

**The Working Blues Musician: How to Get the Gig, Play the
Gig and Get another Gig**

Blues Chattanooga: Center for Blues Studies

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Introduction---I recently met a young musician in town and we started talking about what it takes to make it as a working "gigging" Blues player. Of course I knew most of the answers from experience. When I first started twenty years ago no one ever showed me any written rules on becoming a working musician. It was all trial and error and some real hard KNOCKS. As it turned out this is basically what he and I ended up coming up with to answer his questions. So I will write it up and pass it on. In some cases I may be preaching to the choir. But even if you are a seasoned working pro maybe there is something you can use. Maybe it will help the next musician coming along. The "gigging" musician is a person who pays attention to the following:

1. Musicianship---Skills and skill set on instrument.

Practice. Practice. Practice. Listen. Rehearse. Listen.

Listen. Rehearse. Regardless of whether it's a gig coming up or not. Your goal is to get a tight group that can

impress booking agents, club owners, promoters, etc;. It takes a lot of practice to develop a solid group sound where it all locks in the pocket. Playing music in public is just like any other performing art, you have to have a definitive plan and a definitive list of songs. You have to put that in a show format.

Immerse yourself in the music. Listen to it. Study its history and major players. Learn the Blues standards. Keep listening all the time, day and night.

2. **Dress Code**---Look the part. Have cleaned, pressed pants, shirt, vest, hat (optional). Polished shoes (black or black and white). Start with basic black and build on. Look at older photos of stylish Blues and Jazz players. Don't show up to a gig with work clothes, sneakers, torn t shirt, etc;. Musicians are style trend setters. All musical genres have their definitive sartorial rules. You chose the Blues so look the part.
3. **Maintain a positive team orientated attitude**—Be helpful. Once you get set up, help the drummer or soundman or roadie or someone else with their equipment. Same on the breakdown. Be a team player and follow the set list script. Pay attention to what is going on and what the front man is saying. Be very courteous to the employer of the gig. Be clear about the rules and regulations of the gig and follow them.

4. **Be punctual.** Time is money. Observe all set and rehearsal times. Some band leaders have a fine structure for being late. Be considerate of others who also have to manage their time in order to be on time. Try to avoid showing up 15 minutes to the hit time. That is totally inconsiderate of others and throws everything behind. Rule of thumb is to get to a gig or rehearsal an hour ahead of time in order to set up, chill and be ready to hit at the designated time . The leader will establish the time. If there is an emergency and you will be late or unable to show, it is your responsibility to contact the leader by phone, text, email, etc;. Not being punctual leads to the loss of revenue.

5. **Equipment**--Have your own equipment and have it in working order. Have a backup if necessary. Some players are able to keep a backup instrument and backup amp in close proximity. Keep spare batteries, fuses, cords, power strips, tools, tape, small flashlight, etc;. Have your own mike, mike stand, music stand, cords, keyboards, drums, etc; regardless of what you play. All vocalist should have their own mike, mike stand and mike cord. All horn players should have their own mike, mike stand and mike cord. Mark your cords, mike and stand .

6. **Observer the set list and the breaks.** Don't have the leader searching for the band after a break. Don't have the leader on stage alone waiting for the band. Breaks are usually 15, 20 or 30 minutes. In some cases such as corp. gigs, the musicians do not mingle or eat with the guest. Most sets run 45 to 50 minutes. Roughly seven numbers with one solo each tune and a band introduction. Established bars and bar backs prefer you not play one and one half hour sets. Check with each location on their expectations about set times, load in times and breaks.
7. **Transportation**—A working musicians has a vehicle or access to a vehicle and/or driver that can transport the musicians and equipment. A working musician maintains a running vehicle. Do not expect your band mates to pick you up and take you home unless you make arrangements and/or give them gas money. The standard rule of thumb is every musician on their own bottom. It is up to you to get to the gig.
8. **Communication**—A working musician has and maintains a working phone number and if possible email. Communicating is the basis of business. A working musician responds in a timely fashion to a call or email about a gig or other opportunity. Band leaders get very

annoyed with players who are hard to contact, have their kids answer the phone mindless, get a mad wife or girlfriend who hates you are gigging, a teenager who could care less about your call let alone carry a message or a situation where you can't leave a message, etc;. Be conscious of the value of communicating. In some cases there will be an open call and this means that whomever calls and responds first gets the gig. Remember this is a business that's based on the "call" . You have to be in a position to take the call and respond to the call in a timely fashion. It is up to you to promptly return your calls because this is the "music business" . Never leave a band leader hanging by not returning the call promptly. This may eventually lead to you being ignored and not called about work. Always respond to any phone call, message, email, text, letter in a prompt fashion. Many good players have lost out because they were slow in returning that call for the three month tour or the 10 festival dates.

