

How to Manage Your Guitar Volume

by Dennis Winge

Guitarists have a few disadvantages that many other instruments don't have when it comes to managing their volume. As opposed to acoustic instruments like a saxophone or violin, for example, an electric guitar must be amplified. This means that in an ensemble setting such as a musical or a big band, the acoustic instruments just play and there are either mics for the orchestra or band overhead or there isn't, but they play the same either way. The guitar, however, must regulate its volume manually.

The plot thickens when it's a band that uses a PA to mic certain instruments. For example, in many bands, the vocals, keyboards, and any acoustic instruments playing through a microphone go through the PA. What about the guitar? It is not always a given that the guitarist's amp will be mic'd and go through the PA. However, this introduces some major problems:

- The guitar amp's volume must be set according to playing to the whole room, which can lead to an inappropriate 'on stage' volume.
- If the amp is "uni-directional" which many amps are, the person or people sitting or standing in a direct line from the amp will hear it very loud and clear, while those in the corners of the club will hear it way lower.

In general, therefore, it is much better to mic a guitar amp or to send a direct-out signal from the back of the amp to the PA. This may be appreciated by the other musicians on stage because your stage volume will be lower, but most guitarists will tell you they want to feel the air moving through the amp set to a decent volume in order to get and stay inspired during the performance. Of course, if there are monitors, the guitarist can simply request more guitar in his/her monitor. But as you can see there are lots of different variables to consider.

Here are some very general rules about playing at an appropriate volume.

1. **Ask.** If you're not sure if you're too loud or too soft, simply ask the musicians you are playing with, or the sound engineer behind the console.
2. **Record.** If you have some kind of digital recorder like a "zoom" that you can place at the back of the room or somewhere that's positioned far enough away from you that it can capture all the instruments relatively equally, it is the most accurate representation you can get. You can speak your volume setting right into the device as you begin the recording so you can remember it later. After listening a few recordings in different musical situations or venues, you will very quickly learn what is an appropriate volume setting for those situations. (Just make sure your device is safe from theft. And, one little trick that will prevent you from leaving your device at a venue: leave your car keys next to it.)

3. Gauge the audience. If you're playing music at a restaurant or some venue in which some people may be listening but many are talking over your music, see if people have to lean in to each other when they speak. If they do, you or your band might be too loud. If it's a concert venue in which your band, not a sound engineer, is controlling the PA, one indication that it may be loud is if no audience member wants to come within 25 feet of the stage!

4. Listen to the other instruments. If your band is doing its own sound and let's say only the vocals are being mic'd, listen to whether or not they are getting drowned out. Is it possible your band is playing too loud and drowning out the lead vocals? Many bands inadvertently do this. Or, for example, during someone else's solo during which you are playing rhythm guitar, can you clearly hear every note the soloist plays? Many guitarists get into their own world and don't even listen to their fellow musicians, and their choice of volume clearly reflects this. When you are accompanying a soloist, their volume should be louder than everyone else's volume, plain and simple. When you have a sound engineer, he or she will turn the soloist up manually, but what about gigs where there is no sound guy or gal? Three words for you: "turn it down."

5. Talk to the drummer. "But our drummer plays so loud." This is a common objection to the above assertion that bands often drown out the vocalist. Simply talk to the drummer and ask him to take it down. A great drummer can play with just as much intensity, feeling, and excitement at any volume. In the days of John Bonham, Keith Moon, Mitch Mitchell, and Ginger Baker, the drummers would play very loudly, and it served the music well because those bands were small (only bass, drums, guitar, and vocals) and they were helping to fill up space. However, it should be noted that all those drummers mentioned were extremely talented and musical. Unfortunately in many amateur bands, the drummers have adopted the volume but not the technique and musicality from these greats.

6. Position your amp wisely. Have you ever seen a guitarist stand far away from or even behind his amp? What do you think is most likely to happen in that situation? They almost invariably play too loud. They can't hear how loud it is to people near or directly in front of their amp. Don't be one of those people.

7. Practice playing at low volume. As of this writing, I am a guitarist who has a regular gig in a hotel lobby where the front desk is very sensitive to volume as they have to talk to guests arriving and people calling on the telephone. In the days prior to the first gig there, I had heard that other bands were fired for being too loud. I resolved to put my amp lower than I had ever set it before (to 3 out of 10 on this particular amp, where I usually set it on 4 to 5) and I instructed the drummer to play very quietly. It turns out that they liked the volume overall, but to my surprise, reported that "the guitar is just a hair too loud." I now play on a setting of 2.5 in that venue and I bought an amp stand that angles the amp right to my head so I can hear myself well enough. It is not easy to play at such a low volume and it took some getting used to, but I feel that it has helped my overall musicianship in that I am no longer dependent on volume to help make great music. The drummer, who only uses a snare, bass drum, hi hat, and 1

cymbal, has spoken similarly. Are you or is your band too volume dependent? Can you find ways to express the same emotion and passion that you can at a big concert hall?

There are many other more subtle aspects to managing your volume, but hopefully this can be a good starting guide. You might talk to professionals on your instrument and ask them how they decide what is an appropriate volume for a particular musical setting.