

## Taking Gigs for their Learning Potential

by Dennis Winge

“When you take a job, it should have one or more of these qualities: good money, fun, connections for the future, learning. If it doesn’t have any of these, forget it. Move on.” This quote is from the book “For Guitar Players Only” by Tommy Tedesco

This advice has been very useful to me over the years, even though it sounds so obvious. There were times when I did not take this advice and regretted it. Now I wish to save you from those times. Today we will discuss the fourth necessary pre-requisite for taking gigs: learning.

Many things can be learned on gigs that you can’t learn anywhere else. If you are a guitar student (and if you play guitar hopefully you will always be learning no matter what your level of experience), then taking gigs for learning can be a good idea even if the other elements mentioned in the quote are not present strongly or at all. Here are examples of things you might learn about on gigs:

**Set List** – On gigs you learn how to design a set list. What song should be first? Which should be last? How does the order of the songs affect the overall success of the show? Is the set list flexible enough so that a song can be scratched if the mood doesn’t seem right, or so the order of the songs can be changed on the fly?

**Repertoire** – What type of songs work best for that particular gig? If you play only particular style, then your options are limited, but if you’re ever in a situation where the style of your band is not a good fit for the venue or occasion for some reason, can you throw in a cover or two to give the audience something more appropriate? I’m not saying to change your musical identity, but a little flexibility goes a long way. An example is that I live in area where country music is popular, and my rock cover band, while not a country band, has a small handful of popular country tunes that we pull out when necessary.

**Reading** – If you can sight-read, your options for taking certain gigs are a lot broader than if you don’t. And usually, you can’t sight-read everything with complete perfection on a gig where you’ve never seen the music before. It teaches you to roll with the punches, do the best you can, and continue to work on your sight-reading long-term.

**Volume** – Is the volume of the band you are playing with appropriate for the size and type of venue? Are people moving as far away from the band as possible in order to talk? What is the function of the music for the occasion? Obviously, a cocktail party at a country club at 6 p.m. on a Wednesday would warrant quite a different volume from a dance hall at midnight on a Saturday.

**Technical** – How is the overall sound from where you are standing? Can you hear all the other instruments? Are there monitors? Is someone from the band controlling the sound in the room or is there a designated sound person? Not being able to hear

certain instruments on the bandstand can hamper good performance? If you have a monitor you can request certain instruments' volumes to be adjusted for your monitor, but if you ask and it's still not right, you may have to leave well enough alone rather than stop the flow between every song. This also underscores the value of sound checks, but there will be certain gigs where this is not possible for whatever reason. Taking different types of gigs teaches you to adapt gracefully to each situation.

**Bandleading** – Is the leader of the band organized and prepared. Do you and each of the musicians know what is expected of you? On the flip side, is he or she too controlling and stifling your creativity and putting a damper on how much fun you are having? A possible example of this is a leader who points at different musicians on when to solo and also dictates how long they solo for.

**Performance** – This is perhaps the biggest area of learning, and the one that has the most direct influence on your learning and growing as a musician. How well did you play the material? Were you not as prepared as you would have liked (which underscores the importance of preparation)? Or maybe you played even better than you usually do because the band sounded so good (which underscores the importance of playing with musicians who are better than you whenever possible.) Were you relaxed? It's very common that performance anxiety and generally tension on the bandstand can make musicians not perform at their best? How about your time feel? Were you rushing or dragging? Were any of the other musicians rushing or dragging and if so how did you deal with that?

The possibilities for learning are endless, and if you'll notice, most of these subjects above are presented in question-format. If you can place a small hand-held recorder somewhere in the venue where it won't be stolen or questioned, and you never share the contents with anyone else unless you get permission from every band member, management, and any other legally or socially appropriate entities, a lot of the learning can continue after the gig by listening back. However, my advice is don't listen to it right away. Come back to it a month later when you don't have nearly as much emotional investment in the performance, and your learning will be so much more effective because it's objective.