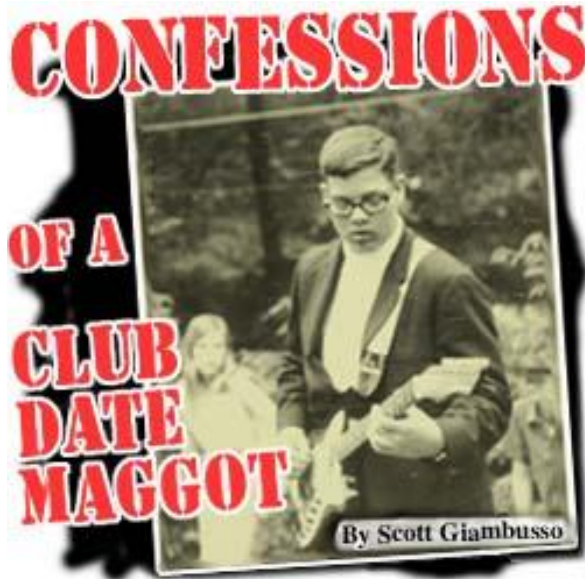


This article appeared in The Washington City Paper: Tour Diary



The Tour Diary takes a side road this week, courtesy of sideman SCOTT GIAMBUSSO. Instead of touring far afield, Scott plies his craft with an endless loop of in-town gigs, often hauling his big bass around during the—gasp—daytime. Because Mr. Giambusso is that rare creature: a full-time musician. And he reminds us that the music business is indeed a business. So while you may not find Scott hanging backstage at the Black Cat or the Velvet Lounge, consider that Mr. G. wakes up every day and gets paid to play music. Not too shabby.

As an extra-special added-bonus offer not available in stores, we present this deal: The first 59 people to [write](#) and tell us "What I Learned From Scott's Tour

Diary" will receive a **FREE** copy of Scott's demo CD, *Giambusso's Small Band Sampler*. Lotsa groovy tunes; perfect for parties. We'll publish excerpts from the best responses. You're welcome.

Now, let's get to the gig...

Living On Rhythm

I am a freelance bass player. I'm not a bassist—as in one who performs in a symphonic setting—but a bass player. I have not held a "day job" since 1975, although I did drive a delivery truck for the [Washington Music Center](#) 12 hours a week in the early '80s. Thanks to Chuck Levin, that part-time job gave me a small base income that allowed me to eventually become a full-time player.

I play what is referred to in the business as "club dates." On the West Coast, they are called "casuals" and sometimes referred to as "G.B." (General Business) gigs, but it's all the same work: background music for functions. I own two tuxedos and a black suit, which I wear as I play parties and dances. And while there is an occasional concert, most of my work is what I like to call "sonic wallpaper" jobs. Often, there are several hundred people crammed into a small room talking so loudly that the musicians can barely hear themselves. But people do hear you. You do make a difference, and that is the best part of the job—beside the check, of course.

It is an interesting living because it's a kind of cross between white- and blue-collar. You need to be civil and know how to conduct yourself verbally and contractually with clients, bandleaders, and the public. But you also have to haul your equipment in the back door so the guests don't see you.

When I walk down the street with my upright bass on one shoulder and my little amplifier hanging on the other, my chiropractor cheers; I feel more like the [Mayflower Moving and Storage](#) man than a

musical artist. I take up a lot of space in transit and inevitably someone will say either, "Boy, don't you wish you played the flute?" or worse yet, "Say, is that a cello?" In which case I want to answer, "Don't you wish you had an education?" Better I bite my tongue.

In addition to the booking agents like Miles Steible and Glenn Pearson who call me regularly for this kind of work, there are also people I don't know who call me all the time for work or references. Early in the '70s, I started compiling a [Rolodex](#) of players arranged by instrument. I can pretty much find the right musician for any situation.

I sometimes blindly throw myself into unknown musical settings. The pain in dealing with amateurs can make for a nail-biting evening. The risk factor is usually directly related to how much money I make. (I have worn a baby bonnet, but I pulled it over my face so you couldn't see it. Arrgh, never again!)

I seem to have finally found my niche on the acoustic bass: playing jazz for people to talk over. As a bass player, the key is to play time. That is, if the rhythm is happening, then the band is grooving, and if the band is grooving, the room should follow suit. Also, it is wise to always be prepared for a background job turning into a dance gig. Drunk people can be very insistent when they want to party down, dude!



I can't stand a hostile crowd. That's why I try to keep in touch with as many musical styles as I can—and confidentially, I think I need more funk in my life. I'll go any direction needed to get the job done. Jazz players think of me as a commercial musician, and commercial players think I'm a jazz musician.



When I started in this business about 25 years ago, I quickly discovered that playing clubs was not my cup of meat. The hours were long, and the pay was lame. I'd drag myself home at 2:30 a.m. stinking like a Marlboro factory. The upside was I got to take a bunch of solos, and it was good for meeting women. However, this lifestyle can also be a real problem because of drinking—[alcoholism](#) is an ever-present danger in this business. I never imbibe on a job...until maybe on the last break. It just screws up my playing, except, of course, when I play country music and then it sounds better when I drink. I'm pretty sure I can never play country music again. I knew I had to find a better way to make more money.

