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Brilliance for hire: Music pros

To make it as a musician in this town, you have to diversify your portfolio

By Jeff Miers NEWS POP MUSIC CRITIC

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The path to becoming a professional musician used to go like this: A young person with a dream nurtures his instrumental skill over long hours of practice that turn into months and then years. The talented dreamer meets others with the same dream, forms allegiances, swears blood brothers or sisters until the end, and a band is born.

First, these young talents learn the songs of their heroes. Over time, they grow to believe they have something unique to offer audiences. Happy-ending versions of this story find the dreamers quitting their day jobs and suddenly they're in an office with a guy with a cigar hanging from his mouth, signing on the bottom line. Those days are long gone.

Even the most talented and prolific local musicians know the facts: In all but the rarest of exceptions, if you plan on making your living as a musician in this area, it's likely that you will have to play in many different bands, in many different venues, offering many different types of music, at all hours and days of the week.

For musicians in Buffalo and many cities like it, refusing to give up on your musical dreams means making yourself over as a "talent for hire," and several local musicians have done just that. (*For more in individual musicians see following story, "The Genius Department."*)

One reason for this, said Nelson Starr, an independent musician working in Buffalo, is that many area clubs play prerecorded music, and that's diminishing in the demand for live music.

"The decreased size of that niche has made success more elusive for anyone but the established or, oppositely, flavor-of-the-month cover bands," he said.

Instead, today's independent musician needs more of a skill-set than ever before. This means being well-



Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News
MUSICIAN NELSON STARR: "I need to ... be fluent and competitive in every avenue of musical endeavor — from jazz to hip hop, from music education to music production."



Local musician Rodney Appleby, seen here at Artpark, says musicians can be their own worst enemies when it comes to business.

versed; being able to make musical contributions to a wide variety of situations at a moment's notice, without the benefit of abundant rehearsal; and learning at least the basics of recording studio production and engineering.

Another reason, musicians agree, is the ever-changing technology. Uploading, file sharing, putting music out there for free — it's all part of the new game, and it can be a tall order for a kid who simply wanted to learn to play guitar and write some decent songs. But it's a choice many local musicians are making.

"I need to do everything I can to attempt to successfully fulfill any musical need that comes along in the marketplace," says Starr. "That does mean making every effort to become fluent and competitive in every avenue of musical endeavor — from jazz to hip hop, from music education to music production."

Diverse sounds

Geno McManus could be the poster boy for the whole "diversifying the musical portfolio" ethic. The guitarist and singer frequently tours Japan, where he has established a name for himself as a solo act over the past several years. He's also involved in several bands, pursues a solo career and works in studio engineering and production. He sees the definition of "independent musician" changing rapidly.

"To be an indie in the past was kind of a rebellious thing to be," said McManus. "Maybe you were once signed to a label and then decided to ease your way into being more independent on the business end to put out music that you might not be able to release through a label, or had an interest in producing new artists. At least you had some time for the kind of development that being on a label could provide. Now, everyone is essentially an indie, and you most certainly do have to diversify the portfolio in order to survive."

Multi-instrumentalist Joe Rozler routinely performs locally, playing everything from pop to jazz to avantgarde piano music to heavy metal.

"It's great that some cats will play blues one night and sambas the next, and people who are up for that challenge will gravitate to it naturally," he says. "But I'm really glad that there are other creative souls who simply do the one thing that is true to them, their native voice. If everyone aimed for diversifying, there'd be less honest art."

Joelle Labert, singer with Buffalo's Flatbed, said she thinks local music fans' tastes are "becoming more eclectic."

"People are becoming more open to appreciating all kinds of music," she said. "So whether a musician plays one style of music or several, there's likely going to be someone to listen. And there is more crossover in music nowadays, whether among genres or within a single musician."

