



Born to Run



everyone has a true calling. Will you recognize yours when it's time?

Musical geniuses like Mozart and Hendrix began playing, even composing, almost before they could walk. I wasn't quite so gifted. I was just a normal kid growing up in Jacksonville, Florida, in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Music wasn't that much of a draw to me, not when there were sports and playing to be done. The first song I remember liking was Johnny Horton's "The Battle of New Orleans," but even then, it wasn't an "aha" moment. I just liked the groove.

Somewhere around my tenth birthday, though, my parents decided it was time to get me into music. They settled on piano; my cousin played it, and it seemed like the best option at the time. They tracked down a piano teacher, who offered up some sage advice: "Don't buy a piano."

My parents were confused. Why not buy a piano? This was an *investment*, right? Why throw money away on a rental when this was something that the boy could do for the rest of his life?

But that piano teacher knew a thing or two. She'd seen parents with visions of their children playing standing-room-only recitals, while all along, the children had different ideas.

"If the child is interested in the piano," the teacher said, "there's always time to buy the piano. But if the child isn't interested in the piano, you're stuck with a very expensive piece of firewood."

"So what are our options?" my parents asked. The piano teacher gave an answer that makes me cringe to this day: "You can rent an accordion from me."

So there it was. Technically the first instrument I ever learned to play was an accordion with that droning, bleating tone.

The lessons I took largely consisted of scales and exercises, running do-re-mi up and down the accordion's keyboard. I did well enough at it, I suppose, but my heart wasn't in it. I was ten years old, trying to play an instrument that's not exactly the most glamorous or easy to play.

What made matters worse, from a teaching perspective, was that I discovered I could play songs by ear.

I'd be sitting at home watching cartoons, and I'd start to pick the theme songs out on the accordion. I could listen to, say, the theme from *Popeye* and play, "I'm Popeye the sailor man," with only a little bit of trial-and-error.

This was a revelation to me, and one that anyone who has been involved in any kind of creative endeavor, be it designing Web sites or devising sales techniques, can intuitively understand. There's a proper way to do things, a prescribed path. It's why everything from roads to baseball fields to sheet music has boundary lines. But the true discoveries come when you cross those lines and veer off into the unknown.

Of course, if you do veer off the beaten path, be prepared for some unpleasantness when you return. Each week I'd return to practice, and my teacher would ask me how I was doing with my scales. "The scales are fine," I'd say, "but listen to this!" And I'd play her the *Popeye* theme, and she'd tell me to knock it off and get back to "serious" music.

Nothing against my poor accordion teacher, but after just a few weeks of that, I'd had enough and walked away.

Even all these years later, I do wonder what would have happened if I'd played piano rather than accordion. I might have followed through with my lessons, learned my scales, and become something of a decent player. To this day, I wish I played more piano.

Parents often wrestle with this idea of how to get their kid into music. The kid sees his favorite bands onstage or plays the Guitar Hero video game, and obviously, he (or she, of course) wants to be a rock star.



He wants to stand onstage in front of thousands of fans, cranking out songs at ear-bleeding volume. He wants it so badly that his parents figure it can't be good for him. Like candy and cartoons, if he wants it that much, there must be something wrong with it.

So they try to steer him toward what they think is the "healthier" side of music, starting small with an acoustic guitar. But it's tougher to play, it doesn't sound as cool, and most important, it's nowhere near as loud. Still, there's a perception that you have to learn the basics on an acoustic guitar before you can rock out with an electric one.

Nonsense. If the kid wants the flaming red guitar, and not getting it means the kid's not going to be playing music, by all means, get the kid a flaming red guitar. You never know how much further someone will go doing something he wants to do rather than something he has to do.

If you're a manager, take a close look at the people under your control. I certainly don't mean to equate them with children, but there's a lesson to be learned from the flaming red guitar. Chances are that your employees aren't going to refuse a new project assignment from you outright. (If they are, you've got deeper problems; we'll discuss those sorts of things when we get to Chapter Seven on band strife.)

However, just because you've sent them to a particular conference or encouraged them to take a particular skills course doesn't mean they're going to like it or get anything out of it. Know your people; know their



strengths. Don't send the homebodies on the road when you can send the smooth talkers. Otherwise they'll end up like the kids who don't get the electric guitars: resentful, then bored, then uninterested. But while the kid without the guitar can't walk out the door and find a new set of parents who'll give him what he wants, an employee who doesn't feel challenged or interested might not be an employee for much longer. And it might not be your choice when this employee decides to go.

