

Careers in Jazz

Every year, university programs spit out thousands of highly trained jazz musicians sporting hard-earned diplomas and lofty expectations. But when these graduates hit the first rite of jazz passage—a desperate trip to the local pawn shop—they learn that the diploma is not worth the paper it's printed on. Entering school, their dream was simple: to perform music they love for attentive audiences in jazz clubs, concert halls, and festivals, and to earn a fair wage for their efforts ¹. But set loose from the nurturing womb of the campus, they quickly experience the shock of an indifferent and often hostile new reality.

The world doesn't take kindly to jazz artists, and before long these graduates find their ideals displaced by cynicism. At best, 1% of them will eventually realize their dreams, and only after years of paying dues. These are the **Chosen Ones**, whose success stems from a rare combination of often freakish talent, perseverance, good looks, personality, ambition, geography, and the ability to skillfully navigate unpredictably changing public tastes.

Why so few Chosen Ones? Simple economics: People who want to play jazz actually outnumber those who enjoy or even tolerate it, let alone pay to hear it. Consequently, in the microscopic jazz economy, there isn't nearly enough to go around, though competition for the crumbs is relentless and sometimes brutal. This simple financial reality underlies virtually all of the infighting, backbiting, and doomsaying that define the jazz condition.

But when the jazz bug bites, it's hard to shake. Of the remaining 99%, the vast majority continue the battle, even in the face of shattered dreams and personal defeat. How do they survive? By compromising their music, lifestyle, self-respect, or any combination of the three.

What, then, are the paths to survival for those who aren't Chosen Ones? Whether through free choice or fate, hopeless devotion or clinical insanity, jazz musicians eventually sort themselves out into the following subtypes:

Jazz Castes, in Detail

Gig Whores

Gig Whores are the largest and most visible class within the jazz community. They ply their trade in hotel lobbies, restaurants, private parties, and anywhere else that jazz is degraded to an artless commodity and sold to the highest bidder. This is done knowingly and willfully, but not without self-awareness and, at times, regret. While a Gig Whore may claim to be working “in the trenches,” the jazz musician within knows they’re really plumbing untreated musical sewage.

Even outside the jazz arena, jazz Gig Whores, working undercover, populate the music world’s ample underbelly: the pianist wearily accompanying a tone-deaf vocalist in a community musical theater production, the bugler announcing post parade at a horse racing track (slyly inserting a Dizzy Gillespie lick disguised as a flourish), the off-camera bassist backing American Idol contestants, the herald trumpeters—dressed in renaissance costumes—serenading department store shoppers at Christmas time, the wedding band leader cajoling guests into a conga line for “Hot, Hot, Hot” (and the six accomplices to his musical crime, barely hiding their embarrassment and self-loathing), the drummer making “badum-dum” sounds for a would-be comedian’s punchlines, the soprano saxophonist playing Smooth Jazz covers and claiming to be “subverting the genre from within”—a delusion that helps them sleep at night after covering, yet again, “Songbird” Each holding their nose with one hand as the other gratefully palms the ample paycheck, then banking part of the pay to subsidize the day when they might dare to take the jazz plunge in earnest.

Yet there is room for heroism in the Gig Whore’s world. That same pianist might acrobatically shift keys and drop beats in tandem with the vocalist, magically masking every melodic misstep. The bassist might find mistakes in the vapid Idol charts and fix them on the fly with improvisational prowess. The wedding band members might “fake” the bride’s favorite song, a last-

minute obscure request they all just happen to know by ear. More often than not, Gig Whores make up in talent what they lack in pride, taste, or integrity.

While money motivates the Gig Whore's musical lifestyle, fear motivates their more immediate actions. Gig Whores have an intense phobia of open spaces—on their calendars—which can elicit sudden adrenaline-fueled cold calls to contractors, restaurateurs, and wedding planners. Between calls, they sit by their phones with the desperation of dateless adolescents. They're also terrified of displeasing their booking agents and clients; they compensate by overworking—shortening their breaks and prolonging their sets. You'll often find a Gig Whore (and their unfortunate band) playing in an empty room long after the client and guests have left, a lone custodian angrily mopping the floor, his earbuds unable to fully drown out the tired sounds emanating from the bandstand.

Identifying Signs, Gig Whore

Tuxedo (including red holiday bow tie/cummerbund accessory)

Overzealous handshake

Male: Bad toupee or comb-over, tie emblazoned with stylized jazz instrument

Female: Excessive display of cleavage, excessive makeup

Survival Techniques, Gig Whore

Advertising on bridal websites

Moving abroad for hotel gigs in exotic countries, only to play the worst in American pop music for drunk American businessmen

Creating spreadsheets tracking free musician meals at various venues

Alcoholism

Joining groups and clubs for networking opportunities: Chambers of Commerce, Toastmasters, Rotaries, and 12-step programs

Epiphytes...

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