



BASS

Dave Santos

Playing Your Best When the Tunes are the Worst

As I write this article, I am sitting on the bandstand with eight world-class musicians from New York, waiting for a speaker to finish his bit at a GMC sales convention in New Orleans. There are Teleprompters all around as the musical director, Jim Papoulis, is communicating with the producer and the front-of-house soundmen at this multimillion-dollar event. The lights are down, except for those on the music stands. The singers are quietly sitting in darkness, the drummer is reading, some of the horn players are snickering and whispering silly anecdotes to stay awake, and I am writing this article on hotel stationery with one eye on the conductor, waiting for our cue.

The speaker is going on and on, reading her script to a crowd of thousands of salespeople and administrative officials. When she finishes, we will "play her off" by reading a chart that we have rehearsed for the better part of a week. The music that we are playing has been arduously planned and choreographed with dancers, lights, walk-ons and -offs, cars being driven onstage to exploding pyrotechnics, rim shots, and sophisticated cues being hit by the band. It's all on the paper in front of me. The M.D. will alert us that the next cue is about to occur by saying something like "Heads up" or "Here we go," and we will all snap to attention and read the chart, while watching him for the cutoff.

I am thinking about a question that was posed after eight hours of rehearsing the same cues over and over again. Although well-written, the musical excerpts are not what these musicians would consider challenging or stimulating creatively. We are all good friends and—oops, I just got my cue, I'll be right back...

OK, I'm back again. Where was I? Oh, yeah—the M.D., one of my best friends, is scowling at me in mock aggravation as I get back to my article. He understands what I'm doing, and knows me well enough to know that the band and I will nail the music when he counts it off despite our lack of attention at the moment. This often occurs in the pit after the band knows the show; it's a "downtime" thing. Uh-oh, here we go again—Jim's getting the word in the cans from the producer to get ready, and I can see him tapping his foot to the click so I'll be right back...

OK, I'm back again. The question that was philosophically posed at rehearsal yesterday is the focus of this article: How do you play at the top of your form when you don't like the music? This inspired hours of conversation: here are some of the highlights:

Guitarist Ira Siegal (George Benson, Whitney Houston, Madonna, Steve Winwood): "Think about the check! We're all here to do a job that we've accepted, for a specific amount of money. If you don't like the music, keep your goals in mind. Don't let a bad gig throw you. If you do let a bad attitude come out, you can lose other, more artistic gigs that may happen in the future."

Drummer Graham Hawthorne (Harry Belafonte, Blood, Sweat and Tears, Donna Summer, Brian Wilson): "Try to find the joy in every experience that you had when you first started playing or listening to music. As difficult as it may seem to do this, at the bare minimum, try to have one moment of joy. It's this overall mental attitude that will bring the other players up. Have hope. Positive mental attitude is contagious!"

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—guitarist Ira Siegal

Trumpet player Barry Danielian (Broadway shows, *Late Night With David Letterman*, Tower of Power, and countless national jingles): "Find an aspect of the music that you can use to improve yourself. Extract from the situation things that you can use in your playing, writing and arranging. Take some ideas with you to build on later in your songwriting. Borrow or steal some stuff. Remember also that you're getting paid to do it. At the end of the day, you have to play it like the client wants it. Also remember that life isn't always filled with things you like to do. Don't let your mental state affect your performance. Don't let your personal taste influence the job at hand."

Sax player Tom Timko (Blood, Sweat and Tears, Miami Sound Machine): "Before the gig, remember this: With freelance work, you will usually make the most money on the lamest gigs. Accept this and laugh at the irony of it. Think happy thoughts about how you can get nice things for your wife and kids with the money!"

Trombone player Randy Andos (Blood, Sweat and Tears, countless jingles and record dates): "The top of my form and the bottom of my form are identical. Draw your own conclusions."

Dave Santos was profiled in "Hired Gun" last year (Sept. '98). He's paid his dues in bands and on the streets of New York City, where playing in the pocket is the name of the game. David's currently on tour with Billy Joel.