

The Wiser Sideman

Career Tips for Becoming a Pro Drummer

By Stephane Chamberland

In this article, I want to address specific tools that you can develop and be aware of if you want to start freelancing. These are lessons I learned the hard way and they were humbling experiences that made me a better drummer and sideman.

Balance your workload

I know many musicians who, when they started to have success and saw work coming, became crazy about taking every gig offered in order to make as much money as possible. I found myself in a similar situation and I realized that the quality of our playing is one of the most important parts of being a professional musician. You have to know the songs and perform them well. To be able to do that, it takes time to learn the material and run through it a couple of times before the gig. So, make sure you don't take on so much that you're unable to prepare adequately before the gig. Learn or write the charts, listen to the music a lot, and play along with the material by yourself before going to the gig or, if you're lucky, the rehearsal.

Make sure you understand everything before the show

If you get the chance to have a rehearsal, this is a great time to ask questions. If you don't have an opportunity to do a full rehearsal, make sure that you talk to the bandleader or the drummer you are subbing for if you have any hesitations. Remember that if there is something slightly unclear in your head about the chart, the form, or the music, it will be a huge deal come performance time, so never leave small unclear details unresolved. As the drummer you are the leader of the band and when the leader is slightly out of focus, the followers become blind.

Practice counting measures

As drummers we all have had the chance to read complex rhythms and challenging snare drum pieces. One of the difficulties could be at the bar

counting level. If you have a bass or piano chart, you still must follow the form. If it's a drum chart you will have to count also. My advice is to practice counting measures. You can count in your head, out loud, or find other ways to not get lost. When you practice this, challenge yourself with a number of bars that are unusual, like six or five. For example, groove five bars and play a fill on bar six. In these situations, you sometimes need to let your reading lead your playing before you hear how it is going to fit.

The external job

Apart from playing the songs correctly and sounding good, you will sometimes have to take care of other things, such as counting-in before the song starts or following the metronome in your in-ears or visually. Starting the sequences if the band is using them is something else that may become your job, so know how the sequence starts and make sure you loudly and clearly cue the other musicians. You may also need to control your own sound, so I would recommend always carrying a small mixer with cables and in-ears. Remember that the way you dress and how you present yourself is also important. Be on time and make sure your equipment is ready and right for the gig. Also, make sure you have the proper bass drum and your drums are tuned for the style of music you're playing.

The emergency kit

Being professional means being ready for any contingency. That's why I always carry a suitcase with many things I may need at the gig. For example: batteries, extra cables, adaptors, black electrical tape and duct tape, Moongels, plasters/adhesive bandages, extra contact lenses or glasses, longer cables for headphones, or anything else you think you may need. The good thing about that is that if someone else has an emergency, you could be the guy saving the day – and the gig.

Gaining points or losing points

This may sound harsh but the reality is that you are gaining points or losing points. The main thing we want is to get a call-back and make the people we're working with feel safe and comfortable. The way you present yourself and talk to the band, the way you play, and your level of preparation are some of the things that are going to make you gain points. Being perfect is not the issue here, but you want to be aware of these things. Stay relaxed and positive. Be present but don't draw too much attention by talking too much or making too many jokes. Be in observation mode and try to listen as much as you can and focus on your job. Be ready and try to adapt to the personality of each musician. Balance your volume when you play and play simple. Everything must be there, musically speaking, but never overplay. Keep transitions simple and just be a great musical drummer. Say, 'Thank you!'



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