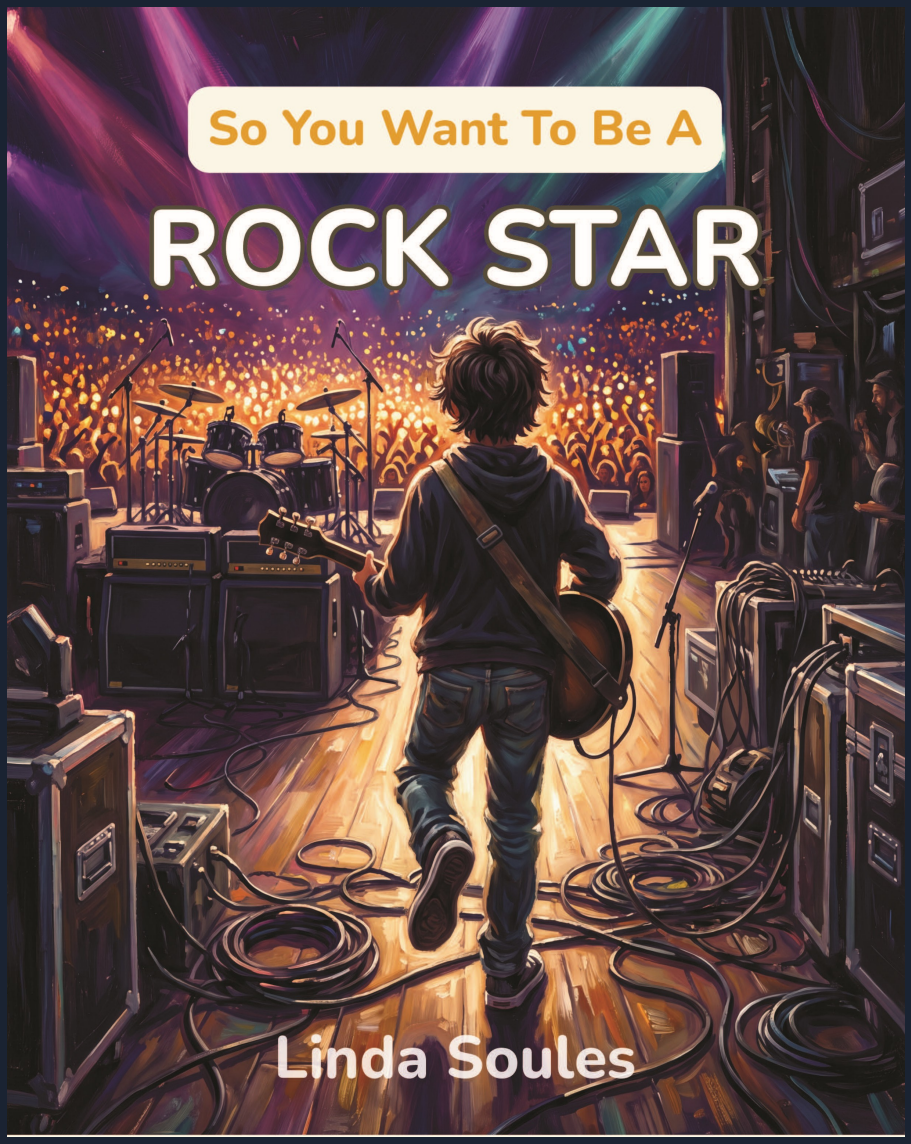
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So You Want To Be A Rock Star

Linda Soules

BookGist Summary

So You Want To Be A Rock Star

by Linda Soules

Genre: Children's Nonfiction

Key Takeaways

• A rock song often grows from a small idea—a riff, melody, rhythm, or lyric—developed through experimentation, rehearsal, and collaboration. Save ideas as demos or notes before they disappear.

• A band succeeds through chemistry and teamwork: musicians listen to one another, share credit and practical work, compromise creatively, and agree in writing about song ownership and money.

• Being a rock musician involves much more than performing. Artists may write, rehearse, record, plan setlists, promote music, book travel, sell merchandise, manage budgets, and understand contracts.

• There is no single required path into rock music. Lessons, school music programs, self-teaching, music schools, and years of playing with others can all help build the skills and experience a musician needs.

