

From Cruise ships to Dirty Dancing (feat. Ryan Mcausland)

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Although I have never personally met Ryan, I've heard a great deal of positive comments about his musicianship and work ethic from various musicians I've previously worked with. This, and his career transition from cruise ships to

working with Dirty Dancing made it clear I wanted to ask him a few questions and share them with you all. I suggest you head to his website after reading the interview to further your appreciation for what he's already done at such a young age, and is working towards achieving.

Can you please clearly outline all your current musical projects and professions which make up your life as a professional musician?

I'm currently working on the North American Tour of Dirty Dancing: The Classic Story on Stage. Apart from the tour I still work with Royal Caribbean as a drummer in the orchestra. I am a member of the Freelance Ensemble Artists of New Jersey Orchestra and I pick up theatre and jazz work anywhere I can in the New York and Philadelphia area.

How long have you been working with *Dirty Dancing*?

We started the tech rehearsal process on September 21st of last year. We put the show together in Alto, New Mexico and started previews after about a week of rehearsals. The show went into previews in New Mexico but officially opened in Folsom, CA on October 5th.

How did you find the transition from cruise ships to *Dirty Dancing*?

I think the experience that I was afforded on ships living and working with people in close quarters definitely helped prepare me for nine months on the road. In both jobs you have to be a very collaborative person. If you're not easy to work with, you won't do well in either setting. There are certain benefits and drawbacks to each job. It's much easier to stay in contact with people when you're not at sea. That being said, on tour you do a lot more moving around. On a ship you sleep in the same bed every night until you finish your contract whereas I've stayed in about 80 different hotel rooms since leaving New Mexico. Both jobs present a unique set of challenges.

When you tour a musical it can be difficult to keep focused and stay consistent because unlike ships where you have a lot of variety with headliners, dance sets, etc. you're only playing one two and a half hour show for nine months straight and it has to be the same show every single night. With Royal, I find the challenging part is adapting to a very broad array a musical styles: one night you're a big band drummer and the next night you're playing the Beatles. You have to tap into a lot of different musical identities on a cruise ship.

How long were you working on cruise ships prior to making the transition?

I had been working for Royal Caribbean for about 2 years when I went out with Dirty Dancing.

Did you actively seek the drum chair at *Dirty Dancing* or did you get the call and make the move?

I'm actually playing the percussion book on Dirty Dancing. This tour is unique in that it travels with both a drummer and a percussionist. I found this tour completely by accident. Between cruise contracts I always touch base with what's happening back at home. On my last contact I decided to give myself three months off to pursue some different projects. I've been chasing a dream of playing Broadway shows since I was about 15 years old and was planning to head back to New York City. I've been fortunate enough to meet a lot of incredible musicians working on Broadway while I was studying at school and I've stayed in touch with most of them over the years. A good friend of mine reached out while I was home and put me in touch with a contractor for the National Tour of Kinky Boots. I auditioned for the show and although I didn't get the book, it did get me looking into other tours. Just before my three month ship hiatus was coming to a close I found a job posting online for the percussion chair on the Dirty Dancing tour. It was an old posting so I figured they'd filled the spot but I applied anyway. A couple weeks later I was negotiating coming back to a contract

at Royal when I was contacted by the Music Coordinator at Dirty Dancing offering me the book for the tour.

What are the similarities and differences between playing percussion for *Dirty Dancing* and as an orchestra member on cruise ships?

I'd say the biggest difference between the two jobs for me personally is switching from the drum set to playing hand drums and mallet percussion. When I studied at school I majored in classical percussion but I've spent most of my career after school on the drum set. It's been a rewarding albeit challenging experience coming back to latin percussion. You really have to take care of your hands. Generally speaking the biggest similarity between the two is time sacrificed away from home. Contract lengths for tours and ships can run about the same which means you're usually forfeiting the better part of a year away from home. That can be very difficult especially for those who are in a relationship or have kids. On a ship you're responsible for a lot more than just music. As part of the crew you have to run safety drills, and as a member of the hotel department you can sometimes be asked to help with activities that don't necessarily pertain to your job specifically. On a tour you're only job is the show: one show for nine months. When you live on the road, you have to be responsible for your food and housing. On a ship that's all taken care of for you. Just because one job suits you may not mean the other will. Some guys like playing the same music night after night and other guys would rather sightread something different every week. Personally, I like going back and forth.

