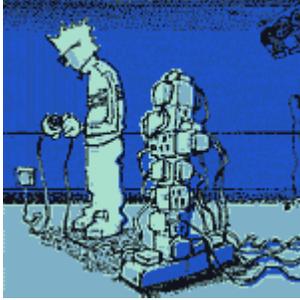


20 Tips For Playing Live



Play live? Check out these top tips...

ASSUMING YOU'VE MANAGED to amass together enough people to make hiring a venue worthwhile, you should give some serious thought about the differences between playing to yourself in your bedroom and playing in full view of thousands (well a few anyway. (By the way, if you're still managing to amass a crowd, start sweet-talking your relatives and friends, and their relatives and friends... and their relatives and friends. And if the worst comes to the worst, maybe promise them a free copy of your album or maybe your autograph which they can sell for millions when you're famous).

It's often forgotten that there's a hidden art to playing live, so, before you take yourself and all your gear centre stage, here's a set of tips that will ensure that things don't fall apart at the vital moment. Of course, it's all very well putting this into practice but you have to always remember that when performing live, Murphy's first law of chaos always applies: what can go wrong, will go wrong! Right then, it's showtime!

Preparation is the key

Give it a plug. Every month, get all your leads out, run a test meter over them, open up and check inside those mains plugs. Are the cable retainers in good condition? Are leads frayed and worn? Replace now before they replace you!

Don't blow a fuse man! See what fuses all your equipment uses. Buy spares and take them to every gig (it's a good idea to tape them inside the instrument cases and amps next to the fuse holders so they're on hand for you to replace as soon as you can). Do not, I repeat, not replace mains (or any other) fuses with bits of wire, rusty nails, fag packet paper or guitar strings. It won't hurt you - you'll be long dead before you hit the back wall of the stage - but those around you will be more than upset! Presumably.

Gaffer cakes. Q: "What's silver and binds the universe together?" A: "Gaffer tape." And it's true. Gaffer tape has been the ongoing currency of every gig since time began. It holds, fixes and pins cables to floors, walls, ceilings and the like. Do not leave home without it. Although there are many not-so-wonderful substitutes, you really have to have the USA-made Duck Tape to make the grade.

Treading the boards. Once upon a lightyear ago I did a 48-date concert tour. The stage manager, who had his roots in theatre, berated the crew to death thus: 'A clean stage is a happy stage.' Whereupon he'd humiliate some hapless roadie and brandish the broom and duster. OK, so he was a touch mad, but there was truth in his insanity. Keep your stage tidy and you keep accidents to a minimum. Tape all leads to the floor and out of the way of musicians and the public. Any which have nowhere else to go but across a walkway should have rubber covers over them. Hide all bags, coats and cases as they make the performance area look like a lost luggage office. Think professional, it will rub off on others.

What's that noise? Don't plug instruments in with the faders/volume controls up. It sounds really amateurish and trashes speakers extremely quickly. Try it when you are working with a pro sound rig and you will possibly be getting used to your crutches with in 48 hours.

Protect yourself

Where's Wally? After every gig go through what is known as The Wally Check (well, by me anyway). Check the most likely and, more importantly, unlikely places before you leave. And once you've checked, go back and double check. If something's important enough to take to a venue (be it a synth, an amp or a pack of Polos) it's important enough to take home with you.

Disk driven. Have two back-ups of every disk, floppy or Zip. Store them in two completely separate places such as your leads bag and your overnight bag. Should disaster strike and the main disk won't work, then you have at least two shots at reloading it live. And have a back-up of all your files on your PC at home.

What a transformation. Lots of keyboards and stage-related devices use transformers but have a back-up one too if possible. Manufacturers cunningly change the voltage and socket sizes so beware. A 15V AC transformer will perform miracles on a 9V synth like you have never seen so use the right one. In desperation you could always carry one of those multiple transformers for emergencies.

On the stand. Make sure that you've got the right stands and racks for your keyboards and other gear. What works well in the bedroom might not work at all on stage. Check at rehearsals to see if really stable. If it isn't, replace it... you can bet it will collapse on stage. Mark the height you like it set at with indelible pen as well. In the rush of setting up it is easy to get the height wrong and if you are like me, just 1cm out is like wearing wellies while having a bath!

Get set. If you're working from a set list, carry a few extra copies of it just in case. They have a wonderful habit of self-destructing 10 minutes before showtime. Either that, or you'll need to improvise thanks to the lack of bog paper in the loos. Make sure all the people you are working with have the same set list.

Drinking and driving

Inspect your intake. Dutch courage and getting loosened up is often part of performing. However, getting pissed up and making yourself look like a total prat in front of 300 people is very easy. It also is a sure way to loose gigs, unless you have a strange reputation to keep up.

Booze on stage. Personally I get nervous with £2 worth of lager poised to trash £3,000 worth of gear and so I don't like drinks anywhere near me unless they are in water bottles with those idiot-proof pop-up tops.

On the other hand... If you are not driving, then once you're gig is finished the bar is your oyster and the bouncer possibly not your friend! Actually, it all depends whether there is business to be done or whether it is time to unwind seriously. I prefer to get back home, pull the chilled vodka and lager from the fridge and then commence a serious re-entry program!

Lost in space. It is quite amazing just how hopeless people can be at giving directions and/or writing them down. Buy a road map and street map. Get the address as exact as possible to include a telephone number. Read the map and get to the gig. Assume nothing! Directions that talk about the number of streetlights, church steeples and factories which have been pulled down are not only dubious but also sadly commonplace!

At the venue

Early riser. Allow plenty of time to get there and set up. And then add some on. Rushing in to a half-full, half-lit club with a promoter chewing your ear off and the resident DJ laughing at you generally means you will set your gear up in such a manner as to render it useless in seconds. It will also mean the first 15 minutes of your set are spent trying to orientate yourself to the stage and show.

He's with me. Some acts like to drag the public on stage, some don't. It is a decision to be taken by you and whoever you work with. One or two people looks good; a stage full of audience looks messy and is an accident waiting to happen.

Keep your hands off. Make sure no one except the performers and crew touches the equipment before or after the show. Ever. Letting little four-year-old Gavin 'have a go' on the decks at a family party is a prelude to his dad and his rugby team mates puking all over it in a drunken spree of 'having fun', believe me. And will you get any money out of them to replace the trashed gear? You'll be lucky to get an apology. Why not ask to have a go in their new Series 5 BMW even though you haven't driven anything bigger than a lawnmower. It's roughly the equivalent.

Hiring a PA. Getting a PA (of the Public Address system variety rather than a Personal Assistant) is a very sensible idea for gigs in venues without a house system... although the assistant is a nice idea. Talk through what you need in terms of mics, outputs and monitoring with the company beforehand. And be nice to them. Giving the PA crew a hard time is a surefire way of making certain your set sounds like an answering machine breaking down, so be nice to them.

Be my guest. The average venue will fine about your guest list as long as it's a maximum of about two guests per band. Don't present a list of 30 or so mates and expect the promoter to agree to it.

Contract king. Even if it is a simple piece of paper saying the date, time, venue who's playing, who's paying and how much, it's better than nothing, which is what your fee could be without a contract.

Jon Bates 10/00