

# How To Survive As An Artist

By MICHAEL SMOLENS

*Michael Smolens, performing artist, keyboardist/multi-instrumentalist, vocalist, award-winning composer, and teacher, offers group and private lessons in Musical Creativity and Piano Creativity for students of all levels.*

## GROWING UP

As I was growing up I never thought of myself as an “artist”, even though I started to play different instruments in grade school. I was on track to become a consumer-based lawyer a la Ralph Nader. (My seventh grade teachers were definitely puzzled at my reading the then liberal *New Republic* magazine cover to cover). Even though I changed my major from political science to music by my second year of college I continued to stay very current with politics and performing in some benefit concerts, including my senior recital doubling as a fund-raiser for a local battered woman’s shelter project.

## COLLEGE YEARS ... TANGIBLE SKILLS

While in college I saw some of my friends barely scraping by while playing in a Top- 40 band and I thought to myself, “Wow, I don’t ever want to put myself in that position”. It was at that point that I decided it was going to take more than just music training to make me a viable professional musician. I started my training and working in several salable skills, such as music transcription (writing out music from a recording), music editing and calligraphy (hand copying music in ink), accompanying modern and jazz dance classes (my introduction to percussion), and teaching privately.

By the time I graduated from UC Santa Cruz music was accounting for half of my income. I went on to expand the number of tangible music skills to keep up with the high cost of living in the Bay Area. These included music book distribution, writing music articles, arranging and composing for others, and performing in both commercial and ‘artistic’ contexts. More recent activity included teaching in group settings, playing as a side man in recordings, and producing other artists.

Though I continue to draw on the above mentioned skills for my own projects, I only engage the Marketplace in the areas that take the least amount of energy—which are now teaching, performing, recording, and arranging/composing. Narrowing my activities down has been a great ‘burnout preventer’.

## TEACHING

Teaching has been very rewarding in both predictable and mysterious ways. It has clarified my own learning process and opened doors to new modes of expression. The ability to be a “teacher to one’s self” definitely holds true in music. Magical and mysterious moments during lessons have often given way to new collaborative approaches and new compositions. In fact, I continue to study several instruments, voice, and arranging to not only enhances my skills, but also to also stays in touch with what my own students are experiencing.

Even more important are the ways in which teaching as an independent musician has forced me to acknowledge my relationship with time, money, and communication. It is inevitable that as soon as a student entrust their musical support to a teacher these issues come up as a matter of course.

To deal with these concerns I took many courses in creativity and communication in the late 1980’s. I began to seriously investigate creativity as a long term relationship, how our listening is heavily filtered through our history, and why students exhibit different learning strengths. By the end of these courses I felt well equipped to handle virtually any situation presented me. This gave me a tremendous sense of confidence, enabling me to articulate what I had to offer in the Marketplace more easily.



## MARKETING GURUS

I’ve been very fortunate to have had invaluable assistance marketing myself as a freelance musician. *Of all the areas that University training neglects for an artist, the most glaring is marketing;* (maybe these instructors never had to concern themselves with this matter in their own careers) ... It is fair assessment to call our culture overly specialized and suspicious of those who prefer to teach several instruments, and embrace multiple styles and approaches. I am what you might call a ‘highly skilled generalist’, and as a result marketing myself as a teacher has been especially challenging. It has taken several decades for me to arrive at a style of print and poster advertising which accurately conveys my love for a particular instrument while at the same time inviting students to explore related skills.

Of the three most important ‘Marketing Gurus’ I have worked with, Bart Brodsky, publisher, has been by far the most insightful and influential. Others in the marketing arena have unexpectedly contributed to my being able to convey my approach with ease and simplicity. For these people I am incredibly grateful for the empowerment I’ve received that has spilled over into all the areas of my artistic life.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

When it’s all said and done, the question How Do I Survive As An Artist? actually boils down to Will I Survive As An Artist? Even though we as (largely unfunded) artists rightfully ask ourselves that question, I’ve come to realize that that question doesn’t hold much power. I would rather pose the question What’s Possible? That seems to open up the possibility of previously unseen options as well as outrageously positive outcomes!

I was very lucky to have found my life’s passion at the beginning of my college years. It has been a combination of grace, what the Buddhists call ‘skillful means’, internal investigation, and external experimentation that has allowed me to flourish as an artist.

The radio humorist/philosopher Garrison Keiller once described artists as living on faith—I could not have agreed with him more!

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