TWENTY REASONS WHY FILM & TV COMPOSERS FAIL

By Mark Northam

Revised Edition

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Preface – 26 April 2019

Dear Reader:

This is a reprint of a 2011 revised publication (originally written in 2004) I wrote in an attempt to help film and television composers in the early years of their careers as well as those who had progressed in their careers to better understand the harsh business realities of the industry. Since 2011 a lot has changed in the film and television music industry, including my own retirement from the industry as I decided to pursue a career as a lawyer, something I had thought about doing for many years. I now live and work in Sydney, Australia as a lawyer with my own firm – my wife and I moved here after our daughter Lynelle was born in 2007 so she could know my wife's family as she grew up.

This week I was surprised and honoured to see a discussion posted on a Facebook forum with the cover of this publication and table of contents (the "20 reasons composers fail") shown with comments expressing interest in reading the publication. With that in mind, I was happy to provide the publication to anyone interested at no cost – I would only note that as the last update was done 8 years ago, much in the industry has changed since the last revision of this guide so please take that into account when you consider the timeliness of the information.

In closing, I look back on my career in music as a pianist and composer fondly, and truly enjoy seeing so many people's names I recognize from my career as friends and colleagues showing up on music credits when I take my family to the cinema here. A career in music is nothing short of a privilege and a joy and I wish all of you the very best in your career as a composer, musician, or whatever form of art you create.

Best,

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Introduction

First, let me be perfectly clear: my goal in writing this text is to help composers *succeed*.

Let me also be perfectly clear about a glaring reality in the composer business: most of those who set out to become professional film and television composers fail.

It's one thing to interview big-name composers and find out how they succeeded in their careers. And there are a multitude of articles like that in the various books and film scoring magazines, including our own *Film Music Magazine*, that cover this aspect of the business. But in addition to knowing the reasons for success of the lucky few who rise to the "A list" of film scoring, it is even more important to success to understand why thousands of others who aspire to be professional working composers fail to reach their goals or fail to create a viable careers and end up dropping out of the business or pursuing occupations other than composing.

Failure is not something people like to talk about. In our business, with its cutthroat competition, people rarely discuss failure publicly, and even privately most composers are extremely reluctant to discuss the details of their failures for fear of showing a weakness that can be exploited by others. Composers also avoid talk of their failures and mistakes because they don't want to be known among their own peers and among those they work with – studio music executives, filmmakers, music supervisors and such – as anything but a success. But just as with history, those who are unaware of the mistakes of the past tend to be bound to repeat them. And that's something I'd like to see composers avoid.

With that in mind, we've spent a great deal of time interviewing composers, both successful and not, and over time have built up a substantial amount of information about common reasons composers fail. As we did these interviews, common reasons for failure started becoming apparent – while composers said things in different ways, some with more detail and others with less detail, common reasons for failure nonetheless emerged.

This guide is the culmination of our efforts, and within these chapters we present to you the most common reasons for composer failure, along with specific ways to avoid failure. The "typical quotes" listed after each reason for failure were created by combing common threads from different composer's quotes, and you won't see any names listed for obvious reasons – not many in the business want their names associated with failure! But what you will see is extremely candid information from composers illustrating twenty of the most common reasons composers fail and specific ways to avoid these common failures.

If you, by studying how and why others fail, find ways to succeed in the business as a composer, then this guide has served its purpose.

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Why a Book about Failure?

Because this guide is actually about how to achieve success by *avoiding* failure.

One of the most difficult realities for many to grasp in the business of being a film and television composer is that most composers fail. Many composers don't realize this until they've spent untold amounts of money on gear and relocation to Los Angeles and come face to face with the cold, hard realities of the film and television music business. I believe there must be a better way.

The turnover in this business is incredibly high, and with that comes a lot of mental and financial anguish, lost dreams, broken relationships, and dashed hopes of creating viable careers doing a labor of love: writing music for film and television.

Meaningful discussion and disclosure about the incredibly high composer failure rate is a critical fact that is missing from almost every university and public college film scoring program I've seen. And that's really a shame, since it's incredibly unfair to students to take their money, not disclose the industry's high composer failure rate, and encourage them to spend four years of their life planning for success in a career where the odds are stacked so heavily against success. Film scoring programs at universities can be effective at teaching composers how to write music, but I have yet to see a program that truly teaches composers how to succeed in *the business*. What good is the ability to write great music if a composer doesn't know how to get a job, effectively negotiate a deal, or build a career in the business?

While some people may believe that it is a step backward or something "negative" to study the reasons for others' failure, I believe a great deal can be learned from the failures of others. Studying past failure is a key element to progress in many fields, especially science and medicine where success in creating new drugs and products is always related one way or another to the failure of previous attempts. If the reasons for past failures weren't studied in detail, science and medicine would not be nearly as advanced as they are today.

In the following sections, the twenty reasons for failure are explained in detail, including quotes compiled from interviews with composers and a detailed discussion about the reason. After each reason for failure is a special section entitled "How Not to Fail" which offers keys to success and ways to avoid failure.

As you'll see, this guide is based upon a common, guiding belief that is reflected in each page: *by studying the failures of others, you can increase your own chances of success*.

With that in mind, let's now look at twenty reasons for composer failure and how you can achieve success by learning from the experiences of others.

Reason for Failure #1: Fail to market themselves properly and effectively

Typical Quote:
"Everybody said my music would sound great with films. I don't know what happened – all my friends said my music was great! I sent out a lot of packages, but never got any callbacks."

It is a fact of life in the film and television composing industry that there currently is a huge oversupply of talented people calling themselves film and television composers. There are many reasons for this, including easy accessibility of the gear it takes to sync music to picture, the increased prominence and popularity of composers, and the income that can be possible if you're fortunate and talented enough to make it to the upper tiers of the business.

Many film and television composers fail because they don't realize that people aren't going to come knocking at their door, begging them to score their film projects. With so much competition, it's critical to go out and make a name for yourself! As I stress in many of the classes and seminars we teach, it's important to go out and market:

1. YOURSELF – Who you are, your name, what you look like.
2. YOUR MUSIC – What it sounds like, what style(s) you're best at, what types of projects your music might/has worked well with.

In this context, marketing means building successful and positive perceptions in other people about you and your music. These perceptions can easily make or break a composer's career, and it's vital that you go out and create these reputations and perceptions, rather than waiting for others to assign these to you.

How Not to Fail:

- Realize that there is a tremendous amount of competition out there. Don't wait for callbacks – YOU need to call back people you make contact with in the industry. Why should a filmmaker call you back when many of your competitors are calling the filmmaker directly and checking in with them?
- Don't expect written responses to demos you send out. Unlike other industry, composers never get "Thanks for your demo, but we're unable to hire you at this time" type letters that are standard practice for many other industries.
- Find out what is truly unique and special about your music and emphasize it. (See Reason #19) Be honest with yourself, and get help from friends you trust if you need it to determine your own musical strengths and weaknesses.
- Get your materials out there, contact filmmakers and music supervisors, and do this continually, even when you're working on a project. Proactive marketing to those who can hire you, including follow-up contact, is vital to success in this industry.

