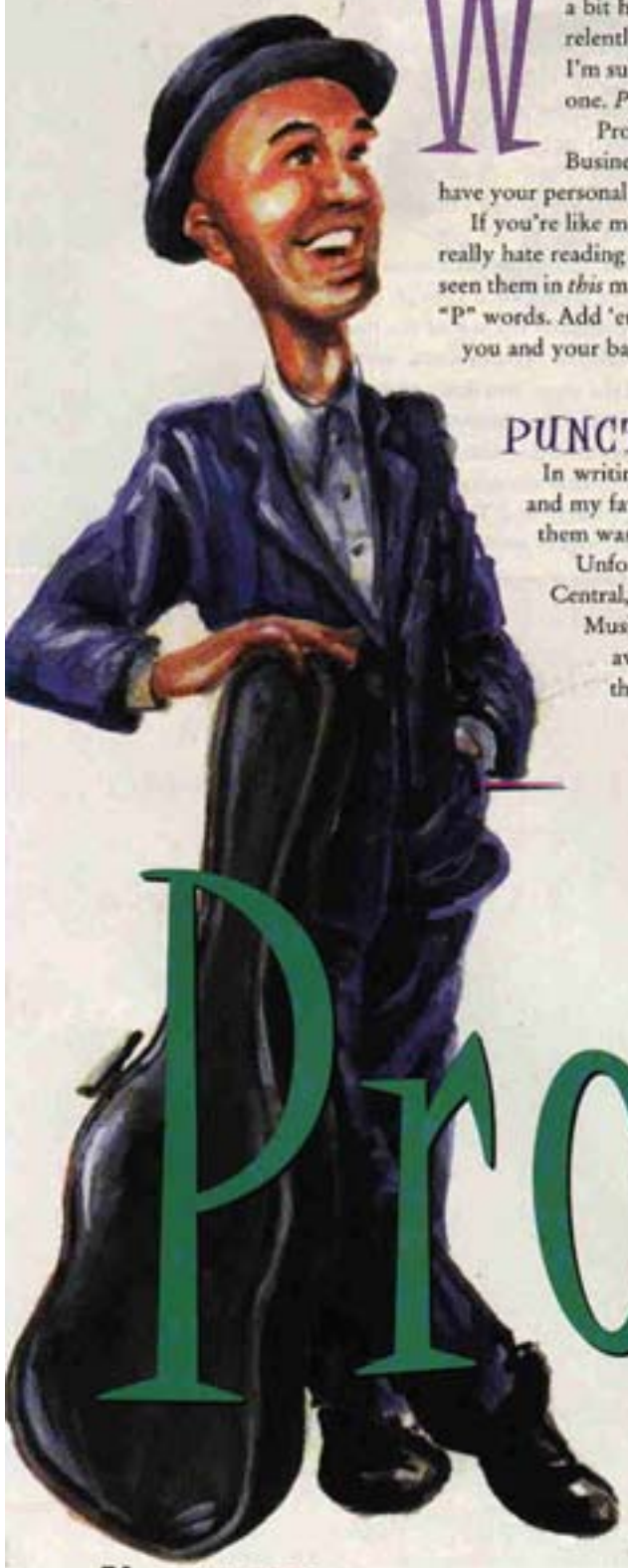

WHA Professi

It's what makes the difference between getting and not getting the gig

BY REVEREND BILLY C. WIRTZ - I

When my editor assigned me to do a full-length article on a particular "P" word, I was a bit hesitant. It's a word that veteran musicians are familiar with and often pursue relentlessly. It's a word that most young players learn about the hard way. By now, I'm sure you've guessed that it's one of two words, and you're right—it's the second one. *Professionalism.*

Professionalism is really a simpler (and less clichéd) way to describe Taking Care of Business. Being a fresh, original, and competent player is important, but if you don't have your personal and business act together, you'll find yourself with a lot of open weekends.

If you're like me—free-spirited, creative, humble, and with the attention span of a gnat—you really hate reading long-winded, bone-dry articles about career strategies. (Not that you've ever seen them in *this* magazine.) So I'll make this one easy, by breaking the subject down to four other "P" words. Add 'em up, and you've got a sure-fire formula for finding more and better work for you and your band.

