

THE ART OF STAGECRAFT – IMPROVE LIVE PERFORMANCE AND DEAL WITH STAGE NERVES

Rohan Healy here from Beardfire Music and The Dublin City Rounders. Over the past four years I've performed over 600 shows with The Dublin City Rounders; festivals, big venues, restaurants, weddings, president's and ambassadors' houses, live radio, TV, on top of trams, on the street, house parties, airports, pubs, clubs and society meetings. Before that I played in alt-country and punk bands and toured in my dad's (David Virgin) act around Australia and Europe with the likes of Lloyd Cole and Cat Power. In this article I want to share some of the tips and tricks I've picked up from experience, and from my mentors on the art of live performance and how to make the best of your stage presence.

The Cave Analogy – You Are The Tribal Leader

Something my father taught me, which he himself learned from Australia rock legend Lobby Loyd (of Rose Tattoo/The Coloured Balls, and a cited influence on Kurt Cobain and Henry Rollins) is what we refer to as The Cave Analogy. In the past, the benevolent and strong tribal leader would position himself at the base of the cave, behind the fire, and stand while the tribe sat. This optimal acoustic positioning meant his voice would travel, boom and reverberate, the light of the fire would illuminate and focus attention on the leader, and the standing height would create an illusion of great size and power. These elements combined would bring a sense of safety, security and surety to the tribe. They were in safe hands, all was well.

And so it is with stage and audience. The PA will amplify your voice/instrument, the stage will lift you above, and the lights will bring focus and illumination to your presence. Know this and relax - that's most of the job done. By getting on stage, you've taken on a leadership role, and you have decided that while you are on stage you take full responsibility for the entertainment (safety) of the audience. You're the biggest, loudest and brightest person in the room. Now perform with confidence and enjoy the experience.

On Stage Etiquette

There's no one right way to be on stage. Some artists engage with the audience a lot, some don't at all. Some artists share long winded stories between songs, others grunt the count in and barely utter a word. Others still make an art out of being eccentric or downright rude on stage! A lot of this depends on the style of music, the type of audience usually performed to and the overall "angle" of the band. However, there are some "dos" and "don'ts" that are pretty well universal.

Tuning, Drinking and Other Nervous Tics – A lot of artists will get in the habit of performing a little nervous action between songs. Whether it's compulsively tuning your guitar after every song or popping down for a sip of water, it becomes irritating for the audience, shows a lack of confidence and slows up the flow of the show. Be honest and critical about your between songs tics and routines, and cut them down or out where you can. You're better off being able to quickly go into the next song, or engage the audience properly and professionally, something that's not so easy with a water bottle in your mouth or while looking down at a tuner.

Get The Light in Your Face – I can't believe how many stages I stand up on and the stage lights are directed down and away from the musicians, or how often the front of house engineer will say "I can move the lights if they're too bright". They are supposed to be bright and they are supposed to be on the artist's faces. You are losing a huge part of your show if the faces and/or bodies of the band are not lit properly or at all. Naturally the audience's focus (except for the musicians in the crowd obsessing over the guitar parts) is drawn to the face, and you can add so much personality and drama to your show with an expressive facial performance; but only if it's properly lit! If you can see the audience in a big show, you're doing it wrong. Being blinded when looking out over the house is normal. Ask any top stage actor or singer and they'll tell you the same. If you play a lot of smaller shows, invest in a small stage light and always light yourself. Never be left in the dark.

Rambling On and On and... – There is a delicate balance to be struck between blasting nervously through all the songs in your set and finishing 20 minutes too early, and telling your life story between songs and boring everyone. It all depends on the type of act you are, the type of gig you're playing and how well the audience knows you. If you're well known by the crowd, you have a lot more leeway. They'll hang on every word and enjoy hearing unique and interesting stories, even trivial ones. This is something I learned from Grammy Award winner Jim Lauderdale who spent 30% to 40% of his show telling the stories behind his songs, his co-writes with other great artists like Ralph Stanley and Buddy Miller, and recollections of legends like George Jones and Gram Parsons. And the crowd lapped it up. Jim knows his audience well.

