

“Organising A House Concert - An Introduction”

During recent decades the gradual demise of the legion of coffee-houses and listening clubs that sprang up across America during the rise in commercial popularity of folk music in the late fifties and early sixties – aka *the folk scare*, has, thankfully, been balanced by the arrival of an interesting and intimate new *underground factor*. As these *underground* events evolved over the last decade and a half, they began to be referred to by the nom de plume, *house concerts*.

In every part of the continent, ordinary folk have been opening their front door to welcome performers, friends, acquaintances and strangers into their homes. Their common bond and principal weakness - a predilection for listening to acoustic music performed in comfortable surroundings. And invariably, *up close and personal*. It's preferable, also, that no smoking signs are posted on the premises, *the bar tab* [if any] doesn't necessitate re-mortgaging your home[!] and the focused attention of the clientele to the performance is, pretty well, guaranteed. Individuals who attend *house concerts* are also, usually, in search of the spirit of community and shared experience, a human trait that is being suffocated by the stampede toward providing the 21st century individual with instantaneous, push button gratification. Taking the time to listen and contemplate is already an art lost on the masses, but we're not talking stadiums and gargantuan SRO audiences here, but, rather, smaller groups of people that may vary, depending on the size of the venue, from around twenty up to fifty. Down in Texas, and Texas being Texas, there are a few *house concert* venues that will accommodate seventy and more customers. With an audience that size, you're really talking *small venue* and some of the *intimacy* related to the performance is undoubtedly lost.

Of course, this phenomenon is not some startling new invention. Rolling the carpet back [if there was actually a carpet in the first place], clearing the furniture to the edges of the room and inviting some, preferably musical, friends around for a *ceilidh*, is a centuries old tradition in the lands of my Celtic ancestors. *Ceilidh's* in their original form, of course, also involved dancing and storytelling. In the time before push button radio and remote control television, entertainment *made in the home* was the order of the day. In the New World universe of *house concerts*, the modern day piper is remunerated for playing tunes and, hopefully, furnishing the listener with a unique insight into the creations being performed. Since we are mainly talking about contemporary folk performers who are the *creative offspring* of Woody and Pete, that insight can run the gamut from humorous to politically barbed to intellectually stimulating.....and, literally, all points between.

So how does one go about organising a *house concert* ? Assuming that you already possess [or have access to] a decent sized room [aka performance area], two factors are, pretty well, essential – a performer and an audience. With regard to the former, and depending on the career status of that individual, this may involve contacting the musician directly or dealing with a booking agent. In either case, before making any such contact, the first and wisest move is to calculate the maximum audience size that can be accommodated in the performance area. Most musicians perform *house concerts* without amplification, although a very large room [not really the norm] may determine otherwise.

Let me add a word of caution at this point. A first time *house concert* host may well find they'll be asked by the performer and especially a performer's agent, if one is involved, to supply a guarantee when booking the performer. The sum involved might be fairly modest and in the region of \$300-\$500 for a well-known artist. At the outset of your *career* as a *house concert* presenter/host, and certainly during your first few seasons, don't be surprised if you are regularly asked to provide guarantees. Once your concert series becomes established, guarantees may become negotiable or even a thing of the past. Remember, however, that in the first instance the guarantee will be coming from your pocket, and should only be paid to a performer who has a potential to generate a *sell out* audience for your venue.

At this early stage, you should also decide whether to have food and drink available at the event [usually coffee, tea or squash – preferably **no** alcohol]. A *pot-luck* meal, where audience members bring along, *gratis*, a plate of food, usually home made, is a tried, tested and highly successful part of the formula. The food can be eaten prior to the show, during the break [if the performer decides to perform two sets] as well as after the show. The provision of food furnishes the opportunity to socialise with like-minded people, and further cements the sense of shared community I referred to in the second paragraph. One particularly advantageous dimension of the *pot-luck* meal is that it allows the musician[s] the opportunity to socialise with the audience, many of whom he/she/they may already know, if only on a nodding basis, from shows played at more formal local venues. From a financial standpoint, a meal-time also furnishes the performer

with an opportunity to promote and sell merchandise, be it a CD, a songbook or a T-shirt. Irrespective of whether the musician is [currently] major or minor league and depending on the location of that musician's next scheduled concert, the promoter/host may wish to consider offering the performer overnight accommodation and meals.

There really are no set rules as to the time of day, and on which day, a *house concert* can take place. What is certain is that the timing needs to be mutually convenient to the performer, the homeowner and have the potential to generate an audience. The performer's touring schedule and the proximity of the homeowner's premises to local [commercial] venues usually are the main determinants. An evening *house concert* will probably be the performer's only opportunity to earn money that day. A daytime *house concert*, usually held in the afternoon, will allow the performer the option to appear at a local venue that evening. Through direct or indirect contact with the performer, a date, a time and the amount of remuneration can be established. Once those factors are settled, the *house concert* promoter can calculate the admission to be charged at the door and decide if the event is a viable proposition, and if so, then formally book the performer.

