



Episode 1,245: How a Music Teacher Cracked the Online Code

Guest: Ross Trottier

WOODS: You're the first person I've interviewed since I came down with whatever had me so sick that I could not produce an episode. I have done episodes of *The Tom Woods Show* when I've been hopelessly unwell, so it was really bad that I couldn't do it. You're the first person. But it's because I'm so happy about your story and I'm so glad to hear how things are going, and yet, I have not asked you for too many details. I thought, let's bring you on. It's got to be an inspirational story. And I know there are a lot of listeners who will get the significance of this, that what you're doing is really taking advantage of the technology of the age you live in. I mean, you are doing something that could not be done in 1977, and you are living as if it's 2018, which indeed it is. So your background is music. First of all, before we get into your business side, give me your background: do you play instruments, do you play in a band, what kind of music are you interested in, how did you get into music? That kind of thing.

TROTTIER: So music for me started as a way to kind of center myself. Like a lot of people that went to public schools, I kind of came out the other end a little directionless, and I was stocking warehouses. And I got into classical guitar, because I had heard actually my little brother playing some, and I thought it was really great. So I picked up the classical guitar, and it wasn't long before I realized that it's just something that I really wanted to study and depth. So I hired a great teacher, I went to school for music, but I ended up dropping out, because there's always been an inner-libertarian in me, and just kind of the college atmosphere was just something that I couldn't really handle too well. It just always seemed weird to me. But staying true to myself, I just kept studying, kept playing, worked a couple jobs, and just always maintained my practice regimen. And eventually got into writing books and teaching and doing YouTube, through a fairly long episode of not being able to stick to someone else's routine and becoming homeless because of it and kind of pulling myself out of that through some of the online marketing and writing books and just trying to solve people's problems through education.

WOODS: All right, hold on. Wait a minute. You just glided over the golden nugget of the whole story. If you were actually homeless at one point, that means that you actually lived the life that so many of these internet marketers pretend to have lived. *I was homeless and with nowhere to turn when suddenly I discovered this WordPress plugin*, or whatever the heck it is they're plugging.

TROTTIER: [laughing]

WOODS: But it sounds like you actually — I realize I'm delving into probably a personal part of your life, but I do need to know a little bit about that. In fact, I seem to recall you saying

something like this around the time that you started promoting your music theory book? Am I getting the chronology right?

TROTTIER: Yeah, so I actually wrote that book — one of the big reasons why I actually wrote that book was I was sleeping in a car in a Colorado winter, and I had rented an office, and it was just warmer there. So I decided, you know, I'm there at like, 4am, 3am, I may as well work on something. So I decided to write a book. It was literally something to do besides freezing in a car. I eventually read a book on how to launch a book and said, hey, this is great. And the book actually, the Amazon on sales, you know, they led to the money that I paid to get into an apartment. So it really was kind of like learning to do this stuff was the reason that I left homelessness. I didn't really plan on it being that way. A lot of what I wanted to do was just play guitar. I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do. But it actually turned out that learning these skills, money showed up. So I said, okay, let's do more of that. And I think that's what I'll continue to be doing.

WOODS: That's really quite amazing, needless to say. First of all, let me make sure people know that the book is called *Music Theory in One Lesson*, which of course is a clever title. Only the libertarians will know the full reference, but it's still a great title really, for anybody. As a matter of fact — now I can't think of his name, doggone it. It's escaped me.

TROTTIER: Henry Hazlitt?

WOODS: No, no, not Henry Hazlitt, the author of *Economics in One Lesson*. But Chris Guillebeau wrote a book called *The \$100 Startup*, and he's written a number of other books about how to live your life so that your job is your passion and that sort of thing. And I went to one of his author events, because I just like him and I've had him on the show a couple times. And during his Q&A, when people were talking about the kind of side-hustles they had, I told your story. I actually told the story: I said I have somebody who listens to my show who had this music theory book, and he did not have a widely known name, and yet he was able to sell thousands of copies of it. And I told the story of how you leveraged free Facebook traffic into sales of that book and it was an extremely clever thing that you did, and it was always focused on exactly — another thing you said earlier was helping people — helping people solve their problems. That's the mentality you have to have.

