



**LESSONS FROM THE ROAD:
BRINGING
MUSICIANSHIP AND
PERFORMANCE
INTO THE OFFICE**

Todd Pasternack

We often look towards established business leaders when seeking out new ideas to inspire us.

Their advice and stories re-energize us, bringing the hope of discovering a greater awareness of where our careers can evolve to, or how our businesses can operate with fresh approaches to drive growth. We dig to uncover nuggets of wisdom from these well-known leaders to embrace and adopt into our everyday lives. But perhaps there's an unexpected type of leader to draw inspiration from.

Have you ever looked at the way bands and music artists—at various levels of success—and found parallels to the ways that businesses need to constantly innovate, grow, and empower their teams to get the best out of them? Or how the power of listening can open up new and unexpected opportunities?

As a former professional musician turned technology executive, I've seen and lived these parallels between the stage and office and put them into practice. There are more connections than you may think. Here are a few “lessons from the road” you can take back to your organization or weave into your life—and start playing with right away.

Start Me Up

I played music professionally for over ten years. I played coast to coast—in junky bars to five people not paying attention to a single note, and in beautiful theatres and outdoor festivals with thousands of people rocking out with us. But even when things felt like they were going great—fans showing up, getting a record deal—there were always challenges, just like running any business. What often kept me and my bandmates going through the tough times wasn't that we were making a ton of money (we weren't), or that we got free food and drinks (the concert promoters often got our rider correct each night on tour), or that we thought we'd be the next Led Zeppelin or Radiohead (okay there was a little of this, but it wasn't the driving force).

What propelled and united us was that we had purpose together. And we felt and experienced that purpose every day as a single unit. For us, that purpose was: give each other a musical platform for self-expression and make that expression through songs as great as it can be.

We were just a bunch of musicians, but we had a mission statement we believed in.

Sound familiar? You've read this in countless books and articles but always through the lens of start-ups or some of the longest standing brands you know. But the greatest bands whose music lasts throughout time also have purpose that unites them.

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Ask yourself:

- Does your company have a mission and purpose? Does everyone there know what it is?
- How do you empower everyone at your company to pull from its mission to inform their work and understand why it matters? Are they actually connected to it personally?
- Have you hired people with a passion for the mission?
- Is your latest project aligned to support the mission? How so?
- Would you turn business down if it didn't align to your mission?

Burning Down The House

Sometimes the only way to evolve an idea is to burn it to the ground and start again. It can be difficult getting comfortable with doing that. Many bands do this instinctively in the rehearsal room or studio when a musical idea isn't coming together quickly. They iterate on new musical parts until it "feels right." It's easy to get attached to an idea, especially when the group you're with is energized on it. Or maybe there's a strong opinion or a really loud voice in the room. Someone is dead set on seeing their idea be the final and only one. But what would happen if you flipped their concept over on its head? What if you made it more simple? What if you merged it with another theory or plan from another team?

Did you know the Rolling Stones song "Start Me Up" was originally supposed to be a reggae song? The song just wasn't happening after a ton of takes so they let it alone, and came back at it from a completely different musical place to what you now hear on Tattoo You.

Getting to a place where this approach becomes the norm takes practice. The first few meetings may be clumsy but it will eventually feel easier. It's better than the alternative: deciding on something that just doesn't make sense or doesn't resonate, or simply exhausting the idea.

Have you ever been in a brainstorming session at the office beating an idea to death until it just dies out? Or nothing solid gets captured because the focus is lost halfway through? I've been in meetings like this where we simply have to stop, recalibrate on what we're trying to solve and why, and start again. Creating a moment to rearticulate the original purpose of why you're all there in the room gives everyone permission to rethink and throw around new ideas that better align with that purpose. You aren't derailing the meeting. You're just creating the space for people to contribute in a new way, and having that space and freedom will be appreciated.

Just make sure you end up with something before you walk out. It may not be the final solution or answer, but it could be the top five to do more research on. Or it could be that you're pulling the plug on a potential project. Remember, you're not committing to something big here yet. Make a plan to work small and build small first.

In music, if you play a wrong note it just happens and it's gone. It's temporal. Thinking about it this way, is the risk really that great to start over again small—then test, learn, and iterate?

Ask yourself:

- What if the idea gets better if you start at the beginning again?
- What is the “core intent” we're after?
- What do our clients really need solved, and what do we uniquely know and understand better than anyone else that can help to solve it?

Welcome Back My Friends To The Show That Never Ends

The stage. The amps, the lights, and sound. The performance.

The meeting room. The projector and deck. The pitch.

Not much different.

A commitment to practicing for a show or a pitch is what really showcases your professionalism and your ability to connect in the moment. Even if the client or boardroom doesn't totally buy in to what you're selling, they will at least appreciate your craft and agility.

Musicians rehearse and rehearse so when it's time to perform they don't even have to think, they can just play. Having the rigor to practice your material—your pitch, your presentation—enables you to be more free in the moment itself.

Ask yourself:

- Can you connect with the room and adjust to what they are asking to learn about instead of sticking to the “setlist” you prepared?
- Can you get off the notes in the deck and own the material?
- What if you didn't show up with a deck at all and just had a free-form jam session using the skills you've mastered?

