



GET THE CALL

Advice from Some of Canada's
Best & Busiest Hired Guns
By Ken Kelley

When

you think of a "rock star," your thoughts likely lend themselves to someone performing before hordes of adoring fans night after night, living the dream of countless adolescents (and adults) worldwide.

It used to be that musicians toured in support of albums; now, the inverse is true, and regardless of how many number-one albums or singles they may have to their credit, an undeniably great live show remains a critically important contributor to many artists' career longevity.

Rightly or wrongly, not all musicians get equal time under the spotlight. And while this might run counter-intuitive to the notion of becoming a rock star, there is no shortage of musicians ready and willing to lend their talents supporting known artists – and who enjoy a comfortable living because of it.

Inspired by Fran Stine's documentary *Hired Gun*, we spoke with a handful of Canucks who perform alongside some of the world's biggest superstars, including information on how they got there and advice for anyone looking to follow in their footsteps.

Todd Kerns



Before landing his position as a bass-playing Conspirator alongside Slash and Myles Kennedy, Saskatchewan native Todd Kerns more than paid his dues north of the 49th.

Kerns rose to prominence in the '90s as the guitarist-vocalist with the gold-selling rock band Age of Electric. When they went dormant at the turn of the century, Kerns optimistically jumped right back into music with Static in Stereo; however, external forces, not the least of which was the collapse of the "old model" of the music business, left that optimism short-lived.

After serving as producer for a number of projects in his adopted hometown of Vancouver, Kerns dipped his toes into the solo artist waters, resulting in 2004's *Go Time*.

In 2006, at the behest of friends, Kerns headed to Las Vegas and it didn't take too long before opportunities began presenting themselves. After meeting Faster Pussycat's Brent Muscat in Sin City, Kerns was hired on as a guitarist for a 2007 European tour with the group.

It was another Canadian, drummer Brent Fitz, that ended up connecting the dots between Kerns and Slash in 2010.

"Brent called me and was like, 'Come jam with Slash tomorrow in Los Angeles,'" Kerns recalls. "In the time I was in Las Vegas, I had jammed with all kinds of people like Sebastian Bach and Slim Jim Phantom, and so the idea of jamming with Slash was immediately appealing. I didn't even listen to anything before making the trip; I just threw a bass and amp in my car, drove to L.A., and played with the guys."

Fast-forward nearly a decade and, in addition to taking part in tours that have brought him to virtually every corner of the globe, Kerns has now performed on three albums as a part of Slash featuring Myles Kennedy and the Conspirators: *Apocalyptic Love*, *World on Fire*, and 2018's *Living the Dream*.

"Slash doesn't necessarily like the idea of being referred to as a solo artist, but on paper, myself and the other guys playing with him could very well be considered side guys," Kerns offers. "Not only has the band remained consistent for the last number of years; what's different about the dynamic with Slash is that he loves bouncing ideas off the entire band. He's not necessarily interested in calling all the shots."

While not everyone looking to break into the music business will have high-profile opportunities tossed their way right off the bat, if ever, Kerns suggests musicians be open to new possibilities, even if they push you outside of your comfort zone.

"When I first came to Las Vegas, I wasn't married to the idea of just being a guitarist," Kerns admits. "If someone asks you if you can do something, you should always answer 'yes,' because then you're in a position where you have to figure it out. It's important to be malleable and willing to go with the flow. You've really got nothing to lose."

And don't worry about the folks that may bring more skills to the table, he adds. "This business isn't just about musical skill. While that's an important part of it, getting along with everyone else in the band and the crew is just as important. Don't bring drama to the stage or the studio."

Phil X



Guitarist Phil Xenidis would be the first to acknowledge that his transition from the fan in the front row to the idol on stage has had a number of full circle moments. Cutting his teeth with the likes of Frozen Ghost and Aldo Nova, it was classic power trio Triumph that gave the guitarist what was then the biggest break of his career.

Although his time with Triumph was brief, the Toronto-based guitarist's stock would soar throughout the '90s and early aughts. He became an in-demand session player, joining the likes of Our Lady Peace, Alice Cooper, Avril Lavigne, Kelly Clarkson, and Chris Cornell in the studio.

It was a somewhat chance meeting with producer John Shanks in 2011 that would help open the door to Xenidis' next big opportunity.

