

by Herman Kluge



Moonlighting By Moondancing:

The **Passion** To Play After Work Drives **Houston Band**



Left to right: Herman Kluge – guitar, Mike Kahn – vocals, Dee Dee Dochen – vocals, Steve Finkelman – bass guitar, Chris Brown – drums, Rodney Merwin – piano and (not pictured) Bobby Markoff – keyboards.

“Don’t give up your day job.” Musicians hear this advice early on when they make the fateful decision whether or not to play music for a living. And if they decide not to play music full-time, then it becomes the mantra, to be repeated silently or out loud, in the event the decision comes into question. For many years, Rick Gardner, a professional photographer (and a fine banjo player), played in the bluegrass band “Fat Chance.” Asked how the band got its name, Rick would say “It’s the answer to the age-old question: “Can a person make a living playing bluegrass music?”” Fat Chance.

That answer though, is not the sole province of bluegrass. The same rule can be applied to many other musical genres as well. The starving artist isn’t a fictional invention. And if you think this isn’t true, invite a professional musician to a buffet. Whatever the case, the dream

rules no longer apply. In addition to managing demanding careers with long hours, they have second “careers” as musicians that they pursue with the same drive and determination as the one that earns their living. Make no mistake - the first career always comes first. (Remember “Don’t give up your day job?”) But as long as there is time and energy and the will to play, they make time for the Tuesday night rehearsal and the Saturday night gig.

HR + PR + CPA + CFO + VP + DDS = MOONDANCE

One Houston-based musical group that typifies this dichotomous lifestyle is the Moondance Band. Singer Dee Dee Dochen runs a marketing communications consultancy. Singer Mike Kahn recruits corporate human resources executives. Keyboardist Bobby Markoff runs an

Can a person make a living playing bluegrass music? Fat Chance

to live the creative life starts young and dies hard. Many a teenage boy or girl picks up a musical instrument or learns to sing while harboring secret dreams of becoming the next Mariah Carey or Eric Clapton. (I’m hoping no one goes into music hoping to be the next Millie Vanilli, but each to his own tastes.) However, inevitably sometime after high school or college, Adulthood and Life and Reality and the other curses of the dreaming class intervene and the (now) woman or man must choose between a life of making music and a life of ‘The Job.’ Or do they?

Either/OR? – Maybe Not

A select group of people now in professional occupations, as well as corporate managers, business owners and executives, have decided that the old “either/or”

established dental practice. Piano man Rodney Merwin practices law. Bass player Steve Finkelman is the CFO of an importing business. Drummer Chris Brown works for the State Comptroller. And their guitar player is a recently retired Vice President of Facilities for an investment firm and newly minted writer of magazine articles.

Although each of these professionals has a different set of work obligations as well as time demands for family and personal projects, they all somehow find time for music in between these competing layers of life activities. So how do they do it? Steve is straightforward. “You find time to fit in the things that are important to you.” Bobby thinks it’s all about time management. “It’s always tempting to over-obligate yourself—if you avoid doing that, you’re okay.” Mike jokes, “You must have a really understanding and forgiving spouse.” Dee Dee says it’s all about



balance. “It’s one of the ‘buckets’ I need to fill to round out my life. Making music feeds my soul – and it’s fun!” Any way you look at it, it is a bit like being the plate spinner on the Ed Sullivan Show.

So what desire drives a person to give up this most precious commodity - free time - for something they were expected to have abandoned long ago? The answer is unanimous: they all do it as a labor of love. For Steve, it’s instant gratification. “Watching people having a good time while you play - that’s rewarding.” “Sure, it’s fun, Mike adds. “Music is a great diversion from the stress of work life. It keeps you sane.” Rodney agrees. “It’s definitely a stress reliever. It keeps you young.” And that’s another recurring theme - it keeps you young. You don’t have time to become a couch potato when you’re spending your spare time in the practice room or on the stage. And the last time I checked, playing music burns calories and counts as an aerobic activity. Extra points for exercise!