Reason for Failure #2: Fail to realize the critical importance of people and relationships

Typical Quote:
"I never knew where to go to look for jobs – there weren't any placement services for film scoring at the college I went to, and other composers weren't a lot of help finding work. I just didn't know where to go to look!"

Some composers fail because they don't realize that there are two main factors in addition to a composer's music that determine who gets hired to write music for film and television projects. These two factors usually weigh much heavier in a filmmaker's mind than the composer's music, because with the many talented composers available today, getting great music is not so hard for filmmakers. These two factors are:

PEOPLE – What is a composer like to work with? Is he a team player?

And

RELATIONSHIPS – The relationships a composer has created are almost always the reason he/she is considered for a job. These include relationships with other filmmakers, music supervisors, studio music executives, and many others working in the film and television production and post-production business from low-level assistant producers to gaffers and actors. Filmmakers will ask anyone and everyone who knows a composer what he/she is like to work with, and one negative review – even from a person unrelated to the music department – is enough to get a composer knocked off the "short list" and not hired.

How Not to Fail:

- Be someone people truly like to work with. Be friendly, outgoing, not egotistical, and show that you really care about the project.
- Build as many positive relationships with filmmaker, producers, music supervisors, and others in the business as possible. These relationships can and will lead to job opportunities.
- Don't look to other people, other services, etc. for a steady stream of leads, and as we discussed previously you shouldn't wait for the phone to ring. You must act proactively, and build your reputation and relationships as quickly as possible.
- Don't expect other composers to provide any job leads at all – these are jealously protected by composers given the hyper-competitive environment, and for better or for worse, composers are a mercenary lot these days.

Reason for Failure #3: Fail due to narrow-minded musical view

Typical Quote:
"I don't know why people didn't like my music. My friends say I sound just like James Horner, and I wanted to score movies like the ones he scored. All I need is a big orchestral budget and I'll have it made."

It's one thing to identify what's unique and special about your music. But it's another to take that view in a very narrow-minded way and ONLY be willing to score films where you can write your favorite type of music, and write it your way. As we'll emphasize here and elsewhere in this guide, filmmaking is the ultimate "team sport," and applying your musical talent to the musical vision of the film as expressed by the director is what composing is all about. Bringing your own musical view/style to the film and pressing others to choose "your music" without collaborating with the director spells trouble.

Film and television composers who are establishing themselves today must, by necessity, be very familiar with a wide variety of styles of music, and be comfortable writing in them even if some styles are not the "favorite" of the composer. Being flexible is important to being able to work on a wide variety of projects, and knowing just how "flexible" you can be is important.

You may like to listen to certain types of music that appeal to you as a music lover, but it's important not to confuse what you "like to listen to" with your work attitude towards different types of music. A composer may not like to listen to waltzes and tangos, but if a film project hinged on whether or not a composer could be flexible enough to write a grand waltz for a dance scene in the style of the composer's orchestral score, the composer would be well-advised to do his/her homework and lean how waltzes are written. Why? Because if the filmmaker starts bringing in other people to write music, that's the beginning of potentially big trouble for the composer.

How Not to Fail:

- Know your limits, and be as flexible as possible within those limits. Don't say "no" just because a type of music you're being asked to write doesn't appeal to you as a music listener, and be willing to consider writing music you haven't written before but can study.
- Have ready access to a wide variety of musical resources – CD collections, ethnic music recordings, etc. and if you're asked to write something that is outside your normal writing experience, have material ready so if you say "yes" you'll be able to study quickly and effectively to learn the style you need to.
- Avoid the situation of having other composers brought in to a film or television project to write style(s) of music that you decline to write.
- Relish the opportunity to learn and write music in different styles – consider them like an artist would consider new colors of paint to create new and exciting paintings with.

Reason for Failure # 4: Fail to compete effectively in the composer marketplace

Typical Quote:
"There was just too much competition in LA. There were too many other composers, and everybody seemed to be willing to work for free. I don't want to compete with a hundred other composers for some lousy job that pays next to nothing. That's not why I went to school to learn film composing."

It's a fact, and has been for some time that there is a great deal of competition for film and television composers in Los Angeles. Similar levels of competition exist elsewhere. As such, if you don't like a lot of competition, you should probably consider an occupation other than film composing.

But just because there is a great deal of competition, it doesn't mean that you won't work. It means you need to compete effectively. That means realizing what the competitive environment is all about, realizing what filmmakers are truly looking for, and making yourself as compatible with what they're looking for as possible.

If you're not well-known, it is difficult to compete based on "your name" or on price, since the filmmaker probably won't place any market value on your name (yet) and to the filmmaker, you're just another one of the many talented "unknowns" in the business and therefore have no reason to demand (or be paid) anything but a low price. So in those cases, compete based on the uniqueness of your music and the great creative voice you bring to the film.

The tough reality is that in most cases, a filmmaker doesn't care how much you've spent on your gear, how many years you have been toiling away learning how to (or being) a composer, or how much you need the job. Filmmakers care about getting great music for their film at a competitive price from a composer who is easy to work with who is ready to contribute his/her all to the filmmaking process regardless of pay.

How Not to Fail:

- Be what filmmakers are looking for: be easy to work with, provide great music, and be ready and willing to contribute anything and everything you can to the filmmaking process. A key ingredient in success is developing the ability to get this attitude across to filmmakers *before* they hire you. If you can make this happen, your chances in getting hired go way, way up.
- If you're not well-known, don't think you can play "hardball" on price no matter how much you need the money. Establish your value with your music, your attitude and everything you bring to the creative process, and work to help the filmmaker realize your potential value to the film. Of course *you* realize your value… but make sure the filmmaker realizes your value. When that happens, you'll have an easier time negotiating price.
- Don't be "generic" – there are thousands of generic composers out there that filmmakers can choose from – composers who have done little or nothing that filmmakers are aware of to differentiate or distinguish themselves from the crowds of people marketing themselves as composers. It's much better to be known for your music and how you are to work with.

Reason for Failure # 5: Fail to realize that talent alone is not enough – not nearly enough

Typical Quote:
"I've written award-winning music, and have written music for over 20 years. My music has received top honors at my college, and I graduated magna cum laude from a top music school. Why don't filmmakers realize this? Why can't I get any work?"