TROTTIER: Yeah, definitely. And that's kind of what I feel I've turned my career into. So I actually turned the book into an animated music theory video, and that video is on the front page of Google for just the term "music theory" as the first video. And you know, initially, I was selling the thing using a nice funnel and all of that, and I was making some okay money on it. But I thought, you know what? It's also taking a lot of time, and I kind of feel like, let's just see what happens if I put this thing out for free. So it's up past three quarters of a million views at this point. I think it'll hit a million before too long. And it just exploded the book sales. And it's literally my book pretty much chapter by chapter in an animated format. And, you know, one thing that makes me very, very proud about just that, in general, is if I look at my YouTube Analytics and I add up the amount of time that people watch on my channel, it's more effective than 200 public school music teachers put together, and I don't have to continually be in front of people. It's already up. It gets somewhere over half a million minutes a month of view time, which, when added up, is pretty staggering.

WOODS: Yeah.

TROTTIER: So it's just asking yourself the question, as a teacher online, how can I solve someone's problem, like, you don't have to be anybody aside from somebody that knows what they're talking about. And you can solve a lot of problems for a lot of people. I get a lot of mail from India, specifically, because they have kind of a thirst for some of the Western styles of guitar. And these people, they don't have music teachers around. They don't have the kind of money to even hire one if they did. And they send me videos of their songs that they've composed and all of that, and it's just really cool.

WOODS: Now, here's the thing that's hard for a lot of us to get. YouTube is free, basically. You make a lot of videos, training videos, and you teach people things. It's not obvious how you'd monetize that, given that you're using a free platform, but yet, I know that you are monetizing it. So what's the strategy?

TROTTIER: The strategy is book sales, always, the main strategy. I was doing a membership website that was doing okay. But it became too much of a time sink. It actually turned out that the skills I learned building the website actually are more valuable than the website itself. So I have really three streams of income: from my YouTube and online teaching, and then one kind of in-person stream of income from music. So one, book sales; two, my ad revenue is actually pretty decent, because I'm not a political channel, so I don't face a lot of issues with being kind of blacklisted. I'm also a classical musician, so most of the stuff I talk about is total public domain. I don't have to worry about copyright claims like a lot of other music educators do that teach, you know, rock or jazz or whatever. So the ad revenue is actually pretty decent. And then I have a Patreon, which is just getting off its feet. I think there might be nine or ten people in there right now. So maybe sometime next year, that'll actually be something substantial. Then I also sell one-on-one lessons, which is a pretty sweet deal in terms of how much it costs me to put the lessons on. So I have an office in downtown Colorado Springs that I teach out of, a nice big chalkboard; I've done my best to make it look like a music classroom. And people come in, and I make 50 bucks an hour just talking about guitar and music and making sure that people know the steps that they need to sit down and get better at it. So those are just some straightforward ways to monetize at least my type of channel.

I think the big windfall for me is actually I've invested quite a lot of money into SEO education. And I do I work with some other companies doing their SEO and doing some of their website stuff. And I actually make more off of that than I do my lessons and books and stuff now. Even though those are nice side income, that goes right into the retirement account. All of my living expenses are all paid for through doing just online marketing. Specifically SEO is the thing that I try to focus on, as well as, you know, email marketing, the standard paid advertising and things like that.

WOODS: Just for those who aren't too techie, SEO is search engine optimization. It's things you can do to your website, or your blog posts or whatever to make it as likely as possible that the search engines will rank your post or your site highly when people do relevant searches. And that can be tricky, really. It's kind of like being a tax lawyer, because the laws are always changing, and so you have to be on your feet. And then these search engine algorithms are changing. You've got to kind of be on your feet. But it can't hurt, certainly, to be doing that. Now, it seems to me, though, there must be many music educators using YouTube, and yet you're doing so well, in terms of views. What do you attribute that to?

