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The secret life of Jim Trompeter

Performing musicians' day jobs are supposed to be unglamorous second careers that afford them the opportunity to pursue music at night. **Jim Trompeter**, however, is not your typical musician: By night, he is a leading jazz pianist; by day, he is among the few who make music at their desks. As a senior composer at WMS Gaming Inc. in Chicago, Mr. Trompeter, 45, writes and produces music for slot machines — the soundtracks that support the games' themes and, yes, all of those beeps and chimes that announce a big win.

What's appealing about this job compared with some of your other musical experiences as a performer and composer?

A steady position in composing is a rare and special thing. And then to be in an environment where I can bring my creativity and jazz sensibility to whatever genre I'm trying to write for in a particular game — that's really fun. Right now, I'm researching music from 1970s action movies for a "Dirty Harry" game we're doing. I'm also scoring Thai music for another title and have a "Men in Black" game where I want the music to be techno and cool and orchestral. Then there's a vampire game called "Count Money" in testing that I did in the style of Danny Elfman. Creativity is part of the job description here, and that's a wonderful thing. And the benefits are great — incredible health insurance, stock options, bonuses, a great 401(k). Those are things I've never experienced before.

You toured with the Miami Sound Machine during its 1980s heyday. What do you miss about those days?

Performing in front of thousands of people is fun and I'm lucky to have done it, but with all of the traveling, that's a hard life. Besides, I am a jazz artist and playing, "Come on, baby, shake your body do the conga," hundreds of times — that's not creative. I can sit here in front of my gear and say, "Hey, I want to make something that sounds like a Lalo Schiffrin score right now," and I get to do that. That's really cool.

What are the alternatives if you're looking to make a career as a composer?

People go into television writing, movie scores, gaming music. When I left the Sound Machine, I went into the jingle business and loved it. I loved being under the gun, where you would have three hours to come up with something — it's like a contest. At WMS, I might spend a week on a song, or three hours on a five-second sound effect. There's something cool about that, too, because I'm never cutting corners. I'm going to put the time in on the craft.

There's a lot of noise on a casino floor. How do you know people can hear your work?

As the last step in our development process we'll call up the game in our recording studio and run it against a casino environment sample, a four-minute loop of the loudest decibel levels you encounter in a casino. Then I tune my game so that if you turn the game on at the default volume level, it will not only compete but win out. When you get a big win, you're going to know it and it's



Jim Trompeter by day. . .

. . . and by night.



Photos by Stephen J. Serio

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going to be a powerful experience.

Do you miss hearing the audience respond?

I don't get my satisfaction from that live environment. I get it because I'm connecting the dots the way I want to connect the dots, solving problems. I went to a test in Vegas and as I walked out of my hotel room, I saw a game that I had done and there were people playing it. I know they may notice the music and they may not. But it's fantastically satisfying to know that what's there, what they're going to hear, is on a really high level.

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