What would you say to an up and coming drummer eager to work for a company similar to *Dirty Dancing*? For example what would you consider the appropriate ways to prepare oneself for the gig etc?

If you're looking for work in theatre, search for as many opportunities to play shows as you can whether it be community shows, high school

musicals, etc. The more shows you play, the better. Musical theatre is a different monster than other ensembles. You'll need to know how to follow a conductor and a click. Specifically speaking, drummers who are interested in playing shows need to have a very broad vocabulary in terms of musical styles. Simply focusing on swing or rock alone is not enough. When you're playing a show, take a listen to the cast recording. Learn how to mimic other drummers. Network with as many people in the field as you can. Talk to them and when you do, don't be afraid to be completely honest with them. People can't help you or offer any meaningful advice if they don't know what you're looking to do. Remain persistent. If things don't play out the way you want the first time, keep working and try again. It took me a few attempts to land the jobs with both *Royal Caribbean* and *Dirty Dancing*.

What's your current schedule look like roughly speaking at *Dirty Dancing*?

We have been playing all over the country since starting in September. Moving forward we'll play a few weeks in Canada before moving to Chicago, Boston, and closing in Atlantic City.

Do you find time to practice/compose between touring?

Definitely. I haven't written much since coming out to tour but it's easy to find time to do so. Practicing is certainly doable. For the most part, we have enough down time in the theatres between sound check and show to run through anything we like. Our drummer Kevin is nice enough to let me jump on the kit from time to time to work on anything I need to. We also have a few breaks in the tour schedule where we can fly home and I can work from there.

Do you play/practice any other instruments other than the drums/would you like to?

I play a very little bit of piano and I sing although how well is certainly up

for debate. I have always wanted to learn guitar.

Do you see value in drummers learning another instrument and/or composing music?

Absolutely! Playing another instrument can open up a whole different perspective that can be invaluable when going back to the kit. If you have an idea of how a pianist or guitarist or violinist etc approaches a piece of music, you're better equipped help support them from the drums. It's also nice to have a musical outlet that is not chiefly your profession; something you can enjoy just for it's own sake.

Have you considered/are you considering relocating for your career in music?

The option is and has always been on the table for me. I have never felt more at home than in New York City, but if traveling has taught me anything, it's that the world is far too beautiful to live in just one place your entire life.

What's the most common trait/skill you've noticed artists are seeking when hiring a professional drummer?

I'd say the ability to lead and follow simultaneously. The drum set is a very powerful instrument and most music directors I've worked with want someone solid and intuitive enough to drive the ensemble while still being attentive and subtle enough to give them exactly what they ask for. Knowing when to follow and knowing when to take charge is a balancing act and the more experience you have, the better you become at it.

Do you have any pet peeves that you would recommend up coming drummers to be mindful of or artists to keep in mind when hiring drummers?

I don't really have any pet peeves, but I'd encourage younger drummers to keep an open mind.

What's your survival tips for life on the road as a sideman drummer?

Take care of your body. It's very expensive and time consuming to fix and you're going to need it for a long time.

What's the most valuable career investment you've made to get where you are now?

Networking. Music is such a social profession. I can't stress enough how important and rewarding it is to connect with as many musicians as possible.

Is there anything you wish you did differently that in hindsight you feel would've position you better?

Not necessarily. I think it's really easy to play out a hypothetical scenario where everything goes the way you want it to had you made different decisions but in reality, you really have no way of knowing for sure. I'm happy to be here and grateful for what I've experienced up to this point.

Are you currently getting lessons from any other musicians? Or plan to?

I am not currently, but I certainly plan to in the future.