Even if a composer can write fabulous music that is recognized by the academic music community as outstanding, that usually translates into little when it comes to the film music community and how filmmakers view a composer's scores. In general, a filmmaker doesn't care:

- *Where* the composer went to school
- *If* the composer even went to school
- What awards those outside the film and television community gave the composer
- What the composer's GPA or honors status was as a college student
- What other people think of the composer's music, unless those "others" are professional filmmakers

Generally speaking, every filmmaker considers music differently, and the appropriateness of the music for a film being made is almost always a more important characteristic than what others think of the music from a musical or compositional viewpoint.

One common problem with music schools is that they fail to give graduating student composers a real-life, realistic, hard look at how their music stacks up to others in the field that they are competing with. I cannot tell you how disappointing it is to get a CD in the mail from a recent graduate from a well-regarded music college that just sounds awful. The reality is that this student, despite years of education, will likely never make it as a composer – they lack the musical talent, and nobody at the school had the heart or cared enough to level with this student that they just weren't "cut out" to be a composer. The fact that the school kept taking this student's money is nothing short of unethical.

But for those who can write great music, a lot more than talent is needed, as we've already discussed in this guide and will continue to discuss in later sections. The ability to differentiate and distinguish yourself from the crowd of competition, to focus on what is unique about your music, and the ability to market yourself and compete effectively in the industry are critical skills, even though they're non-musical skills, that will mean a lot more in the overall picture than how "talented" one is, as decided by whatever people, committees or schools that one chooses to give credibility to.

How Not to Fail:

- Realize that talent alone is barely enough to get you to "first base" in the industry.
- You likely spent years developing your composing skills. Consider spending a considerable amount of time now developing the marketing, people skills and business skills that you'll need to be able to go out and get great jobs with your talent.
- Consult those in the industry you trust and get a realistic view of how your music sounds. Make sure people are being brutally honest with you – your career may depend on how honest they are being, and what actions you undertake as a result of their critiques.

Reason for Failure #6: Failure to keep up with musical tastes

Typical Quote:
"I don't understand why I didn't get this job. My music sounded almost as good as John Williams', and my "big orchestra" sound was better than any other composer who was competing for the job. The director wanted the music to sound orchestral yet very current, so I listened to the latest John Williams scores. I don't know what went wrong! I've been in this business twenty years and these kids keep getting hired instead of me!"

It's a hard fact of life for composers that if a filmmaker wants the "Johnny" or "James Horner" sound, they'll hire John Williams or James Horner (or John / James will send one of their talented protégés). Sounding just like one of the "masters" is not, I've found, an effective career strategy in today's industry requirement. Many up-and-coming filmmakers are looking for fresh, innovative approaches to scoring films in their quest for their own uniqueness.

Many composers who fail don't fully take into consideration and understand the meaning and context of the word "current." For many of these composers, time after time gigs are lost to other composers, who may be younger or not, who keep up to date on current musical trends and styles. The marketplace for tired, jaded composers who get "stuck in time" and try to get gigs with music that sounds five, ten, fifteen, or more years "old" (and credits of a similar vintage) is extremely limited. With all the competition in the marketplace, these "has-beens that never were" are finding little if any work, and instead rely on their connections, if any, to get jobs. Once hired, they become the "weak link" on the production team, and often end up hiring ghostwriters (with current music skills, of course!) to actually write the music. Eventually, the production company finds out and almost always things end up a mess for everyone involved. It's astounding to see jaded guys go from gig to gig operating in this manner – they'll go to almost any lengths to "cover" for their unwillingness to stay current with music, including falsifying cue sheets and taking credit for music written by young ghostwriters who haven't figured out how badly they're getting ripped off yet.

Hollywood is famous for "ageism" (hiring people based on age), and is admittedly youth-obsessed. After all, in what other industry can you place classified advertisements stating the age, race, and weight of people you want to hire (ads for actors, of course). Beyond reasons of vanity, younger people buy more products that advertisers on television sell, and younger people spend more time going to the movies than older people. For those reasons, filmmakers can and must consider the "youth audience" when it comes to the financial viability of a film, and filmmakers in many cases are hiring younger, newer composers. But you don't have to be young to sound current! Sure, for some directors a composer's actual age will make a difference, but there are many examples of composers well over 40 who sound just as current as composers in their twenties. It simply comes down to a matter of whether or not you as a composer are willing to spend the time and energy to maintain a working knowledge of how to write in current styles with current sounds.

How Not to Fail:

- Stay up to date with current musical styles (in pop music, not just in film and television) and current sounds (especially percussion/drums and any electronic/synth sounds)

Reason for Failure #7: Fail to stay current with gear, sounds and computer technology

Typical Quote:
"I've been in this business twenty-five years, and I've done over forty films. Why don't I get hired for better projects?"

This reason relates to Reason #6 (failure to keep up with musical tastes) but deals with more technical than aesthetic issues.

One of the many facts of life that composers have to deal with to stay current and be able to write current-sounding music (aka "edgy") is maintaining a vast library of current sounds for use in composition. This usually means a continual investment in equipment and sounds, including sample libraries, new synth modules, and more. The payoff is an evolving arsenal of sounds and musical tonal palettes that not only keeps up with current sounds but allows composers to actually set the tone that others may follow in terms of musical and sonic choices.

Those who don't "keep up" sonically end up using the same sounds over and over again, with predictable results… how many more times do we need to hear the infamous "shakuhachi flute" sound when the a jungle-like setting is revealed, or the tortuous "oil can scrape" or "waterphone" sounds when the dark, scary scene of the bad guy lurking around appears? All of these highly-overused sounds were cool in their day, but now represent tired, cheesy, unoriginal writing that almost comically refers back to an earlier time.

It's even worse to hear god-awful cheesy synth/samples doing brass stuff on a military documentary series, for example. I wonder if the producers realize how cheap, cheesy music cheapens the overall value and appeal of their programs!

In the area of computer technology, the other people on the post production team will expect you to be using current, up-to-date gear such as Pro Tools, etc. to create your work product which ends up in the film. A lack of current technical knowledge only makes you the "weakest link" in the post production team, and word gets around fast about these kind of situations. Because so many other people will have to deal with the results of your work, both sonically/aesthetically and technically (digital audio files, etc.), you will be judged by whether or not your technical standards are up with current standards or not. And if you're not up to date, word gets around.

How Not to Fail:

- Stay current with gear and sounds, and look for opportunities to use new sounds in interesting and musical ways. Try not to be a "follower" when it comes to what new sounds are used – be a trendsetter!
- Stay current with computer and digital audio technology and find ways to be a technical resource for your clients – especially indie filmmakers. Helping a filmmaker make technical decisions about how the music for a film will be handled technically will quickly get you perceived as a resource and part of "the team."
- Don't ever think you "know it all" or that you have "enough sounds."

