

HOW TO CREATE A SET LIST

How Creating a Set List is Exactly Like Creating a Mix Tape for Your Girlfriend

Written by Crowd Audio [August 2013]

There is this scene in “High Fidelity” with John Cusack where he obsesses over the perfect mixtape to give to a girl. It might be in the book, but in my memory it’s still played by John Cusack because he’s just so good at being confused, flabbergasted and cool, all at the same time.

But you need to take care when you’re making a playlist for your girlfriend. You can’t just mess around with that without some serious brainstorming. And you definitely don’t want to accidentally put a song on there that’s a reminder of your last relationship.

Girls pick up on that because they know they’ve never heard the song and they’ll put two and two together. Because they’re smart like that.

And you need to put the same amount of care into structuring your set list for your next show. The DIY musician blog over at CD Baby has some good points on choosing the right songs in your setlist, but I’m looking at from a different standpoint. The set list has to convey a journey. It has to be a show. Therefore it has to have dynamics and contrast.

Let’s look at some examples.

Start Off Strong

If you’re an unknown band, then start off with a powerful and catchy tune that’ll catch the attention of the audience. Especially if you’re the opening act.

If you have a following and they all like that “one song” you wrote, don’t even think about opening with that. Make the audience wait. Otherwise they’ll just leave like if Journey played Don’t Stop Believin’ at the start of their show.

Keep the Momentum Going

Once you’ve nailed the audience in a trance of musical euphoria, keep going. I would say the first two songs should be interchangeable. They should be just as powerful and catchy to keep the audience glued to the stage.

Sidenote: I realize “catchy” doesn’t necessarily reflect what every musician is trying to evoke with his music. What I mean is “memorable,” “eye-opening,” or “exciting.” Basically pick the song that you think everyone will think is awesome.

Relax

Now it’s time to lay back and enjoy yourself. You’ve caught the audience in your musical web so you can afford to take a side-step into a slower song or a ballad. Think of it like a surfer: It’s the time you spend paddling back out after catching that big wave. You give yourself and the audience a welcome change of pace.

Depending on the length of your set, this might be more than one song. It might even be a separate subset of your concert. I remember this Smashing Pumpkins gig where Billy Corgan came out and played a whole acoustic set by himself in the middle of the show.

The band I am in use this technique as well to lengthen our set when we haven't rehearsed every single song together. Instead of everybody playing all the time, the drummer and bass player take a break in the middle of the set and the two of us (guitar player and singer) sing a few of our quieter songs.

Pick Up The Pace

Once you've nailed that big chorus in your ballad, it's time to start winding up the dynamics of your set list again. Pick a song that's a little different than a ballad but not super energetic. Think of it like the eye before the storm. Play a song that's groovy but subdued.

Funny story, but I was at White Snake a few weeks back and they followed this sort of structure almost exactly. After they played their relaxing ballad "Is This Love?" they played "Here I go Again," which is kind of a massive rock song.

However, it's not as ferocious as "Still of the Night," that they ended the show with. And that leads me to...

End With a Bang

Whatever your single is that everyone came to listen to, this is where you play it. If every band in the world only played their hits at the beginning nobody would stick around until the end.

And again, if nobody's even seen you play and they've stuck around for the end, rewards with an ace of a song up your sleeve.

Alright, I'm clichéd out. If you're serious about taking your music to the next level but have no idea on what makes a professional mix, use Crowd Audio's competition service to launch a contest around your music where you can pick the mix you like the most out of dozens of submissions.

Crowd Audio helps you take your music to the next level. They connect independent bands and musicians with excited audio engineers eager to help them with their music. If you're a musician, Crowd Audio gives you access to a community of audio engineers eager to mix and master your music, giving it that professional sound. If you're an audio engineer, Crowd Audio creates a community of like minded individuals looking to gain experience by doing the audio work they love. Through community and crowdsourced competition, bands get a professionally produced sound while audio engineers get exposure and experience.

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