TROTTIER: Just no BS. I don't like saying this, but this is one of those things that's just true and it's unfortunate, but most guitar teachers think they're qualified to teach because they learned some Bob Dylan songs and played in a band. I actually have a music education. So you know, I learned my music theory through analyzing Bach chorales, kind of in the classical style. So the difference is that I know what I'm talking about. And if people check what I'm saying, 99.9% of the time it comes out correct. Everybody makes a mistake, right? But most of what I do is based in actual musical practice. I don't use tablature on my channel, which actually I probably hurt from a little bit. I use nothing but standard notation. So for anybody involved with the Guitar world, you know, there's reading music, easy version, which is tablature, and it's as if you were to read a book using the syllable — I don't know what the technical term for it is, but they have these syllables underneath the words in the dictionary so you know how to pronounce it. It's as if you were to read a book like that; it tells you how to do it. Whereas what I do and what I focus on is teaching people how to represent what it is they're doing through standard notation and music theory and really come out being a better musician on top.

You know, with that being said, I'm definitely not the most popular music teacher on the platform. I am very niche in that I am the guy that is not going to give you the tabs. I'm not going to give anybody the shortcut. I'm about the in-depth education. So I don't do a lot of click-bait videos that a lot of other educators do along the lines of, you know, "Five Ways to Shred in Five Days." You know, I just try to keep my content real. You know, you can't get better in a year. You can't be good in a year, but here's how you get good over the next five years, and here's how you know your stuff. It's not an easy path, but if you take this path, you're going to have much more fulfillment. And that has really, really rung true with a lot of people.

WOODS: By the way, how much of your walk-in traffic, like your one-on-one lessons, is attributable to people finding your videos?

TROTTIER: I would say roughly half to three-quarters, honestly.

WOODS: Wow, that's pretty good.

TROTTIER: Yeah, and I have a retention rate that's actually crazy. I mean, if somebody starts taking lessons, it's a very rare thing that they don't stick around for at least two years. So I actually am in a position where, you know, I really can't take any more students, and I'm actually trying to not advertise my old website, and I've tried to actually get some of my local rankings to fall off the map so people stop calling me.

WOODS: Wow.

TROTTIER: Because I have too many students as is and another a lot of other work for a marketing clients on the side. So it's almost a curse at this point, but it's a curse I'd prefer to have that not have.

WOODS: Well, sure, yeah. I mean, you almost have to laugh at it in a way. You know, this is a problem a lot of people would like to have. Now the thing is, though, if you're saying that the pivot for this whole thing has been the book that you wrote, that is going to make some people's spirits sink, because they're going to think: well, I could never write a book, or I

certainly don't want to write a book, and so then I don't see how I can replicate anything that he's doing. How would you answer that?

TROTTIER: Well, first off, if writing a book is not your thing, then don't do it. There are so many other ways to get out there as an online entrepreneur. Writing a book is just one way. And some people, you know, they hire ghost writers, if they want to get a book out. That's another angle. But what I would say is this: it's very, very good to take other people's advice and courses on how to do these things. You absolutely have to do that. But at the end of the day, you have to use a strategy that fulfills a couple things. One, you have to make sure that you're solving other people's problems. But you also have to make sure you're solving your problems by solving their problems, which can be tricky, and which doesn't always mean write a book, it doesn't always mean start a podcast, it doesn't always mean have a website. It really comes down to: can you find a problem, and are you passionate about solving it? And if the answer is yes, figure out how to do it.

And, you know, if you don't want to write a book, hire somebody to write a book on it. If you don't want to make a website, hire somebody to make a website. Now, that's not the cheapest way to go, but at the same time, you can't just make a website and make money. You can't just write a book and make money. People actually have to find it useful. So if you start from that kind of central idea and then look at what are the possibilities for getting it out there into the public and what are the possibilities to get people to actually pay you for it, that would be the best place to start.

WOODS: Ross, you say people have to find it useful, but even more fundamentally than that, people have to find it.

TROTTIER: Yeah.

WOODS: And that's the key thing, is getting the word out about it. And not just getting the word out about it — that's hard enough — but also making it sound appealing, making it sound like it solves a problem. And that's the key, the key to everything that you're going to do online is traffic, is getting traffic either to your channel or to your website or whatever the locus of your activity is, is driving traffic there.

