



[Print](#)

## Taking care of business -- and playing overtime

*Many professionals are turning into after-hours rock stars by forming bands with colleagues. It's not only fun but good for their careers, too, WALLACE IMMEN finds*

WALLACE IMMEN -  
Wednesday, August 18, 2004

After the stock market closes, a group of brokers and traders regularly retreats to the track-lit board room of a mutual fund company in Toronto's financial district. They toss off their suits, silk ties and brogues -- and get ready to rock.

"There are ear plugs here if you need 'em. I warn you, it will get pretty loud in here," cautions Malvin (Mal) Spooner, president of Mavrix Fund Management Inc. in Toronto, who ties a bandana around his head before launching into a riff from Cheap Trick's hit *I Want You to Want Me* on his blue electric guitar.

Welcome to a board meeting of The Dealers, part of a growing trend of Canadian professionals who, by day, are doctors, lawyers, brokers, real estate agents and media types but, by night, transform themselves into rock musicians.

Some professionals take up golf to unwind, others join the company hockey team to recall their youth. But Mr. Spooner, 48, says it's amazing how many pros are deciding to retrieve the rock-star dreams they put in the memory trunk while they developed their careers.

Once they do, they discover that playing rock and roll is not only fun but also offers many career benefits. It's not only great for reducing the stresses of a pressure-cooker job but creates networking opportunities and helps build a higher profile in and around their companies. They are also able to give something back to the community by playing performances for charitable groups.

Mr. Spooner says his path is stereotypical of the mid-career executive who becomes an after-hours rocker. "I used to do it as a kid. Almost everyone I know who is into this is someone who was harassed by their parents and told they should get a career because you can't make a living playing music," Mr. Spooner says.

"And you know what, they were absolutely right. But after you get serious and get settled into a career, you meet some other people who had the same experience and you go whoa, I missed something. This is a great opportunity to catch up again."

It's notable that most of the professionals forming bands are in their 40s and 50s. "You find that after years of building your career, you actually crave this," says Adam Sherban, 44, a bond trader for Merrill Lynch & Co. Inc. in Toronto, who swaps his suit and tie for jeans and T-shirt to become "a heavy metal guy."

On this night, he is playing his hand-built guitar with The Dealers but, on other nights, he also plays with two other financial bands. "It's very relaxing and I find it helps me be creative in my work," Mr.

Sherban says.

Professionals forming bands is a phenomenon that may be a reaction to uncertain economic times, suggests Kathy Mahoney, vice-president of corporate programming for the Ottawa Centre for Research and Innovation and the organizer of a battle of technology bands known as TechRocks.

She estimates nearly 50 bands have formed among employees of computer and tech companies around Ottawa and that most of them will apply to perform in the next TechRocks scheduled next spring.

"You've got presidents of companies getting up on stage and suddenly it's like they're kids again. We need this. We don't take enough play time in our lives."

She says getting together is also a great way to network and make contacts in an industry that still consists of many small companies whose staff don't meet in other ways. "We can all relate to the music," Ms. Mahoney says.

Playing in a band can raise your visibility within a company as well. Adam Bain, a broker at RBC Dominion Securities Inc. in London, Ont., says that forming a group called RBC/DC to do a tribute to power rock band AC/DC for a charity event in the city "took on a bigger life than we expected.

"We were stunned by the enthusiastic reaction of the audiences, but we weren't sure how the bank would react to it," says Mr. Bain, 42.

But the band has been a big hit within the company, says RBC spokesman Chris Pepper. The group's performances are featured on RBC's website and the bank helped sponsor a fundraising concert the group did last November for charity.

One media band, The Globe and Mail's own Executive Garage Band, has become regular entertainment at in-house events. The band recently won Newzapalooza, a battle against competitors from the Toronto Star, Toronto Sun and CITY-TV.

Garage Band guitarist Celia Donnelly says that "while there aren't many women in the bands, those who do often become as hooked as the men.

