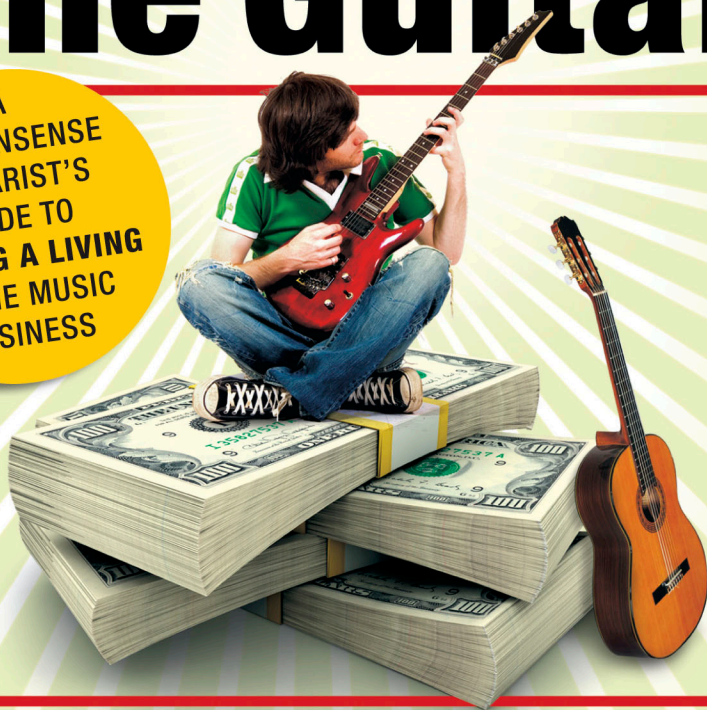


How to Make a **Million** **Dollars** Playing the Guitar

A
NO-NONSENSE
GUITARIST'S
GUIDE TO
MAKING A LIVING
IN THE MUSIC
BUSINESS



By Douglas Niedt

THE RIGHT PEOPLE

The great artists who work with other artists in bands, duos, string quartets, and the like, or have others who do significant business work for them (managers, producers, promoters, etc.), make it a point to choose the right people with whom to work. The great pop bands gathered people together who somehow meshed and created magic. Think of the Beatles, U2, and the Rolling Stones. In the classical field, think of the Juilliard String Quartet and the Beaux Arts Trio. In the classical guitar world, think of Presti and Lagoya. On the business side, many times the artist stumbles upon the right people. Or the right people find the artist (Colonel Parker and Elvis, Sol Hurok and Segovia).

Those of us who work as solo artists often extend the solo attitude into other areas of our life. We have always “worked alone” relying on our own talents and thoughts to produce our art. But, to accomplish our big goals, especially making a million dollars playing the guitar, we need the help and cooperation of other people. We must face the fact that we alone do not have sufficient experience, education, and knowledge to do everything necessary to succeed. Perhaps those who work

in musical groups are already more in tune with this way of thinking.

In general, people who became highly successful assembled the right people who worked together to drive them to greatness. Inevitably, few started out with all the right people. But, they got rid of the wrong people before the bad apples could do significant damage to their careers. Interestingly, they didn't determine a destination and then choose people they thought would get them there. Instead, the right people were gathered first and the wrong ones gotten rid of. Only *after* the right people were assembled did they decide where they were going to go, what they were going to do together, and what their strategy would be.

Collins, in *Good to Great*, describes it in terms of a bus ride. If people get on the bus primarily because they like the destination, what happens if a few miles down the road, things change or you encounter an obstacle and you have to change direction? You have a problem. The people got on the bus because they thought they were going to a certain destination, but now it has changed. They may not want to continue on the trip. They may want to get off. On the other hand, if the people riding the bus are there because of the other people and not a specific destination, then changing direction as conditions change becomes much easier. They're all in it together regardless of where the bus goes.

Therefore, if you begin with "who" instead of "where" or "what," you can adapt to changing conditions. That is very important in the music industry. Also, if you have the right people, the problems of motivation and long-term commitment melt away. The right people are self-motivated by the common inner drive to produce or create greatness.

