

# I Got Stuck as a Self-Made Percussionist — And Then Realized Why

By Adam Tan

Despite percussion's status as one of the oldest musical instruments, the idea of someone striking an instrument with an implement, beater, or even their own body parts can still be an odd principle for many in the general public. And so, in 2024, it can be difficult for percussionists to find a career path that works for them and can provide adequate income for their future. It is also the exact question I ask myself whenever I'm thinking of expanding my own career possibilities: Why would anyone pay to see me perform?

I have been a self-employed percussionist for almost a decade, building my career as a marimba soloist, composer, and educator on my own. Despite living in the small city of Perth, Australia, where our warm but small percussion scene has a history of only about half a century, in the past eight years I have had the honor of performing and presenting as a soloist across Argentina, Australia, Honduras, Hong Kong, Japan, Malaysia, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States, resulting in me presenting over 50 masterclasses in 30 institutions worldwide. I founded and still direct Marimbafest Australia, the largest marimba festival and

competition in the southern hemisphere, which just concluded its fifth instalment in July. In that time, I've also sold over 5,000 copies of my sheet music on my own online store, and my music is now on repertoire lists for auditions, juries, and festivals across the world, including the Texas Prescribed Music List, the Florida Bandmasters Association, Trinity College London, and more. I also have designed

signature mallets (Encore Mallets Adam Tan series) and even a signature percussion backpack (The Traveller by Adam Tan).

All of this happened before I turned 30 this year.

I did the above in my little rented office space known as "The Studio by Adam Tan," which is named after my YouTube show, where I began my adventures in percussion content creation in 2016. Today, my combined social media reach sits at a reasonable 50,000 followers with over five million views. I don't upload on YouTube nearly as much as I used to (I prefer Reels now, which I will talk about more in my masterclass), but this YouTube channel and the world of social media was a key element in getting me to where I am today.

This brings me back to the focal point of this article: What is a "self-made percussionist," and how do we create opportunities for ourselves in this increasingly competitive and fast-paced world of percussion? Everything moves so fast in 2024; gone are the days when you had to fax Steve Weiss Music to order gear, or find an obscure CD so that you could listen to what a percussion work was supposed to sound like before learning it, or sign a



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publishing deal so that you could finally release your own compositions.

Nowadays, it looks like almost everyone is releasing self-published sheet music on websites they made themselves on a service like Wix or Squarespace. Almost everyone can get millions of views on Instagram and TikTok from some relatable percussion content they made that the algorithm liked. Almost everyone has professional-looking headshots, biographies teeming with global competition victories, and an endorsement list the size of a Subway menu.

But I'm really happy to see it; the world is moving on, and more people from all walks of life are being put in the spotlight of the percussion universe. So how do you stand out in this bright world of ours? Here's a small backstory to give you an example of what you can do to become your own shining star.

When I was in my first two years of producing content for "The Studio," I learned something very quickly as I bought all of my instruments, gear, and equipment with my own savings from multiple part-time jobs. Picture 22-year-old me standing in a near-empty office space staring at the beautiful five-octave marimba I had just bought with cash. There was a modest collection of second-hand camera gear, my self-built website was up and running, and I was thinking that I had a good idea of how to use all of the above, thanks to my many years of part-time work in event photography and videography.

But why wasn't anything happening? Why wasn't I being invited to do anything interesting? Surely with all the nice gear, a huge skillset, and having completed my university degrees up to the master's level, there should be people banging on my door asking me to work with them! Everyone needs an Adam in their life, right?

It turns out I'd forgotten about the most important question, which I mentioned at the start of this article: Why would anyone pay to see me perform? I was just a small chicken in a small Australian city, while my less-than 1,000 subscriber audience was mostly based in the United

States. That wasn't going to help much for my day-to-day living, so I had to switch my mindset.

I started with goal setting: if I wanted to get noticed, I would have to view my future in a different way so that I didn't regress into doing nothing, or conversely become overwhelmed and burn out. I started separating my vision of becoming a well-known marimba soloist and composer from my goals, which were things like learning a piece of music for an upcoming gig. Instead, I tried to make these goals more achievable by simplifying them: "Let's just learn eight bars of this piece today." It felt good to tick off these simpler goals more regularly, as opposed to staring at a growing list of pure unobtainium.

