

Taking your music on the road

There are only so many times you can play the same few bars in your own town. At some point, you have to pack up your gear and seek out a fresh audience in a new city. Here's a few ideas for getting started.

NETWORKING

Before playing a new city, it helps to form connections in that scene. Up until recently, this meant getting your music played on local radio (e.g. the student radio station in that city) and this can still be a good first step - especially if there's a speciality show in your genre that might provide a connection with the local music community.

It's helpful to find out what bands in that location are playing similar music or, at least, music that you find interesting. Getting in touch with these bands can help you discover what venues are best to play at and which groups you should play alongside when you visit. There's also the chance of cross promotion - for a start, you could consider putting each other's music on your artist playlists.

Perhaps you could even help arrange a show with a band from out of town at your local venue. If you help them out first, then they'll be more likely to help you when you visit their city. When it comes time to tour,

you can arrange to play a gig with them (putting you in front of their audience) and hopefully borrow their gear and crash at their place as well.

It can be expensive travelling to other places, so it's always great if there's an opportunity to cram a couple of shows into a single visit - whether this is doing an instore at a record shop or playing a house party the night after the official show. These are also both great ways to meet people and create links with the scene.

TRANSPORT

Once you've booked in a gig, you then need to decide how you are going to travel. Air tickets can be relatively cheap if you book far enough in advance (over two months out) and/or are willing to fly at unusual times (early in the morning or further from the weekend). It's also worth considering whether you need to check-in your gear as baggage and how much additional cost that might incur. Make sure you weigh your gear ahead of time if you think you're going to be over the allowance, so you can pre-purchase extra luggage - it is much cheaper in advance than on the day at the airport. Band gear will often need to go to the 'oversized baggage' counter too, so make sure you leave enough time to check in at multiple counters.

The other option is to drive a car/van, which makes sense if you have a decent amount of gear to transport and/or lots of members in your group. The less gear you have, the more flexible you can be, which is why Anthonie Tonnon has been able to

tour New Zealand by train, and Delaney Davidson has taken a similar approach in Europe.

If no one puts their hand up to provide accomodation, then searching out a cheap hostel might be the next best option. However it's helpful to know if there'll be room to store your gear overnight (definitely don't leave it in your car/van, unless it's parked off the street in a very secure place).

TECHNICAL DETAILS

Once you have a gig booked, transport arranged, and a place to stay then you need to get down to the nitty gritty of what you need for the show. Firstly, you need to know exactly what the venue is able to supply. Most will have their own PA and mics, but it's worth double-checking this - especially the latter if you have more than two singers. If you're a band and the venue have told you that they supply backline, then get specifics - does this just mean a bass amp and drumkit with no cymbals, snare or kick pedal? Or are there guitar amps as well?

The same will go even if you're a DJ, since you'll need to know what mixer, turntables, and foldback monitors/speakers are on offer. The worst case for a DJ (or any act that relies on beats) is booking an event at a live venue that usually has bands and finding that they don't have subs and instead just have a vocal PA (which you might blow up!). How the PA is arranged might be important too - e.g., a DJ playing vinyl won't want to be too close to the bass/woofer speakers so their needle doesn't skip - which isn't an issue for a DJ

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using Serato. If you're bringing your own gear then you need to ensure they at least that they have a table or other steady surface to put it on.

Things may seem simpler for hip hop or electronic acts and DJs, but knowing exactly what is on offer is still important - especially in terms of plugging gear into the sound system (it's good to carry a selection of RCA, RCA-TRS cables for a start). The last thing you need is to turn up to the city and find that your mixer won't plug into the DI box and find you have to scour the city at the least minute, trying to find the correct adaptor. Equally, you don't want to turn up with three rappers and find they only have two mics or arrive with your vinyl in hand to do a DJ set, then discover that you were meant to bring your own needle.

Another question to be asked is - does the venue have an inhouse sound engineer that can mix the show? If there are complexities to your sound, then it can be worth bringing your own soundie (especially if you have a friend who will do it cheaply, plus a place for them to stay and room in your vehicle). This is a particular consideration if you're playing a venue that doesn't usually have your type of music - for example, if you're a hip hop or electronica act and you're playing at a venue that usually does bands or vice versa.

The basic layout of the venue is also good to know. Some venues require acts to load-in through a back door, rather than the main entrance so it's no good parking a vehicle out the front in that case. Venues also vary in the times at which they'll allow acts to soundcheck, different policies for free drinks, and may (or may not) have

backstage areas for musicians to hang out and/or leave gear (usually referred to as the 'green room').

The money side of things is also important to get straight from the start. If the venue offers a guarantee, then this makes things more simple. In other cases, acts might have to arrange someone to take money from punters at the door - it may be possible for members of each group that's performing to take turns at this, otherwise a door person will need to be hired.

ON THE DAY

It's hard not to feel at least a bit of nerves on the day a tour starts. Therefore it's better to have everything laid out ahead of time if possible - for example, packing your gear the day before could be a good idea or writing a list of what you need to grab before you leave the house. Forgetting gear is a major hassle and this is magnified when you're on tour and moving cities from day-to-day. This is why it is good to get in the habit of doing an 'idiot check' - this is an extra check that is done before leaving a location. For example, at the end of the night you might have loaded all your things into your van, but then you go back for an idiot check that involves scouring the stage and backstage area to make double-sure that nothing has been left behind.

Trust me, this is much better than waking up in the morning and finding a bag missing, then having to gain access back into the venue the next morning, negotiating with a cleaner or phoning the owner when they're probably still asleep. This can be very stressful indeed, especially if you have to drive on to the next town for

a gig that night!

Equally important is having a back-up plan if things go wrong. If you're a DJ and you are playing off a laptop but it crashes mid-set, then it's great if you've already organised a way to plug in your phone and put on a playlist so you can fill the silence while it reloads. If you're a guitarist and you break a string, then it's handy if you've already arranged with the other band to borrow one off them if necessary, or at least brought spare strings, leads, and picks along with you. Travelling in a band, it can also be handy to have a swiss army knife, torch, and drum key.

This is pretty standard advice for any show, but somehow it always seems to be on tour when things decide to suddenly stop working! As you progress, you may even start bringing more of your own equipment to ensure you get the sound you want - singers might get their own set-up (e.g. SM58/stand/XLR cable/XLR-jack cable) and bands might invest in their own DI boxes, since ones at venues aren't always in the best condition.

Playing outside your home city is always a mix of excitement and stress, but with a bit of planning you can reduce the chance for dramas and allow it to be a fun endeavour. If it does all go pear-shaped, just remember - there's always a new crowd in the next town. It's worth the risk, since there's no better feeling than looking out at an audience of unknown faces to find that your music has connected with them and you've managed to make a new set of fans - and friends - through bringing your music to their doorstep.