Reason for Failure #8: Fail to plan financially; expectations of big money too soon

Typical Quote:
"I just couldn't afford to stay in the business working for free. How can you make any money in this business at prices like this? I'm a professional and expect to be paid reasonably for my work. I've spent a lot of money on my studio and now I'm ready for it to start paying off!"

Many composers who fail don't realize that in the first 5+ years of their careers, they're probably not going to be paid much, if any money for their work. As the market floods with composers willing to do any gig for credit only (free!), filmmakers realize they can have their choice of young, hungry composers for little or no money, often putting any music budget towards production costs (musicians, recording studio) only and asking the composers to work for "deferred" (read: probably no) pay or on the prayer that the performing rights societies will pick up and pay for any television broadcasts or overseas theatrical distribution of a film. Most early films a composer works on will be free or very low-paid projects. That's a reality for most composers, and it should be planned on.

In some ways, it can be helpful to think of your first five (or so) years in the business as a professional composer like a graduate school program – you learn by doing. Grad students often get internships where learning "on the job" is the primary compensation for their work, not money. It's very similar with composing, except you end up observing and teaching yourself what you learn while you score films, with input and responses from the filmmaker and others. While you don't have the luxury of a teacher, you do have the freedom to work "without a net" and reach out artistically without being told "what to do," usually.

But a common mistake many early composers make is to expect money too soon from composing – it just doesn't work that way in most cases. Financial pressure from money obligations that aren't met by low or no-paying film composing gigs can force composers to make bad decisions or take projects primarily because of pay, rather than what's best for their careers or what is most appealing artistically. Many composers we spoke with who have succeeded were able to make wise choices early in their careers to do artistic projects that got them noticed as talented composers. Some composers who have yet to succeed or have failed and dropped out of the business ended up getting burned out doing too many low-quality "crank-em-out" direct-to-video (now called "direct-to-DVD") films that, while paid decently, offered no artistic recognition or satisfaction. If making money becomes the prime consideration of a composer's career, he/she will quickly realize that there are other, much easier ways to make money in today's economy.

How Not to Fail:

- Plan on alternate means of financial support during the first five years of your career as a composer.
- Make sure your financial situation allows you to choose projects you score based on their artistic merit as films and the probability that the film will get some recognition - most successful composers today achieved recognition by scoring films that got recognition in the industry and from the public. Financial compensation really should be secondary in your consideration during the early years.

Reason for Failure #9: Fail to make preparations for the "ramp-up" period

Typical Quote:
"I just can't break in to the business. I've sent my demo out to many filmmakers, and I just can't get any great projects. I've done five films for the same low-budget filmmaker, and he wants me to do more, but I'm going nowhere."

Failure to make preparations and properly execute a "ramp-up" career plan is becoming more and more common among those who are trying to work as film and television composers. During the first 5-8 years of a composer's career, choices must be made at every turn, and those choices may in large part determine the long-term success of a composer's career.

As explained in Reason #8, it is generally unwise to have great financial expectations in the early part of your career, and a key factor in career success can be making smart choices about which projects you pursue and work on. A big part of getting to the "next level" of the business is adopting an effective ramp-up career plan such as:

<u>Make each project you do in some significant way a *better* project for you than the last project you worked on.</u>

This can mean better musically, better in terms of building relationships, or perhaps better financially – although financial compensation alone usually isn't a good measure of how well a film will do for your career. By using this as your central guide, you'll find yourself working on better and better projects, with each project a good candidate to be a film or television project that you'll receive positive recognition for. That recognition can lead to higher quality projects, which in the end will result in higher pay. But ramping up quality-wise first is almost always a success factor.

A trap that many composers have gotten themselves into is to start doing low-budget work and succumb to the temptation of doing more and more of this type of work. A talented composer can quickly make himself/herself invaluable to the low-budget, low-quality filmmaker, as great music can easily "lift" low quality films up to a higher level of perceived value. While this may be impossible in some cases, more often than not, great music can add real value to these films. For this reason low-budget / low-quality filmmakers who make a living "cranking out" lots of these films often align themselves with highly talented new composers and keep feeding work to these composers. The same holds true for "soft-core" pornographic films that are produced en masse for cable television. The composers who score these types of projects can end up getting used to the financial compensation, which can be more than higher quality low-budget films pay, and start making future work decisions on financial rather than artistic merits.

How Not to Fail:

- Choose projects that are better on artistic and aesthetic merits than your previous projects and you'll achieve ramp-up momentum in your career.
- If you do a few, fine, but avoid doing "repeat" projects for low-budget, low-quality filmmakers.

Reason for Failure #10: Fail because of a lack of social skills

Typical Quote:
"Nobody hired me – my music was great, I had a $200,000 studio, and my bills were paid for by others. My friends all said my music sounded great! What happened?"

This is a people and relationships business (see Reason #2). Given this reality, it is absolutely critical that you develop great social skills in order to succeed as a composer.

In many cases, a lack of social skills can completely undercut an otherwise promising career as a composer. Why? Because there are any number of talented composers out there – and more are being churned out by the colleges and schools every year. Filmmakers can and do have the luxury of working with people they grow to trust, and becoming someone that filmmakers trust requires social skills. No social skills can easily mean no trust, and while you may get some work here and there as the "eccentric artiste" it is virtually impossible to rise very far in this industry without good, if not great, social skills.

The critical importance of social skills is important for composers at all levels of the business. Virtually every composer we've ever interviewed for Film Music Magazine that has achieved any meaningful level of success, from Jerry Goldsmith and Hans Zimmer on down, is extremely skilled at relating to a wide variety of people and making clients and prospective clients feel comfortable. This ability to work with people and inspire trust is absolutely vital in a business like filmmaking, where almost every hiring decision is made on word-of-mouth, not on resumes and academic credentials.

Composers are often isolated as part of their work – toiling away in private studios for days at a time – but successful composers know how to "get out" and socialize in the industry to make contacts and develop work opportunities.

How Not to Fail:

- Learn social skills any way you can. If it means taking an etiquette or networking class, fine. But learn how to start a conversation, when and when not to enter a conversation at a social event, and develop ways of communicating with people that put them at ease with you. Nothing is worse than making someone else feel uncomfortable, and nothing is better than inspiring confidence from someone else in you and your work.
- Go out and use those social skills – attend film festivals and industry events and introduce yourself to people who can help you in your career. Join networking groups and industry "breakfast clubs" and other social organizations and make the most of them. Don't be shy! Building relationships through face-to-face social contact can be a highly successful way to get new clients – composers at every level of the business find this to be true.

Reason for Failure #11: Fail to obtain enough education to make smart decisions about the business

Typical Quote:
"I really got shafted in my early years – if I had only known what my rights were. The royalty money I lost by ghostwriting for that guy would have paid for a new house by now! Boy, I hate that guy who used me as a ghostwriter. Nobody ever found out what a great composer I was!"