In the early '80s, I was given the opportunity to work for the Morgan Baer/Gene Donati Orchestra. This was my first taste of [society music](#), which is best known for its medleys of familiar songs and square rhythms. This style was developed in New York society dance halls in the '20s by bandleaders like

Lester Lanin, Meyer Davis, and the legendary [Eddie Duchin](#). Medleys, of course, are tunes tied together without interruptive breaks, so as to provide as much continuous flow as possible. The general rhythm is in 2/2 meter, or two-beat (umm-cha, umm-cha forever). It's often called a fox trot or [businessman's bounce](#) and actually is not too far from a polka. As if you couldn't get far enough away from a [polka](#).

This tick-tock beat is critical to the success of the parties of my parents' generation. It is also anathema to jazz musicians. It is not only pre-rock but pre-swing. It's as if [Count Basie](#) and Glenn Miller (much less Elvis and the Beatles) never existed. When done properly, it is rigid and not really intended to be creative. The society beat is a lot like a prewar version of disco and has broken the spirit of many a good drummer.

The late Morgan Baer was a strange little man who was a booking agent, bandleader, and violin holder. He looked just like Yoda (with an ear job), and his fiddle—which he never played—had a gargoyle head for the scroll. Well under five feet tall and wrinkling into his eighties, he bullshitted everyone in sight and made a fortune doing it. When I joined Morgan in the '80s, the bands in his office were just touching on '60s and '70s dance styles (rock, Motown, disco). The bulk of the dancing was still more two-beat and the omnipotent shuffle (the heart of [swing music](#)).

At it's best, the music is expertly woven from tune to tune and style to style from every decade of this century. Today's society bands, which now employ musicians my age and younger, are leagues ahead of their predecessors in playing rock, R&B, and disco because we grew up with it. And the latest swing craze has been a wonderful reinforcement for all the jazz players, because it let us realize that we were hip all along. Swinging is like flying a jet, whereas a two-beat groove is like riding a donkey. As the [Duke](#) said, "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing." I hope the swing scene lasts at least 'til I drop dead. Anyway, the great bands know how to mix the society music, swing, international rhythms, and contemporary sounds so the audience gets an incredible variety of dance styles. And if the crowd leans toward one style, then that's where the evening's musical focus will stay.



I have often thought that this is not the art of making music but rather the art of crowd control. Give the people what they want and more, before they can come up and try to boss you around. On a recent Christmas party gig, some prominent leach who was hitting on all the young girls at the party kept insisting on all up-tempo tunes (which we gave him) and was disappointed when, after a standard 45-minute set, I called a break. As he walked by me, he jokingly said that the lost minutes would be taken out of our pay. I politely explained that band breaks were written into the contract, but I really wish I had stuck my foot up his ass. Even when you give people what they want, they can still be jerks. Of

course, an awful lot of hosts are very gracious. And a good party will just naturally evolve if the band does it's job. The host should not even have to worry about the music.



Sometimes people get a little too intimate with the band. They either want to join us or else tell us what to play. Just yesterday, I was playing with a trio for a reception for a newly appointed senator, when somebody's sweet old mother wanted us to play "God Bless America." She started singing and was yelling at everyone in the room to join in. After a wonderful moment of patriotic angst, she came back to us and asked for another tune. I think she thought she was the bandleader and would really make this party happen. Fortunately, her daughter pulled her aside and said, "Now, Mom, leave the

band alone! Just let them do their job."

When I book a job I have several priorities. The client is, of course, at the top—give them what they want. If someone calls and wants a [Mariachi band](#) or a string quartet or some other music I don't play, I will turn down the job and try to help them find a more suitable band. Why make an uncomfortable night for everyone? If I can offer my services I will bend over backwards to give them what they want.

After the client comes the musicians. You have to surround yourself with great players who are flexible enough to play at a whisper or rock down the house. Also, it's good to pay them more than scale because then it's easier to get them to do your bidding. If they are happy, the client will be happy, and the party will cook—that is, as long as the caterer gets there.

Which brings me to dinner.

Hopefully, I can convince the client to feed the band and I'll get it in writing if I can. A four-hour job can take up as much as seven hours in travel and equipment setup time, and a little sustenance can go a long way. With any luck, they will serve us the real food. (Mama Giambusso is one of the all-time great chefs of all cuisines, and I know great food when I smell it.)

So I find it wonderfully fortunate that I'm in an occupation that allows me to eat some of the finest catered food in the world. I'm really easy actually: A dish of pasta, some grilled



vegetables, and a glass of red and I'm ready to rock. Often, though, the caterer or hotel will spare no expense and offer the band ham and cheese sandwiches. Which is better than nothing, however, sometimes they are served dry without mustard or mayonnaise. One can't help feeling a bit dissed, but we gag them down anyway. I guess if it really bothered me I could brown-bag it.

