

HOW TO MAKE A LIVING PLAYING YOUR OWN MUSIC LIVE

Part 1: Getting all up in Their Faces

Hi there, my name is Rohan Healy. Over the past 3 years I've performed over 600 shows with The Dublin City Rounders and in my father, David Virgin's band across Ireland and the UK. In my younger days I performed another couple of hundred shows solo and with acts like Jimmy Willing & the Real Gone Hickups, Quiff N Coffins and The Epistolary in Ireland, across Europe and in Australia. I don't mind saying I've accrued a wealth of knowledge and experience through it all that I hope to share with you now in a series of articles. This is a huge topic and so I'll try to condense the best and most practical advice into this piece both for those just starting out and those who've been gigging a long time.

In this article I'll be focussing on **booking shows, finding gigs, how to get paid to play music and what to play when you get the gig**. Let's get to it.

The biggest obstacle many bands, duos and solo acts come up against is “not being ready” when an opportunity calls. Let's say you are offered €300 to play a 2 hour show at a restaurant or corporate event, the show is 2 weeks away and you only have 45 minutes worth of material. Many will miss out on this opportunity because they believe there's no way they can / could stretch their show to meet the 2 hours. First of all say YES, then work out how to do it. Obviously you could add time to your set by learning some tasteful covers, you could write new material, you could play the first 20 to 30 minutes of your set again at the end, you could ask a musical friend with a similar style to play 30 minutes while you take a break. And so on.

What if you're a 4, 5 or 6 piece and the cash on offer is too low? Say YES, break the act down to a duo of the principal performers and take the job. I spoke to Glenn Hansard at an event at the US Ambassador's Residence in Dublin not long ago and spoke about this. Very often The Frames would have to send just a couple of members to tour The States as they couldn't afford it otherwise.

The list is endless; don't have a PA but the gig requires one? Say YES then sort one. Already have a show at the same time? Can the other show be moved around? Say YES then sort it.

Now obviously don't say yes to work that is clearly too difficult or too low paid, but do think outside the box when negotiating or when offered work, especially early on. Paid gigs can be hard to come by at the start and you may have to expand your comfort zone to get them, so don't go into every situation with a set of ideas in mind, be flexible but firm. The Dublin City Rounders we're once asked to play at a reputable hotel in Dublin, however the manager asked would I remove my hat for the show. Needless to say we did not do the show. Some things are non-negotiable.

The Approach: Going Face to Face

The internet and smart phones have made it increasingly easy to connect and communicate. They have also diminished the quality of that communication to a certain extent, especially with regard to selling yourself or your act to a prospective venue, booker or client. It's tempting to sit and shoot emails and leave phone messages from the comfort of your home, and while there are certainly important uses for email and phone communications, for first impressions you can't beat the Face to Face. You know it from experience, how easy is it to ignore a phone call, or

pretend you didn't see an email, then there's the reality of spam filters and full inboxes, many times your message will never even reach the recipient!

It's much harder to ignore someone standing in your venue asking for just a moment of their time, and you'll have a much higher chance of getting a real, immediate, yes or no response as to whether they are interested in having you perform instead of getting the "call back tomorrow" or "can you email me again" run-around!

Following Up – It's "YES" until it's "NO"

So you've made contact face to face, great. Now you need to follow up in a polite but consistent manner until you get a definitive yes or no answer. Following up with an email the next day is a good idea. Don't use attachments or direct "hyperlinks" as these can get caught in spam filters. If you must use links paste the url and remove the blue "hyperlinks" so they are no longer clickable. Once you are in a back and forth with emails it's safer to send links and attachments.

Call your contact later in the week to nail down whether or not they are keen to book, and when. Tell them your diary is filling up and you need an answer soon if possible. Still no response? Try dropping in again and catching them face to face to press for an answer. You wouldn't believe how many times I've gone without a response, believe the lead to be a lost cause, give it one more call/email and actually get the show! Just because you can't get through/can't get a response don't assume you won't get the booking. Keep pressing until you get your answer. Assume it's a "Yes" until you've received a definitive "No" from the person in charge. Also if you get a "we're booked until Jan/Feb/March etc" take a note and remind yourself to contact again when they may be booking new acts, no gig is no forever.

