

SPINNUP

A Guide To Playing live

We hope this guide will help you get your head around some of the things you need to be thinking about when it comes to make the most of your live career.

Table of contents

Planning your first gig

- Rehearsing p. 3
- Promoting your first gig p. 4
- Getting equipment ready p. 5
- Warming up and pre-show rituals p. 6

How to get more gigs

- Getting your confidence up p. 7
- Building a relationship with promoters and bookers p. 8
- Playing for a fee or for free? p. 8
- Putting on your own showcase p. 8
- Getting a support slot p. 9

Touring

- Putting together your own tour p. 10
- Life on the road p. 11
- Tour managers p. 11

Merchandise

- What to offer p. 12
- Meet and greet p. 13

Getting a booking agent p. 14

Planning your first gig

Let's assume for this section that you've got your first gig booked in at a small venue (we'll get to putting on your own gig later on). As the saying goes—fail to prepare; prepare to fail! Take every gig seriously and make sure you and your bandmates are ready for it.

“Fail to prepare; prepare to fail!”

Rehearsing

Getting a regular rehearsal space that you're comfortable with is a great idea when it comes to honing your live set. If you're an acoustic singer-songwriter, you can probably do without one, but if you perform with other musicians then it's essential. Whether it's your friend's parents' garage, a social club function room or a live room in a studio, find somewhere that you can use as much as possible in the run-up to your gig. Any time you have new music to perform and for other musicians to learn, you'll need to get this regular practice going again.

Some artists like to stick a reasonably rigid set list, so rehearsal can be a good time to develop this. It could be a good idea to sequence set lists of different lengths to suit whether you're playing a support slot, a set in a showcase or a longer headline set. But if you prefer to be spontaneous, that's also fine—you just need to make sure that your collaborators are sharp enough to react well!

Promoting your gig

Comedians usually say that at their earliest, smallest gigs, they would try and fill the front row with friends and family to ensure that at least someone was laughing.

Laughter is contagious, and applause and crowd noise can be too.

So first and foremost, try and get your loved ones on board.

Their presence will also hopefully be comforting and help calm your nerves, but if being too aware of them might put you off then it might be an idea to ask them to stand further towards the back!

Next, make sure you are letting your friends and followers know about your gig.

Use email and social media to get the word out, consider using social advertising and add your gig to any relevant listing services. You can find our more in-depth guide to promotion for musicians [here](#).

Ticket sales for many events tend to follow a sort of U-shape curve, where most tickets are purchased around the announcement date and in the last few days leading up to the event. If your event is pay-on-the-door only, it's still a relevant theory.

These are the times you need to put the most focus around promoting your event, but it's good to have ways to keep pushing it gently in the interim. That could be through sharing rehearsal videos or live versions of your tracks, for example.

Whatever you do, make sure your bio / profile info on your social media channels has the date and location or link to the gig so it's the first thing people see when they're checking out out.

Don't forget about any local listings online or in print too.

While newspapers and magazines don't have the promotional power they used to, it won't cost you anything to get listed in their gigs section if they have one.



Getting your equipment ready

Make a checklist of what you need to bring to your gig, and try to have backups of any leads, connectors or parts that tend to break, wear out or get lost easily.

Look at your checklist when you're at home to make sure you remember everything, and look at it again when you're packing up after your gig at the venue.

There's nothing more annoying than realising you left something there, especially if you don't live near the venue.

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Whatever you do, the most important thing is to always promote your new music and gigs and find a way to build a regular connection with your audience.

“Make sure you find out what equipment the venue has well in advance”

Test all your equipment the day before your gig or maybe even a couple days before to make sure it is all working and sounding OK. Finding out something's broken at the last minute could be disastrous.

Make sure you find out what equipment the venue has well in advance, how much space they have on stage, how many power sockets they have and so on.

You may need to bring some of your own equipment—e.g. a keyboard stand or a power extension lead.

Again, you don't want to find out any problems at the last minute.

If possible, it's a good idea to go and check out another gig at the venue in the weeks leading up to your event. Not only will it help you identify any potential pitfalls or issues that need to be worked around, but it could also help you picture yourself up on stage and help get you in sync with the feel of the room.

Warming up and pre-show rituals

It's important to find out how you're most comfortable getting into your zone before your gig. Some people prefer quiet, calm isolation. Some want to watch the act playing before them (if there is one). Some prefer to stay with their friends to help them feel at ease. Some like to listen to music to get them into that mindset.

“Your voice is an instrument and you need to treat it with the same care that you would any other.”

Whatever you do, don't have too many drinks, and unless it's really an essential part of your vocal tone, don't smoke either. Your voice is an instrument and you need to treat it with the same care that you would any other. And like any physical activity, you need to warm up for singing.

