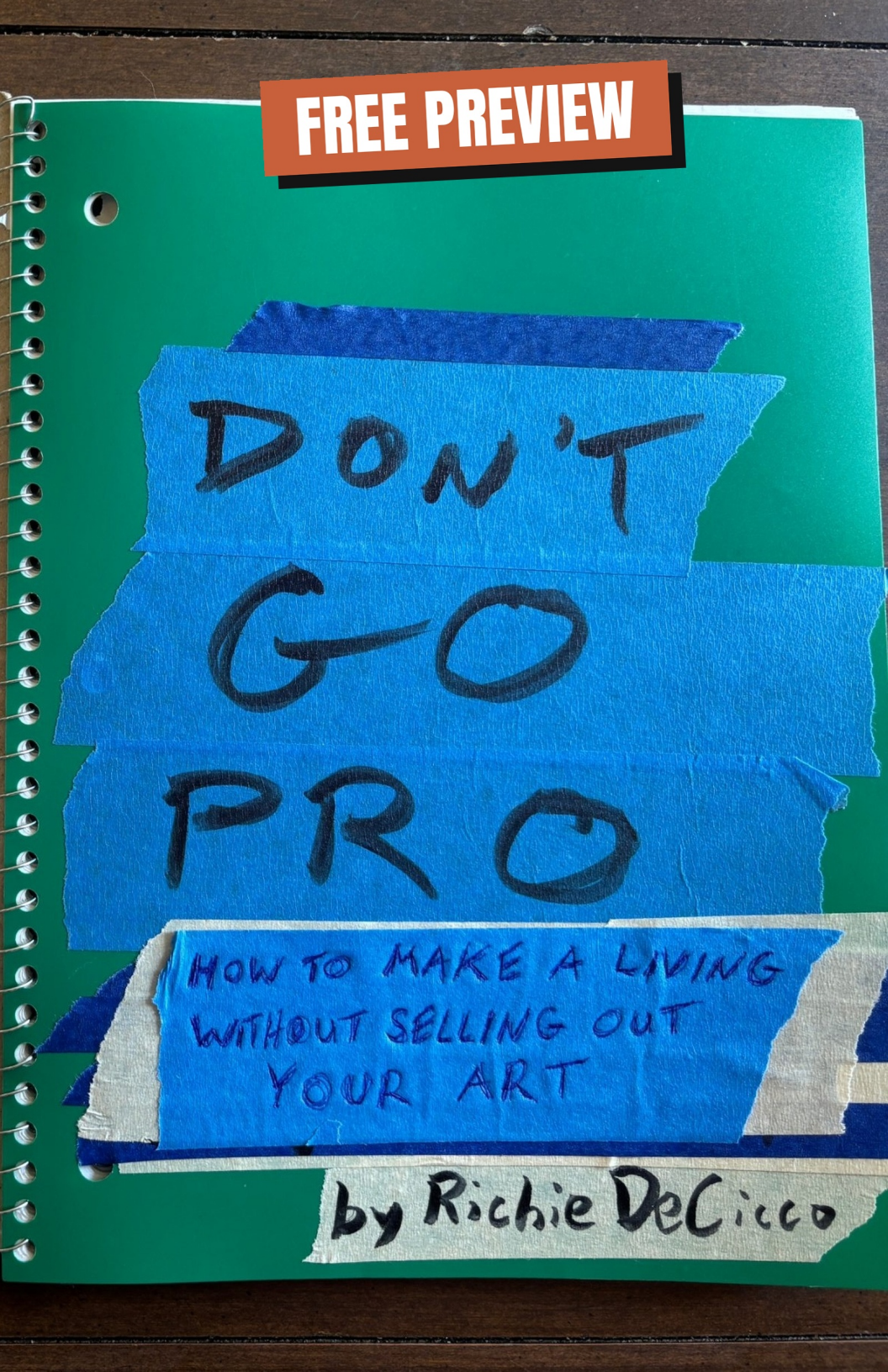
FREE PREVIEW



DON’T GO PRO

How to Make a Living Without Selling Out Your Art

By Richie DeCicco

What’s in the full book

Foreword: The Who, The What, and Why Me?