Now, I have an entrepreneurial-related email list, and the funny thing is, every once in a while, I promote a product that helps people drive traffic. And I would say, of all the things that I promote, these products do the work. And yet, that's what you need. I don't know how to tell people better than — whatever you want to promote, whether you're going to sell physical products or you're going to write a book or you're going to do affiliate — you're not going to create anything, you're just going to promote other people's products. Whatever it is, if people don't see it, then it doesn't work. So traffic is the thing. And yet people are bored with this. *Tell me something that's going to make me \$5,000 in a week.* Come on now. Let's be realistic here. Let's think about what are the nuts and bolts. And a big bolt is traffic.

So in your case, we noted that you used Facebook initially for that book, which is brilliant. I mean, really, I think one of the strategies that I've recommended a couple of times is even with your own — forget about having a page. Let's just say on your own Facebook profile, using, you know, where you have a 5,000-friend limit, what you could do — I mean, if you were a musician, I suppose you would go to different — I mean, obviously, there are many groups on Facebook where you have people who are learning to play an instrument or, you

know, gaining proficiency little by little, but they're helping each other out and whatever. And you would join those different groups and you'd start participating in the conversations, people get to know you. And then you start adding some of the most enthusiastic people as your friends.

TROTTIER: Yeah.

WOODS: And so you're automatically building up an audience that will have some interest in what you have to say and what you have to promote. So there are free ways of doing this, of building up followings that are just sitting there.

TROTTIER: Yeah, and a cherry on top — so I did exactly that with my book, and I did one extra thing that I think especially listeners of this show would appreciate. So I read Robert LeFevre's book on ownership. And I don't really believe in IP, so I'm not afraid to just send out the PDF to people. And I found the people that were other kind of music teacher types on Facebook, some people that were just really interested in the subject. And I said, "Hey, my book is coming out in two weeks. I'm going to give you the PDF now. Please don't share it." And I think it actually was put on Pirate's Bay before Amazon, but oh, well, what can you do? And I said, "Here it is. I'm letting you read it. Just go ahead and leave a review on the Amazon listing when it comes out. I'd really appreciate that." And then I followed up with everybody. I think I probably sent it to 20 or 25 people. And I got probably 10 reviews out of the gate. And I attribute basically all of the book's success to that, because Amazon likes reviews.

WOODS: It astonishes me, by the way, every once in a while, when I'll see some academic's book on Amazon, and it will have no reviews.

TROTTIER: Yeah.

WOODS: Now, first of all, the fact that it has so little enthusiasm that nobody wants to review it is a bad sign. But also, do you not know how this works? To get a book out of the gate, you have to start with about five reviews. And this is just a fact of publishing, where you get people who are knowledgeable in the area and you say, "Could you write a review?" or whatever, or you just urge early readers to post a review. You don't just sit back and hope that it automatically happens. You urge people to do it. And that's how you start getting some traction. But I mean, geez, they can't even be bothered to lift a finger to get one lousy review for their book. I just don't feel sorry for them. You're not even trying.

TROTTIER: Yeah, there's a lot of books on Amazon you can wade through with no reviews. And oftentimes, those are the people that you're going to find on the forums and things saying, "Yeah, don't publish a book. It's not worth your time. It's not blah, blah, blah." It's a lot of work. Online entrepreneurship is not exactly escaping from the amount of time that you work up front. I think people just kind of expect like, "Oh, I wrote a book. Please buy it."

WOODS: Yeah.

TROTTIER: That's a problem in the music world, big time. And it amazes me how some of these musicians, how unthankful they are, because they think, "Oh, I made an album. Everybody should buy it now." It's like, well, you're just lucky to own a guitar. If this was 300 years ago, you know, you probably wouldn't even have one of those.