• The work can be creatively rewarding—especially when audiences sing a band’s songs back to it—but income is uncertain, touring is costly, and many musicians supplement their earnings with teaching or other music jobs.

• Hearing protection, physical fitness, rest, and mental-health support are essential parts of a sustainable music career. Loud sound can cause permanent hearing damage, so musicians should use appropriate earplugs and in-ear monitors.

• Rock has diverse musical roots, especially in Black American gospel, blues, and rhythm and blues, alongside country and folk. Artists around the world have carried those roots forward and reshaped the music.

• Persistence and stage courage matter as much as raw talent: bands face rejection, small crowds, mistakes, and setbacks, and improve by continuing to practice and perform.

• Fans, families, teachers, crew members, and other music professionals are part of a band's success. Rock can connect people, preserve memories, offer comfort, and support communities through teaching and benefit performances.

• Future musicians can begin now with modest tools: practice regularly, learn songs by ear, keep an idea notebook, start a band with friends, perform wherever possible, and protect their hearing.

Who Should Read This Book

This book is ideal for curious children and young teens who love music, dream of performing, or want to understand what a band's life is really like. It is especially useful for readers who are just starting an instrument: it offers accessible explanations of riffs, recording, equipment, touring, and music careers, along with practical first steps such as practicing regularly, keeping an idea notebook, forming a band, and protecting their hearing. Parents, teachers, and music mentors can also use it to start conversations about teamwork, persistence, creative expression, and the realities of earning a living in music. Unlike a biography of one musician or a history focused mainly on famous bands, this career guide combines musical history with a broad view of the work behind performances—from songwriting and contracts to road crews, merchandise, and mental health. Its tone is upbeat without pretending the profession is easy or reliably lucrative. Readers interested in music but unsure whether they want to be performers will also find a useful map of adjacent careers, including production, sound engineering, teaching, instrument building, and music therapy.

Chapter Summaries

What If You Were a Rock Star?

The book begins with the excitement of imagining a life onstage: powerful lights, loud guitars, and an audience singing along. It also makes clear that a band is more than a performance. It is a group of people creating music together while managing rehearsals, gear, money, merchandise, and relationships. The most exhilarating moments depend on work and care that the audience may never see. Songwriting often begins with a riff or another small musical

spark. Bandmates build around it, finding a beat, bass line, melody, lyrics, verses, and a recurring chorus. A catchy hook can make a song memorable, and placeholder lyrics can help writers develop an idea before the final words arrive; Paul McCartney, for example, temporarily called the melody that became “Yesterday” “Scrambled Eggs.” The chapter encourages young musicians to experiment, practice together, and keep collecting ideas.

What a Rock Star Actually Does

A musician’s work stretches from the first saved idea to the final note of a show. Recording rough demos on a phone can preserve a riff or melody, as Keith Richards did when he captured the idea for “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction” in the middle of the night. Bands rehearse until they can play tightly, plan a setlist that carries a concert from its opening to its encore, and record with producers and engineers who help shape, mix, and master the music. The business side calls for attention as well as creativity. Bands may release music through a label or independently, hire managers and booking agents, earn songwriting royalties, and sell merchandise. The book stresses agreeing in writing about who owns songs and how earnings are divided, and getting help understanding contracts before signing. Even a seemingly odd request can have a practical purpose: Van Halen’s brown-M&M test helped the band check whether venues had read important safety instructions for its elaborate stage production.

Where They Work and How They Build a Career

Rock musicians may work in garages, practice rooms, recording studios, clubs, festivals, theaters, and stadiums. Most begin with small performances—sometimes at school, for friends, or in local venues—and use each show to gain experience and find listeners. The career can be financially unpredictable: many musicians are self-employed or work part-time, and some teach lessons or take other jobs to support themselves. There is no required degree or single route into the profession. Players may take lessons, join school band or choir, attend a rock program, study popular music at college, or teach themselves. Learning music notation can be useful, but guitarists can also use tablature, and the book notes that Jimi Hendrix did not read sheet music. It also introduces related careers: session musicians, players for film and television, touring sidemen, music teachers, sound engineers, producers, instrument repairers, tour managers, and music therapists.

