



Everything We Needed to Know About Business, We Learned Playing Music

by Craig M. Cortello

(The following article is an advance excerpt from *Everything We Needed to Know About Business, We Learned Playing Music*, printed with permission from the author. The book is a compilation of 32 profiles of CEO's and business professionals who played music as a child or adolescent and view that experience as a defining one in preparing them for success in their business endeavors. Available in paperback Sept. 2009)

These are alarming times for the plight of music education funding. Economic downturns are an immediate sign of crisis for those programs that have perennially been at or near the education budgetary chopping block. Non-profit organizations that try to fill that resource gap often rely on the benevolence of those impacted by an ailing economy. Perhaps a new understanding of the transcendent lessons of a music education can lead to a reshuffling of education priorities.

Consider a conversation that I had a couple of years ago with Ellis Marsalis, Jr., modern jazz pioneer, music educator, and the father of the first family of jazz in New Orleans and beyond.

“To me there’s nothing wrong with somebody who has played a musical instrument and is not going to do it for a living becoming the CEO of a major corporation, and there’s a ton of that,” said Marsalis. “I met a guy at Merrill Lynch who’s a clarinet player. One of the best pianists we had, a young lady at NOCCA when I was teaching there – She’s a banker in New Jersey” (NOCCA refers to the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, an advanced program for young prodigies of music and the arts for high school-aged youths in New Orleans).

Ellis Marsalis, Jr. understood that regardless of whether the ultimate vocation of the students that came under his tutelage (including his children) turned out to be trumpet, saxophone, trombone, percussion, or banking and financial services, music education could comprise an integral component of their foundation for their success. As he explained, it’s only one element, but an important one in a well-rounded education that prepares a student for a diversified world and uncertain times.



Consider these facts with regard to music education:

Fact Number 1:

We are cutting music education budgets at a time when the demand for innovation and creativity has never been greater, in business and otherwise.

The growing recognition of the need for creative thought in an uncertain world is well established. The leading businesses of the future will be idea factories. Manufacturing and knowledge-based jobs can be outsourced or handled by computers. The ability to identify opportunities and voids in the marketplace, recognize new trends, combine existing concepts and technologies, engage customers in compelling and innovative ways, and to bring together alliances and partnerships that advance mutual objectives will all be necessary skills of the 21st century entrepreneur.

The consistent theme in all relevant research on the topic of creativity is the concept that the capacity for creative thought should be thought of as a muscle. Everyone has that ability, yet it will either strengthen with use or wither due to inactivity. My concern – Where will our children have the opportunity to exercise their “creativity muscles” in the future without music and arts education?

Fact Number 2:

Much of the recent research into the benefits of music education focuses on improved math, science, and I.Q. scores.

I applaud all research espousing the benefits of music education. Indeed, every bit of evidence to support this effort builds momentum. My concern is that this line of reasoning assumes a position of inferiority with respect to the priority of music education. If music education is simply an enhancement to improve the ability of students to master other subjects, then it logically follows that other subjects will always take precedence.



Fact Number 3:

Professionals who have achieved a decent level of career advancement, even in highly technical fields, generally attribute only about 15-25% of their success to technical proficiency. In other words, 75-85% of their success can be tied to other skill sets.

It is likely that in our economy there will always be a certain demand for jobs that are highly technical and where the ability to perform purely technical tasks is the primary determinant of success. But more and more, even in fields considered highly technical, professionals will tell you that technical aptitude is merely a minimum requirement representing a fraction of what is required to succeed. I have found that to be true in my own experience and in the experiences of my peers as well. If we accept this premise, then concentrating on music education's ability to enhance technical skills such as math and science certainly represents a narrow focus.

But what if we can identify and articulate the effect of music education on the other determinants of success, those that comprise the other 75-85%? Wouldn't that put music education in a position of strength and provide a new perspective on its relative importance?

Researching the Business Correlation of Music Education

I've spent the last 18 months discussing this subject with CEO's and business leaders from around the country (and a few from beyond). The task was to identify successful people from a cross-section of business who were influenced by music education as a child or adolescent and who view that experience as a defining one in preparing them for success in their business endeavors. I asked them to reflect and to articulate the lessons learned, attributes developed, and insights gained from their music experience that were highly correlative to success in the business world, "from the band room to the boardroom," so to speak. Here are a few of the common themes articulated by the research participants.



Confidence and Self-Esteem (Stepping Up to the Mic)

One of the most common benefits of music expressed by our research subjects was the development of confidence and self-esteem. Consistently, I heard our contributors speak of the positive effect that performing in front of an audience, mastering a new musical piece, or simply connecting with other musicians in an ensemble had on building their ability to believe in themselves.

