

## HOUSE CONCERTS – FROM [www.TRRitchie.com](http://www.TRRitchie.com)

The late T.R. Ritchie was one of the first to write a guide specifically for first-time house concert hosts. Entitled ***BRING IT ON HOME: A Simple Guide To Producing House Concerts***, his little booklet covered all the details: room requirements, publicity, preparing the concert space, hosting the show, breaktime refreshments, CD sales, money issues, artist accommodations and more.

The text of the booklet is included below, so read all about it, then consider hosting a houseconcert yourself sometime...

### **HOUSE CONCERT (hows KAWN sert) n.**

1/ A live performance before an assemblage of music enthusiasts by a musical artist or artists in a private residence or equivalent setting, sometimes held in conjunction with other festivities, i.e. potluck supper, song circle or jam session.

2/ A unique opportunity to experience a favorite performer, up close and personal, without musical amplification or other artificial barriers between the performer and listener.

3/ A superior alternative to those noisome, crowded, hard-to-get-to venues downtown.

4/ In rural and/or suburban communities, sometimes the only option for hearing live music locally at all.

5/ An interesting addition to the itinerary of the touring musician.

6/ A lively, economical antidote for NEHAH (Nothing Ever Happens Around Here) Syndrome.

### **...THE OBVIOUS CHOICE**

What could be more natural? You love hearing music in a live setting. I make my living playing music. Next time I come through your town, why don't we do a house concert? If you've ever hosted a New Year's Eve party for friends, organized a garage sale or thrown together a neighborhood potluck, you have all the necessary skills required. This little booklet is designed to cover all the bases and outline the details step-by-step to take you from: "Where do I begin?!" to "Let's do it again!!"

It's not rocket science. You can do this. Trust me.

## **ON THE FINGERS OF ONE HAND**

Everything you'll need to do can be enumerated on the fingers of one hand... assuming you have at least four fingers.

1. Find a place for the concert.
2. Spread the word.
3. Set up the room
4. Host the show.

### **1/ FINDING A PLACE**

Well, it doesn't get much simpler than this - we'll do the show in your living room. That's why they're called house concerts, right? Attendance usually runs between 25 and 50 at most house concerts, so if you have a good sized living room, say 12'x15' or larger (about 650 sq. ft.), we're in business. Move the furniture around and you can get a lot of bodies in a space that size. It might be snug, but one of the charms of house concerts are their inherent coziness.

Still, what if your place is just too small? Not to worry. There are all sorts of non-house possibilities. I've done these unamplified shows in bookstores, music shops, in public-library rooms, art galleries, school rooms, community halls, grange halls, church basements, barns, back patios - the informal character of house concerts make them adaptable to any number of environments.

For our purposes, though, let's assume you do have a room of sufficient size. I'm coming through on tour in a few months and we've set a date for the show.

Now what?

### **2/ SPREAD THE WORD**

Start talking it up. House concerts are still fairly rare in many areas of the country, so the idea of turning your home into a temporary concert hall will be a novel concept to a lot of people. But once people experience a concert in a home setting they usually become enthusiastic converts. In fact, this might be the time for a cautionary disclaimer: You may find your one-time foray into producing house concerts so enjoyable that it evolves into a regular or semi-regular series. Worse things could happen.

Once you begin letting people know about the concert you'll discover why house concerts are so well suited for smaller, more closely connected communities - most of your promotion will simply be word of mouth.

Your audience - and typically upwards of 90% of it - will be people you know or friends of theirs, so just start talking it up. Friends, relatives, people at work. Invite the neighbors on your block. Tell your children's teachers, the family doctor, the check-out clerk at the

market, the mechanic who works on your car, the tellers at the bank - anyone you come into contact with on a day-to-day basis whom you think might enjoy live music. Let them know someone's going to come perform a concert right in your living room. Maybe you'll want to have a potluck supper beforehand. If your circle of friends include musicians, maybe you'll want to have a jam session after the concert. Let people know. Remind them that T.V. hasn't completely usurped the culture. Yet.