The Tools of the Trade

The book explains how the core instruments help a band create its sound. An electric guitar’s pickups turn string vibrations into an electrical signal, which an amplifier makes loud; pushing that signal can create distortion, while pedals add effects. The bass plays lower notes and locks in with the drums to create the groove. A drum kit combines instruments such as the bass drum, snare, tom-toms, hi-hat, and cymbals, and drummers use a metronome to develop reliable timing while coordinating hands and feet. The chapter also treats hearing and

recording equipment as practical necessities. In-ear monitors let musicians hear a personal mix onstage, and specialized earplugs reduce volume while keeping music clear. A basic home studio can be built with a computer, recording software, microphone, headphones, and audio interface; musicians can record individual parts and layer them into a song. The message is encouraging: a bedroom setup can be enough to make demos or even complete recordings.

The Rewards and Difficulties of the Job

Among the greatest rewards is hearing an audience sing a band's own song back to it. Musicians may also value turning an unfinished riff into a recording, growing close to bandmates, discovering new places on tour, and learning that a song has helped a listener through a hard time. These experiences make music feel like a connection between creators and people they may never meet. The book balances those rewards with significant challenges. Streaming may bring in little money, touring costs include transportation, lodging, crew, and venue fees, and even a sold-out show does not guarantee profit. Long drives, missed family events, exhaustion, and pressure can affect musicians' mental health. Loud concerts also put hearing at risk, with noise-related hearing loss and tinnitus serious concerns. The book recommends protection, rest, and seeking support; it notes that organizations such as MusiCares offer help with medical care, mental health, and treatment. Bands may also face breakups and unresolved questions about AI-generated music and artists' rights.

Rock's Roots, Touring Life, and a Day on the Road

Rock's history begins well before stadium concerts. The book traces rock and roll to Black American gospel, blues, and rhythm and blues, mixed with country and folk. Sister Rosetta Tharpe's electric-guitar playing helped lay the groundwork before the phrase "rock and roll" became widely known. Artists including Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Fats Domino, Elvis Presley, and Buddy Holly became early stars, while musicians in many countries later developed their own rock styles. The book also notes vinyl's renewed popularity and its value to bands and fans as a physical format. A day-in-the-life example shows the less glamorous details of touring: loading equipment into a van, driving for hours, solving a forgotten-snare problem, carrying gear up narrow stairs, soundchecking, setting up a merchandise table, and playing for a small crowd after disappointing ticket sales. The band chooses to give the forty-five people who came its best performance anyway. The scene emphasizes that every show can build a following, and that adaptability, preparation, and generosity matter whether the venue is nearly empty or packed.

The People and Impact of Music

A band relies on a wide network of collaborators. Producers, recording engineers, managers, booking agents, publicists, tour managers, roadies, instrument technicians, sound engineers,

lighting designers, drivers, caterers, venue employees, and festival organizers all contribute. The chapter makes their roles concrete: a guitar technician can provide a freshly tuned instrument between songs, while a drum technician keeps spare sticks close by. Families and music teachers are also important sources of practical help and encouragement. Fans are not simply the audience; their attendance, purchases, and word-of-mouth support help a band grow. Music can bring strangers together, link generations, lift someone's mood, and preserve memories—even when other memories have faded. Rock musicians can also use their reach to help others through benefit concerts, mentoring, teaching, and donating instruments. Live Aid is offered as a major example of musicians joining forces to raise money and awareness for people facing famine.

The Qualities and Skills Behind the Music

The book identifies persistence, teamwork, creativity, discipline, and stage courage as central qualities for rock musicians. Rejection does not mean a career is over: the Beatles, for instance, were turned down by a record company before their success. Teamwork means listening, making room for other members' ideas, sharing credit and labor, and discussing after a show what worked and what could improve. Creativity may involve unusual sounds, homemade equipment, distinctive stage choices, or a fresh way of combining influences. Musicians also need skills that are easy to overlook. Bands plan budgets, track tour spending, estimate merchandise orders, and keep records of sales and venue cuts. They may make videos and post rehearsal or behind-the-scenes clips to help new listeners discover them, while keeping the music at the center. Physical fitness matters too: singing, drumming, lifting equipment, and performing under hot lights demand stamina. A practical next step is to build habits gradually—practice consistently, warm up, learn to manage simple business tasks, and perform even when nerves or mistakes appear.

