

STAGE CRAFT

Part 2: Develop Your Confidence to Play Great Gigs - Banish nerves for good and stay at the top of your game with Gareth Bird's guide to developing your stage craft...



It's one thing to be able to get gigs. It can be something else entirely to make a success of the actual performance itself. Getting up there to play in front of other people is not something that comes naturally to every musician. There can be a whole world of difference between knowing which notes to play or words to sing and being able to put on a show that a crowd will actually enjoy watching.

If the crowd don't enjoy the show you probably won't get asked back by the venue and you won't do anything to build your band's reputation. Both of which should be aims of any gig that you play.

The key to being able to put on a show rather than just strum through a few songs is confidence. You'll struggle to give your best if you're a bag of nerves and anxious about how you look and sound on the night.

Here's how you can develop the performance confidence to make every gig unforgettable for the crowd – and have a great time yourself when you play live.



KNOW THE MUSIC INSIDE OUT

The first essential is to make sure you're absolutely on top of the music. This is the physical or technical side of self-confidence. You have to free yourself from worrying about whether you play the right notes or sing the right words. This means rehearsing to the point where you can almost play without thinking about what you're doing. Here are a couple of pointers to help you.

PRACTICE AS IF YOU'RE PLAYING LIVE -

To get ultra comfortable with your material rehearse as if you're gigging. This means sticking to the set list in terms of which songs and the order you rehearse them. You can work out song starts (who does what), where there are potential problem areas (down-tunings, guitar switches etc).

Playing the set-list when you're practising is the same as a "dress rehearsal" and will itself help ease any stress on gig-night. When it comes to the gig you'll have been through the same songs in the same order in rehearsal countless times before. This will increase your confidence and technical mastery just like playing gig after gig.

PHRASE TRAINERS

If your band rehearsals aren't as frequent as you'd like you might want to invest in a Phrase trainer. One of these will let you rehearse alone without waiting for the next band get-together. A phrase trainer lets you take a recording of your band playing (or of the originals if you're a cover act), mute

your part on the recording and jam along – as if rehearsing with the band concerned. You can buy phrase trainers for guitarists, bassists and even vocalists.



Tascam CD-GT2
Guitar trainer...

HANDICAP YOUR REHEARSALS

You can make performing feel much easier on gig night and so increase your confidence by "handicapping" yourselves at rehearsals. Rehearse without letting your singer check out his lyric sheets or guitarists stare at fret boards. This will also help keep your focus where it needs to be when the time comes to play live: Out towards your audience!

Drummers and guitarists can also handicap themselves with weights on their wrists. You don't want to overdo it and risk injury of course, so you can for example, use a heavy watch and/or wristbands when you rehearse. You then leave your wrists bare and so lighter and easier to play with whenever you gig.



KEEP YOUR FOCUS ON THE CROWD – NOT YOU

Simply remembering that every show should be about the people in front of you enjoying themselves can take a lot of pressure off you. Concentrate on doing what you can to help "give" them a good time rather than just "take" their approval, applause or admiration.

Remember too that some audience members need help and encouragement to really enjoy themselves. Not everyone can automatically let go and have a great time when they go out. Helping these people to let go and have a great time at your gigs is something you'll eventually want to make happen.



HOW TO RELAX ONSTAGE

Onstage you'll perform and relate to your audiences better if you're feeling relaxed. Crowds can often tell when a performer is uptight or anxious and it can make them

uncomfortable too. Here are a couple of simple techniques you can use to keep nerves at bay onstage:

BREATHE DEEPLY AND SLOWLY

Concentrate on your breathing pattern as this is a key to your feelings of either tension or relaxation. Once you're aware of your breathing, just deepen it and slow it down. This will naturally dissolve feelings of tension and replace them with calmness. You have to keep on top of it as you're learning and gaining performance confidence. Repeat it over and over. Eventually, like most habits you develop, you'll find it's become second nature.



LOOSEN YOUR MUSCLES

As well as your breathing, tension is also transmitted to your muscles. They become tight and this can make your feelings of stress onstage and your ability to perform, even worse.

Watch out for your muscles tightening up. Loosen them on purpose when they do. Concentrate on typical problem areas such as your shoulders, jaw, teeth and tongue for example, all of which are big tension collectors.



FAKE IT 'TILL YOU MAKE IT.

Over time, we all develop particular ways we behave when we're feeling specific emotions. There'll be certain ways you stand and move, certain facial expressions you tend to adopt when you're confident or nervous for example.

The really neat thing about this is that because you adopt similar physical positions and movements each time you're having various feelings, eventually the two (the physical position/movement and the feelings) become closely interwoven.

You can actually experience some of the feelings and behaviours of being confident (or nervous) just by adopting your habitual physical positions, movements or facial expressions.

So, if you want to feel super confident and outgoing on stage, one way is simply to act as if you feel it. To fake it 'til you make it.

You are giving a "performance", like an actor after all aren't you? You can even ask yourself how your favourite guitarist, singer or whoever would be behaving if he or she were on the stage in your place.



Cheryl Cole always warms up with facial exercises before every show!



LIGHTEN UP

Anything you can do to not take yourself too seriously before you hit the stage will work wonders to get you in a perfect mood to interact with a gig crowd.

Listen to some comedy performances on your way to the gig or get into the habit of looking and listening out for jokes you can tell band mates on gig-night.

My own personal favourite is to get in front of a mirror (either in the washroom or back in the van) and

quickly contort a couple of the most insane faces I can imagine at myself. If you're like the other people I've taught this to, and you're doing it right you'll usually come close to crying with laughter. Try it. Then go out onto the stage and see how difficult it is to feel uptight.



"SEE" THE GIG GOING GREAT

Whether we realise it or not we're all guilty of imagining the worst is going to happen in certain situations. This can be something simple like imagining the problems that might arise at the gig, or that little voice inside your head casting doubts about your ability. Any of these will undermine your performance. Combat this by thinking about exactly what the perfect gig would be like. Precisely how would your audience ideally react? What would people come up to you after the gig and say? How would you feel while playing at this perfect gig? The key here is to do this thinking or imagining while you're relaxed. So good places for this would be

To perform confidently make sure that you're absolutely on top of the music...

in bed before you go off to sleep or when you first wake up. Any time when you're feeling chilled.

The more detail you can add to this scene the better the technique will work for you. You don't need to be obsessive about it, to do it over and over. But if you have a gig coming up that you're anxious about, start to imagine it going your way maybe a week before and then think about it again a few nights before the gig itself.



Generally, the further away the gig is when you visualise it, the calmer you'll feel when you run through it in your mind. If you find yourself tensing up when you try to imagine the forthcoming gig, focus on the post-gig period rather than the playing itself. Imagine hearing people tell you how great the show was for example. Now you've done the preparation needed to win over any gig crowd.

NEXT MONTH:

We're going to look at the words and moves you can make to give every crowd a night they can't forget!

Gareth Bird is an active semi-pro musician who gigs regularly at venues like the Hard Rock Café. He's the author of *Gig-Getter: How to get more gigs than you can play and Rouse the Crowd: How to interact with audiences for gigs they can't forget*. He's written about gigging for *Total Guitar* and *Bass Guitar* magazines along with numerous online publications. He's currently finalising details on a *Gigging Masterclass* for the ICMP in London scheduled for later this year. For more gigging and band booking tips visit Gareth's website at - www.gig-getter.com