If you're playing to a house that is made up mostly of people new to your act, play it much safer. If you have a great story to tell, it has to be universally interesting, hilarious, scary, etc. Don't be afraid to name drop and exaggerate from stage. It's a show, not real life! If stand-up comedians and actors can tell fantastical stories, so can you.

If you're playing a wedding dinner or restaurant and people are chatting and eating, you might not say anything at all and go gently from one song to the next, continuing to provide a great atmosphere. Don't stop to tell a big long story if you don't have people's full attention on that level. Assess your act, assess the type of show and assess the audience, then make a call on what feels natural regarding how much you talk between songs, and what about.

Saying Thanks and Crowd Participation – Say thank you between songs, even before anyone claps. It helps get people to applaud and notice that the song is finished; it also makes them feel involved. Tell them they're awesome and how much you appreciate their attention. Don't overdo it. Simple things like clapping along, dancing and singing along can really help to get people involved. It can be a little daunting asking a big crowd of people to do something, but remember the cave, you are their leader. For however long you're on stage, they want to be part of it, and there is safety in numbers.

We've had dance offs where we'll offer a free CD to the most enthusiastic dancer during a particular song. Make sure at least some people are dancing already - it can be an uphill battle getting the first dancers up and going and you don't want to be left looking like a doofus with no one dancing in your dance off! Clap alongs are easy; drop most of the music out and start clapping, pretty soon everyone will join in. It just happens! Sing alongs are tricky, especially when the audience haven't heard the song before. Keep it really, really simple. We have a song "I'm a Man of my Word (and my word is no)". If

we have a keen crowd we'll ask them to join in on the "And my word is no" line which comes straight after "I'm a Man of My Word" so you really can't miss it. "When I say A, you say B" works great. Anything involving complicated melodies, harmonies or lots of words is going to be a very tough sell.

Think of The Visual – If you're going to have light blasted at you, you want to give it something interesting to illuminate. Your image will depend on the style of music to an extent, of course. However, thought should always be put into how to make your act more visually engaging, be it with clothing, props, banners, tricks, movement and so on. Move about the stage; don't stay rooted to the spot. Jump, run, lay, kneel, throw your arms up, stand on the drum kit. Use the stage to create an exciting, energetic show.

Even if you're a gentle folk band move, engage with the other band members. Look like you're having fun and the crowd will find it a lot easier to do so. Put it this way, if 90% of the audience is better dressed than you, there's a problem. Grumpy fellow musicians might roll their eyes at your stage tricks, clothing, props or "gimmicks" but the audience (who you're actually playing to) will appreciate the effort and novelty. The music should, of course, always take priority, but the image shouldn't lag too far behind.

Behind The Scenes – Tips for Staying Cool on Stage

Being on stage can be quite frightening for a lot of people. A fear of public speaking is the number one phobia, statistically. Now add singing and dancing to the mix. Elvis Presley famously never overcame his stage fright, despite many hundreds of performances. And so the fear that comes with being on stage is not so much something to be defeated, but something to be utilised.

Plan Your Set With Nerves in Mind – The first thing to go when adrenaline hits your system is fine motor control and certain types of focus and recent recollection. You might have experienced having a mental blank on stage or being physically unable to perform your guitar solo the way you would at home. This will usually occur during the first one to three songs.

The amount of adrenalin your body has stored is limited and can only last so long before the parasympathetic nervous system comes in to calm things again, and you regain composure. Essentially, when you hit the stage while feeling anxious you can enter a form of "fight, flight or freeze" response. In these situations the autonomic nervous system, sensing danger, will vie for control of your body and mind in order to ensure your immediate safety. What this means in practice is lyrics, songs, arrangements, dance moves or solo parts that are not deeply ingrained through a great deal of practice are likely to be unavailable to you, or at least greatly hampered.