"Even at the age of 51, I can live my guitar dreams," says Ms. Donnelly, a research librarian at The Globe, who played with folk groups and, briefly, an all-girl rock band in high school and university but put it aside to establish her career. "For my 40th birthday, I bought an electric guitar. Now I've got five guitars and an electric mandolin and I play them whenever I can get a chance."

The main appeal of playing with a band made up of professional colleagues is the personal enjoyment, says Jeff Butler, a freelance director of television commercials.

Mr. Butler is a member of the Bay Street financial band The Biznoids, which for two consecutive years has won Baystock, a Toronto financial bands competition that for the past six years has raised research money for the Ontario March of Dimes.

Mr. Butler, 47, says the opportunity to make others feel good is important but playing also makes him feel better physically.

"It makes a great workout. You're jumping around and yelling, which is good aerobic exercise, and

there's weight training, too," he says, as he gyrates his heavy, pearl-inlaid Les Paul Custom guitar.

The amounts the competitions raise is impressive. Baystock, for instance, brings in \$100,000 a year. Another competition for bands from Toronto's legal community raises more than \$150,000 each year for AIDS research.

Tycho Manson, 47, who has played in AIDSbeat since it began six years ago, says he has seen the level of musical quality rise along with the number of bands.

Mr. Manson, a civil litigation lawyer with Torys LLP, has been playing with a band known as The Thin Skulls, which formed to perform a musical skit for a company party when he was at McCarthy Tétrault LLP.

That was six years ago and bands were a little-known phenomenon, but now he says every large firm seems to have a band and "the level of ability has gone higher and higher."

Some bands have polished their acts enough to go on tour.

This spring, Mr. Spooner's group The Dealers competed in a London, Ont., Battle of the Bay Street Bands that raised \$50,000 in donations for a centre for families living with cancer.

The Dealers also flew to Vancouver to play in the first Vanstock, a competition for financial bands in that city. Vanstock will become an annual event, says Steve Wahrer, 50, a broker for Canaccord Capital Corp. in Vancouver.

It was actually Mr. Wahrer's wife who encouraged him to become lead guitarist and singer for the Sofa Kings, a group that also includes a local real estate developer and a contractor.

They've rehearsed regularly in his basement for two years, which Mr. Wahrer says reminds him of one of his earliest jobs, as a booker at Toronto's famous El Mocambo club in the 1970s.

And a few professionals have actually been able to turn their experience into at least a modicum of fame. A case in point is Jason Battah, a dentist in Joliette Que., whose agent, rather than a receptionist, now answers his phone.

In March, Mr. Battah finished fourth in the men's finals of Quebec's *Star Académie*, a television music competition similar to *Canadian Idol*. The singer and song writer has parlayed this popularity into a musical tour that leaves him only two days a week to see patients in the dental clinic.

"I'd love my career to be show business, but to be realistic I've got dentistry as my insurance policy," says Mr. Battah, 24, whose patients ask him for autographs. "Of course I love dentistry, too, or I wouldn't have gone through all the training in dental school. It would be nice if I could continue to have both."

Gord Lord, 44, of Coquitlam, B.C., has had it both ways for more than 20 years. The general manager of Griffiths Gibson Ramsay Productions commercial studio is the drummer for Wall Street, a band that includes brokers, an advertising executive and a chartered accountant. They've been playing together for 20 years and do regular appearances in Vancouver clubs and play for parties.

"It always has been a part-time thing and I think we succeed because we don't do it for the money," Mr.

Lord says.

"I think it would turn into just another job if you had to do it because you had to make a living from it, rather than just doing it for the love of playing."

Mr. Spooner agrees, but he says there is still something magical about being in the spotlight that you never experience in a desk job.

"I think that people who don't perform on stage never understand the thrill of performing," says Mr. Spooner. "I don't think we really understand it either, but it is a thrill."

--

© [The Globe and Mail](#). Republished with permission. All Rights Reserved. No part of this article may be reproduced or republished or redistributed without the prior written consent of the copyright holder.