

How to Design a Set List

by Dennis Winge

The order of songs in a performance has a power that is often underestimated by some bands and musicians. Every song should be strong enough to stand on its own but is also shaped to a small but psychologically impactful degree by the songs that came before and after it. Percussionist Bobby Sanabria says “I want my sets to be like a good play and have a logical progression.” So If you’re a performer, here are some tips that you can use to put your songs in a great order for every gig, open mic, or showcase you do from now on.

I. Let the Whole Determine the Sum of the Parts

What kind of emotional effect do you want your performance to have on an audience? Have you or has your band ever asked this question and written down and discussed the possibilities? When people leave your show, do you want them to feel excited, uplifted, introspective/ thoughtful, expanded? This is step 1 in determining how you want to shape the event with your song order.

An important practical consideration is also time-length of the performance. What is your average song length and how much time is the performance? Divide the latter by the former and the result is the number of songs you can conceivably play within the allotted time. Going over time, especially when there is a strict schedule with other bands or events happening before and after your performance, is very unprofessional.

II. Choose the First Song Carefully

The first song is extremely important as it immediately begins to shape the whole mood. Guitarist Jim Hall in his book “Exploring Jazz Guitar” says “The first sounds [an audience] hear(s) can effect what happens... for quite a way into the performance, perhaps the whole way.” So what song will best set the tone for the whole evening?

There are also practical considerations in choosing the first song. Among the ones that could be good choices, which ones are easiest to play and always sound good? Choosing an easier first song can be important because every playing environment is different and can take a few songs to get used to, so that can be a distracting element.

III. Choose the Last Song Carefully

The only choice perhaps more important than the first song is the last one. If you’re doing multiple sets, the last song of the first set should be a relatively light-hearted one that sets the mood to make people want to stick around. This is probably what vocalist

Al Jarreau was referring to when he said “The last song should be a cleansing of the palette – like sherbert before the next delicious piece of music.”

The last song of the night, however, should be something you want the audience to go home singing to themselves. A lasting impression that will hopefully affect them in a positive way and make them likely to remember you and your performance fondly, and of course make them more likely to buy your music, come to another show in the near or distant future, or tell friends about it.

IV. Achieve Balance and Variety

Apart from choosing the first song and last song with care, the key to creating a good set list is balance and variety with respect to musical elements. Here are some examples:

Balance **tempos** – is each new song at least somewhat faster or slower than the previous one?

Balance **keys** – is each song in a different key (when possible)?

Balance **major and minor** – are the ‘brighter’ songs well poised against the moodier ones?

Balance **feels** – are ‘straight’ feels well poised against the ones that are triplet-based (shuffle, swing feels)?

Balance **time signatures** – are the songs that are not in 4/4 placed for maximum effect?

Balance **old and new material** – Are the more challenging songs in the middle? Putting the newer or more challenging material in the middle of the set is a safeguard against the risk that either the band won’t play it as well or the audience may not receive it as well as the more familiar material, or both. If either of these things do happen and then are in the middle of the set, these selections are sandwiched between more successful selections and won’t hamper the overall flow of the event very much.

Balance **song length** – Are the songs that are short and sweet well poised against the ones that are more epic both in length and in dramatic effect?

Balance **melody & rhythm** – If you have songs that are more rhythmic than they are melody (or vice-versa), are they well poised against those that are the opposite?

Balance **harmony & rhythm** – (Same as above with respect to harmony and rhythm).

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IV. Other Elements to Consider

Talking Breaks – Are the pauses between songs in which you or a bandmate is going to talk to the audience strategically placed?

Instrumentation change – If there are any songs in which certain members change instruments, are these songs placed where they will have maximum effect?

Break-Down Sections – If there are songs which can be performed with fewer instruments than the whole ensemble, this can be a dramatic way of developing a set and keep people's interest. Is this section well-placed?

Spontaneous Changes to Set Order – Sometimes less is more. You may find that eliminating a certain song on the spot because it doesn't feel right in the moment goes a long way toward maintaining set momentum. This is also true of re-ordering the set order on the fly if the audience seems to be favoring a certain type of tune as opposed to another. Is it understood by your band members that this can happen and by whom it can be initiated without the other members questioning it?

There are probably many more elements to song selection, and I look forward to your sharing them with me when you think of them. Have fun and experiment with set order. Perhaps your 'dress rehearsal' could be a play-through of the material in the proposed order to see how it feels.