Bitterness about making bad decisions is a sure sign that a composer failed to obtain enough knowledge and information in order to make better, smarter decisions. In many cases, early opportunities for financial or artistic recognition are squandered or lost because composers just don't realize the significance of their decisions due to a lack of education.

This often happens in situations where composers give up royalties (not knowing their huge worth over decades if the production does well) or credit (not realizing the lost recognition if the project they compose for gets recognition and others benefit). It also happens in situations where composers make bad decisions about the type of projects to score (see Reason #9) and miss opportunities to score high-profile, artistically important films.

Knowledge isn't exactly growing on trees these days, and as we've discussed before, the film scoring schools aren't the most forthcoming when it comes to educating their students about the harsh realities of the business today. In fact, most film scoring programs offer very little education about how to make smart business decisions as an early composer, and that's one of the huge shortcomings of these programs. Composers are left with two choices: either learn through making mistakes and learning "the hard way", or be proactive and search out knowledge so they'll be prepared when it's time to make those critical decisions that make the difference between dead-end, failed careers and rising stars.

How Not to Fail:

- Learn about how music royalties work, and make sure you're fully aware of exactly how much you will be giving up if you let others take royalty credit for your work. Talk to other composers who will share their knowledge with you in this area.
- Learn how contracts work and what current industry standards are. Make friends with a music attorney, even if you can't pay that attorney yet. Many attorneys will give a contract a quick look as a favor to a promising future client, so take advantage of this and learn what should and shouldn't be in a contract.
- Before you let someone else take royalty (cue sheet) or screen credit for your music, be very, very sure you want to do this and are fully aware of what you're signing away. Also realize that by doing this, you may create a reputation for yourself in the business for being willing to do this (others will ask!) and may establish a precedent for yourself as someone who will do "anything" for a job. While a few composers have thrived being the "secret talent" for others in exchange for handsome pay, many more composers have burned out and failed in their careers because they got stuck in this grinder.

Reason for Failure #12: Fail because of a belief that years spent in the business means success is "owed"

Typical Quote:
"I've been in the business twenty-five hears, and I should have been the composer to score that film. My experience makes me far more qualified than those younger, inexperienced composers. It's maddening not to get hired for films that I'm way more qualified for than the guy who got hired. What's he got that I don't, with all my experience?"

There's nothing more pathetic than a jaded, bitter composer who feels that the industry "owes" him work since he's been "in the business" for many years. Many of these "has-beens that never were" keep themselves busy in the politics of composer and royalty organizations, trying to make up for a lack of artistic achievement and recognition by building a political powerbase and seeking recognition not based on their music, but based on how involved they can be politically.

One composer I know that fits this profile spends his days complaining about how there are no longer music editors on small, package deal jobs, bemoaning the fact that he (the composer) has to do all the music editor's functions – spotting notes, scene breakdowns, etc, and complains bitterly about falling composer fees. This composer spends lots of time politically churning the waters in the business, while continuing to make little or no upward movement in his own career. It's a sad commentary on someone who spends more time wishing things were "like they used to be" rather than staying current and finding new and better ways to add value to a film.

What qualifies a composer for a gig is almost never the "number of years" of experience the composer has. Instead, it's their music, their social skills, and the relationships they've built in the business and the confidence and trust they are able to inspire from others, especially from directors, music supervisors, and producers. The current work environment can be especially terrifying for so-called "veteran" composers with big mortgages and living expenses who have spent 20+ years in the business only to find themselves not making the "A-list" and having to compete with newer composers for the attentions of newer, younger directors. One composer I know who fits this description has tried mightily to establish himself as an "elder statesman" of the business, trying to act stately like someone who commands much respect. But he pales, and always will, in comparison to the "real" statesmen of the business like John Williams and others, because despite his years he simply doesn't have the artistic recognition to command this kind of respect, and all the politics in the world won't change that.

How Not to Fail:

- Don't confuse years of experience with quality of experience. If you aren't ramping up (see Reason #9) and doing better and better projects, then you're in trouble – re-evaluate your choice of projects and your career strategy. Don't get burned out!
- If you're losing jobs to others, find out why. Then, use that information to bolster your qualifications and go out and get that work! If you're losing jobs to younger composers, then chances are you are not staying current with music, sounds and gear. Never make the mistake that your "many years" in the business will make up for a lack of current composing abilities.

Reason for Failure #13: Fail to realize that success in related fields doesn't necessary mean success in film & television music

Typical Quote:
"I was a famous composer in my home country, and everyone there said I should come to Los Angeles to score films. People here in LA just don't realize how talented I am! If only I had a chance here to show people…"

This situation occurs often with people from outside LA who move to LA to pursue a career in film scoring hoping to launch that career from a start as a success in a related field (such as musical theater, live performance, classical composition, etc.) or success scoring films in another geographical locale (New York, London, outside the U.S., etc.). A difficult reality for composers in this situation to realize is that film or other music writing credits outside of Los Angeles mean very little to most Los Angles filmmakers and producers. As a filmmaker scans the resume/credits of a composer, known films for recognizable filmmakers stand out and work in a positive way for the composer, just as unknown films and unknown directors may work in a negative way in terms of how a composer is perceived by a filmmaker.

Part of this is based on the fact that with an overabundance of highly talented, proven film composers already here in Los Angeles ready to work for any price, filmmakers simply don't need to "risk" giving the work to someone without a proven track record here in Los Angeles with known filmmakers.

Filmmaking is a somewhat insular business – LA filmmakers build a reputation within the LA filmmaking community for their work, and turn to their peers for help and advice in making decisions, such as when hiring a composer. A composer with no local credits is often seen as a big "unknown" and may be considered a risky hire. Since word of mouth and a composer's reputation and the relationships he/she has built are often the prime hiring motivations from a filmmaker's point of view, non-film composers or those composers from outside LA that have not yet built up LA contacts and relationships often end up not being hired for projects where the post production is located in LA. This can be very frustrating for composers who lose jobs to a less-qualified, less talented composer simply based on lack of a local relationship base.

How Not to Fail:

- Make building local relationships in the film and television business a top priority, no matter where you live. Realize that credits and relationships outside your area have much less value.
- Don't assume that your success in the film and television music business will automatically follow your success in a related field.
- If your "previous career" includes any sort of recognition as a popular performing artist or singer, congratulations… you may have a powerful tool to get work in music for film and television, as classic bands and recording artists are now enjoying a considerable level of success in film and television music since their music already has an established audience.

Reason for Failure #14: Fail to effectively deal with geographic limitations

Typical Quote:
"I'm a great composer, and I live in Ohio. Why can't I get work? Now that we have the Internet, filmmakers can audition my music real-time from anywhere in the world, and I'm cheaper and better than a lot of LA composers."

