

Open Mic Night Suggestions *by Gavin Fitzgerald*

I can't believe it's been 35 years since I attended my first open mic night. It was run by the Society of Australian Songwriters (SAS) which changed into the Songwriting Society of Australia (SSA) in 1999. It was held at the Petersham Inn, and I keenly remember how I felt that night entering into a new domain of live performances. I'd brought a stack of my friends along, which impressed the concert coordinators at that time,



but I really didn't know what I was doing, or how things worked. As I attended more and more open mic nights, I picked up a ton of information about the etiquette of live performance nights. What to me after all those years seem obvious are not to those who are new or have picked up poor habits.



So, combined with my experience as well as research from many online sources I believe the following suggestions may help you have a more enjoyable experience, connect with more people and become more attuned to the nuances of live performances in open mic nights.

Before the Open Mic Night: There are quite a few open mic nights around the traps. Some are covers only, originals only, some are just stand-up comedy, some are for particular genres of music. So, if you are newbie, or not sure about a venue you can do the following:



(1) Network: Ask other performers about the open mic night. Maybe look at our Open Mic listings and reviews in this website. I played in a duo called "Harley D & The Professor" in the mid 90's. We played a lot of open mic nights. One night we booked into the Five Dock Hotel and turned up to find it was a heavy metal band night. Our music could be best described as country rock! Our sound was shyte, but we did our best under the circumstances. I'm not sure if its because Harley D threw his guitar across the pub in frustration about the sound quality, but all the metal heads came up to us and said we were really good!

(2) Reconnoitrer: A lot of new performers come to check out the open mic nights and get to know the MC of the night so they can play. Some even borrow a guitar and play on their first night. This also open up the essence of that particular open mic including:

- a. The music style that's most favoured. Is it folk genre, or country flavoured – I got booed while I played a cover of "*The House Of The Rising Sun*" on a street open mic stage during Tamworth's Country Music Festival.
- b. How long do the performers get to play? Sometimes that can vary depending on the number of players that book, turn up or pull out. I've wound up playing six songs at an open mic night that usually has a three-song limit. Another time I played an extremely noisy crowded pub in Glebe expecting to only play only three songs, but the MC told me to keep playing and eventually I played a forty-minute set. I asked him after why and he said I was the only one loud enough to cut through the crowd noise.
- c. What is the audience's reaction to the songs. Sometimes this can depend on when the acts are on. Early in the evening the crowds tend to be more subdued but once the alcohol kicks in they can start to open up more and cheer. Too late and a lot go home. Sometimes this can depend on the venue. Some are rowdy and only want the music as background. Some are silent with the audience focusing on every syllable.
- d. The venue layout and equipment. Do they have a stage? Do you need to bring your own microphone – I recommend a Shure SM58 – or are they provided? What is the PA like and who is running it?



(3) Practice: I know this goes without saying but facing a crowd, especially the first time can be daunting and the first thing you'll forget will be your lyrics, followed by the more complicated guitar/piano parts. When you are home, it can sound amazing, but under scrutiny it can be less so. It looks especially professional if you do your set without lyrics in front of you - don't worry I'm guilty of this with newer songs – so practice without referring to the lyrics until you don't need to see them. I try to play the guitar parts with no lights on so I can do it by feel but once again I need to work that that too. I recommend starting your practice the week before, playing every day, so you can do one almost gig before the afternoon of the open mic night. Even play before some friends and get feedback from them on your performance.



(4) Karaoke: This is especially useful if you have not worked with microphones before, especially before a live audience. Go with some friends and have a laugh but feel what it's like singing live. It might give you insights for when you do play live. Also, singing along with the notes might help your singing ability.