After the client and the band are content—the songs, the setlist. Then I can relax a little and concentrate on being a bass player. As I said before, if I'm having fun playing then so is the band and the party is a success. This is easier to do if I'm not running the band. As a matter of fact, it's a lot easier to be a sideman than a leader. You just show up with your bass rig and ax, plug in, and make rhythm. I enjoy playing all kinds of music and I know I am doing my job when I see feet tapping and heads bobbing.



This year is a milestone in my club date career. During December '98 I broke a personal record of working 31 jobs. The holiday is fun because I get to wear a tuxedo with a red bow tie and stroll with a couple of other musicians though shopping malls like Fair Oaks and play holiday music for the shoppers while the mall pipes in its own [Muzak](#). Sometimes we can get a kind of [Charles Ives](#) effect going with the house system. The children don't seem to mind the noise and are certainly the most fun to play for because live music is still fascinating to them.

I wrapped up the year in a small lounge in town with a piano trio. It was a pleasant enough New Years and the drunks didn't get out of control. All in all, it was a fat month but hardly a gig record—I remember several years ago I worked with Mike Crotty (fine player and an arranger for the [Airmen of Note](#)). We were comparing work schedules to gauge the general flow of the season and I proudly said, "I have 25 gigs this month." Mike countered that he had 56. I can only imagine that there are some serious workaholic musicians out there. It's funny because you have to work when the work is there, 'cause come January there won't be much to do but practice and rehearse.



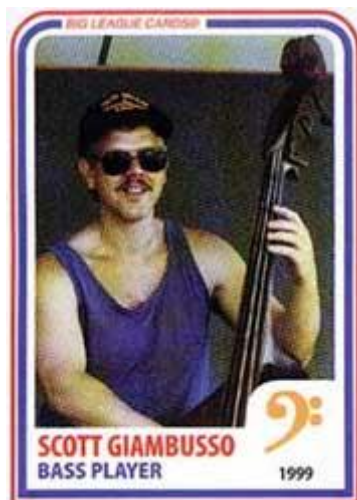
Another outstanding job this month was a gigantic cocktail party at Union Station with a sax and pianist. We played jazz before Delbert McClinton (who, by the way, is a helluva nice guy) came on with his smoking blues band. His band did a painfully loud soundcheck right before we started. When they were done we set up and started playing at about one-sixth the volume of the soundcheck but we were told we were too loud. Then Delbert and his guys came out and peeled the paint off the walls. I love this business.

I played a holiday party with my buddy Steve Dorman at the home of Dennis Radner, owner of the Hair Cuttery. Classy gig, nice folk, tuned piano, good pay, and great food. Sometimes everything works out

There was a lot of different interesting work this month. The variety is what makes it good. I went from the Ritz Carlton to the Prime Rib, from the French Embassy to Phillips Crab House. I gigged in Vienna with Craig Bazen three afternoons in a row for some major corporation. The first day I was in such a hurry to beat rush hour to get over the American Legion Bridge that I left my electric bass at the gig. The caterers graciously let us eat, but I got tired of humus and Swedish meatballs by the third day. You could call me jaded, but I do miss their macaroons

I'm grateful that I've been allowed to make my living playing music. And really happy that I probably don't have to play "Frosty" or "Rudolph" or especially "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" for another 330 days or so.

It was a grueling month and many nights I'd head home to Wheaton after work in time for last call at Phantasmagoria (formerly Tornado Alley), which, unlike downtown D.C., is crawling distance from my house. This is one of the best venues in town—both acoustically and space-wise—but for some reason Bobby Rencher can only attract twentysomethings (bands and audiences) in large numbers. I like to hang and b.s. with Rencher and Bob Berry, the world's greatest bartender (who incidentally thinks the ball-less society music I'm sometimes paid to play is only fit for maggots). As a result of our friendship, I am now the only fortysomething musician I know who is aware of what "skanking" is and can distinguish between a good and a bad metal band. I think if you can't yell over the band then it's good.



In '98, I produced a CD to promote myself. It is a variety demo called *Giambusso's Small Band Sampler*. There is a jazz quartet and a rock quintet blowing vignettes of all styles of danceable and background music for weddings and G.B. gigs. I do a poor man's Steve Lawrence impression on the jazz and bellow a few rock tunes like "La Bamba" and "Mustang Sally." It is not for sale but I give them away as a promotional tool to clients. It's well played but if you asked me 30 years ago what my first album would be it wouldn't have been this.

This month and the past few years have told me that I'm peaking in this business as a freelancer and that it is time to pursue musical projects of my choice instead of playing every wedding and anniversary party that comes my way. Practically speaking, club-dating has been very good to me, but I feel now is a good time to try to create something of my own.

I have several projects in mind, but first I have to go to New York to record an album with my friend [John Colianni](#). I'm really excited John has finally put together the all-Italian band: Colianni, Midiri, Ascione &

Giambusso. This band'll kill ya! John is the [Art Tatum](#) of tomorrow and I hope this recording leads to more concert work. I could use the change.

Let me leave you with some advice: If you see live music being played somewhere, and the music moves you in a positive way, let the players know through applause, or just go up and thank them. You will be adding to the good vibe that live music is all about. Don't take it for granted!

(Scott would like to give thanks to [Bill Holland](#) for apostrophic and gastronomic help in preparing this inside look at the business of show.)