

Law school alum teaches Berklee students the business of music

By: Greg Glasgow

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Don Gorder is the chair and founder of the music business/management department at the Berklee College of Music in Boston. PHOTO BY: Courtesy of Don Gorder

Music and business have long been intertwined for Don Gorder (JD '80). Trained as a trumpet player, he got a bachelor's degree in performance and was working on his master's degree in jazz pedagogy when a class at the University of Miami turned him on to music's business side.

He subsequently got his law degree at DU — on a teaching assistantship in the Lamont School of Music — and ended up teaching at the University of the Pacific in California before Boston's Berklee College of Music recruited him to launch and chair its department of music business and management. Still an active trumpeter, Gorder now teaches classes at Berklee and tries to keep up with the recording industry's rapid changes.

What's the difference between Berklee's music business program and similar programs at other colleges and universities?

I think one of the real differentiators of our program here, as opposed to the many other music business programs out there, is that we are an all-music college. We can give our music business program a really strong music-industry focus. You find these programs at schools on campuses where they have a school of business, and the students in those music business programs will go over to the school of business to take their accounting and their marketing and their management and all of that, which is fine, but you're not going to find a music-industry focus there. We give our music business program a strong focus on business as it is conducted in the music industry.

Do most of your students want a career in the music industry, or are a lot of them musicians who just want some basic understanding of the business side of things?

Berklee has 4,000 students and just slightly over 400 of those are music business majors. So a little over 10 percent of the student body are music business majors. But of those 400 students, I would say a third of them are still looking to have careers on the creative side as musicians, either performers or composers, and they're majoring in music business because they realize that having some background in business can certainly help them to manage their careers more effectively. The other two-thirds are targeting the industry in some way, whether it's the corporate world or entrepreneurial pursuits.

The music business has changed so much in the past decade; how hard do you try to stay on top of what's going on?

We absolutely have to keep on top of it. We can't present a program that teaches them about a business that either no longer exists or is going away. It's changing dramatically, particularly the recording industry. For the students who want to go into the recording industry, we make sure that we're teaching them about the new mechanisms by which music is reaching consumers now so they're prepared for it. The careers are no longer in physical copy distribution. It's all about new media, and it's about using social media in marketing, new marketing methods and viral techniques where they're reaching their consumers via social media. We've certainly recognized the importance of that.

Bands do so much on their own these days, from recording to distribution to promotion and publicity. Do modern-day musicians really need managers?

I think even more so today. The typical musician wants to focus on their music, on their art. Musicians tend to be rather right-brained and creative and not so intently focused on the business side of their careers. And it's time-consuming if you're going to have the presence that you need online and a great website and know how to get plugged in and know how to use social media and write a great blog and make all those connections you have to make if you're going to move your career forward. We talk about the "new manager," who is the one who has the skills to cover all those aspects of the artist's career — who understands the publishing business and the live business and concerts and touring and merchandise.

Things are so fragmented in music now: There aren't a lot of superstar acts but a lot of smaller niche acts. How has that changed things?

It's not the three or four genres and you get plugged into one or the other; it's all over the place with all the niches, which is a good thing. There's less emphasis on becoming a superstar because there's less opportunity to become a superstar. It used to be that you either got a deal with a major label or you starved. Now there's a middle class. They're not getting deals from majors — and they're not really that concerned about getting a deal — but they're making a living. They're selling their music, they're well plugged in online and they're touring — basically they're finding their audience and growing it to the point where they're playing a lot, they're touring a lot, and they're making a living and not having to keep the day job at Denny's in order to support their music.

Does that let artists stay more true to their vision and find themselves a little more slowly, rather than being thrust into the superstar status where they feel like they have to please

everybody?

I think so. If they can do that, if they can find their audience with the music that they want to make, then they don't have to put themselves at the mercy of a label who says "If you really want to get to the mass market you're going to have to make these kinds of changes to what you do." Some bands may be willing to do that but others aren't, and they don't have to. If they've found their audience and they're doing OK with it, then they can be satisfied.