"John had seen some of my videos on YouTube and said I had struck him as one of those guys that could sing or play anything. Just a couple of weeks after that, John, who's known for knowing everyone, asked me to meet him in the studio without really divulging much more in the way of details," Xenidis recalls.

After signing a non-disclosure agreement, Xenidis learned that he was potentially being

tapped to replace longtime Bon Jovi guitarist Richie Sambora in the event he needed to temporarily leave the band to focus on rehabilitation.

"It was April 14th, 2011, and Jon Bon Jovi called me to say the group might need me to sub in for Richie for a number of shows. At that point, it was agreed that I'd play 13 shows and that was it, or so we thought," Xenidis says.

Two years later, Bon Jovi came calling again after Sambora departed the group's *Because We Can Tour* for personal reasons. Xenidis happily reprised his role, spending the next three years touring the world with the group.

With the release of 2016's *This House Is Not for Sale*, he became an officially-minted member.

"I am the *Rock Star* movie come to life," Xenidis laughs. "I remember buying Bon Jovi concert tickets for the *New Jersey Tour*, and now I'm a member of the band. It's just too surreal."

There's no denying that Xenidis worked hard to get where he is today, and he firmly believes a good musician never stops learning.

"No matter what kind of gig you have, never stop working. I spend a lot of time working at my craft and still feel there's room for improvement," he advises. "What may ultimately help set you apart from others is being a well-rounded musician. I've been in the studio with everyone from Alice Cooper to Avril Lavigne. Don't box yourself into just one or two genres and refuse to consider projects outside your scope. The more you're capable of doing, the better your chances of landing another gig."

He also recommends budding musicians leverage YouTube for all it has to offer.

"If you're a musician that believes in yourself, and that you've got something special to offer, you need to put it on YouTube. If it's something special that can highlight your personality as well as your chops, people are going to naturally gravitate to it."

Brent Fitz



In 1996, Winnipeg native Brent Fitz packed his bags and headed for the promised land of California with no definitive plan on how he'd go about making a life in the music business.

But over the last 20 years, Fitz hasn't just managed to squeak out a living; he's done rather

well for himself, performing with a diverse range of acts including Gene Simmons, Alice Cooper, Motley Crue's Vince Neil, and Theory of a Deadman. Along with his longtime pal Todd Kerns, Fitz is also a member of Slash's band.

"When I arrived in California, I had no gig and no visa to work," he begins. "My intention was to go there and get my footing in the environment that I wanted to be in, but it was up to me to find those opportunities where I could."

Fortunately for Fitz, doors started to open in those early days, but no matter who was calling upon him, he insists a level head helped keep his good fortune in perspective.

"You have to know how to wave your own flag, but I feel the worst thing you can do is start shooting your mouth off about how good you are," he warns. "When I first started out, I had people telling me they liked what I brought to the table, and that was humbling because Los Angeles was such a huge city and competition was fierce. One of the biggest keys to success is having others vouch for you when you're not around. That has proven to be one of the most important things for landing gig opportunities, but it's nothing you can force others to say; either they're going to willingly share your name because they believe in you or they're not going to say a word."

Rather than overcomplicating matters, Fitz believes many opportunities in the music business boil down to a simple ratio: half musicality, half attitude.

"Each of those is ultimately critical to success. The musicality part speaks for itself, but when it comes to attitude, you're being evaluated on whether you're someone that others will want to be around. I never played hockey as a kid, but as a fan of the sport, I see a lot of similarities between the mentality of a sports team and that of a band. A sports team doesn't have four or five captains; it typically only has one. That's how you need to think about the importance of attitude in the bigger picture."

And while there are no guarantees in the music business, Fitz believes a big part of his success has stemmed from the fact that he charted his course more than 20 years ago. No, he didn't have the foresight to know who he'd be playing with, but the combination of his knowledge and experience is what ultimately propelled him into the roles he has today.

"From the second I started playing piano at age five and drums at age 10, I knew what I wanted to do with my life," he says. "That might sound outrageous to some, but I very deliberately charted my course from a young age. I knew those gigs in small clubs were giving me the opportunity to hone my skills and prepare me for the next step. Where I am today has everything to do with the seeds I planted more than 20 years ago. It's about knowing what you want and going for it."