Introduction: You Want to Skip It. Don’t Skip It.

Chapter 1: The Sovereign Artist

PART ONE: THE CASE FOR SOVEREIGNTY

Chapter 2: From Sovereign Artist to Validation Hunter and Back Again

Chapter 3: The People-Pleaser, The Bottomless Cup, and The Abandoned Child

Chapter 4: The Legend of Something to Fall Back On

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Foreword: The Who, The What, and Why Me? (Not In That Order)

For as long as I can remember, music has been the most important thing in my life. The consumption, enjoyment, exploration, creation, and performance of music is the biggest piece of furniture in the living room of my head. It really ties the room together. Without it, I don't know who I am. I feel most at home in my head when I am making it.

I have interests and hobbies besides music: cooking, language learning, jiu-jitsu, baseball, and psychology for instance. But at every stage of my life, music has always been a high priority. "Why Me?" is a question I often ask myself. Sometimes in the context of "Why me? Why did I have to be born a musician? I feel like being a dentist or investment banker would have been easier." But in this case it's: "Why am I qualified to write about creativity and offer guidance to other creative people?"

The Receipts

I grew up with working-class parents. My last name, DeCicco (pronounced Day-Chee-Ko), is Italian, and that Italian immigrant "eat pasta and grind" work ethic endured through several generations. My dad is a retired public-school music teacher. My mom is retired from a life spent working all sorts of jobs to make ends meet: bartender, bookkeeper, housekeeper, to name a few.

This is to say, my rock-star dreams were not backed by a trust fund. Making a living on my own was always going to be part of the calculus. I've lived a lot of life

where, "How do I do a little less 'starving' while also being an artist?" was front and center in my mind.

This is not a memoir, but because it's illustrative of the concepts I'm laying out in this little book, I'll get into the nitty-gritty of my life story throughout. For now, a brief synopsis: tiny drummer, karaoke prodigy, bedroom guitarist, songwriter, garage band superstar, close brushes with record deals and pop stardom, classically trained percussionist, jingle music composer, record producer/engineer/mixer.

At times in my life, some combination of the above just barely paid my bills, got me reliable transportation, and kept a roof over my head. At other times, I did quite well for myself. I almost got fabulously rich and famous, but (spoiler alert) I didn't. I had to have "real" jobs through a lot of my life.

Where I've landed now is me at my happiest and most contented: making most of my financial ends meet by doing work that is nowhere near my creative pursuit. This allows me to make art (and take on paid music work) that I'm excited to put my name on. While it's not a credential issued by some official sounding and hallowed institution, that is what qualifies me.

I'll be turning 48 around the time this book is done. I hope I have plenty more time to experiment with what is optimal for me and learn more about what makes me the version of myself that doesn't drive my loved ones crazy. But as far as I can tell, not tying my livelihood to the commercial viability of my art is the recipe that makes that art, and my whole life, the best it can be.

And I have a theory that I'm hoping we can test as a team: that actively seeking commercial viability in our art

is a good recipe for artistic mediocrity. At best, it's a recipe for short-lived success and short-lived satisfaction. I've tested that second part pretty thoroughly. I've got receipts and stories to prove it.

The promise of this book isn't "do what I did and make a life-changing amount of money with your art." It isn't even "make a living while living out your wildest creative dreams."

The promise of this book: if you seek to understand how to find maximum creative fulfillment while also not sleeping in a cardboard box, I've got a lot of great advice for you about what you should and shouldn't do. I'm not pulling this advice out of thin air, but out of my own experience, and from the observed and anecdotal experience of the hundreds of artists I've encountered in my life.