Rock Stars, Inventions, and Unexpected Facts

Profiles of influential musicians show how varied paths into rock can be. Sister Rosetta Tharpe brought gospel, blues, and jazz into electric-guitar performances; Ann and Nancy Wilson built Heart as songwriters and instrumentalists; Brittany Howard developed her musical skills while working as a mail carrier; and Les Paul combined performance with important guitar and recording inventions. Brian May built the guitar he still plays with his father, while Ritchie Valens brought a traditional Mexican folk song to rock audiences through "La Bamba." Their stories emphasize resourcefulness, persistence, and personal voice. The book's sidebars add a playful history of sound and spectacle: a broken studio component helped inspire the fuzz pedal, Link Wray damaged an amplifier speaker to get a rougher tone, and the "Frying Pan" was an early commercially successful electric guitar. Other examples include Metallica performing in Antarctica through headphones, Rick Allen returning to performance with an adapted drum kit after losing an arm, and the Linda Lindas reaching a worldwide audience after a library performance video spread online. These stories invite

readers to experiment and imagine possibilities rather than wait for perfect equipment.

Getting Started and Imagining Your Future

The final practical advice is to begin with what is available: practice for a short time each day, learn songs by ear, record musical ideas in a notebook or on a phone, and start a band with friends. Playing together develops timing and communication in ways solo practice cannot. Young musicians can perform for family, at school events, or wherever an opportunity arises, while remembering that hearing protection is essential because damage can be permanent. School music programs and community rock camps provide additional ways to learn and meet collaborators. The book closes by asking readers to consider what makes their music distinctive, whether everyone in a band is being heard, and whether the musicians are enjoying themselves. It encourages children who tap rhythms, keep practicing, love creative collaboration, or feel energized by performing to consider the possibility of a music career without expecting instant success. The author's note frames rock as both a listening practice and a conversation across generations: musicians inherit, adapt, and add to what came before. Related careers—including singing, producing, composing, DJing, instrument building, and event planning—offer other ways to make music and bring people together.

Notable Quotes

> *"“A rock band is a small business on wheels.”"*

> *"“The bands that last take care of the music, the business, and each other.”"*

> *"“Most listeners don't notice the bass until it stops, and then the whole song suddenly sounds thin.”"*

> *"“Your ears are the most important instrument you own.”"*

> *"“Rock may be the loudest job in the world, and it is also, at heart, a listening job.”"*

> *"“If you have ever felt that the thing that makes you different is something to hide, it might be exactly what a band is missing.”"*

> *"“So, do you still want to be a rock star? Then go make some noise, and don't wait until you're good.”"*

Full Summary

So, you want to be a rock star: onstage with a guitar, a microphone, or a pair of drumsticks, while a crowd sings along to a song you wrote. You imagine the lights, the noise, and a whole room jumping together. Maybe you have drummed on a desk with pencils or sung into a

hairbrush in front of the mirror. Almost every rock star began by making a racket before anyone called it music.

The crowd sees the show, but not all the work behind it. A band is a small business on wheels. Its members write and rehearse songs, record music, load heavy equipment into vans, sell T-shirts, and decide how to share money fairly. Bands that last take care of the music, the practical work, and one another. Yet the effort is part of the excitement: when the drummer counts off and the first chord hits, the bass thumps in your chest, and a roomful of people can come alive together.

A rock song may begin with a riff, a short, catchy pattern played on guitar or bass. One person repeats it while the others join in. The drummer finds a beat, the bassist locks in with the drums, someone hums a melody, and someone else starts scribbling words. Slowly, separate ideas become a song. Many songs have verses that tell a story and a chorus that returns with the same words. A hook is the especially catchy part that stays in your head. Songwriters may use silly placeholder lyrics until the right words arrive. Paul McCartney woke up with the melody for “Yesterday” already in his head and called it “Scrambled Eggs” for a long time.

Then the band rehearses the song again and again, working until everyone can play tightly and hit the beat together. Musicians call the connection between them chemistry, and listeners can feel it. Even a simple song can sound huge when a band plays as one. A band name, meanwhile, can take longer to choose than the first song. Led Zeppelin came from a joke that the new band would go over like a “lead balloon”—that is, flop. They spelled “Led” so people would not pronounce it “leed.”