“Courage is realizing your fear and going ahead and doing what you should do. So for me, realizing that I had stage fright, the confidence builder was that I did it. I was supposed to get up and do a solo, and I actually finished. That built the confidence. Something that I was terrified to do, I could prepare to do it and do it well, despite being afraid.”



**H. Steven Sims, M.D.
Director, Chicago
Institute for Voice Care
Assistant Professor,
University of Illinois at
Chicago Medical Center
Vocalist, Pianist,
Trombonist, & Bassoonist**

“As a surgeon there are lots of times when you make your incision, and it’s a lot more challenging than you thought it would be... That experience helped me in terms of training me that when you get a little nervous, to use that energy to perfect your performance rather than fall apart.”

Risk Acceptance (Let’s Just “Jam”)

Before one can get to a place where creativity and innovation are possible, learning to trust the process that discards familiar, safe systems is a prerequisite. We must walk out on that



uncertainty.

musical limb and have “jam” sessions. We’ll just see what happens and assess the results afterwards. Musicians understand that the greatest innovations often come when you leave the harbor of predictable outcomes and sail into the sea of

**Lloyd Yavener
Vice-President of
Marketing,
Underwriting, and
Claims
Clements International
(Leading Insurer of
Expatriate Markets)
Drummer/Guitarist**

**P.O. Box 746
Metairie, LA 70004-0746**



“The insurance business is purely risk taking...You go in knowing there are going to be risks involved. Any time you play music, there are risks involved. You can have equipment failure. You can have rain. Somebody can get sick. Guitar strings break.”

“Then there’s the personal risk. There are going to be better people in the audience, and I’m going to be nervous. I’m going to forget my part. Or I’ve got to sing this really high part, and I hope that I can hit that note this late in the evening. There’s a whole range of risk that you take in a band that’s highly correlative to business.”

Collaboration and Teamwork (I’m in the Band)

There’s a certain give and take that comes from playing in a band where you have to assess the strengths, weaknesses, and personalities of the members of the team. Fitting the complex pieces of that puzzle in a way that makes the music come together is quite an art. Those skills translate well to business endeavors or projects that involve teamwork and collaboration.

“In five minutes, I’m going to walk into a room to talk about a multi-million dollar RFP (Request for Proposal). I’m going to go in there with an idea or two or three or four, and I’m going to sit down with other senior people in the firm. As if we were a jazz combo, we’re going to just start riffing off of one another, and we’re going to find a rhythm – a creative, strategic rhythm. And then we’re going to come out with some really good ideas.”



“I don’t want to belabor the parallel, but when you have people who speak the same language, musical language or intellectual language, people who have similar skill sets and traits and talents, and you bring them together with a common purpose, good things often happen.”

Bob Knott
Executive Vice-President
Edelman Group
(Global Independent
Public Relations Firm)
Guitarist, Music Critic



Leadership (Conducting Your Symphony of Employees)

The application of the competencies of teamwork and collaboration takes on new meaning from the perspective of a leader. A conductor must understand the strengths of all of the musicians, understanding how their skills fit into the big picture of the orchestra. That conductor must then communicate a compelling vision, motivating the players to either step into the spotlight or to subjugate their own needs for the benefit of the whole, depending upon the circumstance.



Naturally, every singer has all the skills to be an entrepreneur. When you're an entrepreneur, you see a niche and an opportunity in everything."

Genevieve Thiers
Founder/CEO Sittercity.com
(America's Leading Online
Caregiver Matching Service)
Opera Singer

"Once you learn to channel energy and direct power when you're in front of people and you're singing, it's something you never forget. You can't be a singer unless you are a leader."

Salesmanship and Branding (Give the Fans What They Want)

Musicians and bands have to put together songs, performances, or identities that their fans (or potential fans) will find compelling. While greater musical proficiency will improve your chances of success, it's no guarantee. Repeatedly, participants spoke of how that constant campaign of engaging their fans and packaging their music in a way that creates loyalty served them well in business.



"To this day, it [music] is the driving sense of self that I have. I still think of myself as a musician with a day job, not a Silicon Valley marketing executive. Being successful is not about being the best musician. There's somebody singing in a bar that's a better piano player than Billy Joel or Elton John."

Greg Estes
Vice-President of
Marketing, Mozes, Inc.,
(Mobile marketing
technology company)
Keyboard Player,
Songwriter



“You learn that and apply that to business as well. You can have the absolute best technology or the best product or service, but it comes down to brand awareness and getting noticed in the marketplace.”

