

Musicians and Retirement: For BBC World Service, broadcast 2009

I've just retired after a 41 year, never-a-dull-moment career as a freelance musician. The four decades from roughly 1968 to 2008 were unreservedly a great time to be a jazz, rock and studio instrumentalist. I'm a lucky boy and I've just written a book about it. But my announcement seems to have caught colleagues, friends and commentators by surprise, and their reaction - usually one of 'you-must-be-joking' - has in turn caught *me* by surprise, because, guess what, musicians don't, won't, or aren't allowed to retire!

What's the problem here? Why don't musicians just stop? There are a lot of myths flying around about this, and a lot of suspicion (there is something odd about a jazz musician having enough money to retire – he must be suspect – and old rockers and blues musicians die in hotel rooms, don't they?). Musicians don't retire, I'm told, because music is a *gift*, implying there is something sacriligious about a timely departure. Only people with *jobs* retire, sneer other musicians.

Actually, I blame the audience, who gave up listening to music years ago and demand too little. All they seem to want is what they had yesterday. We musicians are needed only as a jukebox, churning out the greatest hits in the order required. Conditioned by 40 years of FM radio, the Pavlovian response to the words 'The Eagles' is 'Hotel California'.

\*\*\*\*

The stadiums fill to hear the old boys churn it out once again for eye-watering sums of cash. Geriatric rockers like Tina Turner or the Rolling Stones continue to feed nostalgia at \$200 a ticket to an audience that is in part watching the gallows, half expecting someone to keel over mid-guitar solo. "It's the way he would have wanted to go" they will nod sagely to each other in the car park after the show. I loved Dave Brubeck's 'Time Out' in 1966, but I don't want to hear a creaky version of it at the Carnegie Hall 40 years later.

\*\*\*\*

Really, it's OK to stop before you become irrelevant rather than after. Everyone knows you should leave an audience wanting more. Think of the advantages: let the young guys have a go and inject some new blood into the system. Me, I'd rather hear what they *can* do than what I *can't* do. Besides, all that relentless self-promotion – so 'unseemly' as the admirable Meryl Streep called it the other day.

Yes, being a musician is certainly a vocation, a calling, but it is also a job from which, after long and fruitful service, it is perfectly acceptable to retire. I assure you, 41 years of me is enough for anyone, especially me! Every stage I'm on is one a younger player is not on, and how are we ever going to get the new Hotel California if the old boys don't shift over? The artistic way can lead to a very self-obsessed sort of existence that may cause heavy wear and tear on one's nearest and dearest, who's patience may already be exhausted.

And the travel is not all it's cracked up to be, trust me. It may look good on paper - London, Paris, Rome, Tokyo – but there is no time to unpack or smell the roses. Scenery is something that goes past the tour bus window at night – you were sleeping all day and missed it. No more backstage deli-trays, half-eaten pizzas, missed breakfasts, and multi-tasking on the laptop while you wait in line for the airport bus. And no more Heathrow airport!

Anyway, who wants to become a Heritage Act?