Some of the more sophisticated and larger concert series now accept on-line payment for their *house concerts* from service providers such as PayPal. Another, similar, service even offers an option to donate a portion of ticket sales to charity, but you need to be a registered non-profit undertaking in order to participate. One point to note at this juncture, although it probably only currently affects what I referred to earlier as major league performers, but many commercial venues are now issuing contracts that stipulate that the performer **cannot** appear locally at another venue, within a certain radial mileage of that venue, and also for a certain time period [sometimes up to 2 months]. From one viewpoint, you could interpret the latter in terms of "*the musician is being bitten by the hand that feeds him/her.*" As I noted at the outset, we folkies are an helplessly addicted but shrinking audience and commercial venues, understandably, are merely attempting to protect their continued existence.

As your *house concert* series becomes established, a policy regarding promoter's expenses will evolve. Many *house concerts series* are financially bank rolled by the host/promoter. The total, annual out goings on telephone calls, food and drink, and mailing expenses should not however be taken lightly. In the case of a new venue, or if a friend is hosting the show for you, most performers will enquire if you had any expenses. The reality being - most *house concert* promoters are rabid enthusiasts who give the performer 100% of the door. Furthermore, as I already noted, with recordings and other merchandise to sell, the performer has a few ways to generate additional income.

Next, you require a clientele. Public awareness of the event is the key to success. Even experienced music business professionals ignore this essential element, to their cost. The potential revenue created by the event will determine how you approach the subject of advertising. *The internet*, local independent radio stations, as well as bookers at nearby acoustic music venues are your best allies at the outset. And let's not forget those friends and nodding acquaintances you keep meeting at club shows, and that old chestnut, word of mouth. The local newspaper's editorial stance on acoustic music will determine whether that is a viable avenue to approach. Once your *house concert* series becomes established, the time-honoured mailing list [postal as well as web address based] that you circulated at the first show [and every show since], will become one of your most valued promotional tools. You'll note that earlier in this paragraph I italicised *the internet*. A web site that is constantly **up to date** is one technological development that has proved **essential** to the *house concert* promoter. If you can establish a clientele that can be contacted by web rather than by mail outs, those crippling postal expenses will shrink considerably. In fact many well-established concert series have managed to totally eliminated snail mail. Remember, a web site that, at the very least, advertises all forthcoming shows and the method for booking tickets is your **24/7 shop window**.

In deciding to proceed with a *house concert*, you have accepted that not only friends and acquaintances but total strangers will be present in your home for a number of hours. Most American series of *house concerts* are reservation only, by telephone and e-mail. This allows the hosts[s] to pre-screen the audience. The majority of house concert promoters approach this thorny area by providing a telephone number/e-mail address as the initial point of contact. Once a ticket is purchased, directions to the property can be provided. Even with the foregoing precautions, security and access in the performance area, and to other parts of the property, on the day of performance, must be given careful consideration. As for the

show, the only comment I will make is that performers who interact with the audience almost certainly guarantee a successful and ongoing *house concert* series.

Rather than create some quango to co-ordinate these events, as this phenomenon has proliferated Stateside, grass roots enthusiasts have established a network of what can best be described as *best practice advisory centres*. The web site www.houseconcerts.com is a prime location where you can learn about what is in reality, and in practical terms, a *regressive social revolution*. In fact the Texas couple that maintain www.houseconcerts.com have published their own guide, "Hosting House Concerts." Based on an assessment of the advice offered by experienced hosts/promoters, a fledgling promoter can pick and choose which facets of the *house concert* formula best suit the property, and the needs of their perceived audience.

One point to remember is that you have now created what could be viewed as a commercial undertaking. While you can witness to your altruism by stating that the performer was given 100% of the ticket sales, you will probably have contravened a number of local by-laws by holding the event in your home. In truth, *house concerts* have not yet become a *major political issue* Stateside and acceptance and tolerance by public authorities, and the occupants of neighbouring properties appears to be the par currently. Of course, scheduling concerts in your home on an almost daily basis would doubtless see that tacit level of acceptance alter radically. In any case, I'd advise **strongly** that you check on State and local tax laws, as well as local zoning laws, before proceeding with your first event, if only for personal peace of mind. The foregoing checks will establish what financial or other records the authorities may wish to view in the future. Who knows, they may even request a slice of the *lucrative financial pie* that you, the host has created! Forewarned is forearmed, I say.....

So there you have the basic considerations for promoting a *house concert*. At one stage, in my role as evangelist, I contemplated inserting numerous quotes from fans, promoters, performers and bookers. When faced with a multi part feature, I veered from that course. One quote I must however use is from Tim & Lori Blixt, the New Jersey based promoters of the Cabin Concerts series, "*For all that putting on these shows can be a chore, the payoff is that the audience gets a once in a lifetime experience that you just can't get elsewhere.*" So consider the possibilities. You may end up conversing with the performer at the buffet table. The musician may decide to perform a request only set, including songs never aired before in public. Those *once in a lifetime* possibilities are truly legion....and they have all occurred time and again at *house concert* venues all the way from Bangor, Maine to San Diego, California and Seattle, Washington to Miami, Florida.

Paul Simon once sang about the *sound of silence*, in reference to our inability as humans to communicate with one another. If you truly love folk music, you have a voice, use it to promote acoustic music.....and then we will never have to endure the sound of that silence.

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 12/00, 01/01 & 03/04

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