

# MAKING THE MOST OF SHOWTIME

How to earn more, stress less, and maximize your time spent gigging



**ONE DAY, PERHAPS YOU'LL BE TOURING** as an indie or signed artist, getting on a bus while a tour manager handles logistics, accommodations, and meals. What we're talking about in this guide is getting your indie band on the road, maybe for your first gig ever. Or you may be searching for a strategy to help build your band's reach by playing gigs in new towns. Or perhaps it's time to hit the road for a multi-gig tour that spans hundreds of miles. The information in this guide will help you make the most of your time—and maximize your earnings—while on the road.

## ① BE READY TO PLAY!

## BOOKING STRATEGIES ②

## ③ TIME ON THE ROAD

## SHOW TIME ④

## ⑤ BE PROFESSIONAL

## SELL LOTS OF MERCH ⑥

## ⑦ MORE RESOURCES



# BE READY TO PLAY!

## ① WHAT ARE YOU PROMOTING?

A new release is the most obvious thing to promote when you're striking out on the road and looking for publicity, but there are other angles you can push. Did you place a song on a TV show or movie? Open for a national act? Win a song contest? Find an angle that local press can latch onto—or something to add to your flyers, posters, and press releases—to give people a reason to look twice.

## ③ PLAN A BOOKING STRATEGY

There's a focused and unfocused way to go about booking and playing gigs, and the difference can spell success or failure. An unfocused approach might include booking gigs in towns you've never played without researching the club you've booked. Or it might simply be booking yourself too frequently in the same area or booking too big a room.

**“Don't strive to be ordinary onstage.”**

## ② GET YOUR STAGE SHOW READY

Don't strive to be ordinary onstage. If you want to command the attention of a room full of people who have never seen you, put yourself in their shoes. What would you want to see from your band on stage?

Before you work on a stage show, take a long, hard listen to your live performances. Record the audio, take video, and study yourself. Are your songs good? Are you performing them well in live settings? Where can you improve a performance or arrangement? Where can you expand and find moments to elevate your show? Does the set flow? Are there awkward pauses between tunes (or senseless rantings)? Before you hit any stage, work hard at writing great songs. Then work on playing and presenting them in the most compelling way you can.

A focused approach will help you establish goals, work toward reaching them, and measure success along the way. Are you playing to bigger and better crowds? Are you playing better rooms than you were six months ago? Have you broken into a new city? Are you selling more and more merchandise?

## ④ GO SOLO

If you're a singer/songwriter who typically plays with a full band, doing a tour without the band could be an option. It takes courage and dedication to grab your guitar and a few changes of clothes and get in your car and go. But traveling as a single person (having a co-pilot is always nice) is certainly less expensive and easier to manage than putting four or five people on the road. If you can swing it, a solo trip playing house concerts or coffee shops can pave the way for a full-band tour later down the road.



# BOOKING STRATEGIES

## ① DON'T ALWAYS THINK BIG

Whether you've brought 75 people to a 150-seat club, 300 to a 600-seat theater, or sold 1,500 tickets for a 3,000-capacity arena, those vacant chairs can weigh on you. A concert promoter is not going to pat you on the back for bringing in enough fans to fill half a venue. Conversely, "SOLD OUT" has a certain ring to it, doesn't it?

Even if you've only sold out a coffee shop that holds 30 people, the venue will want to have you back, and word will spread that you packed the place. Maybe it sounds counterintuitive when you want to build a fan base and make money, but some well-placed sold-out shows in smaller clubs can go a long way.

## ② STALKING THE "A" ROOM

Want to graduate to a premier club in your territory? Finding your way in might take a little creativity.

**1. Get familiar with the venue's calendar.** Look for clues. Do they have a standard number of bands on the bill every night? Is there a night where they tend to give new bands a shot?

**2. Look for holes.** Once you pick up on a club's booking patterns, you can find holes in their schedule where *they need* an act.

**3. Make sure your music is a match.** Once you've identified the shows where the venue is possibly looking for bands, narrow it down to a show where your music is a true fit.

**4. Target that specific show in your email/phone pitch.** Now you are prepared to approach the club's booker in a way that potentially *helps them* out. Put the show name and date in the subject line of your email and let them know you would be a good fit to round out that bill. Your chances of getting a response—and a gig—just went way up!

## ③ THE FIVE-POINTED STAR

Before you book the big show at the dream club out of town, consider Martin Atkins' (author of *Tour Smart and Break the Band*) five-pointed star strategy. Before you book your big show, book five shows in smaller cities/towns surrounding your big gig, all within manageable driving distance. Do everything you can to make fans and friends at these shows, and get email addresses everywhere you go. Maybe this process takes two or three attempts before you've got enough legitimate fans, but once you do, you're ready to book that big club and use your newfound fan base from all five points as a draw.