Writing and rehearsing are only the beginning. Musicians record ideas and perform them, and saving a new idea can be as important as inventing it. A rough recording is called a demo; many musicians use a phone to capture a riff or melody before it disappears. Keith Richards woke in the night in 1965, recorded the riff for the Rolling Stones’ “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction” on a tape player beside his bed, and went back to sleep. The tape preserved the riff—and about forty minutes of snoring. Before a show, bands also plan a setlist: the songs in the order they will play them, arranged to carry the audience from the opening blast to the final chord.

In a recording studio, a producer helps a band find its best sound. Engineers mix the recording by blending the parts so each can be heard, then master it, giving the finished song its final polish so it sounds good on different speakers. Performing takes musicians to gigs—live shows in coffeehouses, clubs, theaters, festivals, and, for a lucky few, arenas and stadiums. Touring can mean playing a different city almost every night for weeks. Singers have sometimes greeted the wrong city after so many shows, so some write the town’s name in big letters at the top of the setlist taped to the stage floor. A live performance requires stamina, and the best bands make each crowd feel important.

Bands must also make business decisions. Some sign with record labels, which pay for, release, and promote music; others release it themselves through online services that put songs on streaming platforms. As a band grows, it may hire a manager, usually paid about 15 to 20 percent of the band's income, and a booking agent, who arranges shows for about 10 percent. Songwriters receive royalties when their songs are streamed, sold, or played in public. It is wise for a band to agree in writing, early on, about who owns each song and how the money will be divided. Friendships have broken over money, while a clear agreement made when everyone gets along can prevent disputes. Musicians should understand contracts before signing; many famous rock stars signed bad deals when young and spent years trying to regain control of their songs. Music lawyers can help bands review agreements.

Bands also send venues a rider, a list of what they need for a show. Van Halen's 1980s rider famously requested backstage M&M's with every brown one removed. The unusual demand was a safety test. The band's huge stage production involved heavy equipment, and finding a brown M&M suggested that the venue might also have ignored important safety instructions.

Rock musicians work in garages, rehearsal and recording studios, and venues ranging from tiny coffeehouses to stadiums with 60,000 seats. Most bands begin locally, playing for friends, at school events, or in clubs, sometimes for free. Each performance offers a chance to improve and find new fans. About 170,000 people in the United States work as musicians and singers. In 2025, their median pay was about $48 an hour, but most did not work full time, and almost half were self-employed. Many musicians also teach lessons or take other jobs. Live music is a large business: in 2025, Live Nation drew about 159 million fans to roughly 55,000 shows.

There is no required degree or single route into rock. Lessons, school band, or a rock school can help musicians get started. Guitarists often learn from tab, or tablature, which shows where to place fingers on the strings; reading sheet music is not essential, though it can help. Jimi Hendrix, one of the greatest guitarists, never learned to read it. Some musicians study popular music at schools such as Berklee College of Music in Boston or the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts in England, which Paul McCartney helped start. Students can study songwriting, performance, or the music business. Others teach themselves. Whichever path they choose, years of practice, playing with other musicians, and performing repeatedly build skill and experience.

Some musicians earn a living in places audiences may not expect. Session musicians are hired to play on other artists' recordings. Carol Kaye performed on thousands of sessions in the 1960s, including hit songs and television theme music. She began as a guitarist and switched to bass in 1963 when a session's bass player failed to show up; within a few years, she was among Los Angeles's most in-demand bassists. Other musicians record for films,

television, commercials, or video games, play in house bands on cruise ships, at theme parks, or on late-night television, or tour as hired players backing well-known singers. Many teach guitar, drums, or bass, while others work at children’s rock schools, where students form bands and perform concerts. Careers also grow beyond the stage: musicians may become sound engineers, producers, guitar repairers, tour managers, or music therapists who use songs to help people heal.

