

How To Put On The Perfect House Concert by Martha Stewart and Me

Bob Bossin's Old folksinger's homepage



Note: This piece was written in the early 1990s when the internet and even e-mail were not widely in use. Nonetheless, many of the details and certainly the principles below still stand. Over the years, lots of people have gotten in touch to say how helpful they found this advice. I am always happy to hear it. And of course, Martha is now out of jail. – BB

Despite the juggernaut of mass marketing and mass media, folk music has remained, effectively, a regional business. There is something nice about that. Nice, that is, until a performer wants to play a new town, or a fan wants to hear, live, the maker of a favourite obscure disk.

Getting an audience out to a club to see an unknown performer is nigh onto impossible. It almost always means that someone is losing money, often the performer. Martha Stewart and I think house concerts are an elegant and viable solution to the problem.

They are dirt simple to organize, cheap to produce and virtually fail-safe. You are pretty much guaranteed a packed house, a convivial atmosphere and, for the performer, a decent wage. The key to success is this: a house concert is a gathering of friends; only secondarily is it a show for the general public. (There are, in fact, some house concert series that have become, de facto, folk clubs, but that is another story.) When you invite friends to a party, 30 or even more will come, right? So it is with a house concert. Yes, strangers are welcome (they can't be all that strange if they like the same obscure folksinger) but they are the icing, not the cake. I have played (and put on) dozens of successful house concerts where people have had a grand time and, at the end of the evening, the performer has walked away with anywhere from \$300 to over \$1000. Martha, on the other hand, wouldn't know a house concert from a soup kitchen, but if she did, she would organize it like this. [*That is unkind. In fact, I think having a special kitchen for soup is a wonderful idea, especially for those frosty fall "closing down the summer house" weekends. -MS*]

For performers: how to find sponsors

Ask. With every mail order that goes out, and with most other pieces of correspondence, I send a little notice headlined "Would you want this man in your

living room?" "All it takes," the flier explains, "is 30 people chipping in \$10 or \$15 each, and we will take care of the rest. It is as simple as that, or pretty nearly." Any bites that come back, I file away. Next tour, I get back in touch.

For fans: how to find performers

Ask. No, Loreena McKennitt, Greg Brown or Ferron probably won't do a show in a living room for a few hundred dollars. But you would be surprised how many of the rest of us will. Often enough we are happy to find a fill-in date, an introduction to a new town, or a paying gig in your neck of the woods.

Unfortunately, house concerts don't work as well for bands. Groups need more room, they may need a sound system, and what is a good fee for a solo performer gets paltry when divided four or five ways.

[When choosing a folksinger, keep in mind the colour scheme of your living room. If in doubt, a "winter" is your safest bet. - MS]

The money (1)

Let's get the money out of the way straight off. \$300 to \$400 is, I figure, a pretty fair base rate for a solo musician on a quiet night, and that breaks down to only \$10 or \$15 per person for 15 couples. Convincing 15 friends to come (with a partner or guest) is not a big deal.

Add a few more people, or a few bucks to the ticket price, stir in record sales, and the gig quickly moves from subsistence to downright profitable. Remember, one of the main reasons for a house concert is that there are no hall costs. Or, often enough, any costs at all.

The money (2): performer's guarantee

Should the sponsor offer a guarantee? I think it only fair, but then I'm Canadian. Americans seem to find this a foreign notion. I just figure a worker should be paid. When I present someone here on the island, I always offer a guarantee, though it is safely low.

As a performer, I have become so confident of the success of my house concerts that I don't worry much about the guarantee. But without one, I am insistent that there be advance ticket sales. *[How gauche. - MS]* Then I can check sales a couple weeks ahead and back out if the show sounds like a disaster. In fact, I have never had to do this, and have only played twice (out of dozens and dozens of shows) to uncomfortably small audiences.

If, as the promoter, you are worried about covering a performer's guarantee, try dividing the cost among friends. Ask each if, in the unlikely event of a loss, he or she would chip in up to \$20 or \$30. This has the added benefit of getting more people involved early, and with a vested interest to boot. I recently made this kind of arrangement to cover a guarantee for England's Jez Lowe and the Bad Pennies who I knew were performing nearby. I had no trouble finding a couple dozen "foul-weather" friends. In fact the show (and the weather) were great, with the gate leaving the guarantee in the dust and the backers' stakes safely in their pockets.

The money (3): dividing the spoils

When it comes to disposing of the proceeds, various arrangements are possible. Many sponsors will give performers the full door. [*I always do.* - MS] Some take out expenses for the coffee, etc., some like a small cut, and some want to share the money with a favourite cause. All can work. But bear in mind: a house concert is something that is sponsored for love not money. That is part of the charm, part of what makes it personal, part of the reason friends will come even though they have never heard of the performer.