If you live and work outside of Los Angeles and New York (the two current filmmaking capitals of the U.S.) and want to pursue a career as a film and television composer, you need to acknowledge some realities when it comes to geography:

- LA filmmakers have a lot of reasons to hire a composer in LA rather than a composer outside of LA. The overabundance of talented composers in LA willing to work for any price makes it even harder to get LA work if you don't live in LA.
- Most filmmakers don't hire composers based on cost. Instead, they hire composers based on the confidence that they have in the composer that the composer will do a great job for the film and be easy and productive to work with. This can give local composers a huge advantage.

Given this situation, many composers successfully pursue local work in the city where they live and build up a strong local reputation. The advantage of working outside LA is that composers often don't have as much intense competition as there currently is in Los Angeles. But also, there are often not as many high-quality opportunities to work on projects that are candidates for the kind of national attention and recognition that can propel the careers of rising stars in the composer industry.

How Not to Fail:

- Don't have unrealistic expectations about being hired to work in LA if you don't live in Los Angeles. Local composers in any locale almost always have a significant advantage in being hired to score films.
- If you live and work in a locale outside of Los Angeles or New York, consider writing for music libraries in addition to your film and television work. Libraries will hire composers regardless of the composers' geographic locale, and a successful music library career can result in a six-figure annual income – more than many Los Angeles composers make due to the low competition and low pay in the area of indie films, etc. in Los Angeles.
- If you are committed to success as a professional film and television composer and want to work on major projects, consider relocation to Los Angeles and plan carefully (see Reason#9) for a career as a composer in Los Angeles.

Reason for Failure #15: Fail to realize how your music *really* stacks up to the competition

Typical Quote:
"But all my friends and family told me my music would be great for film and television"

When you're in your "own world," everything sounds great – usually. Those composers who spend too much time in their own world and fail to realize how their music really sounds when compared to those they are competing with for jobs are often doomed to failure. If a composer is really writing "from the heart," then his/her music is indeed a labor of love. But just because a piece of music is a labor of love doesn't mean that it will compare favorably in the marketplace and be desired by filmmakers and music supervisors. That's one of the harsh realities of this business.

Just as a race car driver cannot drive with blinders on, an important part of a composer's upward career movement is making strategic decisions based on how his/her music is perceived by others – specifically filmmakers, film producers and music supervisors. It is absolutely vital to get feedback from knowledgeable people about how your music is perceived honestly and candidly compared to those you are competing with for jobs.

When you lose a job to another composer, it can be very helpful to learn exactly why you lost the job. And if you go about asking the question the right way (respectfully and with no bitter incriminations, creating a way for the filmmaker to help you despite not hiring you), you can get an answer! This information can be vitally important as you pursue future gigs – it's a direct indication of how you and your music is/was perceived by those who count – filmmakers. Thank the filmmaker for the information and then take it to heart.

One person some composers turn to for candid feedback is their scoring mixer (recording engineer) if that person works for many composers as a freelancer, as is often the case. Candid feedback from a scoring mixer who as a part of his/her job listens to a lot of your music many times in succession can help you improve musically, technically, and can make a big difference in how you and your music is perceived.

How Not to Fail:

- Use every means to get constructive, honest feedback about how you and your music is perceived by filmmakers, producers and music supervisors.
- Take feedback seriously, even if it is negative. Don't take it personally.
- Patterns of repeating reasons that appear from those who give you feedback should get special attention.
- Turn to good friends and family to try and get honest feedback about personal issues (appearance, grooming, hygiene, etc.) that might be interfering with your image.
- Remember the linkage between social skills (Reason #10) and perception in the workplace when evaluating feedback. Negative feedback can relate back to personal skills even if the music may seem to be the obvious culprit – it's easier for a filmmaker to be critical about your music than to be critical about you personally. Carefully consider if your personal skills may have a role in directly or indirectly leading to negative feedback.

Reason for Failure #16: Fail to realize their role in the filmmaking process and how it relates to others

Typical Quote:
"I always knew there was going to be trouble when other people associated with the film didn't like me or my music. It's impossible to get along with some of these people! I wish the filmmaker was calling all the shots, because he really likes my music! This business is way too political."

Filmmaking is perhaps the largest "team sport" in the entertainment business. On every film, hundreds if not thousands of different people play a part in the creation of the film. Time and time again we've seen composers whose lack of people skills, overall attitude, or even just their weird personalities caused them to be looked upon by other "team" members as not a member of the team, and in many cases failure followed.

It is absolutely vital that a composer gets along well with other members of the filmmaking team, especially those directly involved with the music including the director, music supervisor, music editor, film editor, and the producer(s) depending on their role with the music. Remember: producers pay the bills in filmmaking, and part of a composer's job is to create an aura of success around the music being created and the composer himself that will build confidence with those who pay the bills (the producers) and those who approve the artistic direction and decision (the filmmaker, usually). With thousands of people on the market as composers today, it only takes the slightest negative "vibe" or troublesome issue to lead to thoughts of replacing a composer, and there of course is no shortage of composers ready to step in immediately and replace the existing composer on a film.

Composer George S. Clinton said it well at a Film Music Network event a few years ago:

"You need to be seen at all times as part of the solution, not part of the problem."

One composer we interviewed was emphatic about his view that personality shouldn't be a factor in the composing process, stating that, "It's all about the music, and it shouldn't be about me. After the film is finished the audience doesn't care about the composer, they care about the music. That's what matters in the end."

Of course, the audience doesn't know or care about the composer's personality and how he/she relates to others. But in order to get to the end of the project (without being replaced, that is), a composer must work hard to be seen as "one of the team". This is especially important when realizing that when the composer is hired, the "team" is for the most part complete and often has been working together for many months.

How Not to Fail:

- Consider it a privilege to be hired to score a film or television project, and act like it. Get to know as many people involved in the film as possible, especially post production folks and anyone with direct involvement with the music before, during, or after the score is composed.
- Build relationships with people on the filmmaking team, and be sensitive to the fact that you're probably one of the last people hired for the team, so find out about and respect existing relationships, procedures, habits, policies, etc. of the team.
- If issues develop between you and someone else on the team, seek guidance from the director (your immediate "boss" usually), and bend over backwards to work things out in a mutually beneficial way. Bad feelings created on a project can last for years, and may have an extremely destructive effect on a composer's career.
- Keep in touch with team members after each project ends, and send them a CD of the music you write for the film. If you're going to send it to any music people associated with the film, a nice touch is to include the music credits on the back panel or insert card of the CD.

Reason for Failure #17: Fail to be able to deal with constant rejection

Typical Quote:
"I just got tired of sending out demo after demo with no success. Nobody called me back or sent me a letter with their reactions to my demo! When I do get hired, I get sick and tired of the "suits" constantly changing things and messing up my music. I hate this business!"