The tools of the trade turn a musician’s ideas into a sound a crowd can hear. An electric guitar’s steel strings vibrate over pickups—small magnets wrapped in fine wire—which convert the vibrations into an electrical signal. A cable carries that signal to an amplifier, or amp. Push the sound hard enough and it becomes gritty and fuzzy, a signature rock sound called distortion. Foot pedals can add echoes, swirls, and other effects. The bass guitar works on the same principle, but its four thick strings carry the low notes. Bass and drums lock together to create the groove that makes a song move; listeners may barely notice the bass until it stops, and the music suddenly feels thin.

The drummer holds the band together with a kit that usually includes a bass drum played by a foot pedal, a snare, tom-toms, a hi-hat, and cymbals. Drummers use a metronome, which clicks a steady beat, to build reliable timing. Playing with both hands and both feet doing different things at once takes years of practice. On a loud stage, musicians also need to hear themselves safely. In-ear monitors provide a personal mix of the band while blocking much of the stage noise. Musicians’ earplugs lower the volume without making music sound muffled. Many bands can record at home, too, using a computer, recording software, a microphone, headphones, and an audio interface. They can capture each part separately and layer the tracks together.

For many musicians, the greatest reward comes when an audience sings their song back to them. The singer steps away from the microphone, and a crowd supplies the words. A tune that began in a bedroom or garage now belongs to everyone singing. There is pleasure, too, in creating something from almost nothing: a riff and a few words become a song, then reach listeners in cars, kitchens, and headphones around the world. Bandmates share years of rehearsals, trips, jokes, successes, and disasters, often becoming like family. Musicians may travel to new cities, meet other bands, and hear fans explain what a song means to them. Some save letters, drawings, and handmade gifts, and cherish the thought that a young person in the crowd might start a band of their own.

The work can also be financially precarious. Streaming services pay only a fraction of a cent per play, and at that rate a song needs about 250,000 plays to earn $1,000. Touring brings bills for gas, vans, hotels, and crew; venues may also take a portion of merchandise sales. A band can even lose money on a sold-out show. Life on the road means long drives, meals from gas stations, and missing birthdays and holidays. Loud music carries a more lasting

danger: concerts can reach 100 to 120 decibels, and at 100 decibels hearing may be damaged in about fifteen minutes. Professional musicians are especially vulnerable to noise-related hearing loss and tinnitus, a persistent ringing in the ears, so earplugs and monitors are vital.

The strain is not only physical. In a 2016 survey, most musicians in Britain said they had experienced anxiety or depression. Some famous performers have struggled with alcohol or drugs, while many others have sought help and recovered. MusiCares, a U.S. charity founded in 1989, helps music workers access medical care, mental-health support, and treatment. More bands now schedule rest days and speak openly about wellbeing. Bands may also break up because of money, creative disputes, or simply growing apart.

Rock itself has roots in music made by Black American artists, especially gospel, blues, and rhythm and blues, mixed with country and folk. In the 1940s and early 1950s, musicians in churches, Southern juke joints, and dance halls were already playing driving music with electric guitars and pounding beats. Gospel singer Sister Rosetta Tharpe thrilled audiences with her electric guitar. Cleveland radio DJ Alan Freed helped popularize the phrase “rock and roll” in 1951, and by the mid-1950s Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Fats Domino, Elvis Presley, and Buddy Holly had become early stars. Musicians in countries around the world made the music their own, and styles including punk, metal, grunge, and indie grew from those roots.

Rock continues to connect music with the things people can hold. Vinyl records have returned as a popular purchase, and independent record stores have become gathering places, sometimes hosting concerts and signings. A record sold at a show can earn a band more than a thousand streams, while giving fans a tangible souvenir.

A touring day shows how much happens beyond the performance. Imagine a guitarist on a three-week tour, heading to a club five hours away. At nine in the morning, they wake on a friend’s living-room floor, pack a sleeping bag, and help fit amps, drums, guitars, and T-shirts into the van. On the drive, bandmates take turns at the wheel, answer venue emails, and warm up their voices. At a gas-station stop, the drummer discovers the snare was left at the previous club. After frantic calls, the opening band—three fifteen-year-olds from a local rock school—offers to lend theirs.