Creativity & Innovation (Improvising From the Charts)

As previously stated, unless we think of creativity as a muscle that gets stronger with exercise or withers with inactivity, we’ll never reach our creative potential. People involved in music come to the workplace with toned and fit creativity muscles.

“One of the things that musicians and artists tend to do is explore other people’s art and other people’s way of doing things. I think we’re looking for inspiration. I think we look at a level that non-musicians don’t. Most non-musicians more easily stay in their rut.



Musicians tend to find ways out of the rut, because that’s what gives us joy – learning the new thing.”

Dan Burrus
CEO & Founder, Burrus
Research
Technology Forecaster,
Best-Selling Author of
Technotrends
Guitarist



No Child Left Behind?

According to a series of reports by the Center on Education Policy that tracks the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act which became law in 2002 entitled *From the Capital to the Classroom*, 62 percent of elementary school districts reported increasing time for English and/or math since the 2001-02 school year by an average increase of 42 percent. At the same time, 44 percent of elementary school districts reported cutting time from one or more other subjects including science, social studies, art and music, physical education, lunch, and recess by an average of about 30 minutes per day.

“What gets tested gets taught,” said Jack Jennings, CEP’s president and CEO. “Because so much is riding on reading and math, included on state tests, many schools have cut back time on other important areas, which means that some students are not receiving a broad curriculum.”

The report also notes that these changes are more prevalent in districts that are home to struggling schools. One recommendation from the report is to “include measures of knowledge and skills in art and music as one of the multiple measures used for NCLB accountability.”¹

And the irony is that throughout my research, I consistently heard very successful people say that music kept them engaged in the school experience where they might have become disenchanted with the notion otherwise. There are talented students all over school campuses, and many of those children don’t respond well to traditional assessment methods or don’t feel part of the mainstream. Sometimes tutoring and remedial course offerings are not enough to keep children on the bus. We need to find a motivating reason for them to want to come along for the ride.

¹ Center on Education Policy. (2007). *Choices, Changes, and Challenges: Curriculum and Instruction in the NCLB Era*, a report in the series *From the Capital to the Classroom: Year 5 of the No Child Left Behind Act*. Washington, DC: Jennifer McMurrer.



One question that I asked most of the interviewees was, “Suppose a school administrator comes to you and says that they are trying to justify a music education program in their budget, and they ask you for two or three compelling talking points on the importance of keeping that program intact. What do you tell them?”

“You want to teach lessons in a language they understand,” said Dan Burrus. “If you’ve got a boy who doesn’t read or write very well and you try to teach him how to read a Biology book, his eyes will probably glaze over. But if you give him a book on hot rods or motorcycles or something he’s interested in, he might start to read that. What I want to do is play to their interests. And most kids are interested in music, but not all kids are good at school.”

“So why don’t we tap into their interests as a doorway to learn more about reading and writing and studies?” he asked. “Because that’s where it leads.”

“America has a real tendency to reward the typical,” said Joe Santa Maria, Vice-President/General Manager and owner of Fitness Management Systems in Worcester, MA and guitarist/songwriter. “The tendency is to slide toward the kids who are ‘getting it’ right away. They get it. They find the system, they work the system, and they get rewarded by the system – The honor societies and their picture in the yearbook. You know what, that’s great. Those kids are working hard for that.

“We need all sorts of people that are the musicians. The musicians in your schools need support. And it’s not about making them musicians for life. The reality of the situation is that they probably will play an instrument for the rest of their life more for enjoyment than anything else.

**P.O. Box 746
Metairie, LA 70004-0746**



“But that creative brain is necessary,” he added. “Without that creative brain, you’re not going to get great history teachers someday. You’re not going to get great free-thinking politicians and great free-thinking urban designers. Those are the people musicians really are. That’s where that funding should be considered.

“And that’s what music does. It’s just unfortunate that I feel music is looked at as an amenity to a high school rather than a true functioning piece of the curriculum,” he said with conviction. “And how many voices aren’t heard because it’s not a real part of the curriculum.”

About the Author

Craig Cortello is a contributing music writer to *Where Y’at* magazine and *AllAboutJazz.com*, having had the pleasure of interviewing such New Orleans music icons as Pete Fountain, Ellis Marsalis, Jr., and Henry Butler. He is also a 30 year veteran of the guitar, a self-taught pianist, and a composer. In business, Craig most recently served as National Sales Manager of a successful environmental consulting firm with 28 offices in the U.S. and China. He is a board member of the National Speakers Association New Orleans chapter and of the Metairie Sunrise Rotary Club.

For additional information regarding this article and the book *Everything We Needed to Know About Business, We Learned Playing Music*, including speaking engagement requests, contact ccortello@LDV-Enterprises.com.