As is said with martial arts drilling, when under attack your body will do what it has trained to do. Drill properly and your body will react properly. With all this in mind I recommend three things: 1 – Train, train, train. Know your solos, lyrics and songs backwards. If you're still getting a lyric or lick wrong even 20% of the time the day before a show, drop it from the set, or play it near the end. 2 – Start your set with your oldest and strongest material. The first three songs should be ones everyone knows like the back of their hand. 3 – Don't start with overly technical songs. If you have a song that has a 4 minute solo, or a super complicated arrangement, pop it in half way through the set or near the end.

Making Mistakes on Stage – Everyone does it, from amateurs to top professionals. Rarely will you get through a one to three hour rock show without a little hiccup here or there. So yes, obviously, through practice the idea is to reduce mistakes to the bare minimum. However, just as important is how to deal with them when they happen.

Telegraphing is the worst thing you can do. Making a big face or laughing nervously will give the game away, as will making a face or shouting something at a band mate who has screwed up. Oh and never say “Sorry” on the mic! Most members of any given audience will not be musicians, and will not notice a minor mistake at all, so why give the game away by making it obvious? And the musicians in the crowd will understand that it happens. If you make a howler; wrong chord, clear bum note, messed up lyric, etc, here’s a trick my uncle, Dan Rumour – who toured with The Rolling Stones – taught me. If you make a mistake, do it again; if you played it twice it must be part of the song, right? You have no idea how many times I’ve used this! Went to the wrong chord briefly? Instead of scoffing and making a “sorry” face, do it again next time round and now it’s not a mistake, it’s improvisational art.

Always Assume You’re Doing Great – Keeping your confidence and morale on stage can be really tough. You might have an unresponsive crowd, you may feel that you’re performing badly or making loads of mistakes, and this can make you feel like crawling into a hole and being anywhere but on stage. The funny thing is, rarely is it the case that it’s as bad as you think. I’ve done so many shows that I’ve felt from the stage are going down the toilet. Thoughts like: No one cares, we sound awful, or worse; people actively wish we’d get off stage and leave! And yet at the end of the show people come up and personally thank us for a really great night of music and I wonder “why did I put myself through that anguish and let it affect my performance”?! You’re always better off assuming things are going great, you sound great, you look great. And if you don’t feel super confident, fake it! Act like you own the stage and the crowd are lucky to have you perform, no matter how you actually think the night is going. And have fun! You can’t do better than your best so enjoy the show, and the vast majority of others will too, even if they only tell you after the show.

Sing to The Stadium Always – No joke, I once played a show to a single audience member, a solitary old lady in one of Dublin’s top Hotels. There were more people in the band than in the crowd, and there were two people in the band. We weren’t being paid; it was a favour for a friend. We could have called it quits after one song but that’s not how we do it. We played four songs to that little old lady like we were playing to a packed house. What happened next proves you should always go the extra mile. As we began the fifth song a group of around eighty Italian tourists entered, drawn in by the sound of music, and we ended up having one of our most fun and memorable nights. Always play your best - anyone watching deserves to see your best, so don’t let yourself down. You never know what is right around the corner.

Make Your Stage Safe – Not directly related to performance but important. Ensure trip hazard leads aren’t strewn across the stage. Water and drinks should be placed away from where the band will move, and away from electronic equipment. Place amps and PA boxes out of the way and on strong, solid supports. Make sure mic and drum stands aren’t poking out at all angles. If you plan to make use of the stage to move, perform, interact with band members, etc. put a little time and thought into making your stage safe and clear during setup and sound check. Injuries and lost or damaged equipment is all too often heard about in the live music world so sort your space and you’ll be able to enjoy

your performance free from embarrassing, costly or physically damaging screw ups!

You put your all into writing your songs, rehearsing your songs and recording your songs. So don't let them down when it comes to presenting your songs live. Hopefully, some of the points above have given you food for thought and will help you bring your live show to the next level. And remember, we "play" music - enjoy it and the audience will too!

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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