

Dance Musicians: How to Get Gigs

This content was originally posted on the CDSS website c.2010s

Here is a collection of advice about how to get gigs or find opportunities to perform. These ideas are mostly aimed at dance musicians, but parts of this are relevant to performers of all stripes.

The overarching theme is this: if you're looking for gigs it doesn't matter how good you are if no one but you knows it. Whether you are aiming for a career as a touring musician or just interested to participate in your community as a performer, it's just as important to develop relationships and visibility as to develop your talent.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Cultivating new generations of performers is critical to the strength of our dance/music communities in the long term. And, it doesn't have to be threatening to established performers. New and/or young performers bring their friends and peers to the scene. More attendance means more income and more gigs for everyone, and a thriving creative musical culture nurtures - and is nurtured by - a thriving intergenerational dance community.

Up-and-coming performers are often the most dedicated fans of their more experienced counterparts - the most likely to buy CDs and books, take lessons, attend as many shows as possible, and go to weekends and camps where they can dance, sing, jam and hang out. Also, performers can make dedicated organizers. I recommend that groups seek out young performers and enlist them in an organizational capacity as part of an effort to expand youth participation in the whole community. Young folks who are invested in the community on several levels (dancer, organizer, musician) can make a tremendous contribution.

The fact that there are numerous young folks out there who love traditional music and are dying to find ways to play more is a good sign for all of us. I hope we can all get excited about harnessing their energy and talent.

HOW TO GET RICH AND FAMOUS

So, let's get to the details. Here's how to get rich and famous as a traditional musician.

- **Play as much as you can** with as many different people as you can. Go to sessions, parties, open band events, workshops, camps, etc. Stay up late and look for opportunities to jam. Before you can expect to be hired as a performer you have to develop relationship and become trusted by the people who do the hiring. The more they see you and hear you, the more familiar you become.
- **Take lessons with musicians you respect.** They will see what skills you have, and put you on their list of people who might be able to play for a dance or do a gig. Ask them what you need to work on. Ask them if they know of opportunities to play.
- **Travel outside of your home state or region.** Especially if you are a musician or band from somewhere with a really strong and saturated scene of musicians, you might find it easier to get gigs in other areas. See "cold call" below.
- **Look for other musicians at your same level and get together and jam regularly.** Playing with people whose skills match your own is a good way to get over being shy or intimidated, to develop repertoire, and to explore musical ideas together. Your group may develop into a band, or just provide a supportive environment for everyone to improve.
- **Mention your interest.** People don't automatically know you are a musician who is interested in opportunities to play. Talk with established musicians, callers, organizers, dancers, and friends, and let them know that you are looking for gigs. Tell them what you do, who you play with, other gigs you've had recently (if any), and ask for their suggestions. They may not book you instantly, but at least your name will get out there. You never know where a gig offer might come from.
- **Organize things.** If none of the organizers in your area are open to hiring you, become the person who does the booking and hire yourself. Don't go head to head with an established dance; that's a good way to lose friends. Start something new, or get involved with running a less popular event and see if you can revitalize it. Consult with organizers, performers, and dancers near you, and find out what niche needs to be filled. You might discover that there used to be a dance in an old Town Hall somewhere, and the time is

ripe for the series to start up again. As an organizer yourself, you can hire more well known musicians and callers to perform with you at your event. They get a paying gig, you'll learn something by working with them, they'll get to know and trust you and your skills, and maybe eventually they'll ask you to join them or fill in for them at a gig. As your event grows you'll get better known by dancers/audiences in your area, which makes it more likely that you'll get asked to do bigger gigs.

- **Set your sights on smaller, less well known, or more out-of-the way gigs first.** Don't expect to make a lot of money, and do expect to drive a long way. It's worth it. You'll get performance experience and references you can use later. As you build up name recognition and experience you become more of a known quantity and less of a gamble for the bigger gigs to hire you.
- **Cold call.** Most dances or performance venues have web sites with contact information for the people who do the booking. Also try the DanceDB or Dance Gypsy or CDSS. In the contra or English dance world (more so than in the world of folk clubs or singer-songwriters) you can get gigs just by writing to or calling these people. You don't necessarily need a fancy press kit or a web site or a resume. Just a friendly email with a bit of information about your band and maybe a few references will do the trick. By and large the bookers are dancers or musicians just like you. They are volunteering their time to help organize their local dance. If they don't want to hire you or they are already booked for a given date most of them will say so politely. Be aware that some events have regular house bands, some have open bands a certain day of the month, some have a limited quota or a lottery for out of town bands, etc. But it is always worth asking. It helps if you can ask about a specific date, saying something like "my band will be touring in your area on X date, and we're wondering if you'd like to book us."
- **Offer references.** If you've worked with a famous caller, if a dance organizer somewhere knows and enjoys your music, if a well known musician can vouch for you, etc., ask those people if they are willing to act as references. Mention those names when you contact organizers asking for gigs.
- **Look for events with a guest slot.** Some established series or bands regularly hire guests or look for subs for one member of their band. This can be a great way to play with more experienced musicians and to get some exposure without needing to have a whole band on your own.
- **Play at Campers Night, Late Night, Gatherings, Parlor, etc.** Most CDSS Camp weeks (and many other dance festivals or camps) include opportunities for campers to play in an open band or to put together smaller combinations to play a short dance or concert set. Take advantage of these venues - you'll have a chance to show the audience what you can do, and also demonstrate your ability to the organizers and staff of the event. These are the people who may hire you for other events after they've seen what you can do.
- **Keep in mind** that organizers (many of whom aren't musicians) often think in terms of name recognition more so than skill. People running events have tight budgets and limited funds, and if not enough people show up to cover expenses the organizers sometimes have to foot the bill. They are looking for performers who they know will draw an audience and contribute to the ongoing energy and momentum of their series. You may be just as talented as the musicians they hire, but if your name is not known among audiences in the area, it is still a gamble to hire you. The process of becoming hireable is just as much about becoming known as it is about becoming skilled. At the same time, dancers and audiences love to discover new musicians and become fans of up-and-coming bands. As you do more gigs and build up name recognition, you'll start to develop a buzz around what you do which will propel you into new opportunities.
- **Know your stuff.** When you do get an opportunity to play somewhere, be prepared. Know what you are expected to do, and be totally ready to do it. Be confident, be organized, and present yourself as capable, while also being humble. People will form impressions of you quickly that may be difficult to change later. Your attitude and demeanor are at least as important as your musicianship to the organizers' and audience's impression of your skill.
- **Play with other people who make you sound good.** Even an experienced musician can sound terrible in the wrong combination of other musicians. Some people's musical styles and tastes fit together really well, and others just don't. Look for people to play with who make it feel easy, who enable you to do better than you thought you could. Help the people you play with to be that person by communicating your needs: "when you do X it makes it hard for me to do my best" or "I really like when you do Y because it allows me to really rock." Solicit that kind of feedback about your own playing from other people.
- **Set up a long term mentoring relationship** with someone who plays your instrument or has skills you'd like to acquire. Look for experienced people who are inclined towards mentorship. In every community there are established leaders and performers who are excited about sharing what they know with new folks. You may be able to find someone who will take you under their wing and give you a lot of help.