Numbers and space

I tell sponsors I need a minimum audience of 30. (Then, if there is a blizzard and only a dozen couples show, I still have a playable house.) Usually, and happily, the attendance is higher. A few times I have played to about 100 in a large (and very crowded) living room.

The actual size of the room will pretty much determine the potential audience. A good rule of thumb is 5 square feet per person.

Your living room is too small? Remember the sponsor and the host need not be the same person. It is a long-standing and sensible tradition to guilt-trip a wealthier friend with a big living room into offering it for the occasion. Do not feel badly about this, but rather, think of it as a favour: I am told it is one of the things St. Peter looks for in rich people's dossiers. [*This paragraph is in poor taste.* - MS]

Technical issues

What technical issues? Check that there is toilet paper. [*3-ply is best.* - MS]

Promotion

In my experience, people will come to a house concert for the following reasons. In order:

1. They are happy to accept an invitation from a friend.
2. It sounds like a good party and a chance to see the gang.
3. It is an odd and intriguing thing to do.
4. It is for a good cause (if it is for a cause).
5. They want to hear the particular performer.

Which is to say, it is essential to "promote" the event in the same personal way you would any celebration you have decided to host at your home. Whether you phone people or send written invitations, the personal contact is crucial. If, in addition, you want to advertise (whether by a poster at the office, a note in a newsletter, or an announcement in the press) that is grand, and the resulting extra sales are a bonus; but the friends you invite yourself must fill most of the seats.

Other promo tips:

- Loan out CDs or cassettes. This can be very effective. When we presented Jez Lowe, I made up cassettes with three representative songs and left them at the local coffee bar for borrowing. They moved briskly, and the show (which we put on outside) drew 250 people, virtually none of whom had heard of Jez Lowe before.

- Most folk performers have old friends and fans (old in both senses), most everywhere. Folkies are, by and large, the sort of people with whom the silverware is safe, so performers can offer (and sponsors might want to ask for) the names and numbers of area fans.
- Performers can (and should) provide promo material, including graphics, poster art and a write-up the sponsor can send out or draw on.
- To add to the party atmosphere (and the attractiveness of the event), invite people to bring a plate of finger food and/or a bottle.

Tickets (1)

Should there be printed tickets? A reservation list? RSVPs? This is a judgement call for the host to make. I recommend the advance ticket route (or pre-paid reservations). For several reasons:

1. People who have already bought tickets don't change their minds at the last minute.
2. I have seen an RSVP-ed (but un-ticketed) full house evaporate because a storm blew in.
3. The best advertisement is someone who has already bought a ticket.

Tickets (2): Price

You know best what price is suitable for your friends. But don't skimp. I am comfortable charging \$15 or "whatever you can afford."

I recommend you have an "earlybird" price, expiring a week or two before the show. Say \$12 for the early bird, \$15 after that. The purpose being, of course, to encourage advance purchase. There are several other ways to skin this cat, but the important thing is to know well in advance how many people are coming. Then you will know, for instance, whether to say yes or no to last minute callers. [*Or how many jicama sticks with chili powder and lime to prepare - MS*]

Seating

There are several ways to seat 40 people in a living room. Ask everyone to bring a folding chair or a cushion; borrow stacking chairs from a church or union hall. [*If you borrow chairs from a union, why not go farther and borrow banners, placards and hiring boards and use them to decorate. What fun! -MS*]

In my experience, as old as we are, we can still sit on the floor for an hour in relative comfort. In fact it can feel kind of good, psychologically.

Going public

Yes, you can hold a house concert in a public hall and invite the general public. Many have done this successfully - although you should be aware that the expenses can mount quickly. I, myself, never use a sound system in a living room. In a larger hall or public space, sound or lights may be necessary. This is still not an onerous proposition - talk it over with the performer. However, though the event is now "public", you should still promote it in the personal way.

House concert fundraisers

Fundraising by holding a house concert (or any public event) can work out well, but it demands careful planning. The same gathering of 40 people can raise less than

\$100 or over \$1000. It is, in fact, not a lot harder to raise the larger amount, but the event must be planned with the fundraising goal firmly in mind.

There are a number of sure-fire tricks of the fundraiser's trade, like coupling the concert with a Goods and Services Auction. And so on. There is an excellent guide to effective public event fundraising available free from the Canadian government. Isn't socialism grand? [*No* - MS] It is called "Guide to Special Events Fundraising" by Ken Wyman. To find out where to get a copy, contact Ken at KenWyman@compuserve.com.

Martha and I hope your house concert is a splendid occasion. [*Don't forget to clean behind the toilet.* - MS]