

>> Snapshot

Millicent Stephenson

Musician

Musicians' Union



Can you tell me a bit about your career to date?

I enjoyed music in school. I played in the school steel band and played clarinet in the school orchestra. After I left school I didn't do much with instruments for a while but then, at my church, there was an event where a brass line up was needed. The organiser had a saxophone and needed someone to play it so I volunteered because the saxophone is the same family of instruments as the clarinet. I blew it, fell in love with it and haven't looked back.

I went on to play at various church events as well as at the various celebrations for family and friends but more as a hobby than as a profession. Fast forward, and some 12 years ago I decided to charge for what I do and also widen my market and became semi-profession. Music has been my full time job for two years now. I play at festivals, carnivals, dinners, balls and other functions. I also teach piano and saxophone.

I set up my own record label Silver Gliss Music, on which my EP 'This is Life' is produced. I am the Executive Producer. The EP has two tracks composed by me and I'm currently working on my album.

Once a year, I have my own show at the Crescent Theatre in Birmingham where I perform a variety of genres of jazz, gospel, reggae, soul and blues. I also set up the Christian Female Musicians' networking event (Cafemnee), where women in the music industry can meet up, jam, make contacts, learn and talk about relevant issues. I'm very pleased to have performed for the Governor-General of Jamaica when Birmingham City Council hosted his reception. This opportunity arose as a result of the Wise Woman award I won in 2011.

What do you like most about your work?

I love the impact that performing has on an audience. I like people to have a good time when I perform and to bring the wow factor to their night. At a recent wake when I was performing a reggae number, an elderly gentleman started dancing and others joined in, which was really nice.

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 For me, music is about giving pleasure. When I'm teaching, I love it when students just 'get it'. It's so brilliant when the 'light goes on' and you see them understand something and performing it well.

What are the biggest challenges of maintaining a freelance career?

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 There are many challenges of which the biggest for me is finding enough time. Each student needs tailored preparation and then there's the time spent creating resources. You also need to spend time networking and staying connected via social media as well as practising, preparing for gigs and dealing with administration.

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 Seeing it as a business helps me get through it – actually seeing yourself as the business makes a difference. I've had to get organised and learn to juggle and delegate. I've now got a booking agent who takes care of my booking enquiries and arrangements which really helps as I get quite a few bookings so getting someone else to take care of this allows me to focus on other things. For me, the quality of my work is my top priority.

Have you added new work/skills to your portfolio over time?

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 I've added music production to my skills. I was playing at an event and a person heard me and suggested I get a recording and that he was willing to be my producer. I took him up on the offer and started work on my EP. This involved obtaining Cubase software and learning to use it to record the song ideas for development.

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 I've learned about WordPress and how to set up my website and learned lots from the FEU workshops about social media and the web. I've also developed my

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piano and saxophone playing, under the guidance of experienced practitioners, which helped take my playing to another level.

What is the biggest challenge of learning the skills that you need?

The challenge can be applying everything you've learned. There is so much to learn and it's tough to do it all at once. I try to do it as I go along to keep it manageable. Cost is another issue but I am happy to make that investment.

What are the most important things that you've learned?

I would strongly recommend these courses to anyone, and have tweeted about them. I've learned so much from the workshops such as the online resources that are available to give you feedback on your website. I've become so much more conscious about using keywords, links and photos, especially on social media. I recently put up a post on Facebook and it reached six people. After the FEU course, I posted another post with a video using the tips I'd gained and one hour later had reached 550 people, going up to 1050 the next day. What a difference!

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I've become much more disciplined in how frequently I blog or send out mailers, and now have a routine that I stick to, as recommended in the blogging course. I've learned about tagging photos, and created the Twitter hashtag #notjustjazz which I use everywhere. The information has all been so useful and I use so much of it daily. I'm so glad I attended.

What encouraged you to attend FEU Training courses?

I heard about FEU Training through the MU. The courses were just what I wanted and they were free! Apart from being really interesting, they are well run and the tutors are excellent. The organisation is also brilliant making the sign up and admin really easy. Apart from the course content, it's lovely to mix with other creative professionals because this makes it even more interesting.

