

Chances are you've never heard—or heard of—Lorie Line's music. But that is because of the concerted effort she has made to get rich, not famous.

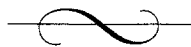


Keys to Success

AFTER TEN YEARS OF UNIVERSITY training in classical piano, Lorie Line finally landed her first job as a professional musician. For \$40 a day she was hired to tickle the ivories every afternoon at Dayton's department store in downtown Minneapolis. Wedged between handbags and lingerie, she serenaded shoppers with a seamless stream of pop tunes—and occasionally gave directions to the restroom—without missing a note. But the young pianist in the glamorous black gown was definitely resourceful. After noticing shoppers lingering around the girdle racks listening to her play, she figured she had the start of a fan club. So she cashed in her husband's 401(k) and used the \$2,000 to record a CD, which she stacked on a corner of the piano to sell. It proved to be as popular as the push-up bra. Within three years she

had sold more than \$1 million worth in Dayton's.

From that unglamorous start more than a decade ago, Line has built an unlikely little music empire as the piano phenom of the Midwest. In towns and cities from Sioux Falls, S.D., to Appleton, Wis., the 47-year-old entertainer is packing thousands of fans into concert halls for 80 lavish music and dance productions a year. Since releasing her first CD in 1989, she has sold more than five million through her independent record label. Her sheet-music books are popular too. Released in 2003, Line's \$35 *Music From the Heart* has been a bestseller for two years; her 17th songbook, it features her arrangements of show tunes and movie themes such as "Phantom of the Opera" and "Wind Beneath My Wings." She brings in annual revenues of \$5 million, netting about \$350,000, working out of her palatial home on the shores of Lake Minnetonka in Orono, Minn.



By Patricia B. Gray • ORONO, MINN.
Photograph by Steve Voit

Like many other artists (even gravelly voiced Rod Stewart), Line is cashing in on a baby-boomer craze for lush, soft-jazz versions of classic romantic standards that were popular in the '30s, '40s, and '50s. Without "Moon River," she'd never be such a star in Sheboygan. But Line knows that the music is only half the appeal for her target market, which largely consists of women between the ages of 35 and 70. "Fans aren't coming to my concerts just to hear my piano," she says. "They want two solid hours of spectacle, and we give it to them." The theme for last year's holiday show—her biggest show every year—was Old Hollywood, and it was loaded with razzle-dazzle. Line wore seven costumes during the two-hour



NOTEWORTHY: Line has sold more than five million CDs.

A Finely Tuned Empire

Lorie Line sings for her sales. Here are some ways she transformed her audience into assets in 2004: concerts, \$3.8 million; CDs, \$800,000; songbooks, \$400,000.

show, including a strapless black sequined gown with a fishtail train, topped off by a ten-foot-long black-fox stole. Even the 12-piece orchestra had five costume changes, from tuxes to velvet smoking jackets. The show's annual costume budget alone comes to \$190,000. Line's stage sets are just as elaborate. On every tour she brings one of her two concert grand pianos, as well as a massive ballroom-sized crystal chandelier that hangs over the piano at center stage.

LINE HAS BUILT HER BUSINESS WITHOUT ANY HELP from the music industry establishment, which snubbed her early on, deeming her too square for the big time. She performs, publishes, and produces her CDs through her company, Lorie Line Music. She has a payroll of 30, including a choreographer, musicians, a costume designer, a dressmaker, and a staff of five who run the small retail shop where she sells her music, books, and tickets. Tim Line, her husband of 19 years, is president. Lorie Line is CEO. "I am the talent," she says. "At Christmastime, when we sell a lot of CDs, I'm also a shipping clerk in the backroom if necessary."

Cutting her first CD provided Line with a quick education in the business side of music. When she called to rent time in a recording studio in San Francisco, she innocently asked the manager how much time she would be allotted to make the CD. "Till your money runs out," he said, laughing. "It's your dime, lady." She assured him, "I'm a department store pianist. I have to get it right the first time." She cut the CD in two days. Total bill for studio time: \$9,558. When she got back to Dayton's, she asked the department store manager for permission to sell her music. He refused. Undaunted, Line found a higher-up willing to let her give it a try. The deal proved a money-maker for Dayton's, which got a percentage of sales.

After that success Line decided to stage a concert to test her

appeal outside the lingerie department. Several months later she rented a small hall in Minneapolis for \$5,000 and sold out all 400 seats. (That's when her husband resigned his sales job to help her manage her business.) Now her shows sell out regularly in 2,500-seat concert halls in Denver, Fargo, Indianapolis, Omaha, and Toledo. She has tried to broaden her fan base by appearing on the East Coast and in Florida, but ticket sales were low, and the concerts were costly missteps—as was an attempt to gain national recognition through a concert on PBS.

Her fans in the heartland remain loyal. Every Aug. 1, when tickets go on sale for her 47 holiday concerts, fans start lining up outside her Wayzata, Minn., store before the box office opens at 8 A.M. Last year police had to be called in for crowd control because the line disrupted traffic downtown. The star served the crowd coffee and doughnuts.

Line has successfully leveraged her fans' passion into a merchandising opportunity. Ten years ago she sent out a mass mailing announcing her holiday concert series. "Be there with bells on!" was the merry tag line on the brochure. Then she had a thought: Why not sell commemorative bells for her fans to jingle during the show? In fact, why not a new bell every year? She ordered up a set of small silver-plated bells with her name and the year engraved on them and sold every one. Last year Line sold 30,000. At \$5 a bell, she rang up \$150,000.

Shortly after finishing her spring tour, Line began rehearsing for her holiday extravaganza. So what if she never does get to see the klieg lights of Carnegie Hall in New York City or the neon jungle of Vegas? "I could live happily ever after as the most popular entertainer in the Midwest," she says. "If I have to choose between being rich or being famous, I'd rather be rich." □

For links to Lorie Line's website and to give us feedback on this story, please visit fsb.com.

FOR TUNE SMALL BUS

Hidden Risks

Think buying a franchise
is safer than starting a
business? **THINK AGAIN.**

PAGE 44

Roger McCabe, 61,
owner of five Meineke
shops in the Midwest,
is doing well but found
franchising tougher
than he expected.

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