If you could simply create more time for yourself, how would you use it? For example, would you invest in more music related skills or study, or spend more time at home etc..?

I would love to learn another language. I have always admired those who speak multiple languages fluently.

Regarding the digital world, how much time and energy do you invest in social media/ online presence vs face to face meetings,

networking and branding etc?

I invest quite a bit of time into my online presence. I think it's important to have a way to represent yourself when you're unable to be there in person. Most of my auditions and applications for gigs have come as a result of YouTube or Skype videos. As a theatre percussionist, it can be extremely useful to be technologically savvy. Many of the shows that are being written now incorporate electronics: Roland Sampling Pads, MalletKATs, Triggers. Electronic Drum Sets etc. It's not imperative that you know the ins and outs of all that equipment but it can certainly make your life easier and lets face it, it's fun to play with those things too. I do think it's important to take as many live auditions as you possibly can. There are just certain things that are hard to convey in a video and it gives you the opportunity to contend with nerves.

Did you ever have an 8 hour a day practice schedule before working full time?

I wish I could tell you that I did but I'd say after university the most I go on a daily basis is around 2-4 hours a day. During school I'd net about 5-6 hours a day.

Do you/did you spend much time transcribing other musicians?

I didn't start until after I left school and one of my teachers recommended it. I wish I had started sooner because it was incredibly helpful!

If you could only practice three things what would they be?

I suppose it would depend on how vague or specific I was to be. Vaguely speaking I'm always trying to improve my time and creativity. Specifically speaking I know that I could probably spend a lifetime trying to dissect some of the grooves and fills that Larnell Lewis lays down with Snarky

Puppy.

If you had to play in one band only, who would it be?

Harry Connick Jr.'s Band. Those guys are having fun!

If you could pivot to another occupation, what would it be?

I would love to learn how to make drum shells. I think if I wasn't playing drums I'd love to learn what goes in to making them. Who knows, maybe I'll get my chance someday.

Have you ever wished you weren't a musician or felt stuck?

There have been times. This line of work demands a great deal of sacrifice. It can be a very lonely at times and I'd be lying if on my worst days I didn't question whether or not it was worth it. However, when I reflect on the the times I consider to have been the happiest, I can't deny it's been while I've been making music. When I'm feeling stuck or unmotivated, I take some time and listen to some of the drummers who've inspired me to start playing and continue to do so. Some of my favourites: Bernie Dresel, Buddy Rich, Carter Beauford, Clif Almond, Daniel Glass, Dave Weckl, David Garibaldi, Sean McDaniel, Mark Guiliana, Gene Krupa, Irv Cottler, Jeff Hamilton, Mel Lewis, Larnell Lewis, Lewis Nash, Steve Gadd, Tommy Igoe, Peter Erskine, Tony Williams and the list continues to grow.

Where would you like to be in 5 years?

I'd like to have all or at least a significant amount of my student debt paid off. I'd love it if I were to be working steady in New York on a show but honestly I'll be happy if I'm just healthy and still playing.

Do you have any other hobbies or interests outside of music?

I love to cook although my aptitude for it is questionable depending on

which ex-girlfriend or former roommate you ask.

What would you say to up and coming drummers who wish to have a sustained and fulfilling career as a full time performing musician?

The best advice I could give is to remain patient, persistent, and open-minded. The only thing I can promise to anyone working in music is that eventually things are not going to go the way you want them to. That being said, some of the most extraordinary experiences and opportunities I've come across in my career have come out of situations where things didn't go at all according to plan. I had been chasing tours and ships for years before I was finally offered a job. I started writing to the same contractor that offered me Dirty Dancing six years ago and I never got a response until last summer. I auditioned for cruise ships for two years out of school before I was offered a position. I even failed my first audition to get into the university that I would eventually graduate from. However, looking back and tracing the steps that led me to where I am now, I wouldn't want it any other way. My teacher at school once told me that you keep giving your absolute best every opportunity you get and eventually someone is going to take a chance on you and all you need is to be ready when the time comes.

Any other comments or insights you wish to share?

Wear sunscreen.

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