"One of my favorite artists, Patty Griffin, for example, changes styles from song to song. She can be folk, country, gospel, blues, you name it, sometimes even within the same track. I enjoy singing many different types of music (folk, Americana/country, bluegrass, blues, jazz) and am willing to try more, given the opportunity," Lambert continues.

"It's all about connecting to the song and giving it its own voice. Singing more than one style has certainly allowed me to play with many different talented musicians here in town."

Producing a career

A musician today also needs to be at least a passable engineer and producer, and often, a promoter and marketer.

There are precedents for handling record production among music's best, including the Beatles, Brian Wilson, Todd Rundgren and Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page. These artists were driven by their own visions of what was possible in the recording studio, and most of them had the money to do so at will. The modern independent musician has no such choice.

"Let's face it, musicians have never had much extra money available for producing recordings or demos," says Starr. "In the past, you had to outsource this to recording studios — and that was extremely expensive."

Now, because digital audio and computing is so advanced, to the point that it's well beyond the million dollar studios of the past, you can exploit unlimited recording possibilities right at home. This has changed the entire landscape of the industry and a musician's role in it."

The technology is capable of being the independent musician's best friend or worst enemy. Economic reality dictates that, as distasteful as this may be to musicians who have spent years, even decades working diligently at simply being musicians, it seems to be an undeniable reality.

"For me, this is a double-edged sword," says McManus. "I learned my engineering skills because I always had that curiosity, after learning how much Jimmy Page, (ELO's) Jeff Lynne, and the Beatles had done on their own in the studio.

"However it seems that now, because the technology is so cheap, and the money — and maybe the patience — more often than not isn't there to go into a proper studio, I think that one possibly feels forced into this field. Some people have the ability to do it on their own, but a lot do not."

So you've gotta spend the money, or do it yourself. And if you do it yourself, you've gotta do it well, if you want to compete.

Meanwhile, the music consumer also has a technological edge. After all, who buys a cow if they've grown up getting their milk for free?

Why should a generation of downloaders wait for a full album, sanctioned by an artist, to be released? Why should their music be "officially sanctioned," in the first place? After all, it's only a mouse-click away.

"It has both helped and hurt independent musicians," McManus says of digital downloading. "I read a quote by [alt/country star] Ryan Adams, and he said that a record release should be like Christmas Day — you have no idea what will be under the tree until you open it. So in this way, it has kind of hurt the musician, because the music is immediate — the minute it is released it is downloaded.

"But if you are unknown artist, then you can upload your songs anywhere too, and that is most definitely a good thing."

Reaching an audience

Rob Lynch, a local drummer, guitarist and singer-songwriter, is a veteran of several Buffalo bands and currently plays with nearly a dozen ensembles engaging in a variety of idioms. He views the digital age as "an exciting time to be a musician and a listener."

"I believe it has helped, in that it opened up the playing field for quality artists to be heard and develop a following, even if it's a few fans at a time," Lynch says. "The options now for hearing new, interesting music are pretty limitless."

Clearly, the need to diversify can be viewed through different lenses. For Lynch, it translates into an exciting musical environment that speaks to his needs as a serious musician.

"I like to make music, so why not keep things interesting?" he asks. "It's natural for me to explore different musical situations, because [doing so] reflects my musical interests."

For local musician Rodney Appleby, many of the problems faced by local independent musicians are of their own making.

"Not much has really changed," he says. "Some musicians are still working for the same money as 50 years ago. Musicians have always been their own worst enemies. Business just isn't their strong point. Most musicians treat it more like a hobby than a profession. Playing for free, for exposure, undercutting each other, spending large sums of money on gear that will never produce any revenue.. venue."

McManus suggests that, as much as things have changed in the music industry — and there can be no doubt that they have — the song remains the same.

"It is in some ways the same as it has always been. It's just that now, there are more uncharted options to learn. The bottom line is still the same, though. You have to do whatever you can to reach people, and turn

them on to your music. What's different is that now, it's mostly up to the musician to be in control of what they do."

jmiers@buffnews.com

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