(5) Lessons: If your feedback includes maybe improving part of your performance then maybe you need to work at your act? I was once described many years ago as sounding like Bob Dylan with a cat shoved down his throat. I realised that if I wanted my songs to sound the best, I had to sing them reasonably well so off I trotted to get a few years' worth of lessons. This in turn actually improved my songwriting. Back in my early twenties people said my guitar was okay but something was missing. Even within a few lessons with a bloke from Venue Music people were amazed at the improved and I kept at that for a number of years as well. I found out years later that my teacher was none other than Harvey James, lead guitarist for Axiom and Sherbert (That's him on "Howzat"). Each little improvement will help your act and your songwriting. So, don't be insulted if someone suggested it would help if you had some lessons – maybe they are being your best friend!

(6) Book: A lot of venues allow you to book a spot on the night which is wise as if a lot of players turn up it's the ones who've booked get to play. However, remember that its first come first serve as to playing order. If you are last in you could be last act of the night. Russell Neal's [SongsOnStage](#) works this way as an example.



At the Open Mic Night: So, you've done the pre-gig work now its time to do the real deal. What actually is an open mic night? "An open mic (microphone) is an event thrown in places like a pub, bar, or coffee shop when the venue opens up their stage to unknowns."

(1) Arrive Early: This is of immense benefit to you as a performer! Especially if you are new to the venue as it gives you time to greet the concert coordinator for the night and *get on earlier on the bill* if it's a listed show. You could even get your meal earlier, so you aren't burping during your set. The early arrivers tend to get to know each other so that all important networking is at its maximum at this time.



(2) Name on the Bill: Make sure one of the first things you do is greet the person running the open mic night and get your name on the bill of players ASAP. I was played only last week and even though I was the 2nd player to arrive and had told the MC that I wanted 3rd spot they totally forgot me! I wasn't playing 15th spot after getting there over an hour early and I nearly headed home. Luckily, they know me well and gave me back my 3rd spot. My ex-partner, Jocelin, stopped wanting to play at Staves Brewery's open mic after getting there early and the late comers badgered the MC to let them on earlier, so she went from 4th to 15th! That used to happen to me at Denis Aubrey's open mic nights at The Excelsior Hotel, so I stopped going to that open mic. So, check your name is actually written on the bill.



(3) Support the Venue: That pub, bar, or café is a business trying to survive. A lot of times they put on an open mic night when it's a quieter night of the week hoping that the patrons of the open mic night will bring in business. When the Society Concerts left The

Fat Angel it folded and closed as it did depend on the cash flow from those concert nights. So, you need to support the venue by buying a meal, drinks or soft drinks when you play. I know a lot of players who expect the venue to provide a performance space as they are "talented". If so, bring a crowd and they'll support the venue, and you can keep drinking the free water. Till you get to that level its "pay to play" as supporting the venue means the open mic night will stay open!



(4) Be Stage Ready: Before you go on go to another room, maybe the toilet, and tune up the act before you. I recommend a digital tuner, even a clip on one for the guitar, so that it's quick to get organised. It's really annoying when the next act starts tuning up on stage. Sure, your guitar could go out of tune, but that's why a clip-on style is so handy. Think of your stage time as "experience money" which you shouldn't be wasting on tuning as its worth more than real money.



(5) Use Simple Gear: The old saying is "keep it simple, stupid" as when you bring complex gear on stage more can go wrong with it. I had a new Boss ME-50 playing on stage with Velvet Road at The Forrest Inn in Bexley. We were doing a great support with hundreds of punters in the room.

Our gig was going well when we started playing a song called "Rain On The Roof" which had a great build using the ME-50's gain section. I'd used it many times at band practise with no problems. I'm singing away, playing the guitar with the band powering behind me, and we hit the time for the gain to come in, I tapped the pedal and the guitar died! Being professional I continued singing till the end. I tried fixing the set up to no avail and the crowd was getting restless. So, I pulled all the effects pedals and plugged the guitar straight into the amp and cranked the volume. The crowd got behind us as the set became wilder and heavier with the crowd loving us, so it eventually became one of our best gigs! It turned out I'd hit two footswitches at once which turned on the tuner! I didn't know that till later and I never used a multipedal live again – I did use the ME-50 for recording time. So, make it simple, especially if you are not yet stage wise.