Who are the right people? They aren't always the ones with specialized

knowledge or skills. Many times they're the right people because they have certain innate abilities, personality traits, or strong character.

When you have the right people, compensation will not be an overriding motivator. If they are in a group with the right people, most musicians give little thought to compensation, especially in the exciting early days of growth and development. They are excited about each other, what they are producing, and the potential they see in each other. That's what drives them.

Understand, though, the picture is a little different for those who are not in the immediate circle of creating the product. They will probably not want to work very long without compensation. Not even the musicians can work indefinitely without some form of pay. And any reasonable person wouldn't expect others to work without compensation. Fortunately, the compensation doesn't always have to be in the form of money.

The business side has countless examples of high-powered producers, agents, etc. taking smaller percentages, fees, or even no compensation at all in the early years of an artist's development, because they recognize his potential greatness. They will do the right things and produce the best results they possibly can because of their inner commitment to building excellence for excellence's sake, not because they think they will get a bigger percentage or a larger fee out of their efforts.

For the less altruistic people with whom you work, all kinds of deals can be struck in terms of shares of future profits and products in order to get things off the ground in the early years. You can negotiate deals with a recording studio owner as simple as "Our band will play at your daughter's wedding if you give us six free hours of studio time." With

a little thought and imagination, you can come up with all kinds of barter and trade deals. Many times you just have to ask for a favor. As Rush Limbaugh's father once told him, "The class acts are the people who will do things for you without a second thought as to what they will personally get out of it."

What if you suspect you are associated or working with the wrong people? Act.

You know the feeling. You are working with someone and they just aren't meeting your expectations. You think, "Well, I'll just give them a little more time. I'll give them other alternatives. I'll give them a third or fourth chance. Things will get better. I will just have to do my part differently to compensate for their shortcomings."

But things don't get any better and resentment builds. You end up spending way too much energy on their problems and shortcomings when you could be spending time and energy with the right person producing greatness. If you're lucky, much to your relief, they eventually quit on their own. Or, you finally take action and get rid of them (much to your relief). Meanwhile, everyone around you says, "What took you so long?"

Keeping the wrong people on your bus is not good for you and is unfair to the right people on your bus. The right people have to pick up the slack for the subpar work of the wrong people. It could possibly drive away the right people. The best people are accustomed to results and excellence, and don't want their work impeded or bogged down by second-rate people around them.

Don't wait too long to get rid of the wrong people. Letting them hang around too long is unfair to them as well. You know in your heart that things are not going to work out. Don't hold the seat on the bus for

them—you're stealing time from their lives. They could be out spending time finding a better place where they can flourish and succeed. Don't hold on for your convenience or because you don't want to have to deal with it. Dealing with it will probably be a hassle, painful, distasteful, stressful, and possibly more. You've made the mistake. Face it, admit it, and deal with it so you can get on with great work and they can get on with their lives. You will be greatly relieved—and that's an understatement.

If some doubt remains in your mind, ask yourself, "If I had to do it all over again, would I choose this same person?" If the person came to tell you they were leaving, would you feel disappointed or relieved? Ask yourself those two questions and your choice of action will be very clear. If any lingering doubt remains, you may have the right person, but you have put them in the wrong seat. Perhaps they are languishing because you have placed them in a position that is not using them to their potential. Or maybe you have placed them in too high or demanding a position. If you change their seat, they might flourish and become a fantastic member of the team.

Let's also be clear that the right people are not always people who will agree with you. They may disagree with you on many things and argue about everything. They will fight you to the finish.

Disagreement is good when the people are arguing to discover the truth. However, if a person is arguing just to prove the other wrong, then you have a problem. The focus must be on issues, not each other. In the end, no matter how vicious the argument, when a decision is made, when you have the right people, they will line up behind that decision. They will unify. They know it was made for the common good and is the best decision for the end goal on which everyone agrees.

Finding the right people is important not only to your career but your entire life. If you aren't spending time with people you love and respect, you won't have a very enjoyable, let alone great life. As Collins says in *Good to Great*, "But if we spend the vast majority of our time with people we love and respect—people we really enjoy being on the bus with and who will never disappoint us—then we will almost certainly have a great life, no matter where the bus goes."