

PERFORMING TIPS

By Steve Glickstein

After more than 30 years of performing, both as a solo performer and as a member of a group, I have learned a few things which may be helpful to those of you who are just beginning to perform in public or have already begun to play gigs but have not yet gained much experience.

Once you have practiced enough to where you feel that you've reached a level of competence to begin playing out in public, you may encounter one of the biggest problems facing performers: Stage Fright. Just about everyone experiences it to some degree, even the seasoned professional. In some, it may only manifest itself as nervousness, which may or may not disappear once on stage, while in others it can be nearly paralyzing in intensity and may even be sufficiently frightening to prevent them from appearing in public. Whatever category you find yourself in, you've got to come to terms with it and overcome it if you want to perform in public.

The things that contribute most to a performer's stage fright are being unfamiliar with the material being performed and a lack of faith in yourself. Anticipation and worry over whether you'll be able to play a difficult musical passage, or forgetting the words to a song, will affect your performance. I try to minimize those worries by being thoroughly familiar with the numbers I will be performing. If necessary, have the lyrics written out in front of you on stage. Faith in your own abilities will come with time and practice.

Control over the instrument you're playing is crucial. You may not realize it, but the calluses on your fingers are a concern. Hard calluses give you a cleaner sound and do not muffle the strings. They allow you to control the sting more. If your fingertips are soft, they will give way when you fret a string or try to bend a note and will actually muffle the string. Also, it can hurt to play when your fingers aren't hardened. Try to remember what it was like when you first started playing and you'll understand what I mean. So don't immerse your hands in water for too long before playing or the calluses you do have will soften up and become a problem during the gig.

How can you prepare for a performance? I've found the use of a tape recorder to be very helpful in the preparation of any number I want to perform. I experiment playing the same song in different keys until I find the one that best fits my voice or gives me the chord positions that I can comfortably play and the sound I want. Similarly, I'll try different tempos and picking styles to determine which best suits the song before I ultimately perform it in public.

Recording what you are practicing will give you an unbiased record of how you sound. If you listen to the recording with a critical ear, it will help you to identify areas which may need work in your rendition of the particular number you are working on.

Learning proper microphone technique will also make you sound better on stage and can save you from straining your voice. By singing close to the mike on soft passages you can avail yourself of the power of the amplifier to project your voice. Conversely, on loud passages you should back off a couple of inches from the mike.

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Try to maintain a constant position relative to the mike. Stay in line with it and sing directly into it. These simple suggestions will make it easier on the sound technician running the sound board for you, as well. When you shift away or sing across the front of the mike instead of directly into it, there simply is less of a signal projected into the mike for proper amplification to the audience.

The sound person will not be able to pick up your voice as easily and there may be feedback as he increases the volume to try to compensate for the change in the level of the signal received from the mike. The same holds true for instrument mikes. Stay close to them. Bear in mind that for roughly every inch you move away from the mike there is a corresponding drop in the sound that is transmitted to the sound board by about one half.

If the sound person has to constantly change volume to compensate for your movement, he won't be able to make you sound good or get enough volume for a clean reproduction of your sound.

A very common problem is the performer who plays the guitar too softly. This is less of a problem these days when nearly everyone who gets on stage has a built in pickup. But for those of you who don't have on board electronics, your playing must be loud enough to be picked up by the mike or it will present a problem to the sound tech who is desperately trying to amplify the weak signal while still trying to make it sound natural and avoid feedback.

Ultimately, there is no substitute for experience. The best way to learn the ins and outs of performing is to simply get on a stage and do it. Anytime you have a chance to perform before an audience, do so. Go to the open mike venues and take a turn on stage. Participate in the song swaps and get together with others to make music as often as you can. Playing together with others is an invaluable experience both as to the discipline of maintaining a steady rhythm and the interaction with other people and their personalities (egos). There'll be more on those aspects in another article.

If you constantly strive to better yourself and learn new material you will hone your skills and be a better entertainer.

Finally, don't lose touch with the enjoyment we all get out of our music. One of the great joys of music is entertaining others and having them appreciate our performance. So, whatever your goal is, remember to keep the music fun. Keep practicing!