Considering the above, it’s fair to ask whether or not these professionals by day, musicians by night are living, to quote the song by Bad Company, “my rock and roll fantasy.” Bobby disagrees. “I’ve played in rock bands, but that was never my inclination. I have a jazz trio and a good part of my enjoyment is the intellectual side of music.” Steve comes from the jazz world as well. “Playing rock is fun, but I don’t fantasize about it.” “Early on,” Mike remembers, “I thought about being a cantor. That’s not your typical rock and roll fantasy.” After college and two years as a kindergarten teacher, Dee Dee sang cabaret in a dinner theater for a year “to get it out of my system” before tackling the business world. Rodney laughs, “There’s a

certain flamboyance to the rock and roll life style that has appeal, but no - I’m not living that particular fantasy.”

The “Wow” Factor

Does the performing life ever interfere or come into conflict with the professional life, or does the business world look down on the musician life as something unsavory? “It’s quite the opposite,” says Bobby. “If anything, there’s a ‘wow’ factor.” Steve and Dee Dee agree that most people get a kick out of learning about their musical sidelines. Mike thinks that sharing his musical leanings with co-workers and clients builds stronger relationships. “People from the business world seem to have this fascination with musicians and performers, so when you invite them to a gig to see you play, they really appreciate being included.” Maybe to some extent the non-performers live vicariously through their musical friends. Maybe this explains the popularity of “American Idol.”

Read the Client = Read the Audience

Do the experiences and skills from the professional life ever make their way into the musical life? Steve emphasizes discipline and responsibility. “You work together to achieve your goal of a good performance.” Mike adds, “Working in HR demands strong people skills and the ability to ‘read’ people. I use these same skills to relate to my audience.” Dee Dee enlivens performance to communicating a message, which is core to her business. Bobby looks at it another way. “There is a well-worn stereotype of the artist or musician who has lousy business sense. Not all

artists or musicians are this way, but my point is that when you bring a bit of business acumen to the table, you get a more professional result. If you can approach the business part of music in a business-like fashion, everyone benefits.”

Piano Lessons at Six

Most got started early. Bobby took his first piano lesson at age six, Rodney at age eight. Steve and Chris started at age ten. At age six, Dee Dee sat at her family’s new piano and sounded out “Maria” from “West Side Story.” Mike remembers his beginning. “I began singing with bands in high school, and haven’t stopped since.” So, given the chance, would each of these professionals ever “give up their day job” and chuck their work career in exchange for the life of a full-time musician? The universal answer - a resounding “NO!”

Dessert Is Our Treat, Not the Meal

“This isn’t about regretting what you want to do, but can’t,” says Mike. Steve suggests that the allure might wear off. “If you only eat dessert for every meal, then it’s no longer a treat.” The group agrees that old idea that you have to be one thing or the other is an outdated concept. And there is base of pragmatism and practicality underlying the career choices, and these choices are fulfilling. “I have a great practice and I like the people,” says Bobby. Rodney loves being a plaintiff attorney as well. “It’s very energetic work.” Dee Dee is reflective about her choices. “My life is a tight weave of business, philanthropy, personal relationships, and music - all of which require creative energy. There is a natural relationship between entertaining and the hospitality industry, which is where I come from. Hospitality is a form of entertainment, because it’s about creating a happy, memorable experience for people. And that’s what we do on stage with Moondance.”

So what happens when the professional work life ends and it’s time for retirement? Will the full-time musician finally emerge? Mike thinks he’ll sing as long as he’s able, but probably not full-time. “That’s not my plan. Music is something I’ll continue to do as long as it makes



sense to do so and as long as I enjoy it.” Bobby, Rodney, Steve and Dee Dee agree - as long as it fun, it’s worth doing.

So how many corporate boardrooms, doctors’ offices, lawyers’ offices, and other work dens harbor the daytime professional who seconds as the nighttime performer? Consider this the next time you go to a social function, a wedding, a bar mitzvah, or a club featuring live music and ask yourself - what does the guitar player REALLY do?

Herman Kluge recently retired as vice president of facilities and administration for AIM Investments after spending 32 years managing corporate facilities and real estate. He serves on the executive board of the Houston Chapter of IFMA and is an advisory board member of the RBH Yates Museum. A musician performing in and around Houston for more than 40 years, he is a published writer of fiction, non-fiction, and screenplays. Herman can be reached via email at voxpopeye@tastygrubs.com.