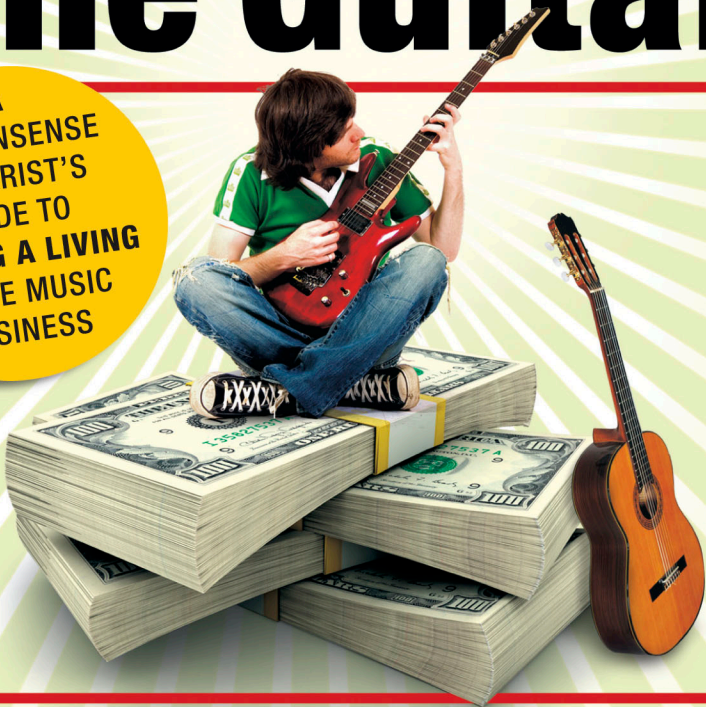


# How to Make a **Million** **Dollars** Playing the Guitar

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



**By Douglas Niedt**

# THE BRUTAL FACTS OF REALITY

## CONFRONTING THE BRUTAL FACTS OF REALITY WITHOUT LOSING FAITH

**L**et me clue you in: things are not always going to go well. In fact, at times things are going to get very bad. Then they're going to get worse. This tends to be especially true for musicians in general. One of the essential things you must do throughout your life is to confront the brutal facts of reality and deal with them. In difficult times, if you continually make an honest effort to determine the truth of your circumstances, the right decisions to get you back on the road to success become obvious. If you aren't confronting reality, you can't make good decisions to get yourself back on track.

Think of finding answers to alarming problems in the same way as turning over rocks to find out what is under them. You will find yucky, squiggly things underneath. You can either scream in fright and throw the rock down, or fearlessly look at the yucky stuff up close—you might even have to touch it!

The entrepreneurial guitarist will look under one of those rocks and may realize:

1. I don't sing as well as I thought.
2. I have a personality problem.
3. I don't relate to other people well.
4. I am a terrible salesman.
5. I am terrible at marketing.
6. Our CD is terrible.
7. My guitar playing is sloppy.
8. The mixing I did on my recording is very muddy.
9. My girlfriend/boyfriend/spouse's ability at \_\_\_\_\_ is inadequate.
10. My lyrics stink.
11. My harmonic structures are too simple/complex.
12. I get too nervous performing in public.
13. Our drummer/lead guitarist, violist, singer, etc. just isn't cutting it.

You get the idea. The list could go on and on. But the wonderful thing is that when you confront the brutal facts, no question will remain about what you must do to fix the problem. Once corrected, you will be a much better artist. You will be stronger and more confident, not weakened or discouraged. After you face up to the hard truths, you will feel exhilarated and encouraged to never give up. You will always find a way to prevail.

In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins tells us that in studies of people who suffered serious adversity, “they found that people fell generally into three categories: those who were permanently dispirited by the event, those who got their life back to normal, and those who used the experience as a defining event that made them stronger.”

To help you deal with adversity in your career, a very powerful tool may be used, called the Stockdale Paradox. In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins describes how the concept evolved.

*The name refers to Admiral Jim Stockdale, who was the highest-ranking United States military officer in the 'Hanoi Hilton' prisoner-of-war camp during the height of the Vietnam War. Tortured over twenty times during his eight-year imprisonment from 1965-1973, Stockdale lived out the war without any prisoner's rights, no set release date, and no certainty as to whether he would even survive to see his family again.*

*He shouldered the burden of command, doing everything he could to create conditions that would increase the number of prisoners who would survive unbroken, while fighting an internal war against his captors and their attempts to use the prisoners for propaganda. At one point, he beat himself with a stool and cut himself with a razor, deliberately disfiguring himself, so that he could not be put on videotape as an example of a 'well-treated prisoner.'*

*He exchanged secret intelligence information with his wife through their letters, knowing that discovery would mean more torture and perhaps death.*

*He instituted rules that would help people to deal with torture (no one can resist torture indefinitely, so he created a stepwise system—after x minutes, you can say certain things—that gave the men milestones to survive*

*toward). He instituted an elaborate internal communications system to reduce the sense of isolation that their captors tried to create....*

You get the picture. He was one tough cookie. In his research for *Good to Great*, Collins asked him how he survived. Stockdale replied, “I never lost faith in the end of the story. I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade.”