I also decided to be more supportive to the others in my local community; if I wanted their support, I would need to support them first. I started simple, by attending more concerts and events that were happening in town, so that I could not only learn more musically but also show support to our percussion (and even non-percussion) community. I would always try to greet the performers and congratulate them on their performances, while making mental notes of what they were doing (e.g., their pre-show routine before performing, or the way they presented to the audience) so that I could be a better performer myself.

A fresh graduate from university doesn't really instill confidence in most employers, so I decided I would make myself more employable by getting more percussion-related experience. I put my hand up to volunteer at more events like friends' recitals and local community orchestra concerts. I offered to record people's gigs and would help promote their events even if I wasn't involved in them. Although very few of these were paid gigs (or I even lost money), many of these experiences became some of my fondest memories!

And, sure enough, things started to change. As my simpler goals allowed me to perform more, as I showed my face in

the community more often, and as I appeared as a supportive figure in many different circles, people started to remember me as "the percussion guy." *"Hey Adam! I saw you at my gig the other day, thank you so much!"* *"Hey Adam! I saw you were recording for this group. I'll pay you if you can help me with my recording."* *"Hey Adam, we need a percussionist for this gig, and I saw you playing in a community orchestra. Are you free?"* Suddenly, I was getting paid offers very quickly.

I started using these experiences as portfolio content, and my websites and social media started filling up quickly, giving an impression to prospective employers and organizations that this Adam person was actually doing a fair amount of percussion-ing in his day-to-day life. And, sure enough, as my social media

## DRUMSET

### **BERNARD LONG, JR** **Virtual Drumset Clinic** **Developing Essential Jazz** **Drumset Styles**

Bernard Jr. graduated with his B.M. in Jazz Studies from Northern Illinois University under the leadership of Professor Ron Carter. He performed in the NIU Jazz Ensemble, touring with such greats as Clark Terry, Benny Golson, Rodney Whitaker, and Peter Erskine. He graduated from Michigan State University with his M.M. in Jazz Studies. At MSU he directed the MSU Jazz Orchestra 3 and performed with the MSU Jazz Orchestra 1. He graduated from Lindenwood University with his MAT in Music Education and with his Ed.S. in School Administration.

Bernard, Jr. is an Adjunct Professor of Jazz drumset at Lindenwood University. He is the band director at Madison Jr/Sr High School in Madison, Ill. and serves on the St. Louis Civic Orchestra board. Bernard Jr is a 2018 honoree of the Salute to Excellence in Education class sponsored by the St. Louis American Foundation. He was selected as the 2022-23 Teacher of the Year in the Madison CUSD#12. He serves on the PAS Education and Diversity committees and is the percussionist for The St. Louis Black Repertory Theater, the St. Louis MUNY, The Jazz St. Louis Big Band, and the National Tour of Antigone in Ferguson.

gained traction I started to get invited to more international events, which gave me greater growth opportunities.

I believe these three small things – simple goal setting, showing support, and volunteering for more experience – are easy yet effective ways to help reinforce your percussion career path, and I still do all of them to this day. Combining these things while putting yourself in challenging environments regularly (i.e., not surrounding yourself with “yes” people all the time) results in you working towards being the greatest percussionist you can be, and that is a good feeling! I don’t want to give away too much of my PASIC presentation, but I love talking about these points on my tours, as they are often the

key ingredients many highly skilled percussionists in my generation are missing.

If you are interested in hearing more on this topic, I look forward to seeing you at PASIC 2024! This will be my fifth PASIC and my seventh visit to the United States. I will share even more methods that can help you with your percussion dreams, including marketing hacks and musical tips. I’m often reminded that the percussion community is truly a global one, and I look forward to seeing all of you continue your own unique and interesting percussive paths.

