



HARMONY, HUSTLE, AND THE LONELINESS OF THE 'FRONT OF THE CHECK' LIFE

By Jeff Mazza, Royal Music / Backbeat Retreat

Owniing a music store can be one of the greatest things in the world — and also one of the loneliest places to stand. I've been one of 100,000 people wandering the aisles of the NAMM Show, surrounded by noise, energy, and excitement, yet feeling completely alone. There's a very real difference between the person who signs the front of the check and the person who signs the back. Only the owner carries the full weight of that responsibility — the payroll, the inventory decisions, the late-night worries, the quiet moments when you wonder if you're doing any of it right.

About ten years ago, I joined an entrepreneurial group — not music retailers, not industry peers, but business owners from completely different industries. That group changed everything for me. They helped me level up my business in ways I didn't even know I needed. They revealed blind spots I didn't know I had. They challenged my assumptions, pushed me to grow, and reminded me that leadership doesn't have to be a solitary sport.

It reminded me of our wedding. Someone surprised us with a set of luxury chef's knives — the kind you'd never buy for yourself. We laughed, because we were totally fine with our \$30 Farberware set, and we hadn't even registered for anything nicer. Then we used them. One cut. That's all it took. Suddenly we understood an entire world we didn't even know we were missing.

You don't know what you don't know... until you do.

That entrepreneurial group sharpened everything for me — my thinking, my leadership, my business, and my sense of what was possible. It made me realize how easy it is for store owners to get stuck in the day-to-day grind, doing the same things the same way because that's what we've always done. Meanwhile, the world changes around us. Customers change. Technology changes. Expectations change. And unless we're surrounded by people who challenge us, we risk falling behind without even realizing it.

With the growth and clarity I gained from being around other driven business owners, I started thinking about what something like that could mean for our industry — for store owners who want to improve, who aren't satisfied with the status quo, who want to grow beyond the industry's 1% annual pace, and who want to succeed not just in business, but in life outside their stores. Because the truth is, most of us didn't open a music store to become exhausted, isolated, or overwhelmed. We opened because we love music, we love people, and we love the idea of building something meaningful.

That's what led me to create the Backbeat Retreat: a place for owners who want to think bigger, connect deeper, and talk honestly about the frustrations and realities of running a store. Not a conference.

Not a seminar. A retreat — intentionally small, intentionally curated, intentionally real. A place where you can take off the "I've got it all handled" mask and talk with people who actually understand what it's like to carry the weight of a business on your shoulders.

And to capture some of those frustrations — and the humor that keeps us sane — I created a fictional music store owner named Leo, who runs a fictional shop called The Melody Mill. Leo lives on a Facebook page called *Harmony & Hustle*, where he navigates the same daily chaos, customer quirks, and emotional roller coasters the rest of us do. He's the guy who deals with the customer who wants to return a trumpet because "it doesn't sound like Miles Davis." He's the guy who stays late to restring a guitar for a kid who has a recital the next morning. He's the guy who loves his store deeply... and occasionally wants to run away from it.

This business is easier, healthier, and more fulfilling when we don't try to do it alone. We need each other — not just for ideas, but for encouragement, perspective, and the reminder that we're not crazy for caring as much as we do.

I've included one of his NAMM Show cartoons here, because I think many store owners will see a bit of themselves in him. And who knows... Leo might already follow your store.

At the end of the day, whether you're wandering the NAMM floor or standing alone in your shop after closing, the truth is the same: this business is easier, healthier, and more fulfilling when we don't try to do it alone. We need each other — not just for ideas, but for encouragement, perspective, and the reminder that we're not crazy for caring as much as we do.

If you've ever felt the weight of the front-of-the-check life, you're not alone. And if you've ever wondered what it would feel like to be surrounded by people who truly get it, that's exactly why the Backbeat Retreat exists.



Jeff Mazza founded and operated Royal Music in New Jersey for nearly three decades. He is the creator of the Backbeat Retreat and the *Harmony & Hustle* cartoon series featuring Leo, a fictional music-store owner. He can be reached at info@backbeatretreat.com.