

The Quixotic Life

by *Jeanne Ciampa-Centrella*'92

When you become a musician, your life begins to fit the description of the poet Miguel de Cervantes wrote about in his famous sixteenth-century novel *Don Quixote of La Mancha*. "When a poet is poor he spends all of his divine fruits and fancies trying to win his daily bread." But yet Cervantes finished writing his story. Despite being thrown in debtors prison and being a parent (somewhat similar), he did not turn his back on his art. Nor should we turn our backs on ours.

Finding a niche in the music industry is difficult and often curiously serendipitous. Whether we are songwriters, sidemen, or audio engineers, we leave Berklee and head out to achieve our musical ambitions and find no obvious arrows pointing us to our destination. What we do and where we end up is often the result of our own efforts and possibly a little luck. In order to know what has contributed to the success of other musicians, I spoke with Jonatha Brooke who owns her own record label and issues CDs of her original music, John Sands who plays drums for Aimee Mann, and Sean Hurley, bass player for RCA recording artists Vertical Horizon. Examining the mathematics of their success, I found an equation used by all of them.

It is a pattern of relentless pursuit that morphs with failures to flush out success. It's also a combination of boundless energy and making intelligent choices, surrounding yourself with the best, and never being satisfied with your own level of performance. Brooke, Sands, and Hurley constantly strive to be inspired and therefore inspire others. Inspired people are never content with their creation for very long. Creativity is a force of nature. Staying in touch with that raw force is an artist's duty. It is our job to avoid spending all of our "divine fruits and fancies" winning our "daily bread" in order to create.

Let's face it, the world owes us nothing, we need to learn to earn a living. That makes the equation for success easier to write about than to actually solve! There are forces working against us (mortgages, taxes, electric bills, car payments, etc.). One could easily succumb to the pressures of life, but the artist needs to rise above the mere pursuit of daily bread.

When you add children to the equation, it's like going from basic algebra to Davis's theory on minute particles. John Sands '78 works as Aimee Mann's drummer and has two beautiful children. We share the same lament. We each love music, recognize its hardships and required sacrifices, and have a determination to never let the cold hard realities get in the way of creating. But when you have children, some choices are even harder to make.

"My kids hate it everytime I leave to go on tour," says John Sands. "But I tell them that this is the work that makes me happy. When I am

home, I'm 100 percent dad, when I'm on the road I am 100 percent musician. I think it's important for my children to learn that I followed my heart and make my living at a job that I am passionate about."

Choosing music and parenthood is a double whammy for which one should earn a double Grammy. Or would that be a double mammy? We somehow have to conjure up Tryton the ancient god of resources, to get the music from our heads to the ears of others and make a living.

Dealing with the logic of my four- and three-year olds as they fight over Sponge Bob underwear annihilates my joy as much as having the budget on my demo exceed all financial predictions. That leaves my non-musician husband uttering, "the horror, the horror" as he gazes into the darkness of his wallet.

I can't rest on my laurels for having sung the title track for the film ??????????????????. Just as a mother must be prudent with the discipline of her little angels/devils, personally, I am never content with any achievement for long. Such restlessness spurs professional evolution.

I'll avoid dropping names, but right now I have the good fortune of working with some great musicians as I seek to release my music on an indie label. Sure, I hope to get with a bigger label, to tour, and still be able to be a great mom and wife. The latter entails the banal; homework, lunch bags with kooky drawings on them, and whipping up a home cooked dinner for four every night. I feel that I'm already a success because my life still feels inspired.

The music business is a big challenge even if you don't have children. Singer/songwriter Jonatha Brooke shared sage advice about finding her unique niche in the business. Brooke, who gained notice initially as a member of the folk-rock duo The Story, has had experience with big labels. She decided in 1999 to go it alone, releasing her music on her own Bad Dog Records label. Her talents and hard work have earned her invitations to record with Bruce Cockburn, Geoff Bartley, Vance Gilbert, and others. Her songs have been featured in the soundtracks of the Disney movie *Return to Never Land* and the TV series *Providence*.

"It's just incredibly hard work that's never finished," Brooke says. "Maybe once in a while there's someone who breaks through organically, but most hit records and artists are keenly marketed and produced and there's somebody at the top who's given the green light and thrown around a big bunch of money. You have to be honest with yourself and ask, does what I'm doing fuel me on every level? Would I be miserable trying to do anything but this? Will selling between 5,000 and 100,000 records be enough?"

"What keeps me going when I feel I just can't get a break is the knowledge that no one can take away what really matters to me. I can still tour whether or not MCA drops my record. I can still make a record without a major label budget or

marketing plan. I have something they can never touch: the next song that I have to write."

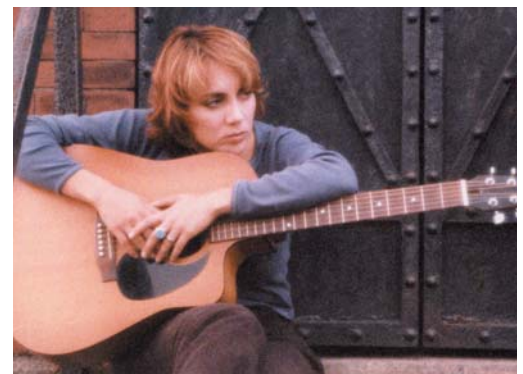
Another view comes from Sean Hurley of the band Vertical Horizon. "It takes time and money to make it all work," Hurley says. "That's what big labels have. The important thing is hooking up with a label that believes in you and supports your music."

"I think it would be nearly impossible for only one person to do what a label like RCA does for a band," says Hurley. "Press, promotion, and marketing all require serious attention to get real results. Even with a label, an artist needs a team of believers in order to break out. The best thing anyone can do is start with one person—a manager, booking agent, or producer—with some connections and start assembling a team as you build your business."

"My personal career has had its ups and downs and I just try to ride along and make decisions that feel right at the time. I'm living and working in L.A. and I wouldn't change a thing because I don't know what might be happening tomorrow as a result of what I am doing today. I just try to take advantage of any opportunity that comes along and get involved with as many projects as I can to keep learning new things. I'm lucky enough to be working with great people and musicians and I know that I'm in it for the long haul, wherever that leads."

After we spoke, Hurley got married, bought a house, and on the day of the closing, he learned that his group was dropped by RCA. It seems that having sold two million albums doesn't constitute an insurance policy in the big leagues. I admitted to Sean that I am a kept woman. Having a husband who has a secure profession makes my continuing artistic aspirations possible. Perhaps being a parent and an indie musician/artist is not an easier equation than being a success on a big label.

To a certain extent, we all strive to be visionaries and love what we do. That love keeps us in music and fires the spirit to create. Love kept Cervantes moving his pen. Artists must keep that love alive. The hope it spawns feeds our dreams which is what matters most in the quixotic life. ❏



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