I have a simple saying that I live by when booking shows "Maybe means yes, no means maybe". If a venue flat out does not want to book you it's not the end of the line with that place. I can't tell you how many times I've called a non responsive venue back a year or two later, the management has changed and I get a booking right away! No doesn't mean no forever. Plus when talking to a prospective promoter or venue never say "such and such a venue wouldn't give us a gig", always use "we are in negotiation with such and such a venue, and might have something coming up there later in the year". It's not dishonest; I've had so many dead end gigs become fruitful after a period of time!

You Need an Angle

The one question you'll invariably be asked by promoters and venue owners when asking for gigs is "What do you do". "I'm a singer songwriter" is not going to help you. To give you a quick example my answer to that regarding The Dublin City Rounders is always "We're a ragtime, rock n roll and blues duo". That usually does it, immediately the persons mind is filled with familiar imagery, and can see how it would fit with their venue. However don't be afraid to cater to the venue. If I'm walking into a biker bar we play "Rockabilly and Blues", if it's a 5 star hotel or restaurant we play "ragtime, western swing and early jazz", if it's a country bar we're all about the "bluegrass, country blues and western swing" and so on. All of these are true, it's the same act, however the breadth of our set allows us to tailor our sound to the situation. We'll play most of the same songs at most gigs, yet we can rock it out or pull it back as needed.

My point is that you need to do a little thinking on how you're going to answer "what do you do/what style of music". How can you can frame and present your act in such a way that it sounds appealing, unique and desirable. You want to find the balance of safe and familiar, and

unique and edgy. “Hi we’re Bog Standard, we’re a trad band a la the Dubliners and The Clancy Brothers”, this would be perhaps too safe, whereas “Hi we’re Bog Standard, we’re a Traditional Irish Fusion act with elements of dance and comedy”. Immediately you want to know more. Find your angle, develop it over time, and tailor it to the venue you are approaching.

Building a Repertoire – The Replacement Method

This is a touchy subject, original music vs covers. And the answer to the repertoire questions varies wildly depending on the purpose of the act. If you just want to get paid to play music and are not interested in song writing I won’t be a huge help here, but there are many resources online dedicated to establishing a covers or tribute band and making a good living out of that. No judgment, just not my field. I’m going to assume that being paid to play your own music is the ultimate goal of most reading this, as it has been mine. But the question is how do you convince a pub to book and pay an original band on a Friday night, and more importantly where are you going to find the two to three hours of material to perform!?

Firstly with regard to building your repertoire, whatever you do don’t feel pressure to learn a bunch of specific “crowd pleaser” songs – I’m looking at you Wagon Wheel, Wonderwall and Galway Girl – it’ll only hurt you long term. If you need to pad out your set with cover versions find songs that you genuinely love. I’ve no problem singing a great old Hank Williams, Slim Whitman or early Elvis tune, but I have never played the three songs mentioned above; you’ve got to have standards. When someone asks me to play a very well known song that is not in our set I just say “I’ve never heard of it”, that’s usually enough to catch them off guard then just start into whatever song you were going to play.

Thanks to musicians using iPads to get up lyrics and chords at will during shows now in order to play requests, some audience members have been given the impression every musician knows every song, you’ll encounter this and it’s unfortunate. They think you’re a human jukebox. Thankfully there are still plenty of discerning music lovers and decent ordinary people who appreciate music learned, practiced and performed. For every person who goes wild for Stairway to Heaven there’s someone rolling their eyes and leaving.

So by all means add tasteful covers, and even better, add very old songs that you can traditionally arrange and register with your Performing Rights Organisation to fill out your set. Ultimately however the goal should be to perform as much original material in your set as you can. I spoke on radio with songwriter and RTE DJ Niall Toner last year about something he called “The Replacement Method” in which the objective is to slowly over a period of time replace your covers with originals that are of a similar style. So if you’ve got a couple of slow dance waltz covers, write a couple yourself and swap them out over time.