(6) Respect the song limit: Most of the time at Sydney's open mic nights you are given three songs to play. The ones that annoy others play each song as a grand opus that lasts for half an hour. Sorry, guys & girls, but there are other players wanting to get on stage. This used to happen down at John Cheshier's open mic nights in The Excelsior Hotel, and he'd pull the player aside and say they'll be given a time limit instead. In fact, I think John made it eventually 15 minutes, or three songs, as sometimes the last people playing would miss out as there was a 10 pm curfew in a lot of open mics. Sometimes not enough players turn up on the night and each player might be given an extra song. Or, I like what Russell Neal does, is that once he has gone through all the listed players those that are left – another reason to stay late – get a couple more songs each. One time in the last few months I wound up playing six songs over two sets.



(7) Banter: Some people hate banter, where the writer may give a brief introduction to the song. However, this might not apply to songwriter nights. On cover nights they just want you to give a brief intro then into it. I like hearing about the songwriter's creative adventures as it seems to add to the song. I remember when John Cheshier told us about the origins of "*Circles Round The Moon*" and its devastating origin making the song much more poignant. Sometimes banter can be used to engage the audience, the liven them up but you do have to have the right personality to carry this off. Be clear in what you say is important as a muffled sentence is annoying.



(8) Alcohol: So many US sites say to stay away from alcohol as you need a clear mind to remember lyrics, chords, etc. Me personally I like a couple of beers before I play as I find they relax me and put me in the right frame of mind. However, I do have a high alcohol tolerance due to my Irish ancestry. Someone of a less drinking culture might find two beers is too much, that's something you have to decide for yourself. You can always drink soft drinks if you are worried, or even light beers. What ever you do don't get up there drunk, unless you can handle it.



(9) Nerves: We all get nervous, it's just the more you play the less it affects you. However, don't tell the audience you are nervous as if you play with confidence they won't have a clue. If you do make a mistake due to nerves don't ever stop but keep going at all costs. In Velvet Road if I forgot lyrics on stage, I made new ones up which made the rest of the band members smile – Ross even said that he liked the new ones sometimes more than the original. Many years ago, Velvet Road was playing at the Cat & Fiddle in Balmain, and we had a new bass player, Mark. He got nervous and couldn't remember how to come in after my lead break for a song. The rest of the band just kept playing after a few anxious glances and I let it rip with another pedal for the lead, so the extended section looked like part of the act. Mark then leaned over to the piano player Ross to ask how he came back in, and he did do that at the right time. No sweat and the huge crowd had no idea!

(10) Eye contact: While playing it's a good idea to "talk" to the audience by making eye contact. If you see someone getting into your material nod at them and smile. Even acknowledge them between songs or at the end. Thank them and the venue and host for the night at the end of your set.

(11) Clean music: I see in many US open mic nights they only like acoustic guitars played clean, but we tend to be more egalitarian here in Australia with electrics, pianos and even backing tracks being used. If you are not sure probably take an acoustic to test the venue.

(12) Respect: Try to avoid loud talking or playing musical instruments while acts are on. Percussion, like shakers, etc are welcome usually as they help the rhythm. However, I have seen some players request that they not be used. Try and give the performer that's on stage as much attention as you can no matter how bad a player as they can improve amazingly with positive influence.

(13) The Host: The person running the night needs to be treated professionally. Most of the time they'll be an extremely experienced sound man and MC like Russell Neal who will work hard to give you the best sound possible. There are bad ones of course, who don't last long, but on the whole, they try to provide the players with the optimum aural experience. A lot of times you'll not have foldback and wonder about the sound being produced. That's a good time to check with the audience as they'll be the ones who'll be doing the ultimate judgement. The host will also have ideas about the venue like what's the best meal to buy this week to "Do you think you could link up my phone?"