Make up some postcards containing the relevant concert information: A description of the music. Date and time. How much the suggested donation will be. Whether you're planning a potluck, jam session, etc. Include your phone number for reservations (more on this later) and directions. Carry a few of these in your car and bag or purse and hand them out. You can also mail them out as invitations.

If you're internet proficient, put together a mailing list and send out an email notice. The beauty of email is that you can send several reminders regarding the show, reservations, etc.

Another thing that works well - this if you're hosting the show in some more neutral, out-of-house setting - is to print up some flyers and post them around town: in the bookstore window, on market bulletin boards, at the library, laundromat, local music store - wherever there's foot traffic. As a simple courtesy, always ask for permission to post things. Usually people don't mind. And in the week following the show, make the rounds and remove them. People will appreciate your efforts.

Something else - tape a couple of these flyers inside the rear side windows of your car. A lot of people will look at them out of curiosity as you go about your daily errands. And keep one of your postcard near your phone at home as a reminder to mention the concert in your everyday phone calls.

If the concert is being held in a more neutral setting you can do this broader job of advertising, but you probably won't need to concern yourself with these last suggestions - the flyers around town and in your car's windows - if the concert is going to take place in your home. If you're like most people, you're probably hesitant to throw open your home to just anyone. In an alternative space you can comfortably go for a larger, more diverse audience.

## **STAY CALM**

Some timely words of advice: Breathe in. Breathe out. Relax. Take it easy. The whole idea is to make a good thing happen and enjoy yourself while you're doing it. All this publicity stuff doesn't have to happen overnight or occupy your every waking moment. If you have a wide circle of friends it probably won't take much advertising to fill the house.

As far as timelines go, here's a general plan for moving things along:

**A month before the show:**

Make up your postcards and start letting people know about the concert - the word of mouth thing and hand-outs. Do an initial email announcement.

**Two weeks out:**

Do a postcard mailing if you like, put up flyers if that's appropriate for the event. If you want to get really ambitious, especially if house concerts aren't the norm in your community, maybe we can get in touch with the local newspaper and do an article timed to appear the week of the show. Most performers are pretty well versed in the promotion of concerts and can help you with everything you'll need along those lines: postcard and flyer blanks, press releases, photos, etc. Post an updated email announcement and reminder.

**The week of the show:**

Make a last round of phone calls to remind everyone to come out, one more email reminder, then give yourself a pat on the back for a job well done.

NOTE: Keep a running account of whatever expenses you accrue, plus receipts: you'll reimburse yourself after the concert and the performer may want the receipts for business expense tax purposes.

**THE BIG DAY**

Now comes the Big Day.

TIP: You can avoid a lot of that hectic last-minute-details feeling by doing a little prep work a few days beforehand. Remember, you want to be able to enjoy the concert, too, so don't run yourself ragged.

**3/ SET UP THE ROOM**

You might set up the room for the concert this way:

STAGE. Create a "stage" area for the performer in your concert room - in front of the fireplace or french doors, in an open corner of the room - and arranging the seating facing the stage.

LIGHTING. Place a floor lamp or small table with a reading light near where the performer will sit or stand. This will usually suffice, but to do an even better job of lighting, lay hands on one or two utility clamp lights, available for \$6-\$8 each from almost any hardware store. Fit them with, say, 60 watt bulbs, and devise a way to mount these, maybe on a camera tripod or the ceiling light fixture or clamped to convenient curtain rods, and direct them toward the performer.

SEATING. Let's think about that a minute. Do you have enough chairs of your own? If not, consider places you might obtain loaners: school, church, the library etc. You can even tell

people to bring their own. Or forget the chairs and arrange for people to lounge on the floor. Or do some combination of all these. Of course, you can always rent folding chairs as a last resort, but the idea is to keep production costs to a minimum.