How This Book Came to Be

I started writing this book with a few loose concepts that spawned in my head and just would not shut up. I thought writing them down would at least get them to leave me alone. What ended up landing on the page was a disjointed, stream-of-consciousness essay that will probably never see the light of day, because it's a bloody mess. It was written therapy, and as such it's pretty raw and wildly cringe-inducing (both for the "TMI" of it and the quality of the writing).

But as I kept waking up early to put pen to paper, my ideas got clearer and more apparently useful to others. A few essays in, I realized I was writing to myself. I was writing to remind my present self of some important things to keep top-of-mind in my life as a creative being. I was also writing to my younger adult self with advice I

wish someone would have given me: some of it was advice people tried to give me in ways that didn't land, or advice I got from messengers whom I was inclined to dismiss. Much of it is advice no one ever offered to me, so I had to learn it the hard way. I know I'm not the first writer to say this, but this is the book I wish I had as I was reaching adulthood and entering the world as a "creative professional." And it's not a coincidence that this book emphasizes that "making the thing you want to see exist" is a good path to doing your best work.

I set out to make a thing I wanted to see exist, and that desire propelled me to the finish line.

Introduction: You Want to Skip It. Don't Skip It.

The introduction of a book is often skippable.

But If you skip this section, you might be a little lost in Chapter 1.

Let's consider this Chapter ZERO. Don't skip it, unless you like a book to feel like a conceptual jigsaw puzzle.

Who This Book Is For

I truly believe that real creative drive and the pull an artist feels towards their work are age-irrelevant. From the time I was banging on pots and pans on my kitchen floor up to today, it has been the only constant in my life. The only thing that shifts from one stage of life to the next is the various forces that come into contact with that creative compulsion. Even if you're up at a mountain retreat with no contact with the outside world, your inner world (which is as infinite as the universe itself) and your physical body are still forces that can be friendly to your work, or forces that can knock it off course. So, setting age and circumstances aside:

- Do you have something inside of you that you're compelled to manifest through music, visual arts, dance, written words, spoken words, food, design, or anything else that anyone would label "art" or "creative"? This book is for you.
- Are you dabbling in one or more of the above creative pursuits just for fun and/or as a hobby, but not really super-committed or enthusiastic about it? If you're dabbling because you're trying to find a home for an insatiable desire to create, then this book is totally for you. If you're not hungry for a creative outlet per se, elements

of this book will be helpful to you (mostly Part Two where I get more into the practice of creation). But if you still feel like a complete and fully-functioning human when you're not exercising your creative brain, then a lot of it (especially Part One) won't land. Maybe reading Part One will make you realize that you are "one of us" and you just didn't know it yet.

- Do you work closely with creative people, or do you have a creative person in your life who matters to you? Strap in for a rocket flight to *Oh-I-Get-It-Now*-Town. This book will help you understand the artistic mind's unique brand of crazy, what enables us to be less crazy, and why.
- Do you have unlimited time, money, and access to tastemakers in your orbit? If that's you and you've managed to pick a singular artistic focus, congratulations. You are unique, and I don't mean that with any sarcasm. Most of the folks I've become acquainted with who were born with lots of money (and even some who accumulated lots of money through their own efforts) don't have to pick a particular thing to focus on, so they never do. This book is for you well-funded outliers too.
- If you are a self-made millionaire and you're circling back to a creative pursuit you had to put on hold to get your money handled, then I do believe you are in the right place. Over the years, my financial circumstances have changed multiple times, but I never lost my appetite for making music. If that's you, wash your hands, put a fancy linen napkin on your lap, and dig in with me.

In the end, anyone with an interest in being creative and finding maximum satisfaction in it will have something to gain from this book. The stronger the desire within you, the bigger reward will be.

If you're still not sure, keep reading. I've got some good stories, so at least it will be entertaining.

Here's the Big Idea.