By late afternoon, the musicians carry their equipment up a narrow staircase and soundcheck, testing instruments and microphones while the engineer adjusts levels. Everyone puts in earplugs before the first loud chord. Then comes disappointing news: only forty-five tickets have sold in a room that holds 300. A mean online comment about the new song makes matters worse, but the singer urges the band to play as if the room were full. They set up the merchandise table, then give the forty-five people a full show. The crowd jumps, sings, and calls for an encore; the band has planned two extra songs. Afterward, the drummer signs the borrowed snare, the band loads the van, sells a few more shirts, and heads to their sleeping

place. Those forty-five listeners may become fans who tell their friends, before the musicians do it all again in another city.

Bands depend on a wider circle of people as well. Producers and recording engineers shape records; publicists share news; managers handle business; and booking agents arrange tours. Bigger acts may bring a tour manager, roadies, guitar and drum technicians, sound engineers, lighting designers, bus drivers, and caterers. A drum tech keeps spare sticks close at hand, while a guitar tech can pass over a freshly tuned instrument when heat and hard playing pull its strings out of tune. The front-of-house engineer shapes what the audience hears; a monitor engineer manages the sound onstage. Venue workers, festival organizers, photographers, and designers also help make performances possible. Fans contribute by attending shows, buying records and shirts, and bringing friends. Families who tolerate practice, drive musicians to early gigs, and believe in them matter, as do music teachers who offer a first chord or a place to rehearse.

Music’s impact reaches beyond the band and its crew. Concerts bring strangers together, while songs can connect generations and help people feel less alone. For some people with serious memory loss, familiar songs from youth remain singable even when other memories fade. Musicians have also used performances to raise support: Live Aid, the giant 1985 concerts in London and Philadelphia, reached an estimated 1.9 billion viewers and raised money for people facing famine in Ethiopia. Artists continue to play benefit shows, teach and mentor young musicians, and donate instruments to schools.

Persistence matters because rejection is part of the work. Venues may not call back, songs may attract few listeners, and progress can take years. The Beatles, later among the world’s most famous bands, were turned down by a record company after an audition in 1962; the company reportedly thought guitar groups were on their way out. They kept going. Teamwork is just as essential. Bandmates listen, compromise, make space for one another’s ideas, and share the credit as well as the driving and heavy lifting. Some bands talk after each show about what worked and what they want to improve.

Creativity means finding a sound that belongs to you, while borrowing from musical history without simply copying it. It can extend to the stage, too: before AC/DC guitarist Angus Young became known for his school uniform, he tried costumes including a gorilla suit and a homemade superhero outfit he called “Super-Ang.” Discipline is behind the seemingly effortless performance. A solo may require thousands of hours of practice, often beginning slowly until every note is clean. Stage courage means playing through nerves, mistakes, or a nearly empty room; if a note goes wrong, keep going. The audience may not notice, and even if someone does, they may cheer you on.

Musicians also need practical skills. Bands make budgets, book travel, track expenses, and decide how many shirts and records to bring on tour. Selling twenty shirts a night for

twenty-five dollars each brings in five hundred dollars, but only if someone counts the stock, handles the money, and remembers the venue’s cut. Simple spreadsheets help. Bands also make videos and post rehearsal clips or behind-the-scenes moments so potential fans can find them online. Clear sound and good light matter more than an expensive camera, and a batch of short videos can be filmed in one afternoon. The music still comes first.

Physical fitness is part of performing, too. Singers depend on breath control; drummers need stamina; guitarists may spend hours standing and moving beneath hot lights. Lifting equipment and traveling with little sleep add strain, so musicians warm up their hands and voices, exercise, and try to eat well. A study of Blondie drummer Clem Burke found that he could burn as many as six hundred calories in an hour onstage, with his heart working about as hard as a professional soccer player’s during a match.

The musicians who shaped rock began as children experimenting with songs and instruments. Sister Rosetta Tharpe was about four when she began singing and playing guitar in Arkansas, traveling with her mother, a preacher and musician. In 1938, Tharpe was recording in New York and performing at Carnegie Hall. Her electric-guitar playing joined gospel, blues, and jazz well before rock and roll had a name. Her 1945 recording “Strange Things Happening Every Day” became the first gospel song to cross over to the rhythm and blues charts, reaching number two. Often called the godmother of rock and roll, she entered the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2018.

