The Bottom Line

How To Get What You're Worth As A Working Drummer

by Jeremy Hummel

We drummers spend countless hours honing our craft and developing a sense of musicality—and thousands of dollars on equipment. While most of us would choose "love" if pressed in a "Do you do it for love or for money?" query, it's also nice to pocket some jingle in return for all the time and money we've invested.

So whether you are a "weekend warrior" or someone like me, who does a multitude of drumming endeavors to make a living as a "professional," it's important to understand your financial earning potential—an important topic that isn't always discussed openly. The music business is rare, in that if one has an understanding of the context in which he is about to work, he can sensibly negotiate his price.

The reality of the business is that unless you're a "first call" drummer who has a manager to handle his scheduling, you're on your own. I began playing in clubs when I was nine years old, and I've been self-employed for the majority of my adult life. Over this tenure, I've learned a lot about booking gigs, doing sessions for an artist, and other aspects of a successful drumming career. I'd like to share these tips by breaking things down according to specific areas of interest. Keep in mind that the principles discussed can certainly cross over from one field to the next.

Experience

Before we get into any of the individual categories, let me first say that negotiating a price for a gig is substantially built on one's résumé. Ask yourself the following question: "Do I have enough experience to merit my asking fee?" It's rarely wise to charge more money than the guy down the street who's been playing much longer than you have. The exception, of course, would be if your abilities speak volumes over his. The point is to be honest with yourself.

Session Work

If someone contacts you to perform on their recording session, there are some key questions that should be asked up front. In no particular order, these include:

"Who's funding the project?" I do sessions for a variety of artists in different musical genres. Some of them are backed by money, others are struggling newcomers. While my price doesn't vary drastically, I know that when artists or bands have money to work with, I can get my rate and perhaps a bit more. On the other hand, I've done sessions at reduced rates for people who didn't have much cash. I'll do this if I feel the music would be enjoyable to work on, or if the gig might open doors for more work in the future.

"Will there be revisions?" One justification for asking for more money from those who have financial backing is that such bands and artists often have "associates" who want to re-record or remix songs. In negotiating my price, I want to make it known how things will go down should they "not like it" later on. Therefore, I give two options: Price "A" is without revisions, and price "B" is with them. In giving your price with revisions, it's good to factor in the time involved with you doing probably two or three takes of the "new version"—not to mention gas, food, etc.

Another negotiating method I've used is to make the session a package deal. For example, some bands want me to be part of the entire pre-production process. While I might increase my fee due to the extra estimated time, if the client wishes to have me do ten or twelve songs, I won't charge a per-song rate. Instead, I make it an all-inclusive package.

One bit of advice: When doing five or more songs—or entire records—ask for half of the agreed price up front and the other half at the completion of the project. Musicians aren't the most stable or dependable people, and you don't want to turn down other work or block out time and lose money because the guitar player decided to get back together with his girlfriend and doesn't want to be in a band anymore.

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There are also circumstances where the band wants me to play on an entire CD, but their other jobs make the sessions difficult to schedule. In these cases, I prefer to give an hourly rate comparable to what I'd get for teaching.

"Where will the session be?" Remember, the idea is to

make money, not spend it. Don't forget to factor in gas, hotels, and other personal expenses involved with doing the session. With the price of gas these days, you could potentially use up your salary covering transportation alone. If you must travel, some artists will pay a salary and then provide an extra allotment for expenses, rather than factoring it all in together. You might be asked to provide expense receipts in this case.

Gigs

Throughout my drumming career I've consistently played gigs. After years of building a reputation as a solid and versatile player, I got to a point where I felt confident in naming my "bottom line" price for live performances. This was the amount I needed to simply leave the house. Of course there are exceptions, but by having an established figure as part of your negotiating tactics, you'll begin to earn what you think you're worth.

It's also good to be realistic about the demographics and venues in which you perform. Sure, I do some gigs in a "concert" environment. But I also do gigs where the clientele is more concerned with how their steak tastes than with the linear paradiddle I just busted out.

Filling In

This is an area where being a versatile player is highly beneficial. If you can play comfortably and authentically in a variety of styles, you can increase your gigging potential on fill-in dates. While it would be great to ask, "How much is your band getting?" and then ask for an equal cut, it's usually not that simple. They might ask, "How much do you need to do the gig?" This is a classic example of why it's good to have a "bottom line" asking price.

I once had a band call me when they had a big gig two weeks away and their drummer bailed. After being told that the *entire band* was making only $50, I gave them a price that would cover the gig, two rehearsals, and my personal time learning the material. Yes, they lost money—but they needed a drummer who could learn their songs fast, and I was the one they turned to. They later said the gig came off better than they ever imagined, so everyone walked away happy.

Who Does The "Benefit" Benefit?

How many of us have gotten calls either for our band to perform or for us to fill the drum chair with someone at a benefit concert? The reason this decision is tough is that one side of you doesn't want to be karmatically punished for all eternity by not playing a "worthy cause" fundraiser. But at the same time, you've played your share of these gigs, and darn it, you're tired of doing freebies! (Believe me, I get called enough for these to relate.)

The first thing I consider in this sort of situation is: What is the benefit for? Is the cause important enough for me to offer my time and expertise on the skins? (I personally have a soft spot for kids, so people can usually count me in for child-related benefits.) A good way of drawing the line is to ask if backline gear, including a drumkit, will be provided. If you don't have to fuss with loading, setting up, and tearing down your own drums, you might be more inclined to take the gig.

Another question I ask is, "Who else is performing?" In some instances, a benefit organizer might be having trouble getting people to commit, so you might feel more inclined to pitch in. On the other hand, if a large number of artists are getting involved, things could work two different ways. I've turned down benefits because I felt there were more than enough performers already involved. On the other hand, you and your band could look at this as a great networking opportunity. And benefits *can* be good for getting future work. It largely will depend on who will be in attendance. It could be a situation where some high rollers will be hanging out, and they might be impressed with your performance and ask your band to play at their private party in a few months.

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I also consider the adult-to-kids ratio. I've done some benefits where parents who were in attendance liked my playing, discovered I'm a drum instructor, and subsequently hired me to teach their kids.

Teaching

I charge $40 per hour for a lesson. I came up with that number by understanding that teaching would be a substantial part of my income; therefore, a priority was placed on making sure I could get students. The goal was to charge a rate that I felt I was worth, but that would still be reasonably affordable. In doing this, I factored in the demographic in which I live. Sure, I could charge much more in the city, but I live in a small town where farms and trees are far more common than office buildings. I know other drummers who charge $100 and more for a lesson. While I'm sure they're worth that amount, I just don't know many people who can afford it on a regular basis.

The Bottom Line

We all want to get work playing the drums in some capacity. In whatever arena that is, it's important for us to feel confident that we're being paid what we're worth. What's *your* bottom line?

Jeremy Hummel was an original member of Breaking Benjamin. He helped that group achieve platinum status with their second release, *We Are Not Alone*. He has since turned his efforts to session work and drum instruction in Pennsylvania. Jeremy can be reached at his Web site, www.jeremyhummel.com.