a clear-cut, predetermined path into professional life. For these students, university studies may be more about getting a broad education while pursuing deep interests, talents and passions, rather than a purely vocational track.

For student musicians, whose education and training encompasses a combination of liberal arts and professional-level skill development, the path may seem relatively clear on the surface but often proves much more elusive upon graduation. Career preparation and awareness have traditionally been low on the list of priorities in the education of emerging artists. Until rather recently, the broad range and extremely high level of skills and knowledge required to enter this highly competitive field has meant that little attention was given to just how one goes about discovering what that career might encompass and how to make it a reality.

Taking time to reflect on your attitudes about work, your motivations and self-awareness, and your perceptions of the 'real' world, is some of the most useful pre-graduation work you can do. Educational activist Parker Palmer represents the spirit of career reflection by saying, "Our deepest calling is to grow into our own authentic self-hood, whether or not it conforms to some image of who we set out to be" (Palmer, 2000, p. 16). He continues: "As we do so, we will not only find the joy that every human being seeks – we will also find our path of authentic service in the world" (ibid).

Palmer makes a key point here: the journey to so-called success in life is not only about you and your personal accomplishments (sorry to burst that bubble). Thoughtful alignment of your career direction with the roles of artists in society means that you are also likely to have a greater positive impact on the world.

Some students [on the cusp of the 'real' world](#) may have unrealistic expectations or perceptions of themselves and find setting meaningful goals challenging (Sharf, 2002). Whether as an idealist or a fatalist or someplace in-between, it can be tempting to resist direct confrontation of the challenges to come. If you see yourself even a little bit in this description then practical tips, skills to develop, resources, and opportunities to build professional connections may be the most attractive to you. However, if you simply develop generic career skills without understanding why and how they apply within your life, you potentially miss a wonderful opportunity. Plunging into a particular career path without consideration for goodness of fit and opportunity may lead to disappointment or years spent pursuing personally inappropriate directions.

The differences between a pretty good career fit and an excellent career fit can appear slight but feel profound for an individual. Recognising and acknowledging your true strengths, and crafting a career path that builds on those strengths, can lead to deeper career satisfaction when strengths align with interests and passions.

Mentors, colleagues and authors

Finding a balance between the philosophical and the practical can help. Seek out mentors, role models and more experienced colleagues who can help smooth the transition. Taking time to read, reflect, write, and discuss your ideas and concerns with colleagues and teachers can relieve some of the 'end of student-hood' stress and help you realise that many concerns about this significant life transition are pretty universal.

Books such as [Life in the Real World](#), [Let Your Life Speak](#), [Art and Fear](#), [The War of Art](#), [The Savvy Musician](#), and [Beyond Talent](#) can provide perspective and common ground with other musicians, along with good questions to ponder as you plan. You can also tap into the resources on the [EmployABILITY site](#).

Dante's story is useful in considering how an open awareness and a willingness to tap into resources is essential when building a very eclectic career.

Dante, a 15-year-old African-American guy, was slumped in a chair with headphones on and his eyes closed. I tapped him on the shoulder and said, "What are you listening to?" He glanced up with a dreamy look and said, "Tchaikovsky." That was our first meeting, over thirteen years ago now. In high school, Dante was a talented bassoonist, conductor and composer. After graduation he headed off to a major conservatory to pursue his dreams in all those areas, eventually focusing on composition.

After conservatory he spent a gruelling year scoring student films before moving home to the Midwest to pursue his evolving musical passions. He reconnected with high-school buddies, forming a live hip-hop band (with Dante on the keyboard) that would land a major-label deal and tour full-time for three years. Dante continues to perform and record successfully with that band today. He to the conductor/music director. He formed a chamber orchestra of adventurous young professionals with the twist that their performances would take place in bars and clubs, and among other projects he performs with a straight-ahead jazz trio.

Today, in his late 20s, Dante's widely varied musical pursuits include a day-job as Community Liaison back at the community music school where we first met, where he helps young musicians like himself access the training they need to develop their skills and dreams. For Dante, music is not defined by genre and concerts are not defined by venue. He moves fluidly between worlds that rarely overlapped for many musicians in previous generations. Good music is good music for Dante, and he continues to explore and develop his skills and passions.

University-to-work transitions for musicians

As a soon-to-be-graduating musician, life as a student, while hectic and often stressful, is very comfortable on some levels, often encompassing nearly all your personal memory and experience. Ending the secure familiarity of school and embarking on the uncertainty of the so-called real world may energise some students while others find the thought daunting. But the transition may not be as neat and linear as students might hope.