#### **4/ HOSTING THE SHOW**

House concerts typically consist of two sets of music of about 40-45 minutes each with a short break between - about 20 minutes - so that people can stretch their legs, chat, have refreshments, visit the facilities, purchase the artist's CDs, etc. - more about this in a minute.

After people have assembled and settled in, you'll welcome everyone and introduce the performer with something simple like:

Good evening, everyone. Thanks for coming out. Tonight we're fortunate to have with us a wonderful musician and performer, so let's get started. Please welcome...

**At the break** you might want to have light refreshments on hand, things like coffee, tea, sodas, chips and dip, etc. You can also ask a few friends to bring homebaked goodies as well. In fact, it's a good idea to enlist a volunteer to oversee some or all this chore (remember - you don't have to do it all.)

**VOLUNTEERS** - It's a usual perk to grant free admission to the people who help out the night of the show, such as your refreshment coordinator and a person to collect money at the door and handle CD sales for the artist.

**BREAK REFRESHMENTS** - Have a couple of coffeemakers in service to keep up with demand, plus the usual condiments on hand: cream, sugar, honey, etc. And plenty of cups. Do you have enough cups? If you want to eliminate a lot of dishwashing, lay in a supply of paper cups, napkins, plates - recyclable...you might as well set a good example while you're at it. Also, set out a basket with a sign that reads: "Donations For Treats" to help defray some of your expenses.

After the break, make a short reintroduction of the artist, then sit back and enjoy the rest of the show.

#### **THE MONEY THING**

I averaged about \$350-\$400 per house concert in 2002, which breaks down to a paid attendance of 35-40 people at \$10 per registrant (or 23-27 @ \$15 per). As I say, this is an average, but a good place to start when trying to formulate financial expectations.

There are a number of ways to compensate me for my performance. If you're in a financial position to do so, you could simply pay me out of pocket. A variation of this is to pool resources with a few friends toward this same end.

The most common way to reimburse me, though, comes from those who attend the concert, by way of a "suggested donation" or "registration fee". Don't let these terms confuse you. It's just semantics. Since house concerts can be defined as private performances in private residences, they fall outside the boundaries of commercial statutes which apply to public clubs or concert halls regarding licenses and entertainment taxes and such. You call it a registration fee or suggested donation, but for all intents and purposes it's the same as a ticket price, cover charge, or admission fee. Different name, same animal. A rose by any other name...

The simplest way to deal with the money thing is to simply collect it at the door the night of the concert, but this can be risky, both financially and aesthetically, due to no-shows. (See below)

If you're not paying the performer directly, by far the best way is via pre-paid advance reservations. This way you'll know exactly how many people to expect and it helps answers several questions and eliminate a couple of problems. One, it provides keys to seating and refreshment needs. Two, if people pre-pay they are less likely to cancel at the last minute, and even if they do, I still get compensated.

**NO-SHOWS.** No-shows are an all-too-common fact of life, and can be the bane of house concerts. Attrition rates of between 30%-60% are not at all unusual, even if people have solemnly promised you under oath to assorted Dieties that they'll be there. Things come up. They have to work late. Kids get sick. They're just too tired. Whatever. It happens. And nothing is more disappointing than to be expecting a full house and then have half or more of the chairs go empty. It's doubly worse when you've had to refuse people who wanted to come because you thought you had a full house.

At the minimum it takes an audience of at least 25 people to generate the good energy for a really successful house concert, so unless you've sold it out via pre-sales, ALWAYS continue to accept reservations, paid or unpaid, until you have the money-in- hand as proof of a sold-out show. If people are reluctant to commit to pre-sales registration, explain that it's a first-come, first-admitted, situation and that the only way they'll be guaranteed a seat is with pre-sale registration before the show.

One thing that can make it easier is to offer an incentive of, say, a \$2 discount for pre-sales admission versus full price at the door. Another way to encourage pre-sales is to set up an account with Paypal so that you can take credit cards.