PUNCTUALITY

In writing this article, I interviewed three agents, two promoters, several musicians, and my favorite soundman, Chris Murphy. The first area of concern expressed by all of them was *punctuality.*

Unfortunately, the rest of the world doesn't understand that, along with Eastern, Central, Mountain, and Pacific, there's a fifth time zone in which musicians live. If the Musicians Union was a little stronger or more influential, we might increase awareness of this problem through flyers and public service announcements. Until then, my advice is to abide by this simple rule: When in doubt, do it the day before.

It's taken me almost fifteen years to grasp this concept, but even though I hate having to do "stuff" on my day off, it sure makes life easier. Just check out the difference. Here's a typical plan I'll try to follow on a typical gig day.

10:00 A.M.: Get up. 10:15-11:00 A.M.: Eat breakfast and pack. 11:15 A.M.: Leave the house. 11:30 A.M.: Drop the dog at the kennel. 11:45 A.M.: Hit Subway for early lunch, then stop by pharmacy for allergy medicine. 12-12:15 P.M.: On the road.

And here's how things would usually turn out.

10:00 A.M.: Get up. 10:15 A.M.: Take a phone call from an old friend who wants me to play a benefit next month. 10:30 A.M.: Get clothes from the dryer; jeans still wet. 10:35 A.M.: Someone calls and tries to sell me aluminum siding. 10:45 A.M.: Begin packing clothes; find only one pair of matching socks. 10:50-11:15 A.M.: Look for car keys. 11:30 A.M.: Find out I need gas; wait in convenience store line for five minutes while senior citizens purchase lottery tickets. 11:45 A.M. Get stuck on two-lane road behind senior citizens in an RV. 12:15 P.M.: Take the dog to the kennel; find out the kennel lost his reservation; wait for fifteen minutes while they move other dogs. 12:40 P.M.: Find Subway is packed; grab a Number Two meal, to go, from McDonald's. 1:00-1:15 P.M.: Pick up allergy prescription; wait in line while high school dropout cashier price-checks four different items for senior citizen. 1:30 P.M.: Turn onto the Interstate, which merges down to one lane due to construction; sideswipe a church van from Alabama heading for Disneyworld—the driver, who looks like a Jerry Springer guest, gives me a look of pure hatred. 1:35 P.M.: Experience a sudden, sharp tightening in my stomach, and suddenly realize why it's called a Number Two meal; pull off into a rest area, and find the men's room

T I S

onalism?

's what going on the road is all about. And . . . it's another "P" word.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY KIRSTEN D. HAMMER

closed for cleaning.

Sound familiar? At least half of these stops could have been made the day before, resulting in a speedier departure, a more gradually digested Number Two meal, and a few less terrified senior citizens. It's all a part of our second, closely-related topic. . . .

PLANNING AHEAD

If you've sent the club a contract, rider, and stage plot, good for you! If you haven't, check back at least a week ahead of time; you may be in for a few surprises. Once again, making this call imposes on your day off, but it's worth the effort. When you call a club, make sure you're speaking with the right person; don't discuss important logistics with a day bartender who, in between pouring drinks, promises to "mention it to somebody." Once you get hold of the right person, always try to cover the following important points:

Setup and load-in times. Is there a specific time by which they want soundcheck done and the stage cleared? Will you be setting up with another band? Does the club serve dinner? (In other words, will you have to contend with early-bird senior citizens covering their ears and shaking their heads as you try to sound-check?) Most important, *where* do you load in?

I can tell how professional an act is by what time they show up.

Pay, door percentages, and ticket prices. Your contract says $700 versus 80 percent at $7.00 per head. The "revised" contract, which they swear was sent to the agent, reads $700 versus 75 percent after $1,200 at $5.00 per head. If you don't deal with this ahead of time, you could have the makings of an extremely unpleasant confrontation at the end of your performance.

