

# BEFORE YOUR BIG BREAK; Landing an entertainment career can take years. Make money in the meantime.

Tseng, Ada . Los Angeles Times ; Los Angeles, Calif. [Los Angeles, Calif]11 July 2021 : E.8.

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## FULL TEXT

JAMES TANG has been a host at a restaurant and worked at a pop-up food stall. He was also an assistant to a talent manager. He's done algorithm training for tech companies and audio transcription. He's even had a job as a warehouse assistant for a children's science education company. Most recently, he's been streaming on Twitch and collecting tips and other micro-donations from his growing fan base. He's a working actor in Hollywood. The stereotype is that every L.A. restaurant server has a headshot or screenplay. Pre-pandemic, the service industry attracted people in entertainment because of the flexibility. But working in a restaurant isn't your only option if you're starting out in Hollywood and looking for a day job.

Tang has been in Los Angeles for about seven years. His highest-profile credits include small roles on "Brooklyn Nine-Nine" and "NCIS: Los Angeles," and he's a love interest in the web series "Love in 2020." He has an agent, he signed with a new manager in December, and now that the pandemic has made self-taped auditions just as acceptable as in-person ones, he's getting more opportunities. But he was barely scraping by before the pandemic. "It's so easy to get stars in your eyes," he said. "There's that myth that you could get discovered at the bakery or something by a random person, but honestly, it doesn't really happen like that."

Actors often start out as day performers with small roles called costars, he explained, which, according to SAG-AFTRA, pay about \$1,000 a day. If you're lucky, that role might take four days to shoot. If you're extra lucky, you might book four of those jobs in one year. That would add up to about \$16,000.

"Knowing those numbers, you have to also not be an actor to survive," he said. "To pay for classes, network, go to events, get headshots, set up a website, all these marketing things."

Those who are successful in Hollywood often say it's hard to give advice because there isn't a singular path to success. It's a gig economy. Rules are loose.

But it takes years to make money from your art. If you don't come from wealth, how do you survive in the meantime?

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## SIDE JOBS

"The job has to be easy and something you can drop when someone calls at 8 p.m. the night before and asks if you can come work at 4 a.m. the next day," said Trang Ada Trinh, a makeup artist who started as a production assistant. In the restaurant industry, you can swap shifts last minute. You can work nights, keeping your days open for auditions or gigs.

Stephen Colbert, Constance Wu, Kristen Wiig and others worked as waiters for years.

The rideshare industry -- Lyft and Uber -- is a common side job in Hollywood. According to 2014 Lyft data, 70% of their drivers work or aspire to work in entertainment industry.

Trinh, who moved to L.A. from Boston only knowing one other person in the industry, first worked at a nail salon. "There were dozens of us [who could cover each other's shifts], and they understood how the film industry worked," she said.

She eventually decided she wanted to work in makeup, which required going to beauty school and working as a production assistant on the weekend. She lived out of her car for three months to save up for a down payment for a new place.

After over a decade in the industry, she's headed makeup departments for digital media companies and now works on Netflix shows. For extra income, she created a men's grooming line, Guise Etiquette, after she found her clients liked the organic products she mixed in her bedroom. She opened and later sold a nail salon specializing in crystal-infused beauty services. Now she's back in school to become a health and wellness coach.

"The thing that I love and hate about the industry is that you never know when you're going to work," she said. "So whatever you can make on the side is helpful. We're like little squirrels gathering acorns."

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#### HOLLYWOOD AS YOUR SIDE HUSTLE

Many start with a stable day job, and entertainment is their side hustle until they can build enough momentum to transition into entertainment full-time.

Sarah Cooper, who gained fame with her viral Donald Trump lip syncs on TikTok and released her Netflix special "Sarah Cooper: Everything's Fine" last year, worked at Google. Ava DuVernay was working at her entertainment PR agency while developing her first independent films.

Kendall Kyndall, the host of ALLBLK's "Social Society" and an actor on BET's "Games People Play," was working in human resources in Michigan when he started posting comedic, 15-second "Love and Hip Hop" videos to Instagram each week.

