



Ready, Set, Perform

Life on stage is very different from ordinary daily life. Performing is not an ordinary activity. If you are going to perform, you need to prepare for it.

It's hard to practice performing since the only time we really do it is in front of an audience. No matter how much you sing to yourself in the mirror in the privacy of your room, it won't even come close to the real thing. The best practice is getting out there on stage, at first at open mics or talent shows. Then with a band, hopefully one you've rehearsed with.

Rehearsal is the next best thing to being there, provided you actually use the time to rehearse your performance. Most singers work on arrangements in rehearsal or even on their vocals (though not nearly enough) but few actually work out the elements of performance beyond singing. Movements, gestures, interaction with other band members, talk between songs, taking the mic off the stand, running out into the audience--these are not ordinary behaviour and they aren't easy. They need practice.

Many singers say they are uncomfortable trying these things in front of their band. It's embarrassing. But it's hard to imagine a singer trying something totally new in front of an audience if they couldn't do it in front of their band. And how will you know if dropping onto your knees is going to work if you don't try it first? The first time Bruce Springsteen jumped from the stage onto a speaker ten feet away wasn't in front of an audience. I think he practiced first. If you are not getting enough work done in rehearsal, you should consider taking a performance workshop which focuses on developing your stage presence. Then rehearse the ideas you have developed.

The band needs to be set up like a think tank: no idea is made fun of (unless it's supposed to be funny). When the guitar player puts the guitar over her head and plays her solo backwards, don't tell her it's stupid. Work on developing that idea into something exciting. As a band, you need to give every member permission to do whatever they can think of no matter how absurd. I'm certain that's how David Lee Roth's shows evolve. He is very loose with his body and he is likely to rub up against one of his band mates. They don't look at him like he's crazy (well, maybe they do). They allow him to be playful, to try anything.

Your band needs to know that what you do on stage is separate from reality. As the lead singer, you can flirt with the guitarist on stage to illustrate a song, and know that it doesn't affect your offstage relationship. It's like a play and the band members are the cast. You aren't going to literally act out the story in the song, but you are going to use each other to show your emotions.

Practicing your act before you perform it mustn't lead to a stale a mechanized presentation. A memorized gesture that has no feeling behind it looks hollow and vapid. Choreography may be especially susceptible to this danger. The singer seems to be on automatic pilot regurgitating movements that once had meaning. Instead, the emotion must come first, generating the movement. Whatever led you to throw your fist in the air and your head back the first time you did it, has to be there every time.

Once you have a wide vocabulary of movements and gestures that you are comfortable with, you can take more chances in your live performances. If you can throw yourself on the floor it is not too hard to writhe to the edge of the stage. If you lean on your guitarist during a solo, you won't be embarrassed to rest your head on her shoulder. On the other hand, you must also select from all the options the ones that best express your concept and throw out the rest. It's all well and good that you love to tap dance but you may not want to include it in your jazz act. Or then again, you might. Once you open the door the possibilities are endless.

Spontaneity is a crucial part of a vital stage show. Although I've mostly been talking about very broad gestures that a rock band might use, the ability to respond in a moment to whatever stimulus presents itself is essential for every style of artist. One of the most moving performances I've seen was a very simple and genuine concert by James Taylor. I don't know how much he needs to practice his story telling now that he's done it for so many years, but I'm sure there was a time when he had to structure it without making it sound or feel stiff. Yet there was always room in the structure for him to respond to what was happening around him. Songs like "Fire And Rain" which he had already been doing for years, still felt fresh and real. He didn't do a lot of jumping or running around the stage but what movement he did was heartfelt.

Whatever your personal style, whether it's wild or sedate, fun-loving or serious, you need to be genuinely affected by our material and it has to show. As the front person, the responsibility for a charismatic performance is mainly on your shoulders. You have many elements at your disposal: music, words, arrangements, movements, costumes, attitudes, smoke bombs. Construct a well-practiced framework to perform within, one that's guided by your concept, and it will give you the freedom to improvise.