WOODS: Yeah, right, right, right. I remember when I was but a pup, and I had just published a book with Columbia University Press, very scholarly book that would be of interest only to a relatively small number of people, but that I really did feel like was important all the same and I'm glad I did it. But I honestly thought, at least certainly in the tens of thousands would buy it [laughing]. And I didn't realize how academic publishing worked. No, no, no, no. Tens of thousands of people never buy an academic book. That doesn't ever happen. But yeah, there is this sense, and you get this once in a while from people — Well, I've gone on rants about this before, that people always overestimate how many sales an author makes of a book. They always way, way overestimate that. And I think it's very sweet, because, you know, they're assuming that their fellow countrymen read a lot, and that's very sweet of them to think that. However, they do not. These people do not read a lot. And when they go to the library, the tax-subsidized library, the tax-funded library, it's to just get a big pile of old novels, you know, from five years ago. That's what they're getting. Nobody's going there saying, "I think I better look up some Hegel while I'm at the library." It does not occur to anybody to do anything like that. So it's it doesn't just automatically happen. There's got to be a lot of elbow grease.

And again, a point I like to make a lot: I used to fill in for Peter Schiff on his old show, and sometimes people would make fun of Schiff, because when he would go on TV, he'd say, "Well, you know, as I pointed out in my book, *Crash Proof*" — and people would make fun of him. *Oh, there he is, promoting his book again.* That is the only way you're supposed to do this. I mean, you can't just sit there and say, "Well, I don't want to push my book on people. I mean, they'll find out about it." No, they won't. There are 200,000 books published every year. They're not going to know about yours if you don't keep it as front and center in front of their face as possible. And I will say that, having gone a number of years now without having published a book, that is one thing I do not miss about it. There are some things I miss about publishing a book. But one that I don't miss is being in constant salesman mode about that book. Everywhere I go, it's got to be the book, the book, the book, the book, to the exclusion of everything else, because your publisher's demanding to see numbers. So you know, the book, the book, the book. You've got to focus entirely on that, and it's just, ugh, after a while, ugh [laughing].

TROTTIER: Yeah. Actually, it requires — so this is a story about thinking about books, how much how much focus does it take. I actually walked through the middle of a public mass shooting thinking about my book, and didn't realize what was happening until halfway through, because it takes so much focus. Another part is I'm kind of a space case, but I actually walked into one of the worst situations in my life because of how much — you know, it's something that I was thinking about.

WOODS: Whoa, I can't say I've had that experience.

TROTTIER: Yeah, and I still, when they talked to me afterwards, you know, I had spent the whole day at the police station afterwards. And then I was walking home and I spoke to the local news, I plugged my book, totally.

WOODS: [laughing] Yeah, well —

TROTTIER: Even for that, as shameless as that is, hey, I just went through that. I'm going to plug my book.

WOODS: Gosh, that's unbelievable. Well, anyway, as you say, not everybody has to do that. And even if you feel like it would help, you can always get help doing it. And also the book, if you were to write a book, it does not — and again, not because the book itself is to be promoted in isolation from everything else. You know, you do the videos, the videos go to the book. I mean, the book, it's a pivot; it can be a source of revenue; it can be something that you direct your other efforts to, whatever. But it doesn't have to be 500 pages.

TROTTIER: No.

WOODS: I think sometimes people hear "book," they think, *Oh, my gosh, I remember I wrote a five-page term paper and I was ready to murder somebody. How could I write a book?* But especially in this day and age with eBooks, eBooks have lowered people's page number expectations. And you can write eBooks that are well under 100 pages, well under 100 pages, and people are perfectly happy, because as long as you have the information they seek and as long as you're solving their problem, they're not going to say, "I wish I could have spent an extra eight hours reading this." They're not, really. Almost nobody's going to feel that way.

TROTTIER: Yeah, the entire point of my music theory book is it's 52 pages, and I boil down roughly the first year and a half and a half of college music theory into 52 pages. You know, it's dense in terms of how much it covers, and it doesn't give you all the secrets, and it's not going to give you 1,000 exercises to do. But it's 52 pages, and if you understand the material, then you can understand everything else based off of the central principles. And I think, in all honesty, there needs to be more of that done to academic subjects. Maybe people would start reading more.

