



CAREERS IN JAZZ PERFORMANCE AND COMPOSITION

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Introduction

There are two general kinds of careers in Jazz:

1. **Leader/composer/innovator** — emphasis on the quality of *your* music; originality and identifiability; presentation; public image; relationship with record companies, presenters, media, critics and audiences.
2. **Sideperson** — emphasis on skills in playing the music of others, versatility, reliability, social skills, membership in a musical community, relationships with fellow musicians, respect of peers.

The two require very different qualities, but they usually are not mutually exclusive. Many musicians start as a sideperson and evolve toward a leadership role, or play one role in their groups and another in other people's groups. Successful "sideperson" careers are more numerous and tend to last longer. However, having strengths in both areas gives you the best chance for a successful long-term career in jazz.

Sources of Income

Clubs

- a. USA — generally low pay (except a few top clubs); seemingly irrational booking policies may be due to record company subsidies, club operated at a loss to generate good PR for hotel chain, illegal activities, etc.
- b. Europe — good pay; often subsidized by government, often supported by local jazz societies
- c. Japan — best pay

Concerts, Tours and Festivals

- a. Self-promoted local concerts—breaking even is usually the best you can expect, but self-produced concerts allow you to build an audience and free you from dependence on club booking policies.
- b. Colleges and arts centers in the U.S. provide an alternative source of gigs. Many are booked through regional arts foundations or networks, like New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA). Also, look into the Music Performance Trust Fund of the musicians' union local for school gigs, etc.
- c. Jazz tours in the U.S. are rare, very difficult to book, and are usually unprofitable in the short run, but they are very important for building an audience, selling CD's, getting airplay, etc. Tours in Europe are common, relatively profitable, and easier to book. Some artists book their own tours through e-mail, online resources, phone calls, etc. Others have a European (often a fan or semi-professional agent) or American agent (generally only for major artists) book the tour. European

gigs often include hotel; some larger presenters may pay part or all of your airfare (usually not). You usually pay for local travel and meals.

- d. Festivals--excellent, rewarding gigs with relatively high pay, especially in other countries. Hard to break into unless you fit a specialized category or need. Warning: festival contracts sometimes require you to agree *not* to play in the area for several weeks or months before and after the festival. They may pay your airfare, but do not expect to play elsewhere while traveling at their expense.

Recording Fees Advances, CD Sales Royalties

- a. Fees for sidepeople on jazz recordings range from \$500 for one day (Criss-Cross, a small Dutch label that records neo-bop in NYC) to \$5000+ (typical for a major Jazz star, one or two days recording). Average for up-and-coming musicians is probably around \$1000 (though this is highly variable). Note: When producing your own CD with your own money, friends may work for less, but exploiting colleagues--even good friends--tends to backfire later, so pay as much as you can.
- b. An advance is essentially a loan of anticipated royalties from the record company to the recording artist. It's not exactly like being paid for making a record. Always hire a lawyer who specializes in music to study any recording contract before you sign it (of course, the lawyer's fee will take a large chunk of your advance!).
- c. Royalties on CD sales are the leader's share of profits after all the expenses (including any advance) are recouped (I don't think anyone I know well has ever sold enough CD's to get royalties beyond their advance). Sidepeople don't get royalties on CD sales; they are paid once for the session.

Mechanical Royalties

In the U.S., composers (and lyricists) get a set rate per song sold ([click here](#) for current listing of mechanical license royalty rates). These fees are called mechanical royalties. New composers are often underpaid, or may not be paid at all, especially for low-selling recordings (under 10,000 copies). It's very difficult to prove what you are owed. BMI, ASCAP, SESAC and other performance rights organizations try to track radio and concert play of their members. They also tend to underpay new, unknown composers, especially in jazz. Fees for public radio and college radio, where jazz is usually heard, are extremely low (I once got a check from BMI for \$0.42 for having a piece played on NPR's "All Things Considered," carried on over 100 radio stations).

Other Sources of Income

"Commercial" Music

Composition, recording and performance of popular music, film and TV music, background music, etc. is generally far more lucrative than jazz. Many jazz musicians make a substantial part of their income this way. Successful popular composition pays far more than recording or performing as a sideperson. For example, at \$0.0755 per unit, having one song on a platinum CD (one million units sold) earns the composer \$75,500.00, not to mention royalties from airplay, film use, etc. The pay for sidepeople on pop records, film scores and tours is about the same as the high end of the jazz spectrum.

Composing or recording TV and radio commercials is a little different. You should get royalties equal to your original fee (usually union scale) for every additional quarter-year that the commercial is broadcast. However, many companies will ask you to sign a "buy-out" contract, where you agree to be paid once only regardless of how the music is used. The American Federation of Musicians and a book like [This Business of Music](#) or [All You Need to Know About the Music Business](#) can provide more details on contracts and payment for recordings of all kinds.

Teaching Music

Nearly all jazz musicians who *can* teach do teach at some point, and many make a large part of their income that way during much of their professional life. A few years ago, 85% of NEC Alumni reported that they teach music on a regular basis for part of their income. Private lessons, public elementary and high schools, private schools, clinics, summer music camps and college teaching are all possibilities to consider. Each requires its own kind of preparation.

Day Jobs

Many artists find a happy balance between a day job (preferably a skilled, interesting and flexible one) and a performing or composing career. For example, many jazz musicians in New York City work part-time at night as legal proofreaders (a sometimes tedious but flexible and relatively high paying job). I know a painter who works three days a week as a radiological technician, giving X-rays. Other artists I have known work as language teachers, computer programmers, software consultants, locksmiths, graphic designers, piano tuners, house painters, movers, carpenters, psychiatrists, photographers, college staff, phone sales people, educators, administrators, real estate investors or practically any other job that allows periods of time off and/or the ability to determine one's own schedule.

A Note on Attitude

It can drive you crazy trying to figure out how and why other people are making it, or why others may seem to have a level of success or access to opportunities that you may not have. Musicians tend to be self-critical and to notice their own failures and feelings of exclusion while taking their successes and the acceptance of their colleagues for granted. It's useful to realize that a great many seemingly successful jazz musicians have sources of income other than Jazz performance itself (a spouse's income, family or inherited money, foreign grants, "secret" day jobs, connections to commercial gigs, etc.), and they often avoid talking openly about these because they feel that knowledge of their dependence on non-jazz income will diminish their credibility as serious musicians. The fact is that very few people earn a comfortable living solely by playing jazz. Acceptance of this fact will make you saner and more practical in finding solutions to the problem of how to survive and be happy while continuing to play the music you love.