Finally on this point, don’t be rigid with your set. Depending on the show you may play more original material vs covers or less. A 45 minute or hour showcase, album launch, support or headline slot you’ll probably be playing 90% -100% original, however a 3 hour pub show might require a few more “old classics”.

Get Creative with Venue Spaces

When building a list of venues to approach we usually think pubs, clubs, hotels, restaurants and specialised music venues. These are all great of course, and well worth a shot, but may be difficult to crack unless your act is a little more (or a lot more in some cases) established. That’s why I recommend thinking outside the box. One of the most well know Dublin music venue

success stories of recent years is Abner Brown's Barber Shop in Rathmines. A barbers by trade that began hosting live music nights and in a relatively short period of time had garnered international attention and attracted guests like Michael Stipe of REM and Northern Irish alt-rockers ASH. Flower shops, small cafes, gallery spaces, the list goes on. Don't be afraid to pop in and ask if non-traditional shop or space would be interested in having live music on. You might not make a fortune out of the gig itself, but it'll give you something to talk about to bigger players in the gigging game, you'll improve your performance and learn your trade.

The original idea with The Dublin City Rounders was to play traditionally arranged ragtime and original music in beer gardens and smoking areas for tips. Within 6 months we were performing at Aras an Uachtarain, within a year we were on national radio and TV and not long after that we were seen by 7 million people on BBC1 and had a song in The Irish Times Song of The Week. My point is that where you start is not where you'll end up, you've got to start somewhere, get creative.

Face to Face Tips and Tricks

So you've made a list of venues to visit, what can you do to give yourself your best shot at getting their attention and getting work playing music there? Here's a few simple tips to get you started.

Friday and Saturday evenings are a no-no for bars and restaurants. Management and floor staff will be extremely busy and you'll only rub them the wrong way if you ask for a quick chat about live entertainment at peak times. The same goes for lunchtimes and evenings generally wherever food is served. Before midday and between 2 and 5pm are good bets for certain spots, some clubs will only open from 4 or 5pm so get in soon after opening. This will give you your best shot at actually getting 5 minutes with a decision maker without getting on their nerves.

Dress well. Obvious but needs repeating, tidy hair, good clean shoes. Carry yourself with dignity and confidence, over confidence is better than under confidence. They may have had other acts in looking to play, or might already have music, why would they hire you? Looking and acting the part is important, of course your performance has to be good to get the repeat work but no one will ever get to see and hear you on stage if you can't convince someone you deserve to be on stage in the first place. Make sure the most chatty, charismatic member of your act/management is doing most of the talking.

Have your things together. Business cards, a smart phone you can take details down in, a diary or diary app with your available dates. Know your rates; when asked "how much" don't stutter and stammer, have a set of rates and times and options. Always charge a little higher than you need to but let them know you're willing to negotiate, especially where regular work or perks like meals are an option. Have a spiel memorised, but don't blurt it robotically, just use bits of it when appropriate. Your spiel should include, bare minimum, the type of music you play, how many there are in the band, any notable venues you've played, any notable press/media you've received, the fact that you promote all your events on social media and with posters.

Always be polite, no matter what comes, please and thank you all day long. I've dealt with some incredibly rude individuals when asking around for gigs, and you may too, so keep your cool and don't sink to their level, it's not worth it, your reputation is worth more than the short term satisfaction of an angry outburst. The vast majority of people I've dealt with playing music have been sound, very good people, so don't let the rotten ones bring you down.

Finally; bring backup. Two people walking into a venue always adds weight and credibility to your pitch. You can bounce ideas and banter off your partner, it helps with nerves and motivation when entering new places and it puts you in a position of power and authority much more so than walking in somewhere on your own. Obviously if you're in a band this is easy, but if you're a solo act consider bringing along a good friend, a sibling, parent or partner. Make sure they understand what you're trying to achieve and are happy to help and support you. Make sure they dress well and are as polite and dignified as you would expect someone to be who is representing your act.