Almost every artist has living inside of them a validation-hunter. This part of us chases whatever will make us feel like "enough": money, sex, love, applause, praise, a heart emoji... There is nothing wrong with wanting these things. They are natural drivers that our biology programmed us to chase for the survival and propagation of our species. Where we stumble as artists is when we compromise our artistic path to get to those things. We come to a fork in the road, often many times throughout our lives. The first path leads to the development and execution of our best and most authentic creative work. The other path leads to a quick hit of validation. Every time we pick the second path, we pixelate our creative vision, and shrink ourselves as makers.

Part One illustrates how the hunt for validation sabotages our growth as artists, often without us even noticing, and I'll use my long list of missteps and screw ups to paint the picture. We'll also work together to reveal where validation-seeking is sabotaging your creative quest, and hold it up to the light where it's not so scary.

Part Two is the practices, tactics, and strategies you can use to:

- catch yourself in the act
- put the work back in front of the validation
- consistently push towards the most authentic and best work you can do

If you make music, paint, sculpt, draw, act, sing, standup comedy, or write, or if you make stuff with your creative energy, or you aspire to, this book is about protecting the one thing no one else can do: make the stuff only you can make, without compromise.

(Chapter 1 follows here, unchanged by all the money and fame I got offered to change it to a commercial for Planters Peanuts.)

Chapter 1: The Sovereign Artist

Naming something can be a powerful act.

There are schools of philosophy that believe a thing doesn't exist until it's been given a name, so I'm going to come right out and conjure a thing into existence:

The Sovereign Artist (I'll usually abbreviate to "Sovereign" for the rest of the book)

To be considered Sovereign, a creative person:

1. has, or is in the process of developing a unique artistic vision.

2. is constantly in the process of developing the skills and tools to execute on that vision.

3. doesn't seek validation for its own sake, but instead makes *art* for *its* own sake.

4. as should follow #3, is willing to do what it takes to develop their vision to its full potential.

5. won't compromise the vision, or the path to it, for the *sole* purpose of making the work commercially viable.

Think of the way in which we usually hear "Sovereign" used: "sovereign nation" or "sovereign country." A completely sovereign nation is a place that has total autonomy and its own way of doing things. It can choose who it interacts with and how it is influenced. It can choose to engage with other countries... or not. When it chooses to engage, it does so on its own terms, and without sacrificing its culture, resources, and landscape.

But a nation like *that*: one that answers to no one, depends on no one, and bends to no outside pressure, is purely theoretical. Plenty of countries are sovereign on paper. But has any nation on Earth ever been *fully* independent? Free of every treaty, trade tie, and outside influence? With just about any country I can think of, there are times where compromises have to be made to accomplish anything. Even the most influential and powerful nations in the world rely on other countries for things they can't get done on their own.

Just as no nation is an island, no artist is either. The Sovereign Artist isn't chasing total independence. They're chasing the *real-world* version: maximum autonomy, exercised on their own terms, with a clear-eyed acceptance that some compromise is the price of doing anything at all. The real-world version of "uncompromised art" is making the best art you can with the ideas, tools, and circumstances you have...without compromising your ideas for the sake of validation, which often means "money." And the biggest pitfall that leads to unintentional compromise is Going Pro.

When someone develops a strong affinity for an artistic pursuit, it is a very common, and seemingly logical plan to develop their artistic skills with the ultimate goal of using them to earn a living. I call this "Going Pro." The beating heart of this book is not a pure assertion of "Do not ever go Pro." It's "Don't assume going Pro is going to be the same as making your art."

A "Pro":

1. Has a suite of creative skills, tools, and perspectives they've developed in the pursuit of their artistic vision

2. Rents the application of that creative suite out to someone else's mission or vision, creative or otherwise.

I have done a TON of this kind of Pro work. Initially, I thought it would bring me creative fulfillment. I'm here to tell you, if you're seeking creative satisfaction, you're not likely to get it by Pro work *alone*. In fact, for the sake of both the Pro and the Artist inside you, these two applications of your creative suite must be walled off from each other as much as possible.

