

GIMME 10!

PRACTICAL ADVICE FROM
PROS WHO KNOW

JON WURSTER

Sorry showcases, stone-faced audiences...he's seen it all. But the road and recording vet has the last laugh, answering the call of indie rock icons like Superchunk, Robert Pollard, and Bob Mould.

by Patrick Berkery



Pierre-Yves Arnoux

One way of measuring success as an indie rock musician: The cash flow from your musical endeavors keeps you from having to go back to working at the bar or record store when you're off the road.

Another way: Other musicians continually ask you to record and/or tour with them. Well-respected musicians, at that.

Though Jon Wurster does work on the side as a comedy writer/actor and a collaborator of Tom Scharpling's on the cult radio program *The Best Show On WFMU* (not to mention his occasional contributions to *MD*), music is his primary gig. So consider him an indie success on both fronts.

Since his main band, Superchunk, slowed its workload earlier this decade, Wurster has become a go-to drummer for artists like Robert Pollard, the Mountain Goats, Marah, and the New Pornographers.

Jon's thunder-ball drumming can currently be heard on new releases from Bob Mould (*Life And Times*) and New Pornographers singer-guitarist A.C. Newman (*Get Guilty*). Here, the veteran timekeeper shares wisdom acquired over his nearly twenty-five-year career as a working drummer.

1 LEARN FROM LETDOWNS. In February '86, when I was nineteen, I moved to North Carolina to join this band called the Right Profile, which sounded like a cross between the Band and mid-period Rolling Stones. We got signed to Arista two months later; it was the most insane experience. Then immediately it all went downhill. The songs were never good enough, we tried producer after producer, we lost momentum, and we weren't a priority with our label or management. That ended, but around 1990 we changed our name to the Carneys and did a five-song demo at the Power Station with Steve Jordan. That was the best, most formative drumming experience of my life. Steve was just amazing, the greatest teacher I ever had. I don't think he ever said, "Try playing this." It was more like we had telepathy between us. His whole thing rubbed off on me in the hugest way.

2 TURN OFF YOUR MIND, RELAX, AND STRETCH YOUR BODY. I started yoga and meditation independently of drumming, but I felt pretty immediate results in terms of playing and just feeling better on tour. I do yoga for about twenty minutes each morning. I meditate less frequently than I should, but I've found it really helps a lot, even more than yoga in some ways—just clearing your mind, going to some sort of "zero" state. On the last Mountain Goats tour, I found myself overthinking things during shows. My mind was in the way of my performance. I'm not quite sure why; I knew the songs, I had them in my muscle memory. But one night I made a conscious decision: "I'm turning off my mind." And that really helped.

3 KNOW WHEN THE BAND IS OVER. I was in this band out of high school called Psychotic Norman, sort of a post-punk Minutemen/Fall kind of thing. One day one of the guys didn't show up for rehearsal—at his house! That's a hint that it's over.

4 THERE'S ALWAYS AN UPSIDE. In 1991 the Carneys tried to play our way out to L.A. to get signed. And it was a death march. We pull into Lubbock, Texas, and we're supposed to play some outdoor patio. The promoter goes, "Guys, I'm sorry, it's gonna rain; the show's

canceled. But don't worry, I can get you all into the Dread Zeppelin show I'm promoting down the street!" We opened twice for a metal cover band, played two humiliating industry showcases in L.A.—the worst. But the day I got back, my brother tells me Mac from Superchunk was asking about me playing drums with them. I was like, "Yes, thank you!"

5 BE A GOOD GUY. Agreeability and personality can be just as important as drumming ability. People will think, *Is this someone I can travel with for months?* I like to think I'm easy to play and travel with.

6 BEING IN ONE BAND ISN'T EVERYTHING. Being in a band for ten years full time, like Superchunk... I don't know if I want to do that again. I consider myself a member of Bob Mould's band and the Mountain Goats, but there's so much downtime with those gigs that I feel I can do other things. When you're in a band full time, there are so many things you can't do, because your whole year is pretty much planned out. So playing in something that's only a month or two—I like that. It gives me time to do other things.

7 STAY POSITIVE. I think you have to be in the mindset that *things will happen*. I've gone through a couple of depressing times where projects have been canceled; I'd planned my schedule around those gigs, and I got bummed about it. But at some point I had to say, "Things are going to get better. I'm going to get gigs." I believe in the law of attraction. I think it works.

8 MAKE THAT CONNECTION. It's definitely who you know. I wasn't a very network-y guy early on. But on some level, you have to be. You have to make some connections. For instance, I'd gotten to know Neko Case from seeing her play. Neko had recommended me for the New Pornographers gig, which led to playing with A.C. Newman. Jason Narducy played bass with me in Robert Pollard's band, and he invited me to join Bob Mould's band.

9 ENORMODOMES AREN'T ALL THEY'RE CRACKED UP TO BE. I was playing in the band Whiskeytown, and we were opening for John Fogerty on a shed tour. When we were going on, it was still daylight. And you're playing to 1,000 people that are trying to find their seats in a place that holds 12,000. Later, Superchunk opened for the Get Up Kids in fairly large halls, and I'll never forget the stone faces on the people that were there to see them. We just had to make our own fun out of it. I remember walking back to the Electric Factory in Philadelphia on that tour after getting something to eat. The show was over, and these kids were driving by. One of them rolls the window down, and you could tell she recognized us. You think she's going to say, "Good show!" But she drives by and yells, "More like *Supersucks!*"

10 DOGS RULE. I used to worry about my dogs so much when I was on the road. There was a tour where Superchunk played Brazil, and one of the dogs I had with my girlfriend had really hurt its back the day before I left. The entire time I was worrying about this sixteen-year-old, seventeen-pound Shih Tzu. I'm able to worry less about them now. Still, we were in Japan once, and a dog I'd found on the street, which we'd had for a year, died in the middle of the tour. You're so far away from home and you just can't do anything, and that's dreadful.