Go For the Long Shots!

The wonderful thing about music in general is the possibility of being suddenly shot up the industry "ladder", be it permanently or for a single engagement. This is why you should never limit your gig enquiries to "my level" whatever you think that is, aim high and you will get the odd big win. A great example is when, after only 6 months of working in The Dublin City Rounders, I called the office of the President of Ireland, spoke to the secretary and enquired about live shows at the Áras an Uachtaráin (The Irish President's residence). She was very polite but said that the events for the year had been booked out and suggested I email our details to her for future reference. Yeah I'd heard that one before. But sure enough a few days later I got a call asking could we perform at the Aras for President Higgins as another act had cancelled due to illness. And there we were with a gig at the President's place with just one phone call and an email. Make sure long shots are part of your strategy, I'm sure I don't have to tell you the kinds of doors that one gig opened for us, and personally it was a once in a lifetime occasion we'll never forget!

I later found out that when the previous act had cancelled, the stage manager had to choose between The Dublin City Rounders and another VERY high profile Irish act (a lot more established than us at the time) and he went with us on a feeling. You just never know how things will turn out in this biz.

It's a Numbers Game

Don't set your sights too keenly on any one venue, booking is a numbers game. You might walk into 100 spots over the course of a month or two, and if you have a success rate of 5% that's 5 gigs, 10% it's 10 gigs! Some of these might become residencies and off you go. Every gig you do can be used to get the next gig. And like those working the hook up culture and night club scenes, learning to deal with rejection is all part of it. At first it can be tough, but every venue that doesn't hire you or doesn't do live music is just one you can strike off your list and move on. After a few of these rejections any initial impact wears off, you no longer take it personally, and if you're confident enough in your product you know it's "their loss" anyway, onto the next, onward and upward!

I must have had maybe 150 to 200 rejections either by email, face to face or over the phone in my career, and that didn't stop me booking hundreds more successful shows for my acts, so you'll be fine, tough it out.

Getting Re-Hired – Gig Behaviour and Etiquette

Getting a first gig is tough, so don't squander the opportunity by putting on a bad show or making a less than glowing account of yourself. Of course it goes without saying that the show is the most important thing, a great performance is required, however it's the way you act around

the show that will make the biggest difference in getting re-hired and good recommendations.

Here are a few quick tips on how to place yourself above the rest when it comes to gig behaviour:

Be on Time – C’mon lads, this is basic. Set reminders, set alarms, sort your transport, have a plan B; if it’s a new place and it’s far away get there well ahead of time. Set up quickly, quietly and as tidily as possible, don’t inconvenience the patrons or staff if possible, don’t leave dangerous leads and cables strewn across the floor. The same goes for packing down. As soon as you hit your last chord tell the DJ to start playing/put the house music back on, unplug and pack everything away. You don’t want to be carrying amps when you’ve had a few after the gig, or while sorting money, plus there’s always the possibility of a frisky patron grabbing your guitar or mic and risking damage or theft.

Drink and Intimacy – These are controversial topics. I don’t drink at shows, ever. Gigging is a large part of my job. I need to work with heavy gear and dublin-city-rounders-post-modern-sleezeelectricity, I need to manage sound at some shows, I need to play guitar and sing to a high standard, I need to deal with patrons and staff politely and professionally, I need to manage money and future bookings and business, and I need to ensure the safety of my gear, my workmates and myself. Drinking reduces my ability to effectively do any of the above. Now if you’re established enough to have a driver, roadies, a sound/light crew, a stage manager, a tour manager, a secure back stage at every show by all means have a few drinks afterwards. Even then you hear of bands like hardcore punk legends “Sick of it All” who have all that and still don’t drink at shows because it affects their performance and long term health.