Ann and Nancy Wilson saw the Beatles on television in February 1964 and decided to become musicians. Ann, who was shy because of a stutter, found a powerful voice through singing; Nancy became a fierce guitarist. The fast acoustic guitar opening of Heart’s “Crazy on You” remains famous. Their first album arrived in 1975, when the sisters became two of the first women to lead a hard rock band while writing songs and playing instruments. Brittany Howard learned piano and poetry from her sister Jaime, taught herself guitar, and went on to play bass and drums as well. After meeting bassist Zac Cockrell in high school, she practiced with him daily. While working as a mail carrier, Howard played small stages with Alabama Shakes; the band won three Grammy Awards in 2016. Her later solo work included a Grammy-winning song named for Jaime, who died at thirteen.

Inventiveness has always been part of rock. Les Paul, fascinated by gadgets as a boy, altered player-piano rolls, made a harmonica holder, and built an amplifier from pieces of his mother’s telephone and radio. Around 1940, he fashioned “The Log,” a solid-body electric guitar, from a wooden post, and developed ways to record multiple parts on one song. After a car crash shattered his right arm, doctors set it at an angle that allowed him to keep playing; he performed weekly into his nineties. Brian May and his father built the guitar he wanted but could not afford, using an old fireplace mantel for its neck, mother-of-pearl buttons as markers, and motorbike springs. May still plays the guitar, called the Red Special, and picks

with an old British sixpence. He also earned a doctorate in astrophysics and worked with a NASA space mission. Ritchie Valens, meanwhile, turned the traditional Mexican folk song “La Bamba,” from Veracruz, into a Spanish-language rock hit. His secondhand guitar was refinished in his school wood shop. He died in a plane crash at seventeen, but his recording helped inspire generations of Latino musicians.

Some famous sounds began by accident or with a homemade fix. When a studio mixing-desk part broke during a 1961 Nashville session, a guitar sounded buzzy and rough; engineers later built a box to recreate the sound, and the fuzz pedal went on sale in 1962. In 1958, Link Wray poked holes in an amplifier speaker to make his guitar sound rougher. A talk box sends guitar sound through a plastic tube into a musician’s mouth, where lips and tongue shape it before a microphone picks it up. Musicians joke about G.A.S.—the urge to buy another guitar, pedal, or amp—short for “Guitar Acquisition Syndrome,” later expanded to “Gear Acquisition Syndrome.”

Rock has produced scenes both enormous and unexpected. Metallica played in Antarctica in 2013 for 120 people, using headphones rather than loudspeakers to protect the environment; they became the first band to play on all seven continents. Rod Stewart’s free 1994 New Year’s Eve concert on Rio de Janeiro’s Copacabana Beach drew about 3.5 million people. At the opposite extreme, in 2021, four members of the punk band The Linda Lindas, ages ten to sixteen, performed at a Los Angeles library; a video spread around the world, and the band signed with a record label within days. Drummer Rick Allen, who lost an arm in a 1984 car crash, designed a kit using electronic drums and his feet, then returned with Def Leppard to a roaring reception. Dave Grohl finished a 2015 Foo Fighters show after breaking his leg, seated while a medic held it steady; later, he performed from a glowing throne he designed from his hospital bed.

Getting started does not require a perfect instrument or a finished plan. Practice for fifteen minutes each day rather than waiting for one long session a week. A used guitar, keyboard, or drum practice pad is enough to begin. Try learning a favorite song by ear, and keep a notebook or phone recording of riffs, lyrics, and melodies before they disappear. Start a band with friends, even if you know only three songs, and perform for family, at school, or wherever a small audience will listen. Each show helps make the next one less frightening. Join a school music program if you can: band, orchestra, and choir build listening, reading, and ensemble skills, and schools may lend instruments. Above all, protect your hearing with musicians’ earplugs whenever you play or hear loud music; damage can be permanent.

As you imagine your future, ask whether the song sounds like your band and whether everyone is being heard. Would you still love playing it after five hundred performances? What will someone at the back of the room see and feel? If making music and moving an audience appeal to you, rock performance is one possibility among many. You might sing, produce

recordings, compose for films or games, DJ, build instruments, design costumes, plan events, or choreograph performances. A distinctive idea can start as a few notes, a homemade gadget, or a song that will not leave your head. The important thing is to begin, keep learning, and make room for the people playing beside you.

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