The Moment It All Clicked

My story doesn't end with me walking away from the accordion, of course.

For me, as for so many of my peers, the defining moment of my musical life was seeing the Beatles appear on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. Over the course of three Sundays in February 1964, the Beatles were beamed into millions of American living rooms and changed the course of music history forever. They played songs that we all know by heart now, but back then nobody had ever heard anything like "I Want to Hold Your Hand," "All My Loving," and "I Saw Her Standing There."

I saw the Beatles, and that was it. I was hooked, and there was nothing else I could imagine myself doing again. The Beatles influenced so many people in so many ways; some liked the long hair, some liked the cool suits, some liked the hundreds of screaming fans.

For me, it was the electric guitar.

There was something to that look, that style that John Lennon and George Harrison had, the way their guitars cut through everything around them. I couldn't explain it then, and I'm not sure I can explain it now. But something in the way they looked onstage touched me on a deep level, and I knew I had to be a part of that. After that night, I talked my father into getting me a guitar, and never looked back.

There's a school of thought that holds that rock'n'roll is all about "feel"—that traditional musical elements like notation and sheet music have no place when you're getting up in front of a crowd to rock. And that's true to a certain extent. We're not the symphony; our music breathes and can change from night to night.

However, long before you can get up there in front of the crowd, you've got to put in the time with those traditional musical elements. Guitarists call it "woodshedding," as in "going out to the woodshed to practice." You spend the downtime practicing so that you can spend the uptime playing.

The great guitarist Larry Carlton once told me that his philosophy toward the guitar was simple: "Play what you love, but practice what you must." In other words, you want to play rock guitar? Great! But make sure you practice the basic fundamentals, as well as jazz, country, and blues. When you're young, it's a delicate balance of keeping yourself interested in the instrument while building a foundation of musical knowledge.

When I was in seventh grade, I was fortunate enough to find a teacher who helped me bridge the



gap between playing what I wanted and learning what I needed. And as it turned out, he was only two years older than me. Terry Cosgrove was a guitar teacher ahead of his time, one who showed me only what I needed to get up to speed and play some simple rock riffs. He gave me the gratification of playing the riff to a song I could hear on the radio. Maybe I didn't fully grasp how one riff related to another, but early on, I didn't need to. Just developing the love affair with the guitar was enough.

Think about what put you where you are in your career. Was it a family business? Did you follow a mentor? Did you just happen to answer the right job posting? For any job, dozens of elements have to come together at exactly the right time for you to be where you are right now.

Think back to everything that had to fall in place. A chance meeting at a cocktail party. One more phone call to a prospective client. One more résumé sent out. When you look at it that way, it's fairly amazing that you are where you are. Would I still be where I am if I hadn't seen that *Ed Sullivan Show*? Possibly. But possibly not. Would you still be where you are if you hadn't had that one moment of opportunity?


The obvious next step, then, is to take that opportunity and build on it. Put yourself in a position for opportunities to arrive, and you'll be amazed at the doors that can open.


For me, the door was labeled "Marshmallow Steamshovel."



The Best Band Names in the World

When I was growing up, everybody around me either played in a band or wanted to. Those of us lucky to be playing in bands tended to jump ship pretty frequently, going from band to band every year. It wasn't like a summer romance; it was much more serious than that. In my early teens, I joined some bands that were unforgettable, if only for the names:

 *The Summer Sons.* My first band. My guitar teacher invited me to join him in this one. We'd play British Invasion songs, and tunes like Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs' "Woolly Bully." (Years later, I got to play "Woolly Bully" alongside Sam the Sham himself. If someone had told me in 1965 that I'd be doing that thirty years later, I can't imagine how I would have reacted.)

 *Marshmallow Steamshovel.* By now we'd started incorporating a little bit of soul into our repertoire, playing songs from Motown and Memphis. We were still trying to imitate the Beatles—everybody was at that point—and since they'd released *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, we rented some fancy marching-band costumes to try to tap into their look. We ended up looking more like Paul Revere and the Raiders—a little odd and out of place in the gyms and recreation centers where we played.



🎸 *Doomsday Refreshment Committee.* Still a cool name for a band, if you ask me. Our drum head featured the old Kool-Aid Man pitcher with a mushroom cloud coming out of the top of his head! Doomsday was the time I started thinking of myself as a real guitarist, for reasons I'll explain in a moment.

