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# The working class

## Struggling musicians do all sorts of things to make a living while pursuing the Big Dream

By Michael Kuhlmann

February 19, 2006

When musicians flaunt their favorite pair of jeans in a TV spot, you know they've made it. Until that time, however, they're usually struggling to book shows, make this month's rent or car payments and balance rehearsal time with a day job.

Consider this: A live show only brings in \$300 per band member. And that's on a good night. It's a huge challenge to find profitable venues. (Coffee shops typically don't pay very well.) And if spinning records isn't your forte, then a secondary source of income becomes essential. This is reality.

But there are benefits, of course, like being a venue's VIP, which means skipping the cover charge and getting free drinks – or at least getting a big discount on your tab. It's a constant ego massage. After all, not anybody can spin the ones and twos or break into a heavy guitar riff.

And while most musicians don't have a retirement plan, many have developed flexible work schedules that allow them to go on tour at a moment's notice. Above all, they earn bragging rights of saying that they



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Clockwise from top left: Willie Chambers, Sean O'Donnell, Alex Devereaux, and Lavelle Dupree Carter



play music for a living (nobody said you can't have more than one living). Here's how four local musicians get by.

– MICHAEL KUHLMANN

**Sean O'Donnell**

**Band name:** Reeve Oliver

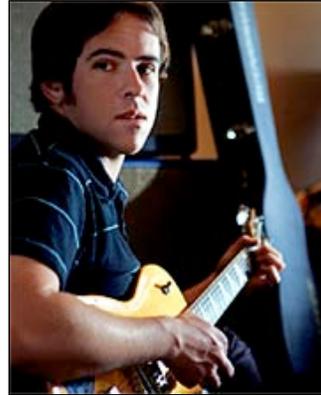
**Web site:** [www.reeveoliver.com](http://www.reeveoliver.com)

**Music genre:** Alternative rock

**Age:** 26

**Location:** Hillcrest

**Day job:** SeaWorld dolphin show host



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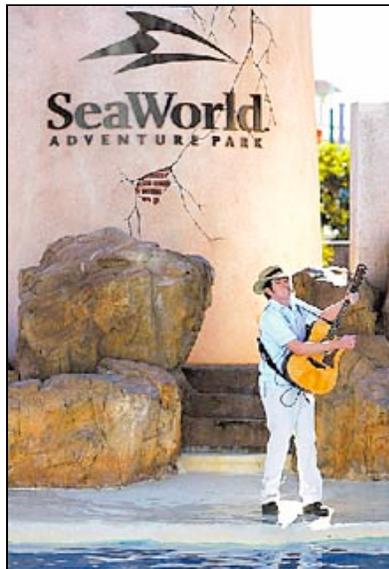
Sean O'Donnell of Reeve Oliver (pronounced Revolver) is one of the more established local musicians. His band recently struck a deal with Capitol Records.

Still, when he's not touring, he's earning extra cash by playing with dolphins. That is, he warms up the SeaWorld crowd as they enter the dolphin show. "I don't know any other place that would just let you pick up after a couple of weeks (of touring)," he said. "It's kind of an ideal job for a guy in a band."

After playing Weezer's tropically themed "Island in the Sun," the Caribbean-clad O'Donnell becomes the host of the show, getting his audience excited for the next dolphin trick.

It's his primary source of income, since going out on the road in his three-piece band typically pays him \$100, sometimes less.

"We're not making a lot of money (playing gigs)," he said, "but we make a lot of money on merchandise (including CDs). If we didn't have that, we wouldn't be able to do anything."



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He works at SeaWorld three to four days a week during the off-season. He doesn't have a retirement plan, but he does get some health care

coverage, free passes to the zoo and the occasional double take whenever folks leave the show.

“What's really weird is when I get recognized at the show, as I'm saying 'bye' to people,” O'Donnell said. “People are like, 'Hey, Reeve Oliver?' and I'm like, 'Yeah, but don't tell anyone, because I'm wearing this costume.' So that's pretty funny.”