Definitely a member of group number three as outlined above—those who use an adverse experience as a defining moment that makes them stronger. Collins then asked Stockdale, “Who didn’t make it out?” Stockdale replied, “Oh, that’s easy. The optimists.”

But wait a minute. Wasn’t Stockdale an optimist? He goes on to clarify.

*The optimists. Oh, they were the ones who said, “We’re going to be out by Christmas.” And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they’d say, “We’re going to be out by Easter.” And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart.*

False hopes are quickly swept away.

Then Stockdale sums up with what Collins calls the Stockdale Paradox:

*“You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the*

*end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”*

Imagine telling your fellow prisoners, “We *are* going to get out of here. But we’re not getting out by Christmas. Probably not by Easter, probably not by Thanksgiving. Deal with it.”

All this relates directly to the entrepreneurial guitarist. This is how you will hang in there during the bad times and emerge stronger and better. Not only that, but always seeking out and facing the brutal facts will continually smooth and refine your path to success and perhaps greatness.

What separates people, what will separate you from other guitarists and musicians, is not the presence or absence of difficulty. Difficulty in life is a given. The difference is how you deal with your difficulties. As UCLA basketball coach John Wooden (possibly re-quoting Art Linkletter) says, “Things turn out best for the people who make the best of the way things turn out.”

Your band broke up, your singing partner was killed in an accident, your CD you put your heart and soul into sold 42 copies, and you got booed last night at a gig. You must keep your faith that you will eventually prevail in the end, regardless of your difficulties. The end may be nowhere in sight at the present time. You must confront the brutal facts of your current reality in order to seek solutions (which will usually be very apparent) so you may move ahead. Hit the difficulties of your situation head-on. You will emerge from adversity a stronger person, better able to deal with what lies ahead.

Collins believes the Stockdale Paradox is a signature of all those who create greatness, either in their own lives or in leading others. In his

studies, no matter how bleak the situation, no matter how insurmountable the difficulties appeared to be, the people who sought success all maintained unwavering faith that they would not only succeed at attaining their immediate goals, but would move on to greatness. At the same time, they were relentless in confronting the brutal facts of their current reality.

As an individual artist, you must courageously turn over those rocks that are blocking your path and look under them. But if you're working with others in a band, group, duo, or in business relationships, another dynamic enters the picture. Coming up with answers all by yourself, and motivating the others to follow what *you* think is right, will not lead to greatness. Work *with* the others.

Also important is to create a climate in which the truth can be heard. If you want to face reality, you don't want people around you telling you what you *want* to hear. Instead, involve the others.

The key is to ask questions. Keep asking "why" to gain understanding and gather information. Members of some of the great classical chamber groups describe many of their rehearsals as being raging battles over how to interpret one measure of Beethoven. They yell and argue, sometimes to the point of being ready to whack one another with their bows! "Loud debate," "heated arguments," and "intense disagreement" are some of the phrases you will hear mentioned when groups describe their rehearsals. It can get heated, but it's okay because the right people are gathered together who are all completely on board to search for and find the best answers to any question. They are committed to greatness and don't mind facing the brutal facts. They don't mind engaging in dialog and debate. They don't make it personal. The arguing is for the good of the ensemble.

When things go wrong, figure out what went wrong, but do it without blame. Conduct an autopsy without blaming others so you have a climate in which the truth can be heard. It can be tricky, but when you have the right people in your group, you should rarely have to put blame on anyone. Indeed, some will voluntarily take the blame. The important thing is to search for and find understanding of what happened and *learn from it*.

Collins says his research showed the key elements to achieving greatness to be deceptively simple and straightforward. The great were able to strip away clutter and noise and focus on the few things that would have the greatest impact.

They were able to do so because they worked both sides of the Stockdale Paradox. They never let one side override the other:

- A. They maintained faith (not false hope) but didn't lose sight of reality.
- B. They faced the brutal facts of reality but never lost faith.

If you can use this every day in your own life, you will dramatically increase the odds of making the right choices at the right time—a key to success in the music industry.