(14) Give positive feedback: If you like someone's material, or their performances tell them! They will remember you at the next open mic night and may give you some tips, or advice about other open mics around.

(15) Stay Late: So many performers just show up for their set then clear off. In a lot of these open mic nights there aren't many in the audience, sometimes only other performers. If you stick around, you get to know some of the other performers as well as gaining some other songwriting ideas, both in technology and in technique. I don't know how many times I've asked other acts about some equipment or other. Staying around to watch others play their songs constructs a supportive community and is brilliant for networking. Leaving immediately after you perform is noted by the others in the audience: "Why is John leaving so early?" "Oh, he realised he left the cat in the oven to dry out after giving it a wash." Obviously, there will be reasons to leave early, but it tends to get noted if it happens all the time. If you do have to leave early leave between acts as it can throw a performer if you walk out in front of them. It is actually considered rude and disrespectful by many performers.

(16) Help with the lug out: It's a pain in the neck pulling apart the P.A, speakers etc and taking them out to the car. If you help out it gets things done easier. It's a good place to start networking and if there are future problems the host will look more favourably if you help with the lug outs. I've seen that happen recently with other songwriter performers. Remember we are a community of songwriters and as such work together to help the whole.

After the Open Mic Night: Now you are bathing in the afterglow of your open mic performance sitting at home. Hopefully you had a good gig and can evaluate your performance. If you've had a not so good gig, then it's time to see what you need to fix. I've gotten into the habit of doing videos with my phone so I can look back and see my performance as if in the audience. A couple of recent evaluations I've had of late include:

(1) I played at the Native Rose, in Rozelle, a few weeks back and as I was playing "Kate's Friend" in my second set which unfortunately I didn't video. I really felt in the reggae groove of the song, and I looked up as two gorgeous blonde girls hear me, mouthed "Wow!" and sat down to listen. However, when I got into the dark blues of "6.30 (In The Morning)" they got up and left. Tony West, another player on the night, had observed this happening and thought it was very funny. This made me think maybe I need to write more reggae material or play some of my lighter material at this venue.

(2) A few days ago, I played at Molly Malones, and I could feel that my second song, "Falling From Airplanes" had additional emotional weight to due to the recent break up with my partner. I could sense it connecting with the audience and one of my mates, Pit, was in the audience that night and said I really nailed the second song. I still have to check out my video to see what I did right, or wrong, to help me improve – yeap, even after 35 years of open mic nights I'm still trying to see ways I can become better in my delivery.

To end off I'd like to quote a comment about open mic nights from Redditt: "A lot of people really hate the fact that



entertainment industry (in all mediums and aspects) is a very networking-based business. Everyone and their mother will swear that so long as you have talent, you will get noticed.....and they are all incredibly, absolutely wrong. Talent is great, but there's a million and one talented people out there in the world. Truth is that talent isn't very rare. What is rare is finding people who are good to work with, who are professional and show up on time and do their job, who help lift others up and aren't afraid to give advice or support someone else out of a sense of envy or competition. People who are easy to be around, sociable, treat others with kindness and respect are the ones who get asked to work way more frequently than the very smart, but

ultimately horrible to be around person who has the gear and skills. I can't begin to tell you how many talented people I've seen act like complete shithheads to others in their field, expecting their knowledge to keep them hired, only to be surprised when at the end of a season (I work in TV, specifically comedy, FYI) they don't get asked back. I've seen it with music too, as I have a lot of musician friends, and the ones who are "enfant-terrible" are not the ones who are asked to go on tour and play Coachella. Work on building rapport with people just as much as you work on your own material or skillset, and you will go far. Ignore one or the other and it's at your peril. Also: you will wind up making friends and that's always nice!"

There are lots of great sites about open mic nights online if you'd like to do further research. See you around if you are playing open mic nights in Sydney. Cheers, Gav