Come Together

You can quickly recognize when a band is clicking in a recording session or having a killer show on their tour. While there are many reasons why that could happen, the underlying reason is that the musicians trust and (mostly) respect each other. It's no secret that businesses typically don't operate well if there isn't this same mutual respect, trust, and common ground rules for an open flow of communication to share ideas. That culture has to be established from the start and embodied by the leadership and everyone in the organization. Whether that's done as part of the on-boarding process for new hires, at every all-hands meeting for a quarterly update, or stated at the beginning of each meeting—everyone needs to tune themselves up before trying to play a song together, and get themselves familiar with the material beforehand.

Having an understanding of each stakeholder's goals and what they care about sounds like a simple piece of advice, but you quickly find out that without it you can't build any trust. And you certainly can't influence without establishing that first. You can't get anything done because you can't make the connections between what you're trying to achieve and what you're cross-functional team/client/partner/boss is trying to achieve.

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Think about the last meeting you were in. Did you step into the conference room expecting to walk out with a completely different action or next step? Did the conversation meander? Was the trust between the people in the room affected as a result? I've found that a simple articulation of the desired outcomes at the start of a meeting (even better, in the invite!) gets everyone aligned and quickly surfaces for you when people have other interests. It's up to you to play a bit of the riff at the start of the session and ensure everyone else is onboard to play along. If not, find out before you start turning your guitar up even louder and everything just becomes noise.

Ask yourself:

- What's the health of your team?
- When was the last time your team had an offsite to connect and plan together?
- How are you modeling trust for your team and your company? How can you help others?

The Best of You

As a leader, you can enable each member of your team to deliver their best performance by helping them turn their strengths and passion into energized, high-quality work. On the road, I always enjoyed meeting with fans before and after shows. It filled me with energy while helping the band connect more deeply with the most important people to our careers. I was good at it because it made me feel good. Our keyboard player, on the other hand, preferred to stay backstage, work on the setlist, and focus on the cadence of that night's show. He loved the job and took a sense of pride in putting together a collection of songs that fit what city we were in. I liked having a say in a few songs, but he found joy in that process—so that was his job.

Ask yourself:

- What are the strengths of each person on your team?
- Do they recognize those strengths and get to use them each day? Have you told them they can use those strengths in their everyday work and should?
- How are you enabling everyone to shine, and focus on what they love doing to create something great?

What Are You Listening To?

One night back in my touring days I ended up on stage jamming with two very well-known musicians I really respect. Being young and eager to prove myself, I knew what I was going to play before I stepped foot on stage. After the first few bars went by and I thought I was playing great, I looked back at one of the two musicians and got the coldest stare of death in my life. I was crushed.

But I quickly realized I wasn't playing with the other musicians, I was playing at them. I closed my eyes and open my ears—and my mind—and really listened hard to come up with an idea that fit the musical moment and then played it. I tentatively looked back at the same musician and got a tiny smile and nod that I “got it.”

Lesson learned.

Ask yourself:

- When was the last time you hardly said a word in a meeting and really listened?
- How well do you understand your customers' behaviors, expectations, and mindset in various contexts? Have you ever really opened up and listened, prepared that everything you expect to hear may end up being the complete opposite of that?
- How well do you know your customer's customers?
- What are you hearing that's new and unexpected? What can you do with that information that no one else in your industry is doing?

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Who Are You?

The roles within bands can take shape pretty quickly when they form. For example, the guitarist and keyboardist may write the music, the singer writes the lyrics and melody, the drummer helps in arrangement, and the bass player is responsible for: accounting, booking the band, marketing, managing the email list, and making sure the club provides a sufficient amount of Pabsts backstage. I kid, but not really.

In bands and in the office, everyone plays a part. Everyone contributes.

Ask yourself:

- Does everyone in your company have a solid understanding of what their role is and how they uniquely make an impact on the business?
- How can you help your team or your manager succeed? Have you asked them?
- What's one thing you can do today to let someone else on the team shine?

As a business leader, it's important to know you don't always have to be lead guitarist or singer. In fact, it may be better to let your team have that role and you just keep the solid, driving groove behind them on the drums. **Let your team shine and set them up for success, and the crowd will come back for more.** 📍



Info



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About the author

After being a professional musician for over ten years (writing, recording, producing, touring internationally) Todd Pasternack had the unbelievably good fortune of becoming just as passionate about creating with code and technology as he was with musical instruments. Todd transitioned full-time into digital marketing design, development, and ultimately strategy and product development. Over the years, Todd has consulted on advertising technology for brands and agencies such as Ford, Apple, Showtime, Nike, American Express, Coke, R/GA, W+K, BBDO, and built and grew relationships with strategic technology and publisher partners such as Facebook, Microsoft, Adobe, Twitter, Comcast, *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, CBSi, and others. When Todd isn't geeking out on ad tech, he's spending time with his wife and two sons in Palo Alto, CA. You might also find him playing guitar and singing alongside his wife on bass and vocals in one of their music projects.



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