Vocal warm-up exercises are a great idea, whatever your style, and there are lots of YouTube tutorials and apps that can help you find a routine that's right for you. There are also throat lozenges designed for—or at least marketed to—vocalists that can help soothe a raw voice and throat. (n.b. an essential read on protecting your voice is this [Guardian article about why singers like Adele keep losing their voice](#)).

As with making music at home or in the studio, rituals can help you put yourself in the right frame of mind and help you channel your energy.

Some examples of pre-show rituals from famous musicians include:

- Lorde likes to take a nap under the same blanket and eat berries or dried nori
- Beyoncé and Rihanna both say a prayer with their band
- Coldplay's Chris Martin says he has many, including needing to brush his teeth to “feel smart”
- Leonard Cohen used to recite a simple Latin verse with his band

As you can see, these are pretty varied and sometimes a bit bizarre!

The point is it's something personal to you, and something familiar and calming that helps you focus. It's a little like a Pavlovian response—e.g. where a dog learns to associate the ringing of a bell with food being given to them. You just need to find the trigger that's right for you, and it doesn't matter how silly it might seem to someone else. .

How to get more gigs

Playing live and getting on the circuit is, in many ways, the most crucial part of building your career and promoting yourself. And in terms of getting more gigs, it's definitely a good idea to target promoters and bookers directly rather than waiting for them to come to you.

“Don't wait for promoters and bookers to come to you”

Getting your confidence up

When you're starting out, it's all about honing your craft, getting comfortable on stage, and learning to deal with different situations, crowds, room sizes and unexpected mishaps. In these early days, don't get too hung up on trying to get booked at all the best places. Just try play in as many places as possible.

Before you're established, open-mic nights can be a good place to try out new ideas and build your confidence. Busking is quite different to playing to a room but it can help you get used to putting yourself out there. Work hard to get support slots, no matter how low down the bill you are and offer to play friends' parties or local free events.

Don't just take it from us. This is how Ed Sheeran says he honed his live performance craft in his book *Ed Sheeran: A Visual Journey*:

“The day I moved down to the capital, I emailed every single London music promoter on Musicborn.com and said: “Hey, can I have a gig, please?”.

I probably emailed 300 and 50 of them got back. I often did two or three gigs a night, jumping on stage at 7.30pm at one place, at 9pm at the next and at midnight at another.”

Building a relationship with promoters and bookers

As with other groups of industry people, identify your targets by scouring websites and magazines. Build your list of email contacts for promoters and go to their shows and venues and trying to meet them in person. Then in a similar way to your fan email newsletters, keep them updated once a month with new music, news, your gig listings, videos, press mentions and anything else that might make them interested in you.

Play for a fee or for free?

While any serious venue should really pay you at least some small token fee for providing entertainment, don't be completely against the idea of playing for free if you're into the idea of the gig. If it's not going to cost much for you to get there and play or if it's local, it's worth considering.

Sadly there are still venue owners and promoters who still try and get people to play for free. It's up to you whether you think the opportunity is worth it. Ultimately though, you shouldn't really be playing more than one show without payment per promoter or venue. You should also phase out doing free gigs altogether after you have established yourself even a little.

Putting on your own showcase

If you're finding it hard to get a gig, consider hiring out a cheap venue and throwing a showcase yourself. You could use the opportunity to invite down local press or talent scouts if you have the contacts and fill the rest of your space with your own friends. You could also split the cost with other artists and bands to make it less of an outlay and more of a full bill.

Getting a support slot

Being the opening act for another band can be a great way to get yourself in front of a new audience, to practice in a lower-pressure setting and possibly even to get on tour. There are three ways to pursue this:

- By getting booked by a promoter to be an opening act on a multi-act bill
- By getting the band to become fans of yours
- By getting the band's management or agent to become fans of yours

So clearly you want to pursue all of these avenues. Go to the gigs of other bigger bands you like and try and introduce yourself to them and give them your music, saying you'd love to be considered for any support slots. Email the management and bookers of other bands you like with your demos, stats and links and say the same. Obviously be realistic with who you're approaching, but the more other like-minded acts you approach and befriend, the more chances you'll have to get gigs in this way.



Touring

There are lots of useful platforms, websites and apps that can help make managing your online presence much easier and more efficient.

Putting together your own tour

Let's start with the DiY version. Once you have some profile, a little fan base and ideally some online press, you can start reaching out from your local area and scene and start contacting promoters elsewhere. What you need is for that first promoter to give you a chance in another city. If you can get one date locked in, then you can start contacting promoters and venues in other nearby cities or ones that you'll pass by to see if they might be able to put you on at their space too. The more gigs you can get locked in, the more appealing you'll seem to other promoters, and the more chance you'll have of getting the next promoter to say yes. It's like a domino effect.