**Adam Tan** is a marimba soloist, composer, and content creator based in Perth (Boorloo), Australia. Adam is known for

making online content about percussion with over 45,000 followers and 10 million views across all platforms. Adam’s works for percussion are performed regularly around the world and appear on repertoire lists for schools, competitions, and festivals. Adam is the director of Marimbafest Australia, an organization that has curated five international marimba festivals and competitions, and he has operated the percussion studio and retailer The Studio By Adam Tan. Adam was invited by Ju Percussion Group as a VIP Guest to the Taiwan International Percussion Convention (TIPC) in 2023. Adam is a composer with Edition Svitzer, artist with Soundbrenner, and an Associate Artist with the Australian Music Centre. [PN](#)

## PERCUSSION ENSEMBLE SESSIONS

### ELBTONAL PERCUSSION Percussion Ensemble Clinic/Performance

Elbtonal Percussion ensemble from Germany is dedicated to such artists and cross-overs as Radiohead, Keiko Abe, and Thierry de Mey. For this program, Elbtonal will present a selection of representative works from its concert program: “Madeira River,” from Philipp Glass, was originally commissioned for a ballet company and is inspired by the flowing waters of the Amazon. Thierry de Mey’s “Musique de Tables,” a classic of modern percussion literature. “Allemande” from Bach’s 6th Cello suite and “Präludium” BWV 999, a tribute to the grand master of European music. “Stomping Buckets” by Stephan Wildfeuer. “The Wave” for marimba and Japanese percussion by Keiko Abe. The concert ends with the atmospheric, contemplative ambiance of “Daydreaming” by the British band Radiohead.

The four Hamburg percussionists of Elbtonal Percussion master the creative crossover of classical, jazz, and world music. With massive drums, cymbals, and gongs from all over the world, enriched by marimba and vibraphone, Elbtonal Percussion enthralls its audiences with their exciting dynamism and diversity of style, as demonstrated on nine CDs and two DVDs. Elbtonal Percussion has been touring since 1996, has performed over 1,000 concerts, and has been invited to play at numerous renowned festivals. Concert tours have taken them throughout Europe and Asia.

### UNIVERSITY OF NORTH ALABAMA, DIRECTOR TRACY WIGGINS New Percussion Literature Showcase

The UNA Percussion Ensemble presents a session of new works for the percussion ensemble. The works on this program have all been composed in the past five years, and represent many of the great publishers and composers in the percussion world.

Tracy Wiggins is assistant director of bands and coordinator of the percussion program at The University of North Alabama. He has a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the Hartt School, University of Hartford, a master’s degree in Percussion Performance from the University of New Mexico, and a bachelor’s degree in Music Education from Oklahoma State University. He has performed with the Huntsville Symphony, Tuscaloosa Symphony, Fayetteville Symphony Orchestra, Florence Symphony Orchestra, Carolina Philharmonic, and the Santa Fe Symphony. Tracy has presented clinics at PASIC, The National Conference on Percussion Pedagogy, and the Midwest Clinic, and co-hosted the 2018 PASIC New Music/Research Focus Day. He is the president of the Alabama PAS Chapter, is a former member of the PAS Board of Advisors, and has served on the PAS University Pedagogy and New Music/Research Committees. He currently serves on the PAS Percussion Ensemble Committee. At UNA he oversees two percussion ensembles, the contemporary ensemble, the world percussion ensemble, and the marching band percussion section.

### TA! OTRA PERCUSIÓN Virtual Percussion Ensemble Daytime Showcase Concert TA!LA

TA!LA is the new show by the percussion duo TA! otra percusión. Although the group has stood out for including Latin American works in its shows, as well as for premiering pieces created by young composers from Chile and Argentina, creating a show that contains exclusively Latin American music written or arranged for percussion was a dream that had been growing since the beginning of the duo and that today we can see as a concrete project.

TA!LA immerses us in a miscellaneous moment of adrenaline and virtuosity. A unique show, full of the colors, textures and sounds from Latin America. Cuecas, chacareras, boleros, corridos, among other rhythms, come together in an energetic show that combines new works and arrangements of classic pieces.

TA! otra percusión is a duo created in 2014 by percussionists Ska and Santiago Kuschnir. The performers play on a stage surrounded by traditional percussion instruments, scrap, and other materials. The music moves forward through lights, slide projections, and screens, and the rhythms and images immerse the audience in an atmosphere that captivates and surprises. TA! is a unique duo whose shows are made for anyone who wants to experience something new.