And the same goes for intimacy. Just because a starry eyed lad or lady has had a few drinks and thinks you’re the next Mick Jagger doesn’t mean you should take advantage. You have a duty of care to behave responsibly with audience members who are attracted to you. Like the bar staff, you are working until you leave the venue. Not only will you develop a bad professional reputation if you decide to go all “discovery channel” with too many tipsy fans in the venue, you could risk some pretty serious personal issues as well, I’m sure I don’t need to go into any more detail.

Now I’m no prude. I love a drink on a day off, I just don’t mix work and heady pleasure. By all means get a girl or guys number if that’s what you want to do, and have a pint after the show if the gear is packed and you have a lift home. Just use your common sense and think long term, don’t blow it all for a quick fix. Put it this way in 2016 I did 217 shows with The Dublin City Rounders, if I drank as much as was offered I’d be raging alcoholic, and if I chased the ladies I’d have more kids than Genghis Khan! Just because you can doesn’t mean you should.

The Show Must Go On – I’ve played so many shows that were almost a complete disaster. The sound guy wasn’t there, the PA wasn’t there, the stage times were wrong, we’d forgotten some important piece of gear (I once forgot my cowboy boots and had to go back to get them, no way was I going on stage in dublin-city-rounders-hector-dbs-15runners!), a band on the bill didn’t show or is late. The list is endless. You have to make it your business that some kind of show will take place no matter what. Power failure? Candle lit acoustic gig. A band didn’t show? You do two sets. Sound engineer didn’t show? Get on that desk, figure it out and make a noise somehow! Beg, borrow, steal and think outside the box to make sure the show goes ahead. This is where getting to the gig early will save your butt. It gives you time to think, sort missing gear and make a plan B. Never throw your hands up and go home, save the day again and again and you’ll gain a great reputation with promoters, venues and audiences.

In Summary – Always think of your live performances like any other job in terms of your behaviour when off stage. If you wouldn't do it in an office space or if you were working in fast food, don't do it at your show!

It Gets Easier

I've outlined a lot of practical, applicable steps above that can be used to secure bookings. It looks like a lot of work, and it is, not only that but you'll come up against unique challenges and have to find unique solutions that only apply to your situation! But it does get easier. Every show you book makes it easier to get the next one. In time you'll have a steady stream of regular shows, and you'll begin to get people calling you for shows instead of always being the one initiating. It's important to continually raise your standards and fees as you develop. The more you've played the better your act will be, the higher your profile will become, the more respected you will be within the industry, the harder it will become to book you and therefore the more it will cost, as it is with any industry. Think long term, decide where you'd like to be in 2, 4, 6 years and work towards it.

In short, yes, it is possible to make a living playing live music, and when you add the other income streams available through music; merch, music sales, publishing and royalties, teaching and consultation work, you can certainly do well for yourself. But like any business it takes time, good ideas and hard work to establish yourself. But sure what else would you be doing anyway!

About The Author

Rohan Healy, a dual citizen of Ireland and Australia, is owner and CEO of Beardfire Music. After studying acting, music, legal studies and commerce at Trinity Catholic College Lismore, Rohan began a full time career in music which has spanned the past 15 years. In that time Rohan has written, recorded and produced 10 solo albums, appeared on The Voice UK and Busker Abu with The Dublin City Rounders, shared the stage with the likes of Cat Power, Lloyd Cole and Jim Lauderdale, booked and performed almost 1,000 shows in Australia, the UK, Ireland and Europe and has dozens of production, songwriting and performance credits on other artists' works.

Rohan also studied acting at The Australian Theatre For Young People and appeared in a number of stage plays as a young adult. Rohan works closely with father David Virgin (Healy) (of SPK, Sekret Sekret) and brother Al "Quiff" Healy (of Quiffs N Coffins) on The Dublin City Rounders, The Annual Dublin City Rounders Alt-Country Song contest and the running of Beardfire Music.

Rohan offers personal music business consultation on booking, management, live performance coaching and music exam prep, publishing and royalties, and is a music producer at Beardfire Studio.

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Article Source: <http://ceolcaint.com/make-a-living-playing-you-own-music/>