One of the great challenges of transitioning into professional life is the sudden loss of both specific directions and a support structure for music making (Bayles & Orland, 1993). Graduation brings a sudden end to the highly structured life of a music student. School years, for all their stressors, are often fairly certain in their expectations. Course requirements, lessons, juries, recitals, rehearsals and concerts are spelled out explicitly, and other people do much of the behind-the-scenes work. You sign up for a course, get the syllabus, attend class, do the work, and get a grade based on your work and accomplishments. You generally know what is expected of you, when it must be completed, and the standards of excellence to which you will be held. Almost all the structural pieces are already in place and your job is to follow policies and procedures in a timely way. Professional life is rarely that straightforward. Project forward to the day after your long anticipated college graduation. What now? Where do you start? What are the first/next steps you need to take? When do they need to happen? What level of excellence must you reach to 'succeed' at whatever you most want to do? Will you be prepared to step into this unknown world and master it? Accepting personal responsibility for your life and career is another important facet of awareness as you ponder next steps after graduation.

As an independent DIY (do-it-yourself) musician, your career progress depends on consistent and persistent effort, personal motivation, goal-setting (and tweaking) abilities, and the unrelenting work ethic needed to move a professional career forward. These important skills may not have been overtly taught in school or at university, although they are often an integral expectation in educational settings. What's more, there are rarely obvious 'right answers' to situations, opportunities and challenges that arise in the professional world.

Businessman [David Shakarian](#) famously said, "I never worked a day in my life. It's not work when you love what you do" (Shakarian, n. d). Professional musicians often work long hours with little time off. Many enjoy not only creating and sharing music but also the behind-the-scenes work necessary for performances to happen. "I'm always working," a young professional singer said recently, "but I love everything I do, whether I'm performing, giving an interview, or building my audience through social media. It's all fun and rewarding for me". Others simply tolerate the necessary business side as a means to enabling more performances. John Snyder, five-time Grammy winner and professor at Loyola University, says however:

There's no reason to expect every musician to do every job. It's redundant, inefficient, and unlikely to happen. But there are plenty of kids out there who could care as much about marketing and social networking as their roommates care about playing in a band. Impact will ensue if all of these people get together and create a community of shared values in which each member plays his or her part. It's a networked company, not a hierarchical company. (Personal communication, 2009)

Collaboration and partnerships will encompass a vital part of your career, so develop and nurture relationships ([networks](#)) and seek out people whose skills and interests complement yours. Nobody has to do everything, but the work has to be done.

Paying your dues: Talent isn't enough

Another important element of the transition to professional life is the shift from the relatively homogeneous population of campus life to the lively variety of the wide world beyond. Developing diverse colleagues and friends across several generations, vast levels of experience and a range of cultural and world views, is a wonderful and stimulating aspect of post-collegiate life and a great opportunity to expand your collaboration and partnership opportunities.

You probably know your relative place in the pecking order of the conservatory, but what will this look like once you have left campus? Avoiding arrogance but modelling appropriate self-confidence, and balancing that confidence you have in your artistry and skills with a humble willingness to learn from colleagues and mentors who have been in the field for some time, can help smooth your transition into professional life. Experienced professionals often enjoy mentoring young artists and they can provide everything from support and encouragement to gigs and other opportunities. Like Dante, reach out to professionals you admire. Ask if you can buy them coffee or lunch and talk about their work, or about performing or composing or whatever interests you. Be a good listener. Rich and mutually beneficial relationships can grow from these encounters.

There is certainly stiff competition for work as a musician, but you can get a head start by thinking about stories such as this one. Try to come up with some dot points about your motivations and values, your impression of what success will look like, and your attitude to being pro-active.

Use these dot points to frame questions, asking yourself: 'What do I really want to know about this?' Some of the answers will be found in the music toolkit and broader resources, but be sure to also talk with advisers and colleagues.

References

Bayles, D., & Orland. T. (2001). Art & fear: Observations on the perils (and rewards) of artmaking. The Image Continuum: California.

Palmer, P. J. (1999). Let your life speak: Listening for the voice of vocation.

Note : The David Shakarian quote was retrieved from <http://www.answers.com/topic/shakarian-david>



This resource comes from Life in the Real World: How to Make Music Graduates Employable, published by Common Ground in 2012. Purchasers of the book are permitted to download all of the tools and resources.

If you have yet to purchase the book, please order it from [here](#).

This resource was contributed by Janis Weller and Professor Dawn Bennett, Curtin University.

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