## ④ HOUSE CONCERTS

A house concert is just what the name implies: a concert in someone's home. Typically, a house concert is an invitation-only event presented by a host, with all the proceeds going to the artist. As a general rule, house concerts are:

- ★ Intimate shows with 15-50 people sitting close to the performer
- ★ \$10-20 per guest
- ★ Performed by solo artists or small groups with little to no amplification
- ★ Likely to house and feed the artist for the night

Sprinkling house concerts in between club dates can be a great way to fill out your itinerary. It does take coordination to connect with a host and organize the event, and you are relying on your host's ability to get enough people in the door to make it a success. But house concerts can be an excellent way to personally connect with fans, sell merch, and make decent money.

# TIME ON THE ROAD

## ① WHEN YOU'RE NOT ONSTAGE

Your gig takes up 25% of your day, don't waste the rest of it. Have a set of acoustic versions of your songs rehearsed and ready. For each town where you've booked an evening gig, contact local coffee houses and record shops and ask if you can do a daytime performance free of charge (with a tip jar). Also see if there are local radio stations where you can play, do an interview, and spin some tracks. Even if the listenership or turnout is minimal, in-studios and in-stores are excellent video and photo opportunities that make great content for the web!

## ② STOP BREAKING DOWN

Make sure to get your van, car, or bus serviced. Make sure the oil is changed, brakes are good, etc. If you're renting a van, try to find a reliable source and do your best to have it checked out before you hit the road for any extended trips.



## ③ BE SOCIAL

Your social media exploits will be more effective if they're targeted.

1. If you've played in the area before, **reconnect** with the folks you met the last go-round.
2. **Create a Facebook event for each show** and invite attendees based on their location.
3. **Check out the venue websites where you're going to play.** Get familiar with their social media profiles. Do they have Facebook and Twitter pages you can follow? Who are their most active fans? Reach out to them.
4. **Do you have an email list you can segment by state and city?** If not, now is the time to start. Send a personalized email to the groups of people who live within driving distance of your show.
5. **Keep a tour diary.** This can be as simple as a few sentences and pictures from your adventures you can post on your blog.
6. **Who are the other artists you're playing shows with?** Find them online. Begin a dialogue. See if you can interact with some of their online fans, because some of them will be at your show.

## ④ DOCUMENT THE ADVENTURE

Whether it's a one-off show or a multi-city swing, take pictures, video, and audio—not just of your concerts, but of the people you meet, the places you go, the landmarks you see, and your band cruising around. Interview audience members and upload to YouTube. Post the videos on your website and on Facebook, and Tweet like a bird.

## ⑤ FIND ACCOMMODATIONS

Veteran touring bands often stay in houses of people they've met at gigs, and these often become a regular stop if the band tours the same route again. A key to success: be a good houseguest. Buy your hosts toilet paper or offer to cook breakfast. You're cultivating relationships that could be very useful for future trips.

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## ⑤ GET GOOD SLEEP

Getting sleep and staying hydrated are essential to enjoying a multi-show tour. You won't last if you're partying all the time. You're out there to perform: everything else comes second to keeping yourself in physical performing shape, especially if you're a vocalist.

If you're traveling on a budget and not always staying in hotels, finding a comfortable place to lay your head can be a challenge. Pack inflatable AeroBeds, at least one pair of earplugs, and a sleep mask to help when you're trying to catch sleep in odd places at odd hours.

## ⑦ BE HEALTHY ON THE ROAD

Eating healthy on the road can provide you with more energy and better moods, which can positively affect your songwriting, performances, and relationships. One quick tip: pass up a fast food restaurant for a stop at a local grocery store for a healthier meal that won't break the bank.

Stock the van with a cooler and with dry foods like fruit, cereal, granola, bread, vegetables, nuts, seeds, raisins, dried fruit, veggie chips, corn chips, peanut butter, yogurt, and hummus.

# SHOW TIME

## ① ARRIVE EARLY

Get to the venue 20 minutes before your load-in time. It will show the venue you are serious, and it also gives you a chance to get friendly with the sound guy, who should be your best friend that evening.

## ② ASK EVERYONE TO SIGN YOUR MAILING LIST...

... and get their city, name, and email address. Offer a gift, like a free download, in exchange for their info, and encourage people to find you online after the show. Make sure your website is printed on your CDs, posters, and merch. Announce where you can be found online during your set.

