

# INTRODUCTION

What does *making it* mean for you?

Picture it. You've arrived. This is success. What does it look like? Is it a specific gig or moment? An award? Maybe it's just a feeling.

For me, making it meant performing at the Palais Garnier, the home of the Paris Opera and easily the most beautiful opera house in existence. A literal palace built in the center of the world's most aesthetic city to honor music, theater, culture and taste.

Every night a different king or queen sits on its throne. When the curtain closes, someone has to walk out on that light-drenched stage, take the final bow and drink the wine this palace produces: the adulation and reverie of thousands of satisfied Parisians.

I wanted to sit on that throne, even if only for a night.  
If that's not *making it*, what is?

Well folks, I'm proud to report that I made it. In December 2024 I sang the title role in Igor Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* at the Paris Opera. I ran out to center stage and took that final bow at the Palais Garnier. And let me tell you, the wine was sweet. It was everything I dreamed it would be. And when the curtain came down I was a made man.

After the show I shared the usual congratulatory cocktails with a handful of diplomats and some minor Duke. Then I got out of costume and snuck through the gaggle of fans and well-wishers to my waiting ride. As my driver ferried me back to the Four Seasons, I thumbed through my fee, paid in cash of course. The shoebox could barely contain it.

Once all the Euros were safely back inside, I cracked the window and breathed a deep sigh of satisfaction into the chilly, baguette-scented air. The satisfaction of knowing my agent, manager, accountant, publicist, lawyer and assistants were out there making it happen, paving a gold-bricked path for me to follow into the sunset. From now on it would only be top shelf gigs. All I'd have to do is step out of my Rolls Royce, sing my songs and cash the checks. Everything was beautiful and nothing hurt.

And that's what it's like to *make it*.

Sounds about right, doesn't it? Whether we realize it or not, that's how many of us think about our careers in the performing arts. We'll just keep grinding away until one day we *make it*. And then we'll be golden forever.

Let me tell you a truer story.

I really did sing at Paris Opera and it really was insanely cool. Truly. Taking that final bow was a singular, ineffable thrill.

And thirty minutes later I was on the subway back to my budget AirBnB to pack my bags. The next day I flew economy home to NY where I spent the evening unpacking and cleaning up after my recently departed subletter. When my fee was wired, I paid my rent, bills, student loans, taxes and agent. Luckily I didn't have to pay my lawyer, accountant, publicist or assistants because they don't exist. Then I finished learning some music, repacked my bags and hit the road for a few more months of singing for my supper. In short, I went back to being a blue collar, self-employed performing artist.

The vast majority of freelancers working in the performing arts do not have teams of people managing every detail of our professional lives and never will. Even if we achieve the goals we set for ourselves. Even if we are perceived to be *making it*.

Things like making budgets and managing expenses, arranging travel and accommodations, organizing and paying taxes, student loan and credit card debt, buying insurance, managing relationships, unions, incorporating... And if you travel internationally for work, add visas, passports, international taxation and exchange rates to the mix. Basically just look at the *Table of Contents*...

These responsibilities almost always fall back on us as individuals at every stage of our careers. And we have to find ways to manage them while living out of suitcases and consistently performing at a high level. It's a lot to manage.

If it sounds like running a business, it's because that's exactly what being a freelancer is. None of us went to conservatory, the Actor's Studio or a thousand open mic nights so we could become accountants or CEOs. We are passionate creators, not finance bros. But the truth is, whether we like it or not, each of us is the CEO of our own freelance career.

Singing the song, dancing the dance, playing the scene, telling the joke, *doing the thing*, will always be the most important thing we do. We can't get anywhere without relative mastery of our crafts. But if we ignore how the financial and entrepreneurial aspects of freelance life work (the CEO stuff) we're only half-prepared for a career. As they say, ambition without preparation is futile.