Accommodations. This is often the most common area of miscommunication. There are few scenarios more aggravating than driving six hours, setting up in a frenzy, and then being told, "Oops, we forgot to make the reservation." They also forgot that it's homecoming weekend at the local Baptist college, and you end up squeezing for musicians into two double-beds and a threadbare cot at the local "Rooms By the Hour, Day, or Week" flea farm. *Always* double-check to make sure the club knows exactly how many rooms (and beds) you will need. Better still, call the motel and make sure the rooms are indeed reserved and paid for. Some clubs and promoters are notorious for skimping on accommodations. If the ones they offer aren't suitable, ask nicely for better ones, and offer to pay the difference. *Avoid band houses at all costs.*

Food arrangements. Does the club provide free or discounted meals for the band? Will the kitchen be open during soundcheck? What about after your show? Do they serve meals, or just sandwiches and hot wings? If the club doesn't provide food, figure on an extra 45 minutes (weeknights) to an hour (weekends) to feed the band.

Equipment rentals. Most smaller promoters and clubs don't know the difference between a DX7, a CP-70, and a 1099. Many local music stores will gladly tell them a specified model is available and at the last minute switch it for a "substitute" model, often in a dilapidated state and minus such essentials as

power cords, footpedals, and instructions. If prior arrangements aren't made, expect the usually-outrageous rental charges to be taken out of your pay.

Getting to the gig. *Make sure to get good directions.* If the person on the other end of the line says, "Well, let's see. I don't drive, myself, but I *think* . . .," try again later. If you are flying and will arrive during rush hour, you may need some alternate routes. When driving into metro areas after 3:30 in the afternoon, listen to talk/news stations for traffic reports. If you are traveling anywhere between Washington, DC and New York City between 3:30 and 6:00 in the afternoon, God help you—and be sure to allow yourself at least one hour extra travel time. When you're in the Indiana/Kentucky/Tennessee region, be aware of screwball time zone changes. Be sure to make gas and rest stops *before* you enter densely populated areas. Locating a gas station, paying for the gas, finding a rest room they'll let you use (especially in Delaware), and getting across traffic back to the Interstate can add another thirty minutes in some places.

Now that you've planned ahead, had a smooth ride, and checked into the motel, you'll need to concentrate on . . .

PERFORMANCE

There are countless ways to approach a live performance. Your style of music and your image will often determine how to come across to an audience. But if you want to come across as a *professional*, regardless of style, heed these words:

Look like a band. There's a funny psychology to an audience. They want to relate to you personally and musically, but they also want to see you as just a slight cut above them. Whether you're trying to look sharp or sloppy, bad-ass or androgynous, push it to the limit. Make sure that anyone walking into the place can tell immediately who the musicians are.

When in doubt, do it the day before.

Once you start playing, **establish and maintain a flow.** There's a certain feel, a rhythm, a groove, to a well-paced show. Learning to establish that groove begins with two basic premises: the twenty-second rule, which is to try not to take more than twenty seconds between songs. And the sandwich rule, which sounds slightly obscene but actually entails sandwiching new, unfamiliar songs between two of your strongest uptempo numbers. That way, when it bombs or everyone forgets the bridge and turns the thing into a "clambake," you can regain momentum with the next song.

Unfortunately, the band can't always control the flow, especially if it's forced to deal with . . .

Drunks, hecklers, and local characters. Welcome to the wonderful world of alcohol and its effect on the human brain. Personally, I think every music school in the country should have at least one mandatory seminar on this subject, but until they do, here's a crash course.

Drunks. Two types, friendly and mean. If they're friendly,

tolerate them and sit through at least one recollection of the night they were kicked out of a Denny's in New Orleans with David Allen Coe. If they're mean, don't antagonize them. If they act at all threatening, let the club handle them immediately.

Hecklers. Two types, *Sphinctus genericus* and *Sphinctus genericus maximus*. Two heckler comebacks will work for you 75 percent of the time: "Excuse me, sir, but please don't come here and tell us how to play music, and we'll promise not to come down to where you work and help you dunk the fries." And, "Excuse me, ma'am, but please don't talk while we're trying to play, and we won't come and sit on the end of the bed and talk while you're working." (These comebacks, of course, should always be punctuated with at least one annoying rim shot.)