I would be an A+ hypocrite if I told you not to take on Pro work. We all need to keep a roof over our heads and food in our fridge. If making your living as a Pro feels like the best path for you to pay the bills, I'm not going to discourage you.

Q: "Hey idiot! Then why did you call the book *Don't Go Pro*?"

A: Because *Go Pro if You Want To, But Don't Go Into it Thinking You'll Be Making Art* isn't as catchy.

The world needs Pros. But the number of Pros who are making their purest uncompromised art is an extremely small club.

For the vast majority of us creatives, making a living as a Pro is a very different prospect. If you engage in Pro work, leave your Artist hat at home, and put on your **Technician** hat. You are performing a service, like a plumber or doctor. I don't know about you, but I'm not looking for my dermatologist to "express himself artistically." I want a clinician who can look at my skin as his workspace, not his palette. And if I have acne, and he tries something that doesn't address it properly, a good dermatologist won't take it personally. He'll reach back

to his tool kit and try something else. As I write, an even better title for this book emerged:

Go Pro if You Want, but Keep it Compartmentalized from Your Art.

Also not very catchy. But it does describe my point perfectly.

As a songwriter and musician first diving into the world of advertising, I approached it as a way to express myself artistically that could also make me a good living.

It was a naive mindset, and ended up being a nasty triple-compromise.

Compromise #1: Sapping my artistic reserves by pouring artistic energy into Pro work.

Compromise #2: Taking it as a personal criticism of my artistic vision when the music I made for commercials was criticized or rejected.

Compromise #3: Not doing the best work I could do as a Pro by trying to approach it as "art."

There are plenty of positives about Going Pro, which I'll crack into in a chapter called Art vs. Craft. As that chapter also makes clear, the positives are only worth it if you're approaching the Pro work with the right mindset.

The right mindset is "technician with the skills of an artist." We must act as craftspeople who strive to keep Pro work cleanly separated from their art, for a better result in both worlds.

The biggest thing that stands in the way of being able to effectively hold this mindset is **validation-seeking**. And

it’s also the best way to sabotage your Sovereignty in any job or career scenario.

In Part One, We’ll get down and dirty with the Validation Monster (a well-intentioned but bungling parasite living rent-free inside a lot of us creative-types), by first identifying and addressing your validation-hunting tendencies. We’ll do this by dissecting what validation hunting can look like, how it sabotages your Sovereignty, and how to catch the Validation Monster in the act.

In Part Two, we’ll get deep on real world applications. Having awareness of validation-seeking behaviors is an asset. But awareness without strong, contrary action isn’t enough. To be a Sovereign Artist, we need to do the things that Sovereign Artists do, while also starving out that Validation Monster. We starve him by making the Sovereign inside of us strong enough to steal all of his fuel.

We’ll also spend a lot of time exploring the ways artists can do less starving and more art. Let’s dive in.

So. Still with me?

If you read this far and something in it grabbed you... the Sovereign Artist, the Validation Monster you maybe recognized a little too well, the whole idea that you don't have to fuse your art to your income to survive... then good. That was the point.

This is where the preview ends. What you just read is the setup: the who, the why, and the core idea. The rest of the book is where we get into the difficult (and sometimes scary) work that makes good things happen. Part One digs into how the Validation Monster sabotages you (with a lot of my own embarrassing receipts), and Part Two is the actual practice: what Sovereign Artists do to keep the work theirs while still keeping the lights on.

I wrote this for the person I was at 22, but it all still applies for me at 47, and probably for whoever you are right now. It's the stuff I had to learn the hard way, so maybe you don't have to.

If you want the rest, it's right here:

shop.dontgopro.art

The full book, plus the free PDF the second you buy. You can also pick up the audiobook if you'd rather hear it in my voice.

And if this preview was all you needed: genuinely, no hard feelings. Go make the thing only you can make.

Richie