

STAGE CRAFT

Part 3: Rouse Your Audiences! Gareth Bird offers some tips on how to connect and interact with your audience to keep them coming back for more.



The key to being a great live act rather than just an average one is knowing how to interact with your audience. Average bands or solo artists strum through their sets while great performers connect with their crowds as soon as they get up on stage.

The good news is that the ability to turn even the most unresponsive audience into enthusiastic fans who sing your praises to everyone they meet for weeks after the gig is something you can learn.

Some musicians will tell you to forget any form of communication with your audience other than your music. That's fine if you're a million-selling artist with crowds who are won over by just the sight of you. For the rest of us, no gig is ever only about the music.

I SAY, I SAY, I SAY...

It is fair to say, however, that no amount of know-how about what to say to a crowd or what cool moves to pull will save you if you can't play, if you're not rehearsed, if your material choice is lousy or if your gear doesn't work properly. So, we'll assume you've got those basics covered.

Here then are six key action points to make sure you get your gig crowd going every time you play.

* 1. DON'T LEAVE IT TO CHANCE

Don't be ashamed to plan your interaction. All good performers of any kind work with some form of "script" even if it's only an outline. Your set list is your friend. A well constructed set-list is crucial to getting any crowd going. Aim to put the real highlights, your best up-tempo numbers, in the second or final set. This is when the audience will generally have warmed up and be more likely to let themselves go. You'll probably want to plan the bulk of your direct, one-on-one interaction for the final set. For your opening set you'll still need something to get the crowd going as much as possible and a good strong opening number is guaranteed to gain your audience's attention, even if they don't all leap up and start dancing like lunatics from the very first chord.

Think about potential 'dead spaces' or delays in between songs which can often lead to the audience losing interest. If you can't avoid a gap, for example when someone has to tune down or change instruments; then decide in advance that this space will be used for some direct audience interaction. Stage banter is perfect at these times.

Work out how you can avoid any other unnecessary gaps between numbers. Make sure band members know who starts which song and that they do so promptly. Think about playing some songs in 'blocks', where you join numbers together with no gap in between to maintain the momentum of the show. Timing is everything: Plan for how you can use the most obvious and best moments during a gig to interact with your crowd. Aside from in between numbers, key moments to communicate with the crowd can be: the opening of the show, if and when you receive song requests, band member introductions, audience participation, reminders about your website or merchandise and when you thank & say 'Goodnight' at the end of the show.

* 2. SHOW YOUR ENJOYMENT

If your stage show consists of staring awkwardly at your fret boards, don't be surprised if the audience seem to have trouble getting into what you're playing. Stage banter is an important part of winning over any crowd, but most of the impression you create with an audience will, (after the sound of your music), come from what they see you doing rather than any chat you might get into. This doesn't mean you need to go crazy on stage to create an impact. Just exaggerate any movements you do make and as cheesy as it may sound, try to smile and make some eye contact with audience members from time to time.

If you're stuck for ideas on how to move check out clips of your favourite artists on YouTube and adapt what they do. The key is to make sure you look like you're into what you're doing.





Get the crowd on your side: an enthusiastic audience will help you play better and so you'll enjoy your gigs as much as the crowd does.



3. LOOK FOR 'HELPERS' IN THE CROWD

One of the most valuable tips you can ever learn about audience interaction is that not all members of a gig crowd are equal.

To really engage an audience you don't just put out your best moves or one-liners and hope someone in the crowd responds. Instead you focus them on the people most able to help you go down better on the night. At every gig there will be people who are more open and responsive to the

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band. You need to check out the room early on, as soon as you start playing. You might even check the room out a little while you're setting up and shortly before you go onstage. See who looks like their having a particularly good time or like they'd be most up for one. These are the kind of people who are moving a little more than most when you start playing, singing along or just looking intently at one of the band. Those who clap most enthusiastically after the first number are often a good bet. If you're really lucky so early in the night, they might even be dancing! Make a point of actively looking for these best candidates to aim your moves and words towards. Even to just to use the bulk of your smiles and eye contact with. Try to find a number of these people or groups scattered around the room. Even when there's only one, that can still be enough to work the magic you need. You'll find that when you play up to these people and encourage them to be more extrovert you'll actually influence the rest of the crowd to have a better time. It's almost like giving everyone permission to open up and go for it a little more themselves. Try it and you'll see what I mean. Just keep in mind that once these helpers are identified, you have to make sure you don't completely ignore other people during the show.



The master: Mick Jagger is a natural extrovert but anyone can learn how to whip the crowd into a frenzy.



4. GET THE CROWD INVOLVED

You can interact with an audience through talking directly to them over the mic. However, if you can get a member or two of the audience up and onto the stage with you, it will do more than anything else to make for a truly memorable night. Those who do get up onto the stage will only be those who want to be there, even if they play at being reluctantly in the spotlight. Everyone else watching will identify with the person up there. Some will be relieved that they're now under no pressure to get up there themselves, others will be keenly waiting for the next opportunity to get up later. As far as the band is concerned, you're the ones in control so it will pay you to get someone up that your audience will enjoy watching for whatever reason. You're obviously free to use your discretion and only invite up someone you'd like to see a little closer or maybe get to know a little better if that suits you for whatever reason and you're not too creepy about it! How do you get people to join you in front of everyone else?

If it's a private party, you get the host or birthday boy/wedding couple up, more than once if necessary.

If it's a public gig the easiest way is to tell them you: "Need some help onstage." This 'help' can take the form of some additional rhythm (pack a spare tambourine, bongo drums or triangle – yes really), backing vocals, dancing, to be sung to, for an air guitar contest or to interact with inflatable instruments or other props. When you really engage audiences like this they'll be queuing up to get on there.



Props can also help your audience share your limelight without risk of your real gear getting damaged or stolen.



5. IT'S THE WAY YOU TELL THEM

As far as stage banter is concerned, most of the impression you make will come from the way you talk rather than the actual words you use. A lot of musicians have a tendency to mumble when they talk on mic so make sure you speak up and out when you talk to the crowd. Aim your words out towards the top of the far wall in the room and deliberately talk louder and more slowly than feels natural to you. This way what you do say will actually be heard and understood.



6. CHOOSE YOUR WORDS – BEFORE YOU PLAY

Every crowd is different and you'll want to leave at least some room for some spur of the moment words to the crowd. However, you can avoid awkward silences if for example nerves have a tendency to make your mind go blank, with a little preparation of what you'll say before you get out onto the stage. A handful of reliable one liners can be your fall-back position if you really can't think of anything to say on the night.

Practise these actions every time you play and you'll put your band way ahead of your competition.

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