**PAY-PAL.** Have you heard about PayPal? It's a very convenient way for anyone to accept credit cards, which are in themselves a convenient means of making pre-paid reservations. I know of several house concert producers who use PayPal for just this purpose. Check out the website at [www.PayPal.com](http://www.PayPal.com).

In any event, at the end of the evening you'll have taken in X amount. In most instances you'll extract your expenses and and send me on my way with the remainder.

## **ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Here are a few other things to consider during the course of getting ready for the show:

**CO-PRODUCERS** - There's no law that says you have to do it all by yourself. Enlist a friend or two and divvy up the work - it makes for a lot more fun.

**WHAT TIME DO WE START?** - For Friday or Saturday shows, things get under way about 8 or 8:30. If you do a weeknight or Sunday show, start things a half-hour to an hour earlier - or perhaps consider a late afternoon show on Sundays, especially if it's in conjunction with a potluck or picking session...more about this later.

**SMOKING OR NON-SMOKING?** - Early on, discuss preferences with the performer regarding smoking - both theirs and yours. Usually house concerts are non-smoking affairs, with accommodations - most typically out on the porch or on the back stoop or patio - for those who feel the craving before the show, during the break, or afterwards.

**THE KID SITUATION** - Since the shows happen in such close quarters, children can cause considerable disturbance if they don't have the capacity to sit attentively through the two hour concert. As a general rule it's a good idea to encourage people to arrange for sitters for children below the age of about twelve.

**PARKING** - Is there adequate parking in your neighborhood to accommodate the extra cars? A secondary benefit of inviting your neighbors is that they usually won't take issue with the parking situation if they feel like they've been included in the loop. Just make sure your guests don't block driveways or fire hydrants, or otherwise complicate life for themselves or others.

**PERFORMER ACCOMMODATION** - The performer will need a place to stay while in town, whether with you or by arrangement with someone else. Think of the performer as a distant relative or old college acquaintance. Make up a place in a spare room or on the couch in the den. Show the performer where the coffee is in the morning. Lay out a towel and washcloth. That'll be great.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** Some performers are extremely allergic to pets; others have adverse reactions to tobacco smoke and the like, so when you're talking to the performer about accommodations, remember to ask if they're susceptible to these or other irritants. One more thing: If you'll be providing meals, make sure you know their carnivore/omnivore/vegetarian affiliations early on.

**THE EXPANDABLE CONCERT** - You might feel like going all out with this and turn the concert into an all day/night affair, with a potluck, jam session, cookout, etc. This is good. This makes life bigger. And by all means, if you know musicians who are coming to the concert, invite them to bring their instruments. It's another charm of house concerts that they so easily evolve into a loose and communal music exchange after the show.

HOW ABOUT A WORKSHOP? - I frequently do songwriting workshops in conjunction with my concerts. They're informal sessions, usually about two hours in length, for groups between 10-15 participants, at around \$30 per person. The format is a round-robin discussion. We'll critique works-in-progress, talk about finding the songwriter's authentic voice, explore ways of developing melodies, discuss how to develop arrangements for effective performance, and answer other music and music business related questions. Anytime people are interested in doing workshops I'm happy to come to town a little early, or stay on a little longer to hold a session.

## **SURPRISE ENDING**

Guess what? We're done. That's all there is to it. Now that you've seen how easy it is, spread the word: House concerts are a coming thing. And I'm convinced they're going to become more and more popular as time goes by. We live in an increasingly isolated culture and people are hungry for an authentic experience of community. They want to be part of something real, and house concerts - however humble a gesture they may be - can be a little part of that reality. They illustrate that people can make things happen, right there where they are, without the necessity of a lot of hype or expense, and that music, art, and some kind of magic are still afoot in the world.

Let's toast to it then - to making things happen. Let's bring it on home. Because it's ours.

Yrs Fr A Sng - TR Ritchie