

Make your music photographs tell your story (by Cheryl B. Engelhardt)

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I've been very lucky to work with talented photographers throughout my years as a performing artist: Odin Wright, Stephanie Staidle, Annie Watson, Matt Greenslade, and Anne Skidmore Photography have all graced my websites, press photos and album covers with their talents.

When it comes down to it, music photography is just another way to help you communicate with the world. When your music photos support your lyrics, music, website, tweets, emails, or releases to complete who you are and help convey your message as an artist AND your artist brand, then they are doing their job! To get your next music photo shoot to be a true snapshot of you at this very moment, and to make the most of the shoot, follow these few guidelines I've learned from my favorite photographers:

1) Who's your photographer?

Hire a pro if you can afford it. They know how to use the camera and the light, and they can coach you to take your best shot. Be sure to communicate with them what you are going after. Send them a few tracks of your music. Let them get to know you as an artist. If it's not the best time to hire a pro, don't be afraid to take some great shots yourself. In this day and age of free filter apps and ubiquitous selfies, a well-thought out photo shoot with your bestie will automatically step up your images and set them apart.

2) Get the light right.

If outside, aim for a cloudy day to eliminate shadows and unforgiving bags under your eyes. Face the light and have the photographer's back to the light for more focus on you, or swap positions for artsy silhouettes. For indoor shoots, definitely play with lighting yourself more than you think you should.

3) Choose a background.

I am all for the super artistic, gorgeous backdrops. I wore a little black dress in the middle of a New Hampshire snowy winter for that perfect shot. Those were in my "it's not about me, it's about the music, the production, the orchestra arrangement" days. So of course, being only a small part of a photo made sense. In my "I'm an artist who owns a music company" days, close-ups with interesting but not distracting backgrounds are more appropriate to really communicate what I want. Are you going for whimsical? Folksy? Bad ass? Decide what you're trying to convey with the photo and make sure your backgrounds are in line with that.

4) Have a variety of wardrobe and background options.

If you're a solo artist, it's never a bad idea to get a few different kinds of shots in the same day. There will be a consistent feel to the photos, but you will also be able to use them for different purposes: press shots for a variety of media outlets, album covers, bio photos, and your websites. If you're a band, too many wardrobe changes may seem too

contrived, plus you have the variable of working with different people and your positioning, so you may not need to have as much variety in your clothing and background. Again, you have to examine where you are with your music and take it from there.

5) Take advantage of the opportunity.

I like to get a shot of the background without me in it, then I can use it for Facebook event headers, backgrounds for my website, etc. It's also nice to have a wide shot with the subject way over on one side and lots of space. This is great for making show flyers and having a clean canvas for putting text. You also want a few shots where you are the center, both looking away and looking at the camera. One rule of thumb is do not do any poses you wouldn't do on a normal day. Bringing your hand to your shoulder may look kinda sexy but have you EVER done that in real life? If you're one to jump up on bench, or gaze into the clouds, go for it. And if you want something extreme, definitely push your comfort zones and try different poses... as long as they feel natural. You can glam up your shots with daring wardrobe and makeup and still be natural. Check out Casey Desmond's latest shoot.

6) Make sure you are 100% comfortable.

I can tell which shots would look great and which shots were just shots by how I felt when taking them. Play around, and plan on having to sift through 1,000-2,000 shots from a day's shoot.

7) Photo editing.

If the photographer is also a photo editor, let him or her adjust your top 10-20 favorite shots, or you can do it yourself with programs like Lightroom or Photoshop. Things like cropping, altering brightness and contrast and playing with effects like vignettes and colorizing can add subtle pizzazz and a pro touch to your photos.

8) Roll them out!

Enjoy your new look and roll it out when you decide it's best. Some good options are before an album release, as part of a tour announcement, or to create new buzz in your downtime.

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