🎸 *Sweet Rooster.* This was band in which I started playing with Donnie Van Zant and Ken Lyons, two of my future bandmates in 38. I didn't know it at the time, but I'd be spending most of the next twenty-five years with them.

What do all four of these bands have in common besides the strange names? In all four, I was learning not just the music but the lifestyle of the musician. That meant learning to play well as part of a larger group. This is a major theme of this book, one we'll return to many times, and here's where it starts.

If you can't jell with your bandmates almost from the start, it's going to be a long, hard road for you, and one that might end sooner than you expect. (Ask Pete Best about that. Pete was a drummer who didn't fit in so well with the other three members of his group. They cut him loose, and while he struggled with a solo career, they went on to become the Beatles.)

Working in small groups can be the bane of your workday existence. You've got one person who wants to dominate, one who wants to do nothing but cruise on the rest of the group's efforts, one who goes along to get along. We'll go into more detail about small-group interrelations in later chapters, but for now, the focus should

be on yourself. Every time you find yourself part of a new team, you should be asking yourself these questions:

- 🎸 What's my role in this group?
- 🎸 What do I bring to the group that no one else can?
- 🎸 How am I contributing to (or detracting from) the success of the group?
- 🎸 How much responsibility will I have in keeping the group afloat?
- 🎸 Which of my teammates can I learn from, and what can I learn?

This kind of self-examination will help you become a better group member much faster than if you just show up with your instrument and expect to join the band. Although we were in our early teens at this time, we were already working our way through these kinds of tough questions. Some of us answered the right way and ended up making a career of all this; others decided that they didn't like the answers and moved on to other pursuits. No harm in that, certainly. It's far better to find out too early what you're suited for than too late.

So let's take a closer look at how I answered the questions above:



- *What's my role in this group?* Initially I was the rhythm guitarist. That's the guy who plays the chords in the background, keeping the song moving while the lead guitarist steps to the front for the solos. It was an important

apprenticeship, watching how the group worked together all around me.

- *What do I bring to the group that no one else can?*

In my earliest groups, there wasn't much I could do that a bunch of other guys couldn't. But I did have a cool guitar—a 1967 Fender Telecaster Custom—and a willingness to try out new ideas and work with my bandmates. I also had a horrible little mustache, but the less said about that, the better.

- *How am I contributing to (or detracting from) the success of the group?* When you're young and in a band, it's not just about what goes on onstage. You've got to handle all sides of the process, from booking dates to publicizing concerts to hauling equipment to (we hoped) getting paid and handling the money. I was always willing to jump in and take on more than my share of those responsibilities in order to do what I could to keep the group moving forward.

- *How much responsibility will I have in keeping the group afloat?* Since most of these early groups didn't last more than a summer, I guess you'd think I didn't have much success, right? And you'd be correct—sort of. Every musician's early bands are like training wheels, meant to be discarded as you move up to higher speeds. Sure, Keith Richards and Mick Jagger have known each other since elementary school, but they're the exception rather than the rule. Figure out how much work you'll need to put in versus how much value you'll get out, and then you can decide how well your group is faring.

- *Which of my teammates can I learn from, and what can I learn?* Now we're getting into the heart of it all. You can, of course, learn something from anybody,

even if it's what not to do in a certain situation. But what propels you forward is when you learn from those who have been where you are and have already stepped ahead. For me, the Doomsday Refreshment Committee, a tiny band, was the launching pad for a career that put me in front of sold-out stadiums. And it was all because of one guy who played me the blues.



Nobody this side of Mozart is born a musician. But almost anyone can practice into musical competence. It's the same way with your business: figure out what your particular calling is, and work your way toward that.



When you're part of a group, you've got to ask yourself some questions to make sure you're being the best teammate you can possibly be: What's my role in this group? What do I bring to the group that no one else can? How am I contributing to (or detracting from) the success of the group? How much responsibility will I have in keeping the group afloat? Which of my teammates can I learn from, and what can I learn? Thinking in global terms like this, looking beyond your group's to-do list, will help your group focus more on what needs to be done rather than how it's going to get done.



Examine your own career. What's the most fascinating part to you, and what part do you wish you could put behind you once and for all? If you were told to take one element of your career and do only that element and you'd get all the benefits you're receiving right now, what element would that be?