Check out *Canadian Musician* and NWC Webinars' recent "Get the Call for Session Gigs" webinar with Brent Fitz at www.nwcwebinars.com.

Donna Grantis



Best known as the co-lead guitarist in Prince's celebrated funk-rock band, 3RDEYEGIRL, Toronto native Donna Grantis has charted an impressive course for herself in the music business.

"As a teenager, I attended – and later taught at – Guitar Workshop Plus, an immersive summer music program with an emphasis on music instruction and performance," Grantis says. "I received my bachelor of music degree in jazz performance from [Montreal's] McGill University. In addition to learning about jazz, theory, composition, arranging, and musicianship, one of the best things about studying music was the opportunity to spend four years in a musically immersive environment with like-minded students."

While at McGill, Grantis gained a tremendous amount of performance experience both within and outside of the school, taking virtually every gig that her schedule permitted.

"The intent was to learn and work as much as possible. As a bandleader, I fronted an instrumental fusion group, while as a freelance session musician, I gained experience and versatility playing jazz, blues, rock, pop, funk, and Latin in a variety of groups, from duos to big bands."

After moving to Toronto, she continued to perform in a myriad of settings, including stints with a diverse range of artists like Amanda Marshall, Kardinal Offishall, SATE, Kellylee Evans, and others.

It was a YouTube video of a performance with her fusion group at a Toronto club that caught Prince's attention and ultimately resulted in the Purple One extending an invitation for Grantis to join him at Paisley Park.

"I viewed every musical interaction I had with anyone – be it a jam, rehearsal, gig, or session – as an audition for more work and a chance to define my reputation. In that sense, I had hundreds of 'auditions' prior to meeting Prince and the band. Those experiences helped prepare me for the jam that changed my life."

There was no shortage of diversity in a Prince show, Grantis says, noting it would typ-

ically span genres including rock, blues, jazz, funk, fusion, pop, and soul.

"I also learned how to listen and interact with other musicians. 3RDEYEGIRL, in particular, was quite an improvisational band," Grantis notes. "Every show we played was different and the arrangements of the songs changed on the fly as we followed Prince's cues."

Asked what advice she would offer to musicians looking to follow in her footsteps, Grantis insists nothing substitutes for hard work and determination.

"Know the material you are expected to play inside and out. This means always being able to deliver on your instrument by technically playing your part perfectly, with tremendous feel and the right sounds. Be professional, punctual, respectful, and have fun!"

Nathan Whitney



While the path that led guitarist Nathan Whitney to perform alongside country superstar Thomas Rhett wasn't conventional, he insists he wouldn't change a thing about it.

Whitney started playing guitar around age 12 and initially found himself drawn to the energy of punk rock. But when he heard the work of guitar virtuoso Joe Satriani as a high school student, he realized there was more to the instrument than he initially believed.

After attending Humber College in Toronto and being immersed in the city's cover band scene for some time, Whitney decided to, quite literally, sail the musical seas.

"I ended up spending six years playing in the show band on cruise ships," he says, noting he was responsible for providing a soundtrack to everyone from jugglers and other non-musical performers to vocalists and other musicians.

Admitting his musical upbringing was a tad sheltered before boarding, Whitney considers the cruise ship gig to be an incredibly valuable learning experience.

"I learned so much about music in general and the different styles involved. It was such a great experience that I tell people that if they plan on attending a music-based college or program, to try their best to do a four- to six-month stint on a cruise ship because it will open your mind in ways you might not have believed possible."

After finally coming back ashore, Whitney re-entered Toronto's cover band scene, which, thanks to various connections he'd made, led to the opportunity to play guitar with Canadian country star Kira Isabella.

"Out of the blue, a friend of mine who plays drums for Thomas Rhett called me and told me there was something that came up with one of their guitarists and asked me if I'd be interested in joining the tour the following week," Whitney recalls.

A little more than 12 hours later, he was in Nashville rehearsing with the band.

When you sign up to play with an artist like Rhett, you're not only playing some of North America's biggest venues; you're also, in most cases, sticking to a set list that leaves little room for deviation due to the fact it's closely tied in with production cues.

While this might not be the ideal kind of gig for a musician looking to stretch out into new territory with every show, Whitney says it's important that he and his bandmates treat every night as if it's the first night of the tour.