Constant rejection is simply part of the business, and those who do not understand this often fail quickly, or become so bitter and jaded that even when success comes knocking, they don't know how to deal with it.

Rejection is a function of someone saying "no." Composers get into trouble by taking rejection personally, as if the rejection of his/her music is total rejection of him as a composer, and perhaps as a person. As we've discussed before, most people who write music write it from the heart, and the creation of music is the result of a personal, emotional process. Unless time is a real challenge, the music represents the composer's best efforts at writing "ideal" music for whatever scene or other requirements are presented.

But while composers may see their music as a personal emotional expression, many others in the filmmaking process will view the music as raw material to be tweaked, adjusted, changed, etc. in order to "fit" the film just as actors are instructed to change how they act, deliver their lines, etc. in order to fit the filmmaker's artistic vision. Composers who get upset that their first submissions while working on a film aren't accepted should remember that it usually requires many "takes" of a scene for the director to be happy with all elements of it – situations where the actors, production people, etc. do everything perfectly on the first "take" of a scene are exceedingly rare. *Why should composers expect their artistic contributions (music) to be any less subject to fine tuning and artistic molding and sculpting that directors do to harmonize all creative elements of a film to create a unified artist vision and direction?*

No composer would turn in music to a filmmaker either at the demo phase or during a job that the composer knowingly believed was bad, wrong, or not appropriate. But it's impossible to read filmmakers' minds, and so composers time and time again are presented with situations where the composer's best efforts are rejected by a filmmaker. Instead of the composer adjusting the musical requirements to fit what may be new or more further refined desires as expressed by the filmamker, a composer can become overly "attached" to a piece of music and find himself in an artistic standoff with a filmmaker. This can quickly be the end of a composer's work on a film or a reason not to be hired for a film if this happens during the hiring/demo process. If a film director believes that the composer does not completely share, understand and support the director's artistic vision for a film, the director has a good reason to get another composer.

This situation usually has little to do with the "talent level" of a composer – instead, it has to do with the composer's ability to create music that supports and is compatible with the artistic vision as set forth by the filmmaker. Indeed, many top film composers have been replaced on films. Again, it's not about the talent – it's about how the music *and* composer are seen as supportive and compatible with the artistic direction of the film.

How Not to Fail:

- Realize that rejection, especially when submitting demos, is a common occurrence. Turn rejections into opportunities by asking in a nice way why you were rejected, and what advice the person who rejected you might have. You may realize that there are aspects of your music that you are completely unaware of that are creating negative impressions on people who hear it for the first time.
- Avoid rejection during a project by making yourself a valuable and contributing member of the filmmaking team and work hard to understand, as completely as possible, the artistic direction and vision of the filmmaker.
- Avoid rejection during the filmmaking process by learning the vocabulary filmmakers use and asking as many questions as you need to in order to understand the artistic direction of the film. Examples from other films are great tools that directors like to use to demonstrate musical specifics, since most directors cannot speak technically about music. Make sure you understand each example given and how the examples relate to what the filmmaker is trying to achieve with a film.
- Avoid rejection during the demo phase by asking as many questions as you can to get as complete a picture of what the filmmaker and others on the music team of the film are looking for from the composer.
- Understand that rejection is part of the business, and don't take things personally. There are times when it is absolutely important to separate yourself from your music and not take rejection of your music as rejection of you personally.
- Understand that rejection usually means the filmmaker is looking for something and you haven't quite delivered that "something" that is being sought by the filmmaker. Ask questions, get more details, and use examples as necessary from other films or other music you've written in order to fine-tune your understanding of what is desired musically by the filmmaker. If either you or the filmmaker uses musical examples from other films, make absolutely sure you both have a clear understanding of *which* music from the film is being used as an example.

Reason for Failure #18: Fail to focus on making music; too much attention on studio, gear, and technical considerations

Typical Quote:
"I just don't have time to go to industry events, I've got to categorize all my newest guitar samples. My samples are the most realistic in the business, and I just got my new Macintosh G4 Dual Processor computer reconfigured. I don't know how I'm going to pay for all of this, but my studio rig can't be beat."

Some composers who fail do so because they've retreated into a world of technology, thinking that having lots of great technology will somehow ensure success in the business. I use the word "retreated" because that's in essence what they've done. Most composers are far more comfortable tweaking samples and building/configuring/etc. gear than they are going out to film festivals and meeting new potential clients – filmmakers, and others. By taking "the easy way" and spending most of their time in the comfortable, safe world of tech, composers can find themselves without work and facing failure quickly.

Remember that technology is only a "way" to get a job done. Technology is a tool, and as such is useful only if used to create a product that satisfies a need and results in a financial exchange. What would you think if you met a carpenter who spent all his time polishing his tools and buying nicer and nicer tools and toolboxes? Many would come to the conclusion that this carpenter has too much time on his hands, as his work seems not to be needed by those who hire carpenters.

Consider you are a homeowner and in need of hiring a person to build a swimming pool in your backyard. Would you hire the pool builder who has the biggest toolbox and the greatest number of tools? Of course not – you'd want to see examples of his/her work, and that would likely be the primary basis on which you'd make your hiring decision. A builder's tools tend not to be very important to a homeowner, since the homeowner probably doesn't' know or care what role each of those tools play in the building process. Just as a homeowner will focus on the success of past creative efforts of a pool builder (and probably hire the one with the most experience and the most attractive designs), a filmmaker will likely focus on your music, as should you. It's the final product that matters, in poolmaking or filmmaking.

Too much focus on the tools of the trade can also lead to a false sense of success based on the quality, power, and abilities that the tools can help a composer achieve. What good are the latest sample libraries if they take you away from the process of finding work, meeting filmmakers, and building relationships and great credits in the business? While it's important to know your tools well so you'll be prepared for any contingency, an overemphasis on your tools can wreak havoc in other parts of your business, such as your marketing efforts. A belief that having the latest tools will lead to great jobs is, in most cases, a way to avoid doing the kinds of things that truly are necessary to get great jobs – especially going out and meeting and building relationships with filmmakers.

How Not to Fail:

- Budget your time to make sure you aren't spending too much of your valuable time on your tools. Make sure you have a specified amount of time each week that you spend doing the tough things – going out and meeting new filmmakers, film producers, music supervisors, and others in the business.
- Budget your spending to make sure you are putting your money to the best use – the greatest new sounds and gear won't mean much to a filmmaker if your demo package looks or sounds anything less than fantastic.
- Spend your "tech time" on gear that directly benefits the process of writing music. If tech issues for non-writing gear (such as audio signal processing gear, mixing gear, etc.) get to be too much, consider hiring an audio engineer to deal with those issues while you concentrate on writing-oriented issues.
- Realize when "enough is enough" and don't be overly picky about tech projects that can involve endless tweaking and adjusting, categorizing, etc.
- If you're not getting enough work, then take that as a big "red flag" that you are spending too little time on marketing and relationship-building activities, and refocus your time accordingly. While tech can be fun, don't let it become a "retreat" that you fall or jump into when the other parts of building a career as a film composer become difficult.