Local characters. In almost every bar there's a waitress who's a would-be Bonnie Raitt or an old guy named Walt who begs every band to let him sing "Jailhouse Rock." If you really want to endear yourself to the staff and the regulars, what the hell, let 'em sing one. (But *only* one!)

If it's the waitress, don't bother to ask, just count off "Love Me Like a Man" in A, down from the V chord. As for Walt, start in E but be prepared to modulate quickly up to Ab minor. In a small town chances are that the waitress is engaged to one of the staff, Walt's related to half the town, and by giving them five minutes onstage you've made their day (or even their year), guaranteed yourself a return engagement, and dramatically bettered your chances for a good deal on some tires at the filling station on your way out of town.

Since we're drifting over toward the area of public relations and dealing with co-workers, we're about to encounter the only cardinal, etched-in-stone rule of professional live performance, and that is . . .

DON'T PISS OFF THE SOUNDPERSON

Very few musicians wake up in the morning, look in the mirror, comb the shag over their bald spot, and say to themselves, "Tonight I'm going to piss off the soundperson." Likewise, very few soundpersons wake up, fold up the sofa, and think to themselves, "Tonight I'm going to hit the SUCK button." You may not know this, but every P.A. board has a secret SUCK button. It's controlled by the soundperson and usually stays in the "on" position when high levels of attitude emanate from the stage. The focus of this third concept is to help keep your soundperson's (middle) finger *off* that button. How do you do that? Glad you asked.

Show up on time. I know, you're sick of this one, but in the words of Chris Murphy, "I can tell how professional an act is by what time they show up."

Treat your soundperson as a co-worker, not a subordinate. Be patient. Try to utter as few "I *must* have"s as possible. Referring to yourself or the band in the third person—*i.e.*, "Reverend Billy never has fewer than three monitor mixes."—identifies you as the proud owner of a *prima donna* starter kit.

Every P.A. board has a secret SUCK button.

Once you've started playing, **communicate with hand signals (not that one)** whenever possible. Never yell at, taunt, or make observations about the soundperson's grooming habits. Remember, most of the newer boards have *stereo* SUCK buttons.

If they've done well, **give 'em a tip.** A mic cable went bad, the prehistoric monitor blew up, yet you made it through the night sounding good. A small donation, usually twenty bucks, is the right thing to do, and it will dramatically increase the chances of the dreaded button being left in "standby" mode on future gigs.

Apply the tipping concept to other co-workers, especially waitstaff, who have been helpful during the show. As a rule, most waitresses over the age of 25 are working their way through school and/or trying to support a family as a single mom. If they're attractive, you can bet that they get hit on by every band and/or drunken customer who's passed through the place. They've heard *all* the lines, and even if they do find you as adorable, cute, roguish, creative, and talented as you know you are, they'll really be turned on if you say please and thank you and leave a large—make that huge—tip. You'll be amazed at how fast your drinks make it up to the stage.

Keep an eye on your friends. This often-overlooked area includes spouses, dates, and friends nicknamed Wild Man who come in as guests of the band. Make sure that spouses and friends understand that your quality time with them will be limited: Audience members will want to meet you, buy you drinks, and even hit on you. It's all part of the job. Be aware that if Wild Man lights up a joint in the dressing room or drops his pants in the middle of the dance floor, your agent will be getting a call on Monday.

At the end of the show, before your last song or the encore, **introduce the band members, acknowledge the staff, promoter, and any other acts on the show,** and thank the audience for a good evening. Everyone will appreciate it—they'll probably rip up your bar tab and maybe even call a cab for Wild Man.

I don't know a single musician who likes to be told what to do or how to act. It's part of the reason why many of us are in this business in the first place. That's why I've tried not to make this yet another list of do's and don'ts, but rather a series of suggestions to help you avoid getting sidetracked by the less exciting aspects of the business.

You'll find that the longer you play music, the smaller the circle gets. Guys who were once soundmen are now chief engineers at major studios, former waiters now own bars in Daytona Beach, and bussers are now extremely powerful promoters. When you approach them for gigs, the waitress will remember the night you put on an incredible show for ten people as a snowstorm raged outside, that soundperson will damn sure remember whether he or she had to use the SUCK button, and the busser will remember that, for Uncle Walt's sake, he owes you one.

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