WOODS: All right, so let's wrap it up like this. About a week or so ago, I was saying, just to be funny — and I'm sure you'll get what I was driving at. I was saying to folks: look, if even a music teacher can figure out how to make the online world work, then so can you.

TROTTIER: [laughing] I agree.

WOODS: My point in that was not that music teachers are the lowest of the low in our society or anything like that, but that they're not the first people you think of when you think entrepreneur. They're just not. And that's okay. Not everybody has to be an entrepreneur. But it's not the model; it's not the sort of person you're thinking of. And yet, somehow you made that work. Now, I have a lot of people who listen who kind of want to do something like what you're doing, where they live on their own terms. And they do something they love, and it supports them comfortably. But sheesh, they don't know what step one is, or even if they do know what step one is, they're just afraid to take step one. At least right now, they're comfortable and secure. They think at least they know what tomorrow is going to bring. Or it's: I don't have the time to do this. Or whatever it is, something is paralyzing them. So do you have any advice for people?

TROTTIER: Yeah, I actually have the same advice that I give my music students, and I think this applies to just about everything. Take a breath right now for all the times you're going to screw up, because it's going to happen. And if you accept that, it's a lot less scary and you will find what you're looking for as long as you plan on finding what you're not looking for as a part of the process getting there. So just start.

WOODS: Yeah. Really, that is the thing. That really is the thing. If there's a voice telling you that, well, I've got to wait for just the right moment, there'll always be an excuse why something's not the right moment. And then you'll be lying on your deathbed saying, "Well, I'm on my deathbed. That's not really a very good moment." There'll never be exactly the right moment. And again, I sometimes even say about children, a lot of times people say, "Well, it's not the right moment for me to have children." And then a lot of these moments go by. And I think to myself, yeah, maybe when I started having them, maybe that wasn't — I don't know. Maybe that wasn't exactly the so-called right moment. But who knows? What does that even mean? If I had thought that way, I would be deprived of five of the greatest people in the world, you know? So the whole "I have to wait for the right moment" thing, no, no, no. What you can start doing immediately as carving out an extra hour of your day. And here's where you're going to find that extra hour: you're going to go to bed half an hour later and you're going to wake up half an hour earlier. That never killed anybody. You're going to do that. You start that hour a day that is entirely yours. You don't owe that to anybody, not to a client, not to a boss. That's entirely yours. That's Ben Settle's point, always, is that you start — your first hour is for you.

TROTTIER: Yep.

WOODS: And then you go and do your other stuff. So I would definitely get started there. Well, I appreciate this, and I'm glad to hear that you feel like, in some way — I mean, the last thing in the world I want to do is try and take credit for all the hard work you put in. But you did send me a nice note saying that, in some way, I had been a source of encouragement. And if that's the case, then I'm delighted to hear that.

TROTTIER: It's more than the case. My mind needed certain things rationalized, and I heard you rationalize them first. And I don't think I would have started down the path that I did having not heard your podcast.

WOODS: Well, that is really great to hear. And I'm glad you've had such wonderful results. So let's direct people somewhere. Let's get people to see your videos. I'm going to link to your YouTube channel at [TomWoods.com/1245](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC1245). But is it easy to find that YouTube channel? Could you give out the name of it?

TROTTIER: Yeah, so two real easy ways to find it: "Ross the Music Teacher," just Google that on YouTube. Or the thing that I'm most proud of is just Google the words "music theory," and look for the first video there. It'll say, "You Need to Learn Music Theory" on the cover.

WOODS: Nice, nice, excellent. Yeah, in fact, I think I looked at that just the other day. It had over 800,000 views.

TROTTIER: It's somewhere in there. I'm trying not to look at it too much, because I waste time watching the numbers, but it's a lot.

WOODS: That's absolutely insane. I mean, that makes my zombie video look like a piece of crap compared to this. That's amazing. But at least you're actually teaching people something, whereas all I'm doing is ridiculing people. So I'm glad in the abstract that somebody teaching something does have 800,000. That is good to see. All right, well, Ross, continued good luck to you, and thanks for your time.

TROTTIER: Thank you, Tom.