At this stage, you should just be looking to cover your costs, but unfortunately even that can be too ambitious when starting out. Don't be afraid to ask promoters if they have anywhere you can sleep if the budget is tiny or non-existent. Always ask for at least your petrol or train or bus fare to be covered

“No-one said this was going to be glamorous!”

Life on the road

If you're taking a van on tour with your equipment in it, consider putting a mattress in it too and sleeping in it. Rough and ready as they come, but many famous musicians have started out this way. No-one said this was going to be glamorous!

Be careful with your physical and mental health if you're going on tour. Yes, your sleeping conditions might be sub-optimal, but it's important to try and get enough sleep and not to get too sucked into a lifestyle of excess. Going out on tour can make people feel homesick, and being thrust into situations where you're expected to be sociable whenever someone wants to talk to you can create anxiety.

Just be aware of how you're feeling and acting, and be honest with your bandmates or promoters if you're not feeling great. The music world has too many scary stories about artists who have gone awry due to the pressures of touring and fame, and it's important to be aware of these dangers from the moment you start out.

Tour managers

If you're lucky enough to get to a certain level of success, you may be able to afford or justify a tour manager. Their job is to get you from gig A to gig B successfully, and make sure you have everything you need to make you comfortable and to be able to perform well. But they are not supposed to be your babysitter!

They will deal with any problems you have with travel, logistics and performing and will liaise with the promoter to make sure everything is running smoothly and as agreed. They will also deal with the financial side of things and make sure that the budget for the tour is not getting out of hand.

With smaller acts, it's often the case that the band manager will double up as the tour manager, and even driver in many cases.

Merchadise

Selling merch is often what turns a break-even or loss-leading tour into something profitable. Selling physical copies of your music (if you have them), branded clothing, accessories, artwork and paraphernalia can all add up.

And don't think you need to have a certain level of fame for people to want your merch; if it's cool enough and catches people's eyes, you may even make a sale to a non-believer. Some people even like to wear merch from undiscovered bands as a badge of honour, showing they're ahead of the curve and know bands before anyone's writing about them. But of course the bigger you get, the more likely you are to make some money from your merch.

What to offer

The bigger quantities you buy or make of your merch, the less each unit will cost, but it's best to be cautious when you start out and concentrate on not burdening yourself with too much stock. Do a trial with a small run and see what the demand is like before you commit to anything too big.

Above all, express your musical identity, individuality and your visual brand. If you don't have a visual brand, you'll need to get a logo or at least choose a typeface. If you have some design skills, you could create your designs yourself. Otherwise you'll need to find a graphic designer. Ask friends and fellow artists you know for recommendations if you don't know anyone.

T-shirts and tote bags are probably the biggest sellers in terms of standard merch these days, but the sky's the limit in terms of what you could offer. Be creative. Have different designs and of course sizes when it comes to clothing. Offer something that isn't available to buy on your online store. Come up with something unusual. There are hundreds of branded merchandise companies who can make versions of whatever you want with your logo on it, from USB sticks to lighters to umbrellas or sweets. Check some of them out and see if anything they stock could be a fun addition to your range.

Meet and greet

When you're starting out, you'll definitely need to minimise costs, so asking a friend to help run your merch stand for you is a good idea. You should also join them after your set finishes so you can meet your audience. Especially in these days of instant access via social media, people expect to be able to have contact with acts who are not superstars yet, and it will really help people form more a bond with you.

There are even many well-known acts who are not afraid to be present at their merch stand who understand the power of the personal touch and the extra social media coverage their fans will give them

Whoever's running your stand, make sure you announce your merch stand at the end of your set so people know about it!



Getting a booking agent

A common question people ask is — how do I get an agent who'll find shows for me? The short answer is that you can't force getting one; you need them to come to you.

What that means is that until there is some interest in you and you're getting asked to play a lot already by promoters and bookers, an agent probably isn't going to be interested in you. So it's best to sit tight and keep promoting yourself until someone comes to you.

That said, there's no harming in sending some emails with your music to agents, but it's best to do so when you've got some gigs coming up and a bit of press so that they get the best first impression possible. Do your research and find the agents who represent the smaller bands you like the most and make your email introduction when it's ready. Send them an update every now and then if you have new music and news to shout about.

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We can't tell you how to make your live show more awesome or give you more confidence about performing live. That comes with practice, courage, planning and determination and ultimately time. Get out there and gig as much as possible and keeping honing your craft so when a big opportunity comes your way, you've got the confidence to know that you'll smash it. Hopefully this guide has given you a good overview of everything surrounding your stagecraft itself.

We hope you found it useful!



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