## ③ EVERY SHOW IS BIG

Play the empty club like it's the biggest gig of your life. Sometimes, the club's empty, but you need to treat the 10 people in attendance to 100% of your A game. They paid their hard-earned money to see a show, so give them a show to remember. You'll likely impress them for giving it your all, and that could even amount to merch sales as they feel compelled to make up for the lack of bodies in the room.

And of course, you never know who's in the audience. One of those few folks could be someone who could make a difference in your career. And in the age of the smartphone, anything can make it online in the blink of an eye. Play something lousy, do something idiotic, it could be shared with the world before you know it. Play something great, do something amazing, that could be there, too. Always shoot for the latter.





# BE PROFESSIONAL

## ① HAVE A STAGE PLOT AND INPUT LIST

A stage plot is a graphic representation of your band's setup when you perform live, including everyone's names, placement on stage, and what gear you use. In addition to a stage plot, send the venue an input list that spells out how many musicians are in the band, including amps, instruments, mics, and DIs. Email your stage plot/input list to the booker and the live-sound engineer as soon as the gig's confirmed.

## ② BUDGETING FOR A TOUR

Start with a comprehensive list of all the things you'll need money for (food, gas, tolls, parking, accommodations, etc.), and plan for the unexpected. It's a good idea to determine clearly beforehand what constitutes a "band" expenditure (strings and drumsticks?) and a personal expenditure (new "stage" clothes?) to avoid any confusion or arguments on the road.

Once you've made your exhaustive list, see where you can save. Get the clubs to feed you a meal. Work on those alternative accommodations. Save on food by buying bulk and avoiding restaurants. Consider your club guarantees as your income, and perhaps you can have an estimated take on merch sales. But don't overestimate what you'll make and leave yourself stuck for cash. This is where busking, or playing for tips between gigs can help pay the tolls. It's easy to find ways to spend money, and more difficult to create earning opportunities.

## ③ ADVANCING A SHOW

Confirming in advance all of the details surrounding your gig with a venue contact is always a good idea, including a confirmation of what you're getting paid and whom you'll be collecting from. Once you've confirmed your show, the booker should send you a contract or email with all the necessary show details, including who your main point of contact is.

## ④ PROMOTION

Who's promoting the show, you or the promoter? If it's the promoter:

- ★ How many posters and flyers are going up, where, and by when? Who is making the flyer? You or the venue?
- ★ When do tickets go on sale and through what outlets? If there is a pre-sale of tickets, get a link so you can share it with your fans in advance.
- ★ Has the local media been notified about the show?

## ⑤ BE ORGANIZED

Especially when you're on the road for multiple gigs over the course of a week, a month, or more, put a tour book together. Print out all the relevant information you're going to need. Use a 3-ring binder and arrange the pages in a neat, orderly fashion for quick reference. Don't rely on smartphones and WiFi. Have the following information printed for every gig:

- ★ The name and address of where you are staying.
- ★ The name and address of the venue and who your contacts are.
- ★ Driving directions to venue and streets to avoid.
- ★ The best place to park.
- ★ Load in time. Sound check time. Door time. Show time. Set length.
- ★ Club contact with name and phone number.

# SELL LOTS OF MERCH

**1. Step up your presentation.** If you want to sell merch, you need to SELL it. Present it in an attractive way and put your best salesperson at the helm. Bring a tablecloth, create a stylish sign, dress it up with LED lights (or Christmas lights) and bring tape, tacks, and hangers and display your wares in an orderly fashion.

**2. Set up the merch table before you play,** and make sure it's attended to before, during, and after your performance.

**3. Provide payment options.** Use a smartphone app and take credit card payments at your shows. Have plenty of one-dollar bills on hand for change for cash sales.

**4. Sell CDs and MORE.** In case this isn't obvious, sell your CDs and more, including download cards and vinyl, T-shirts, hoodies, mugs, stickers, hats, and skullcaps. Make bundles that discount multiple items.

**5. Avoid clutter,** clearly displaying the products for sale and their prices.

**6. Convey your artist aesthetic.** This includes the design, color, and merch items you sell. If you have a signature piece of merch you wear or use onstage (e.g. bandana, leggings, lighted drumsticks), offering the same item to your fans might be a great way to have them identify themselves as a follower of your music and brand.

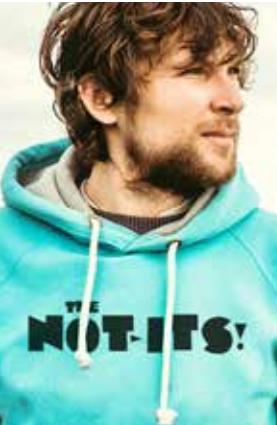
**7. Make it accessible.** The merch booth has got to be easy to get to, unobstructed, and clearly visible to many people at once so long lines don't hinder sales opportunities. But don't let it become a hangout for friends. A congregation of people chatting away (but not buying anything) will dissuade folks with actual interest and actual dollars.

