

Go For It - Surviving the Challenges of Becoming an Artist

by Nora Germain

Fulfilling a life in music persistently translates into navigating glorious but precarious pathways. Even years of musical training don't necessarily guarantee a resilient, sustainable, productive and successful career. Knowing this, Jazz violinist Nora Germain has written *Go For It - Surviving the Challenges of Becoming an Artist*, a poignant, well crafted book for those wishing to pursue a professional career in music.

While *Go For It* isn't necessarily a specific blueprint, manual or technical guide on how to make it in Jazz, it does function as a motivational memoir representing the perseverance of Germain's spirit and the ingenuity she maintains throughout her own journey as a renowned artist and musician. That particular labyrinth takes the reader through a complicated childhood and the divine, but also ambiguous, quality of her formal and informal educations. Even if it can't help you find a booking agent, schedule a tour or navigate every tidal wave of disruption today's musicians must surf, *Go For It* can help prepare artists for the hardship, confusion, and sheer joy of a life realizing a disciplined improvisational mindset.

Arrogant instructors, gigs lasting past dawn, and working/playing through a myriad of supportive friendships, collectively frame Germain's intimate professional timeline - often in ways that perhaps only other musicians can truly appreciate. Unfiltered, sometimes raw, but always accessible, Germain's prose consistently speaks to honoring one's internal compass while managing being a creative gypsy armed with a bow and violin.

“Surviving” is the operative word here as Germain works to overcome a variety of early challenges before even having a chance to create the foundation for her eventual success. Her steadfast love and fascination for the violin prevails, and so the leap of faith to an arts based boarding school, a burgeoning curiosity for Jazz and perfectly timed mentorship by bassist Marshall Hawkins, along with the sonic introduction to violinist Stéphane Grappelli and eventual studies at The New School and USC, all propel her forward.

Bound to the countless structural hurdles she faces are constant refrains that becoming a “jazz violinist” is a curse for career minded musicians - a misguided philosophy that continues today. Undeterred, Germain uses this as motivation to “transcend the stereotype, the sound of the instrument” and even her gender. Eventually she’s simply celebrated as “Nora,” an ascending artist working towards channeling the essential qualities of what she loves most about Jazz.

Functioning as a soloist, band leader and someone who has played with a remarkable variety of professional musicians, Germain routinely cultivates an open and creative mind to what her professional path might entail. Consistently Germain does well to speak to the importance of the violin within Jazz and the diverse ways musicians have represented the instrument, all while detailing how she pursued her own mastery by collaborating with artists throughout a broad range of musical idioms.

Gifted with these impressive lived experiences, some of the most compelling portions of this memoir rally around finding one’s own sound while shaping an authentic musical identity. Throwing the burden of perfection aside, Germain recounts numerous times when failure isn’t just an opportunity to learn, but more importantly, the reality musicians must accommodate in order to thrive within the instability of their careers. Tirelessly optimistic, Germain speaks to

“antifragility,” or the idea that you can constructively plumb the depths of any perceived limitation by intentionally resurfacing with positive belief systems that will enhance any musical opportunity thrown your way.

Salient but sans any preachy attitude, Germain tackles the importance of creating timeless music with an assortment of suggestions refining a vigorous critical lens while honing your craft. Recognizing the emotional and spiritual call-and-response that often happens during live performances, some of Germain’s most fascinating passages involve recognizing, negotiating and drawing energy from audiences. Another delightful section correlates her own attempts at painting to musicianship, as both arts negotiate the tension and beauty of a facing a blank canvas.

Exploring the kind of spontaneity that “can only happen on stage,” Germain ponders this unique magic with an excellent chapter on the intimate nature of improvisation. No magic bullets or shortcuts here, just sage advice about “flow state,” the mercurial nature of experiencing the zen of spontaneous creativity. Refreshingly honest about her own personal strengths and weaknesses as an improviser, violinists will especially enjoy the granularity of how Germain speaks to the physical, emotional and psychological aspects of playing the instrument.

Unpacking the often strange and absurd segregation of Jazz, classical and other musical genres, Germain chooses to experience music as “one big quilt,” a philosophy built from the colorful patchwork of experiences with artists representing rock, blues, folk, classical, Jazz, and various house bands that cover all that and more. Inside details of managing live performance and studio recording include Germain’s holistic practice of leveraging humility and generosity in order to support peak collective musicianship.

It's not hard to think about the stereotypic "hero's journey" while absorbing *Go For It - Surviving the Challenges of Becoming an Artist*. How can musicians live well while mastering such unpredictable and demanding crafts? What kinds of community are required to balance the frustration of rejection, while fueling the creative fires required for a life in music? Throughout her book Germain consistently speaks to questions like these as well as slaying the dragons of self-perception, manifesting a deep appreciation for the titanic influence of Jazz, and working to support sacred musical traditions while leaving one's mark on the idiom. By being so frank, introspective and generous with her life story, with *Go For It - Surviving the Challenges of Becoming an Artist*, Germain has found yet another elegant way to do just that.

Michael Ambrosino writes about music and culture, producing and hosting a variety of Jazz programs on 33third.org including Los Olvidados, an audio documentary on Pan-Latin Jazz.