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## Lavelle Dupree Carter

Stage name: DJ Lavelle

Web site: [www.lsdjs.com](http://www.lsdjs.com)

Music genre: House

Age: 33

Location: Mission Beach

Day job: Aubergine club promoter/resident DJ



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Lavelle Dupree Carter is in the fortunate position where what he does during the day feeds what he does at night. As resident deejay for downtown's upscale nightclub Aubergine, Carter spends most of his day honing his skills, mixing and producing records in his Mission Beach home.

But while he doesn't earn six figures like superstar DJ Tiesto, he admits that local deejays can break big spinning two turntables, as opposed to inching up the managerial ladder at a corporate firm.

“There's a misconception that, being a deejay, you don't really do much besides work the weekends,” he said. “Getting the gigs (beyond Aubergine), promoting the gigs, making new contacts, keeping the fan base stimulated – those are the things that happen Monday through Friday during the day, and those are the most important and hardest things to do.”



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And what's his payoff? A weekend gig with partner DJ Scooter can earn him up to \$1,000. If he's spinning alone, he'll max out at \$700. Although Aubergine doesn't provide him with a 401k or health insurance, he enjoys a different kind of fringe benefits: free cover, free drinks and free

promotion.

“I live at the beach, my car works, I get to set my own hours, and I love it,” he boasted. But, he said, “I can’t let the success go to my head. I know, at any point in time, it could be over.”

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## Willie Chambers

**Band name:** Windsor

**Web site:** [www.windsormusic.net](http://www.windsormusic.net)

**Music genre:** Pop-rock

**Age:** 28

**Location:** Encinitas

**Day job:** Accounting manager for JPC Construction



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“A family affair” would be the best description of Willie Chambers' local pop-rock band, Windsor, which also includes his brother on lead guitar. His father – his day-job supervisor – bosses him around during the day.

“It's so great working for my dad,” he said of his job. “It's really flexible, so I can pick the hours I want. I usually try to keep it 30 hours or less a week, so that I can work on my music.”

As his father, James Chambers, was beginning to become overloaded with clients, he added his son to his payroll and hooked him up with health insurance and a 401k, working as an account manager for a construction company.

“Because I worked for a different company for a year, it allowed me to choose to work with my dad rather than have to,” he said. “So that has given me a lot of confidence, and I really feel like I'm helping a lot because I've taken all his paperwork (and organized it).



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“It feels like the company is a whole lot more organized now – so I have picked up some skills from UCSB.”

But without his steady income, Willie admits he would not be able to

support himself. He estimated that a mere 10 percent to 20 percent of his income comes from Windsor. This is not surprising, given that a local show, where teens spend \$7 per ticket, only earns him \$400.

“At the smallest venues, we make the most money,” he said. “Usually, the club will give us a dollar or two (from) each ticket. It’s not that much.”

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## Alex Devereaux

**Band name:** Swim Party

**Web site:**  
[www.swimpartymusic.com](http://www.swimpartymusic.com)

**Music genre:** Alternative rock

**Age:** 31

**Location:** Cardiff

**Day job:** Graphic designer for Syndrome Distribution



Swim Party is a relatively new band that formed after meeting on craigslist.org. The quintet doesn’t have an album out and is still working on a demo, yet Alex Devereaux would like to only have one job one day – being a bassist in a financially successful band.

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Devereaux works for a Vista-based skateboarding company, Syndrome Distribution, which he describes as having a “laid-back” atmosphere.

“We’ll come in to work late, if there are some ways,” he said. “But we’ll stay late to make sure the work gets done – it’s pretty flexible like that.”

Having done a stint as a bartender for a few months at a sushi restaurant, he decided to quit his part-time job there and pursue a full-time job as a graphic designer.

“(The job as a bartender) was just a couple hours a week for some extra cash,” he said. “I had the Sunday/Monday shift, which are slow nights, but it was OK. Your tips are based on the bill, so if they’re getting dinner, the bill’s going to be more expensive.”

Devereaux said he needed a second source of income, because at



roughly \$200 per show (\$40 dollars each), the band's budget was really an afterthought. Nowadays, though, the 31-year-old skater does at least have one thing he's proud of – health insurance.

“It's definitely nice,” he said. “I've had a lot of injuries in my life.”

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■ **Michael Kuhlmann** is a local writer and former Union-Tribune intern.

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