At first, he had hundreds of followers, then thousands. After a year, he had a million. Soon, he landed hosting gigs for BET, VH1 and TNT.

"A lot of people back home were saying you need to go to L.A., you need to quit your job," he said. "And yes, I did quit my job, but I made a plan. I always say: If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail."

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#### STARTING FROM THE BOTTOM, BUT STRATEGICALLY

Ben Lopez, a filmmaker and the executive director of the National Assn. of Latino Independent Producers, sees a lot of people working in Hollywood in jobs that are adjacent to what they actually want to do.

He calls it the "Good Will Hunting" strategy, where you hope that if you work as a janitor at Harvard, and you're in proximity to the movers and shakers, your talent will get discovered.

And that does happen. Antwone Fisher was a security guard at Sony before Denzel Washington directed his autobiographical script. Ozzie Areu started as a security guard at Warner Bros. and eventually became personal assistant to Brad Pitt and Ellen DeGeneres. Then he worked for Tyler Perry, who encouraged him to open Areu Studios, now one of the nation's largest Latino-owned-and-operated film studios.

But Lopez, who works with up-and-comers, tells young people to be strategic and do their research. If you want to be a creative executive, who are the people you want to work for – or be like – in the future? Don't just know who Ryan Murphy is, but know who is part of the team that works with him.

"People apply everywhere hoping they'll get in somewhere, but make it targeted so you're not wasting years and years looking for that right job and opportunity," Lopez said.

Whatever you choose, keep your eye on the dream, he said. Sometimes when people get too successful in day jobs that offer comfort, money and security, it's harder to quit, Lopez said.

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#### BUILD A SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNITY AND MONETIZE IT

When the pandemic struck – and auditions, service-industry work and social gatherings disappeared – Tang spent a lot of time playing video games with his fellow actor friends.

They decided to start streaming and research how to monetize on Twitch. They soon learned it wasn't quite as easy as getting paid for playing video games. On Twitch, for example, you have to hit certain audience benchmarks before you can apply to be a partner, which comes with storage, financial support and ability for fans to subscribe.

You can also make money from ads, sponsorships or donations from subscribers – though half the cut goes to Twitch. There are tip jars and "bits," virtual goods that fans can buy to cheer you on.

Tang has been streaming for several hours a day, with the understanding that those who make money on Twitch do this full-time, and that it can take years of consistent output before you start seeing meaningful financial rewards.

This isn't a backup plan, but a way to have a day job that might connect to your bigger ambitions.

"It's hard, and it definitely takes time to build a community," said Kerri Pollard, the chief revenue officer of Patreon. "But it's also not a flash in the pan either." Patreon is a membership service that helps creators get paid directly from their fans, or patrons.

"It's not one piece of content, one song going viral, it's a group of people loving what you do and wanting to have that intimate connection, exclusive experience or access," she said. "It's about finding your most loyal fans, and those are the ones that stand the test of time."

Kyndall said many people are concerned with the number of followers they have, but it's more important to interact with your fans.

"I did not have 1 million followers when I started getting brand deals," he said. "I had like 300,000 followers, but the engagement was so high."

Pollard said it also takes time to find your product and market fit. That means that you build a specific product and try to fit within a target market repeatably and predictably. You really need to understand: Who are you making content for? What is resonating? How do you take that kernel, build it and monetize it, so you can continue working as a creative?

Once Kyndall had built a loyal following, he learned to be particular with the brands he chose to work with. Hair product collaborations made sense because he talked about hair all the time in his "Love and Hip Hop" videos. Now he has a "Bestfran" sneaker with Legacy Lapels, inspired by the term he calls his followers.

"Think about it not just as something to pay the bills while you're trying to break in, but as, 'I'm going to start building this community,'" said Pollard.

Patreon's most high-profile success story is likely Issa Rae, who monetized on Patreon for her web series "The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl" before she created "Insecure" on HBO. Now her HOORAE Patreon page is dedicated to supporting other Black creators and funding their projects.

"Whether you're at the beginning of your entertainment career or the middle of it, that's the future," said Pollard. "To be able to build your community directly on your own terms."

Caption: PHOTO: (no caption)

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