



**Michael Jackson guitarist Orianthi (shown) and U2 offstage keyboardist Terry Lawless are just two musicians who got their gigs through word-of-mouth referrals from colleagues such as Mike McKnight.**



**Mike McKnight tours with Mariah Carey and is our resident guru. Email your questions about touring, technology, or music biz issues to muso4hire@earthlink.net.**

## Ask Mike WORD OF MOUTH

**Mike,**  
I'm sure you've been asked this question a lot, but how do people get great gigs like yours? Do you send out résumés? I don't even know where to begin.

Thanks, John

That's *the* \$64,000 question, and there's no simple answer. Most gigs like mine are word-of-mouth referrals. Someone will ask, "Who do you know that does *this*?" and get their number. Here are a few examples.

When I moved to L.A. in the '80s, I did an unpaid internship with renowned programmer Bo Tomlyn. His company, Key Clique, created sounds for the Yamaha DX7 and other keyboards in heavy use at the time. Imagine buying the best sounds of the era from a guy that was actually in the studio with stars like Michael Jackson. I knew I wanted to be a part of his team. After a year of my working for Bo and playing nights in a '60s cover band, Earth Wind & Fire offered Bo a gig as a keyboard tech/programmer. He didn't want to do it, so he recommended me. I worked my ass off and did a really good job for EW&F. They brought me into the studio for several of their records and eventually put me onstage in 1994.

In 1990, I was taking piano lessons from [B-3 shredder and *The Contemporary Keyboardist* author] John Novello. He'd

heard Madonna was looking for players and programmers, so he threw my name in the hat along with his. Based on that referral, I got the programmer/playback gig and worked with her until 2005. It mushroomed from there – U2 heard about me from Madonna's people, then when I left U2 in 2001, I handpicked Terry Lawless, who's still there. I got my Mariah Carey gig in 1996 on referral from Madonna's monitor engineer, and am still working with her. I was also just hired for Roger Waters' upcoming *The Wall* tour on the recommendation of Trip Khalaf, a great FOH engineer I've worked with for many years.

On Michael Jackson's *This Is It* rehearsals, M.J.'s programmer Mike Prince asked if I knew any good musical directors. I recommended Michael Bearden, who got the gig and just did an amazing job. He and Mike Prince brought me in to help with the sound design and remixing, and asked if I knew any killer female guitarists, so I emailed friends for ideas. [American Idol MD] Ricky Minor's production manager Rob Leifer recommended Orianthi, who

Bearden had also seen play, and she got the gig. [Check out the Orianthi cover story in the May '10 issue of *Guitar Player*, and learn all about Bearden's work with Michael Jackson in the Sept. '09 *Keyboard*. –Ed.]

So, how do you get to the point where it's *your* number people pass along when someone needs a keyboardist, programmer, or tech for a tour? First, do every gig to the absolute best of your ability, no matter how insignificant that gig may appear. The only thing that travels faster than word about how good you are is word about how *bad* you are if you don't deliver the goods. You need to network in a way that isn't annoying to other touring professionals. You need great MySpace and Facebook pages, and if you're a crew person, try to get invited to [Crewspace.com](http://Crewspace.com). If you have personal problems, leave them at home. If you like to get high, keep it under control and off-duty. Constantly work on your craft, show up on time, have a positive attitude, and people *will* throw your name out there. ☐