

“Making it Work” as a Working Musician

I talk to a lot of high school students that love to perform and are interested in studying music in college. Some see themselves as music teachers in a steady school job while others can't quite picture themselves in the classroom. The music world for sure needs both. If you want to pursue a music performance, theory/composition, or jazz studies degree program, you need to keep in mind what you will do to earn a living as an adult.

Let's say you are a healthy 22-year-old that is single and just graduated from college, you could make it work (very, very conservatively) to live on \$2000 a month. This would total \$24,000 a year...right around the American poverty line for a family of four. Most household incomes are above \$50,000 a year -- over double the mentioned earnings.

MONTHLY INCOME	\$2,000.00
Taxes (15%)	\$300.00
Loans/Savings/Tithe (10%)	\$200.00
MONTHLY BUDGET	\$1,500.00
Housing (probably living with a roommate)	\$500.00
Utilities (gas, electric, trash, etc.)	\$100.00
Renters/Instrument Insurance	\$50.00
Internet/Cell Phone	\$100.00
Car Insurance	\$50.00
Gas/Transportation	\$200.00
Health Insurance	\$200.00
Food (\$50.00 a week)	\$200.00
Personal Items	\$25.00
Music/Supplies	\$75.00

Right out of school, you probably won't have enough gigs to sustain you, so you will have to find other ways to make money. Here are examples to earn your income:

MONTHLY INCOME	\$2,000.00
"Good" Gigs: (\$200 x 2)	\$400.00
"Normal" Gigs: (\$40 x 10)	\$400.00
Private Lessons: (\$20 x 50)	\$1,000.00
Side Jobs (Clinics, CD Sales, Church Music, etc.)	\$200.00

With the above figures, a normal week might consist of playing one “good” gig (ex: a wedding on a Saturday night), 2-3 “normal” gigs during the week (ex: backing a singer for a show), and giving 12-15 private lessons (ex: teaching 2-3 nights a week at a music shop). Finally, you will have to find various things each month to finish your income.

Looking at the figures, it seems doable, but again, these are the “base-line” numbers.

Some things to consider personally...

You get sick and have to sub out a gig or cancel lessons...you don't make money.

You want to go on vacation or visit your family...you don't make money.

Some things to consider practically...

A group that you've been playing with falls through...you don't make money.

An event gets rescheduled or a venue you play at closes...you don't make money.

As well, as a professional musician, you don't get paid to practice or rehearse. You will need to block out a few hours each day to always sound your best. In addition, people don't always call you for paid gigs, teaching opportunities or recording sessions--many times, you have to go get them yourselves. This can take A LOT of time. You could easily spend a hour a day just researching venues and calling buyers alone.

Not to be uninformed, there are good paying gigs as a working musician: symphony musician, college professor, or artistic director of an organization. However, there is a very large, very competitive pool of people that want these jobs. Rarely will someone right out of college land a position that is a full-benefits, pension-program salary.

To put things in perspective: To make the same money, you could work a restaurant job and make \$10/hr, clocking a little under 40 hrs/wk, having all of your mornings free.

A few of my music friends are really good at the “hustle,” but most of them work a day job part-time to make their needed monthly budget. Here are some examples of day jobs people I play with have worked to subsidize their income:

Music Shop (sales rep) Coffee Shop (barista) Grocery Store (shelf stocker)

All in all, you have to decide if you are up for the “chase” of becoming a working musician. There are a lot of people out there already trying to make it work that have been doing it for longer than you have and want the same opportunities you are looking for. In addition, if you want to have a family, you also need to consider standards of living and your lifestyle to have time at home. After reading this article, if you still feel like it is worth it to “make it work”, then go get 'em and don't stop working hard!