Whether you're just starting out or you're already mid-career, these are the things that, if mismanaged, easily and often derail the practical possibility of a freelance career. Auditions come with enough pressure as-is. Nobody needs the extra pressure of knowing that if they don't book this gig, they're moving back to Mom and Dad's basement to save money for overdue tax bills. It's hard to be at your best if your mental bandwidth is clogged with ignored and unresolved responsibilities.

It doesn't help that these responsibilities and the knowledge and skills necessary to manage them are rarely taught

or even discussed. While experience is often the best teacher, learning by experience usually means learning from making mistakes. And when opportunities and income are as hard to find as they often are in the performing arts, it doesn't leave much wiggle room for financial and entrepreneurial mistakes.

If your palms are starting to sweat, you're not alone. Nearly half of Americans self-identify as financially illiterate. For freelance performers like us, I'd bet that that number is a *lot* higher.

We can rage and protest against these systemic shortcomings of what we were or weren't taught until we're blue in the face. But the far more productive, predictable and self-reliant path is to own responsibility for *all* aspects of our careers, to learn the rules of the game and to play it well. I promise it's not as scary and complicated as you may think. Even if you're terrible at math.

Luckily you've got the right book in your hands. In the pages that follow we will look at exactly how to sidestep the avoidable financial and professional pitfalls that trip up too many freelancers. And we'll illuminate and simplify things so you can focus on *doing the thing* with less stress and more stability. We'll help you stay on the path to *making it* by...

Making It Work.

## **A few things before we get started...**

First, this book is meant to be a reference. More of a freelancer's almanac than a cover-to-cover page turner. But reading every page will help you be as prepared as possible for the curveballs that freelance life will inevitably throw your way.

At the same time, this book is not going to make you an expert in any of these subjects. Instead it is meant to alert you that these things exist, that they cannot be ignored and to help you manage them. To paraphrase Joseph Campbell, ignoring scary or uncomfortable things doesn't make them disappear; instead, they fester, grow, and emerge in even more harmful ways in our lives. I don't think he was talking about taxes but it still applies.

Think of your career as a car. Your school taught you to drive. But they likely didn't teach that that if you don't occasionally get an oil change you will ruin your engine. If you ignore a flat tire you'll destroy your wheels. Even if you treat your car perfectly, eventually you will still have to take it to a mechanic. When you do, if you know the basics of how a car works, you will ask better questions and get better service. And you'll also be way less likely to get screwed if your mechanic is sketchy.

Next, this book is written from my perspective as an American citizen and resident. If you're not a US resident, the chapters that deal with tax rates, investing, credit cards, insurance, unions, incorporation and student loans will be factually different from your situation. But the topics we cover will inform the corresponding freelance knowhow you will need to gather in your country to be as financially and entrepreneurially literate as possible.

This book is also written from my perspective as a freelance classical singer. There are two reasons why. First, freelance classical singers usually pay out-of-pocket for more of our own expenses than many other freelancers in the performing arts. That will make for more in-depth budgeting examples as you'll soon see.

Second, to quote Thoreau, “I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well.”

Obviously the classical music niche is unique. So to make this book as broadly useful as possible, I consulted friends and colleagues who are comics, Broadway performers, instrumentalists, you name it, and included their experiences and perspectives. At the end of the day, showbiz is showbiz. The vast majority of what we cover will be broadly useful to all freelancers, especially if you travel for work.

With that in mind, if you think of an important topic not addressed in these pages or something you could add to an existing topic, please get in touch via the contact page at:

*MakingItWorkBook.com*

I would love to include experiences, perspectives, tips and challenges from as broad a cross-section of disciplines and people as possible in future editions. No intrepid freelancers left behind!

Finally, speaking of new editions, updated versions of *Making It Work* will be released each year to keep up with changing rates, dates and policies that affect freelancers. This is the 2026 edition. If it's not 2026 when you're reading this, some information may no longer be accurate. You may need to do some follow-up research to ensure you're working with up to date information. Or you can get your hands on the newest edition of *Making It Work*.

Now let's get rolling with the basics.