

I just got a nice note from a young trombonist who is figuring out where he wants to live and how to go about establishing a career in music. He asked me for some general advice and I thought I'd share it here too.

Best wishes,

LX

Hi _____,

Thanks for writing.

As I see it, success as a freelance trombonist requires a combination of well-rounded competence, personal reliability, musical consistency, patience, trustworthy-ness, diligence, humility, knowledge of your own strengths and weaknesses, a total love of music [regardless of the kind of musical situations you find yourself--if the music on a given gig is not "your thing", you play the gig the best you can, you keep quiet, you take the money and go home], and there's also a significant amount of plain old luck.

Luck enters with regard to where and when certain critical people hear you play, so it's always important to play and be your best in whatever situation you agree to commit to [no matter how "unrewarding" it may seem at the time or how much/little it pays!!]. It is important to do something to remind yourself why you took up your instrument in the first place EVERY SINGLE DAY. Before music was a business for any of us, it was something we love to do. Certain players usually get hired in part because they vividly communicate this love they have for Music, so it is not trivial to a successful music business outlook. Any given gig might be a drag, but Music is what we really love. People [not just audiences, but the people who hire you] will pick up on this important characteristic. I have witnessed world-class players not get hired back because they just looked like they were having a lousy time on a given gig. And I am not talking about "schmoozing", or just trying to be funny or popular, or pretending to be something you're not. It is a part of successful player's total character.

As I say all this, keep in mind I began to "break into" the business about 25 years ago. A lot has changed since then. Musical demands for players has changed, the taste/s of the public has changed, the music business has changed, technology has changed. Anyone who is successful NOW probably went about certain things quite differently than someone expecting to establish themselves just starting out today! Watch, observe, listen and treat people with respect. You play WITH not THROUGH other people. Freelancing is not a race, it is a more of a potluck dinner. Each of us brings something for everyone else to enjoy. Sure, there will be inevitable comparisons made between who is the better player [or who makes the best potato salad!], but leave that to others to judge you in comparison to other players. You focus on what comes out of your horn and what comes [or DOESN'T come] out of your mouth.

For all but the two or three players I can think of making their living as soloists, professional trombone playing is still centered around the ability to BLEND in an ensemble situation. The players I like to play with the most [even though

many of these players might also be well-known soloists!!] make the act of playing music comfortable and easy for everyone around them--regardless of the "style"! They pay attention, they listen, they play with a great sound. Since they pay attention THE FIRST TIME, they don't feel the need to ask too many questions in the process; they "take in" more than they "put out".

Again, given the chance, they can step up and be noticed--often on a world class level-- but they also know when to tuck in and blend. They play with consistent time, pitch, tone and dynamics. If placed in a "lead" chair, they treat others with respect and instantly remove any doubt as to what they are going to do musically while remaining open to alternative approaches. If they are placed in a section chair, they do so without complaint or fanfare [yes, that was a 'round about trumpet player reference]

Sure, we all have egos and each of us wishes we were getting the acclaim as players we deserve. But we also deserve the chance to prove ourselves in a section position. One of the busiest freelance trumpet players I know, well-known for his world-class lead playing once told me, "I pay my bills playing second and third trumpet on movies." So he is in-demand in either case...lead or section. Diversification can lead to more opportunities.

The players I like to play with "check their egos at the door" and focus on making the most of the music in front of them.

They know how to tap and communicate the music in whatever style of the music they are asked to play--whether they "like" that kind of music or not. If there are kinds of music you cannot hide your hatred or discomfort from, save everyone [including yourself] the hassle--turn the gig down next time!!

In other words, successful freelancers tend to know what they are getting in to!! If it is something they don't feel like they can do, they know when to admit it to the leader, composer or conductor and even recommend someone who does. They avoid these types of situations, however, by constantly seeking out new musical opportunities and putting in the time and effort to learn how to deal with them. They have curiosity and use it to grow and adapt.

Successful freelancers have well-rounded abilities in many things inside and/or outside music. They adjust, they cope, they tend to help others do the same.

Successful freelancers are usually easy to get in touch with. Even if they are NOT available for the gig, they are available to reach. They return phone calls. They're pleasant to talk to. They don't complain much, but are usually quick to address or point out important/controversial issues of concern to whatever group they are a part of.

Out here in LA, these days, it feels like our business has been changing on almost a daily basis!! No one has a crystal ball which outlines what the future holds for us as musicians--and trombonists are at the bottom of this particular food chain too. Trombone players have lived with the "Last hired, first fired" joke/philosophy ever since the last of the big bands were replaced by rock and roll bands at school dances. But many of us have managed to survive these changes. Perhaps we provide an example to other "busier" instruments of how to adapt to the ever-changing world of the "music

business". I predict it will continue to become less and less likely that a trombonist in his/her 20's will be able to make their living ONLY as a player. There will be exceptions. A few great players will get a few of the necessary "breaks" and get in there, but the bad news is very few of us [since we are basically "fired" when we leave a gig] ever feel completely "in there".

I think some people new to this world tend to consider music from a very personal point of view, and only judge what it must be like to play trombone professionally based on what they hear on certain players solo cd's. That's fine, but there are many ways of making a living in music and there are often alternatives that you must consider when you decide to do it for a living. Sometimes that might include teaching, arranging, producing, contracting groups, or even a flexible NON music job.

Each person I work with has arrived at his/her current position of the "pecking order" [which doesn't really exist on paper anywhere!] in his/her own way. Some have self-promoted quite a bit, others totally let their playing do all the talking. One thing I say to many of my students is that no one really wants to hear "what you can do" they want to "hear you do it"!!

Also, a very wise freelance oboist I know said, "Everyone I know who talked themselves IN to a job has immediately or eventually talked their way OUT of it!!"

No matter where you end up living, just keep listening and sharing your love of music!!

Best wishes,

Alex