**8. Have bags available.** Don't let the "how am I going to carry all this stuff?" objection lose you a sale.

**9. Get your email list front and center.** The merch booth is your opportunity to attract new fans even if they don't buy anything. Have your email list and website info as the centerpiece. This is a great chance to turn a stranger into a lifelong fan.

**10. Be visible at the booth following your performance.** If you've created a moment on stage that made fans say to themselves, "I need to take some memory of this home with me," what better way to ensure a lasting connection than to have a conversation with your audience after the show?

**11. Make a donation to charity.** Affiliate yourself with a charitable organization and give a percentage of the proceeds to it (and make sure that's clear). Or pick a special item, maybe a t-shirt with a design that promotes a cause, and build your donation into the sales price.



**12. Make sure the venue isn't expecting a cut of your merch sales.** Sometimes a venue will expect a percentage cut of any merch sales you make. Make certain you know about this (or negotiate your way out of it) ahead of time.

**13. Make sure the items you sell are good quality.** Merch is a numbers game, and low prices mean more profit, but this stuff represents your band and brand. You want to make sure your fans will wear this gear (and promote your band) and that they won't be disappointed when the \$12 t-shirt they bought shrunk two sizes the first time they washed it.

**14. Track sales.** Keeping detailed records of what you've sold, in what sizes, in what types of venues (21+ bar, outdoor festival, etc.)—even what the weather was like—can help you strategize what new merch to sell, what NOT to sell, and how to display and bundle your wares. Not to mention, this helps you know when it's time to reorder.

**15. Stay stocked.** Don't disappoint your fans—who may have saved up their money or waited for this show to buy your vinyl release with the free signed poster—by running out of stock. Tracking sales and keeping stocked with your most popular merch is vital to your success at the merch table.

**16. Make your sales pitch.** Finding creative ways to bring attention to your merch table, what you have for sale, and announce that the band will be available at the end of the show to sign CDs and posters needs to be part of your stage banter and should be a rehearsed—or at least a planned—moment on stage.

**17. Offer exclusive gear or recordings.** Consider a live EP or a set of cover tunes on CD as an add-on or additional option to your studio albums, or something that's exclusive at the show that fans can't get online or from a retail outlet.

**18. Put a tip jar on the table.** Some fans will not have the funds on hand to buy something from the table, but might want to throw a few bucks in to help you out—or throw their change in as a show of support. You won't collect anything if you don't try it. Pre-stock the jar with some singles and change to encourage contributions.

**19. Be ready to cut deals.** In addition to bundling merchandise to encourage larger sales (discount for a CD and t-shirt bought together, free poster and stickers with a purchase of \$20+), empower your merch table salesperson to cut deals on the spot. If someone is buying three CDs or LPs, and you know you're making \$30 in profit, give him the leeway to throw in a shirt or another item as a thank you. You don't want to eat into your profit, but a little generosity can go a long way to turning someone into a superfan.

**20. Sell unique merch.** Easy to say, but not always easy to pull off. But a onesie, dog collar, or beach towel with your heavy metal band's logo might be too cool to pass up.

**21. Sell anything and everything.** Broken drum heads and sticks or a damaged guitar signed by the band could bring some coin from devoted fans who want to take home something that was used and abused by the band. Get creative.





# MORE RESOURCES

Sites/publications to help you book, manage, and survive on the road:

**MERCH.LY BLOG** - [www.merch.ly/blog](http://www.merch.ly/blog)

**INDIE ON THE MOVE** - [www.indieonthemove.com](http://www.indieonthemove.com)

**MUSICIAN'S ATLAS** - [www.musicansatlas.com](http://www.musicansatlas.com)

**INDIE BIBLE** - [www.indiebible.com/discmakers](http://www.indiebible.com/discmakers)

**MUSICPRO INSURANCE** - [www.discmakers.com/services/music-pro-insurance.asp](http://www.discmakers.com/services/music-pro-insurance.asp)

**DISC MAKERS BLOG** - [blog.discmakers.com](http://blog.discmakers.com)

**CD BABY'S DIY MUSICIAN BLOG** - [diymusician.cdbaby.com](http://diymusician.cdbaby.com)

**BANDSINTOWN** - [news.bandsintown.com/home](http://news.bandsintown.com/home)