Reason for Failure #19: Fail to be unique and stand out from the crowd

Typical Quote:
"There's just too much competition in this business! How can a new composer get noticed with all those "big guys" out there to compete against? There just aren't any chances for new composers any more, and even if there were, there are just too many composers!"

This reason for failure relates directly to the oversupply of composers on the market now. There is a very simple truth that often means the difference between success and failure in a crowded market:

Today, at any level of the business, a composer must give a filmmaker unique and highly compelling, clear reasons to hire you for a project. If a filmmaker believes this to the extent that he becomes completely and totally committed to the position that you, and only you, are the best person for the job, then you may be hired for the job. Any lesser degree of commitment by the filmmaker usually results in not getting hired.

Being unique is one of the most important concepts in film composing today. If you're seen as being a "generic" composer who writes "generic" film music ("dramatic orchestral," etc.), then you're likely going to have a tough time getting hired. Why? You're in direct competition with the hundreds or thousands of other composers who are also seen as generic. Many composers today are seen by filmmakers as "generic" – like it or not. That's exactly why it's vital to not be perceived as "generic" in any way – it's the "kiss of death" in many cases, when it comes to getting hired.

A perfect example of this theory is the 20th century composer Philip Glass. His music is unusual and unique, and when you hear a Philip Glass composition, you'll know it if you are at all familiar with his style. Whether it's a deep feature film about women and personal struggles with society ("The Hours") or a documentary about the spread of AIDS on The Discovery Channel, Philip's style comes through loud and clear. It's why they hire him, and it's why they pay him "the big bucks" as some call it. If they want "that sound," they know they have to hire Philip and pay Philip's price.

Philip Glass writes music that is highly unique, and he has succeeded in becoming noticed by filmmakers exactly because his music is so unique. Will they hire Philip to score the next action sci-fi film? Probably not. But Philip is not trying to be all things to all people. Instead, he's letting his musical uniqueness speak for him, and is making sure that his music gets heard by decision makers in the industry. The fact that his music is so unique is his biggest selling tool, and it's the reason he's being hired by more and more filmmakers today.

How Not to Fail:

- One of the most difficult hurdles for a composer to overcome in the early career years is becoming "known" so filmmakers and others in the business will come to recognize his/her name and unique musical style. Always keep this in mind, and go out of your way to do things and write music that gets recognized.
- Two ways to achieve uniqueness are: being so unique *personally* (being exceedingly nice to people, great to get along with, contributing wonderfully and generously to film projects) that you are remembered for your great reputation and people skills; and being so unique *musically* that your music makes a unique and powerful positive impression on the filmmakers and others who hear it to the extent that your name is recognized because of the uniqueness of your music.
- Avoid being perceived as generic and "typical" at all costs.

Reason for Failure #20: Fail to properly plan for success

Typical Quote:
"I don't know what happened. I got this great film and everybody was excited, then nothing. I even got signed to an agency after the film hit the theatres, but the agent hasn't done anything to get me another job. I really don't like agents – even with the success of this blockbuster film, I'm still not getting nearly enough work. What's wrong?"

This final reason for success is perhaps the most important and common reason for failure and career problems that we heard in our interviews with composers. We saved it for the last reason in this guide because so many of the other reasons for failure (and the related factors for success) become related to this reason.

Planning for success means doing all the things necessary so that when some amount of success is achieved, it becomes a stepping stone to bigger and better projects instead of a plateau that is achieved, followed by a career decline.

Many composers fail after one reasonably significant success. As an example, just look at all the composers you see credits for in feature films or television shows that you never hear about again. These composers fail in large part because they either don't know what to do when success happens, or fall into one of the biggest "expectation" traps in Hollywood: *a belief that one success will inevitably lead to other successes.*

Some composers we spoke with took the financial proceeds from their success and, believing that more successes were right around the corner, spent their money on new gear and luxuries that they "always wanted" instead of spending money on activities that would capitalize on the initial success. These composers figured that now that they were "known" due to the initial success, work would start popping up like dandelions in springtime. When this didn't happen, they found themselves financially unprepared to deal with a lack of work, despite their initial success.

Other composers were unable to properly deal with their initial successes on a writing level – finding themselves with a good paying, high-profile job and not enough experience or skills to address the writing demands of the job (this occurred with series television composers especially). Some composers failed to educate themselves on what was really needed to meet the tough demands of scoring high-profile, time sensitive projects, and ended up spending all their money on vast teams of ghostwriters and such, afraid that the client would "discover" their lack of ability to personally meet the creative and personal demands this type of project often requires.

It's easy enough to deal with not being prepared on a technical level – money and technology (and some quick lessons from a friend, engineer, etc. about how to use the tech effectively) issues can usually be solved quickly and easily. But compositional issues, issues involving a lack of people skills (see Reasons #2 and #10), teamwork issues (Reason #16), and a lack of focus on writing great music (Reason #18) can quickly turn a high-profile success into a high-profile flame-out that can wreak havoc on a composer's professional reputation and personal life.

How Not to Fail:

- Prepare for success by having in place the skills, equipment and attitude that will be necessary when success occurs.
- Build relationships in advance with people you may need the services of on your team in case of a high-profile, high-demand project.
- Plan financially and don't squander the proceeds of your initial successes on non-career items. Put a percentage of your earnings back into your marketing budget to help create awareness and exposure for you and your music for future projects. Maintain an amount of money in savings for future needs.
- Make the most of early successes by achieving maximum publicity for those successes. Consider the services of a professional publicist on a per-project basis to help achieve maximum awareness within the industry of you and your successes.
- Imagine what will be needed if you are called tomorrow for a high-profile, high-demand project. Consider your needs in the areas of **people** (what types of people you would need on your tem), **technology** (what gear and operational knowledge you'll need to write and produce the music), and **personal capabilities** (what writing skills you'll need, what amount of time you'll need to devote to the project) that will be necessary for success. Make plans for how you'll meet these needs when the time comes.
- Even if you are working on low-profile, low-budget projects, act like you've already achieved success – not in terms of ego, but in terms of pride. There's nothing wrong with treating a small indie film like a big, high-profile film. The pride you have in your music and the project as a hole will be evident to the filmmaker and others on the filmmaking team. The pride you have in terms of your attitude towards the project and your music's important role in the project can result in great publicity for your music and the project.
- Realize that a consistent "attitude of success" can really lead to success – especially in an industry where perception is paramount and so many success factors relate directly to how you and your music are perceived by the industry and the public.