

December 4, 2015 4:34 pm

# Openings: What's the point of learning an instrument?

Stephen Witt



Share



Author alerts



Print



Clip



Comments

## The instruction chain School of Rock has more than 100 locations even as the genre itself dwindles in popularity

I recently wrote a book about digital piracy, and I am asked, often, about the state of the music industry. My stock reply is that while the internet has certainly corroded album sales, artists have recouped some of this loss through growth in the live concert market, which has tripled in size since the launch of Napster in 1999. After spouting this boilerplate at a recent talk in Seattle, I was approached by a thin young man with long, scraggly hair and a collared shirt buttoned to the neck. He played the trombone, he told me, and he had a question for me: “What the fuck are you talking about?”

He went on to describe his predicament: he'd spent years training in jazz conservatory, set aside four to six hours a day to develop his chops, had memorised the standards and now was scraping by on the occasional gig. Jazz hadn't paid well for decades, of course, and he understood that, but in the late 1990s a live musician might earn \$200-\$300 for a stand-in performance. Now that was down to \$50. From his perspective, the concert market was in decline.

I responded that dwindling interest in one kind of music — jazz — was paralleled by growth in another — electronic dance music. For example, I said, the DJ Calvin Harris had reportedly earned more than \$60m from touring in 2014. The young man cut me off. “Calvin Harris isn't a live musician,” he spat. “He just presses a button.”

I've thought about this exchange a lot in recent months. In the early 1990s, I was one of the last kids ever to pester his parents for an electric guitar. I spent years trying to master it, but got, essentially, nowhere. If I were a teenager now, I wouldn't bother with that — instead I'd pester them for the music sequencing software Ableton Live. (Or, more likely, I'd just download a pirated copy.) Ableton



Live isn't any easier to learn than a guitar, but it's certainly a lot more lucrative. And this leads to an interesting question: what's the point of learning to play an instrument any more?


You might ask the DJ and mega-producer Skrillex. Before going electronic, he was known as Sonny John Moore, which makes him sound like a Delta bluesman, although he actually fronted an emo band. He sang, played the electric guitar, released an album and got, essentially, nowhere. He made the switch to software in 2008, using a sequencer to program layered drum tracks and his signature "massive drop". He won a Grammy, went platinum and now produces hits for Justin Bieber.

Skrillex takes a lot of heat from the critics, but he's an authentic musician with genuine talent. He makes tens of millions of dollars a year from touring. On stage, Skrillex scrambles, dances, runs and hops around like a leprechaun. While performing in this manner in Mexico City in 2012, he collided with a prop from his stage set and was knocked on his rear. As he sat on the floor, dazed, his pre-recorded music continued to play. The crowd loved it.

But just because musical instruments no longer serve any purpose doesn't mean people will stop learning to play them. My friend the frustrated trombonist has many compatriots. Jazz conservatories around the world accept thousands of students a year, training them to play music no one wants to hear. Classical conservatories are even worse. The pianist and composer Kurt Ellenberger has called this "the education fallacy": the belief that an increase in music education leads to an increase in paying audiences. It doesn't.

Unfortunately, the fallacy is spreading to rock music. The for-profit instruction chain School of Rock now has more than a hundred locations, even as the genre itself is dwindling in popularity. Rock is entering its own conservatory phase — like jazz and classical, it's taught in schools, and listening to it feels like homework.

I pulled out my own guitar recently. I noodled around for a while, but sounded worse than ever. Soon I put it down, and went back to browsing for music on my phone. Eventually I settled for "Sorry", the new single by Bieber, produced by Skrillex. I routed it through my stereo and the song came blaring through my speakers. Just pressing buttons, I guess.

 Share  Author alerts  Print  Clip

 Comments

---

**FT LIFE & ARTS VIDEOS**