"The main thing we set out to remember every night we take the stage is that we're entertainers. The songs in the set and the order in which we play them might not be new and fresh for us, but it is for the audience. That's the perspective you have to keep in mind. It's our job to help them make the most of those few hours they are with us."

Cory Churko



One of the first shows that Moose Jaw, SK native Cory Churko ever played ended with him passing out after just two songs.

Mind you, he was only seven years old at the time, and was only slated to perform two songs on fiddle to begin with, after which he dutifully went to bed for the night, so his story isn't quite as salacious as we initially led you to believe...

Nonetheless, it was those early, unconventional experiences in music that were at least partially responsible for shaping him into the successful musician he is today.

"I actually started out playing in a band with my father, mother, sister, and brother. We used to play a lot of weddings," Churko tells *Canadian Musician*.

Unlike the majority of parents who worry about their children's financial stability when they consider a career in music, it was Churko's father that suggested the family band bring their show on the road. Subsequently, Churko cut his teeth as a teen playing in bars and clubs from coast to coast.

After logging time as a member of Carson Cole's band and the subsequent disbanding of his own country and rock groups, his next career move once again came about in an unconventional way.

"My wife asked me to perform some songs on the fiddle for an activity focused on senior citizens, so I learned nine songs that I could perform and that got my mind thinking, 'Why not try busking?'"

Churko took to Vancouver's Granville Island and quickly found an audience – and some respectable coin – for his talent on the fiddle, and while busking never amounted to a full-time venture, word of his talent spread.

"Out of the blue, I got a call from someone at Mercury Records asking if I'd be interested in auditioning for a country music artist that was going to be going on tour," he remembers. "It was all very mysterious."

That artist turned out to be Shania Twain and that tour was her debut outing, the *Come on Over Tour*. While the audition process was understandably exhausting – Churko says it lasted months – he eventually made the cut and was selected to join Twain's band through to her self-imposed hiatus in 2004.

Churko subsequently went on to work with Kelly Clarkson, joining the American idol on her *Breakaway* tour first as a fiddler before being bumped up to guitarist – a role he had for a decade, leaving only so he could rejoin Twain as she prepared to head back on tour in 2014.

While Twain keeps Churko plenty occupied, he and fellow Prairie natives Brent Fitz and Todd Kerns, along with drummer Shane Gaalaas, have channeled their love of classic Canadian acts like Loverboy, Streetheart, and others into the group Toque. The four-piece originally came together for a benefit show, but have since taken to recording and the road as scheduling permits.

Rob Crowell



If you were to look at Rob Crowell's list of credits from the past decade, you'd wonder if the man is indeed a man or some sort of chameleon. Among those with whom Crowell has performed are Kesha, Matt Mays, Deer Tick, Cracker, and Jim Lauderdale, to name a few.

Crowell insists it was the culmination of all his musical experiences that has made him the well-rounded musician he is today.

"It was while I was playing with Deer Tick that I decided to base myself out of Nashville," the drummer explains. "It won if only because it was probably where I knew the most people and I figured I'd be able to most easily hit the ground running."

Being a well-rounded musician is one thing; picking up your life and moving to a city where you know some folks but are far from "entrenched" is a whole other thing altogether, but this is precisely what the Fredericton, NB native did.

Even if Crowell had been worried about the prospects of "making it" in Nashville, his worry would have been all for naught.

"On my first night in Nashville, I ran into a friend who said he was happy to know I was in town because he felt like he had so much work he could potentially send my way. I was immediately welcomed into what felt like a tightly-knit fold, and it's something I was rather grateful for."

Crowell admits that while luck played a huge role in helping him land the gigs he has to date, remaining open to new possibilities is an important component of that success.

"A lot of great musicians have opportunities presented to them that, for whatever reason, they aren't able to take. I've always been, probably to my detriment, someone that says 'yes' to pretty much everything," Crowell says, laughing. "I see it as an important facet of both personal and professional growth. I'd rather be playing for little to no money than not playing at all. You can't put a price on experience."

For much of the last year, Crowell has been playing drums for Texas country trio Midland, performing with the group throughout the U.S. and Europe. And while the steady paycheques certainly don't hurt, Crowell has a word of advice for those looking to follow in his footsteps:

"You have to love what you're doing. The pay almost becomes a secondary thing because if you don't like where you're at and are just in it for the money, you're going to grow to resent others, and probably yourself."

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