9. **Observe the business structure and the leader**—It all falls on the **leader**. If someone approaches you on the gig with a question or issue you always refer them to the leader. The **leader** is responsible for the welfare of the band . The **leader** pays the band in a timely fashion

based on an agreed upon wage stipulated in a scope of work or short contract. The **leader** deals with booking, promotion, the gig management. In some cases you are hired for the gig with a verbal agreement. In other cases you may be given a scope of work or a short contract. Be able to produce a current drivers license and provide a social security number. Some band leaders will issue you a tax statement at the end of the year. This will benefit you if you make the proper deductions on your own taxes. Also keep records of your own food, equipment purchases, mileage, gas, uniform purchase , repair, cleaning, instrument repair and purchase. Check with your accountant or tax preparer and be surprised at what you can declare as a working musician. Don't ever get into a bind with the tax man, too many musicians have lost it all that way. It is better to be prepared that to dodge it.

10. **Drinking and Drugs:** Working musicians maintain themselves on the gig. Heavy drinking and drugging doesn't work in the long run. Avoid smoking and drinking on stage. If you must bring liquids on stage (tea, water) be discreet and make sure it won't spill into the equipment. No food.

11. **Guest and hangers on**---Working musicians know the usual rule: no wives, no girlfriends, no hangers on. In some cases you may be issued tickets or passes. Dressing areas are usually cramped to begin with. You need very little interference at work. If necessary you purchase tickets for your own people. In some cases you will get a discount rate.

12. **Volume**—Working musicians know that you don't have to play at one level LOUD all night to be appreciated. If you and the band play a fff (Triple forte ---"real dam loud"---blues rock) all night you have no sense of musical dynamics. Then your vocalist is forced to scream over the band to be heard. Learn to use the dynamics of music. Actually, blues and jazz are music's that come across very strong at a moderate volume with a strong bottom beat. Be attentive to where you are playing. A concrete floor is different than playing on carpet. A wood lined room is perfect but that rarely happens. So be prepared to adjust the volume. Let your audience be able to talk to their table mates. Be aware of your audience and the venue. In bars, the last set may get turned up but that's the bar scene. Keep a set of earplugs. You can also get custom made earphones for musicians. They also make earphone monitors.

13. **Pay Scale/About the Bread**—This can be a slippery slope. Very few musicians like to get too specific about the amount of money they make on a gig. Everybody would like to get 100.00 for the gig. But the rule of thumb for the Blues is usually on a sliding scale and it also depends on the quality/rating of the musicians.

Cosmopolitan Pros very seldom work locally for local scale wages. The **working semi-cosmopolitans** form the core of the decent players. This group of players would include the professional musicians with portfolio. They have live performance and studio credits. For many this is their main source of income. On the bottom are the **hobbyist, "scrubs" or least skilled players**. These are the musicians who are willing to play for no or low wages.

Some of them have well-paying jobs or professions and they do it for a hobby. Some of them are just learning or have never really fully learned to play blues. This undercuts the working musicians in a lot of cases.

However, the skill level of these musicians in this group can be a bit "shady". This group lacks showmanship as well and usually they are not very good at live performing.

The rule of thumb is to get the best players you can afford. The better the players the better the gig is likely to go.

In the southeast, most local in-town gigs for in-town bands at a blues venue/bar/restaurant pay a band on the low end 150 and on the top end 450-750. This includes workdays and weekends. The pay is higher on the weekends of course. Some leaders try to get at least 100 a man for gigs. Small festivals, special events and music festivals pay local bands anywhere from 250-500. That is about the scale for opening for a major touring act too. The larger venues and festivals can pay between 500 to 3000.00. These gigs come usually in the summer and are not that frequent in nature.

To go out of town with a band, the scale in the southeast today for a typical Blues band ranges from 175-300 a person for the gig. On overnight trips you also are entitled to lodging and at least one hot meal. If the venue has food and drink for sell, the band usually gets it for free or at a discount price. Always ask the band leader.

Best advice is to always get the details about the gig in writing if possible. That should give you all the details about the date, time, location, pay, dress, rules, set list, etc;. Having the set list and cd of the songs is ideal. You can just ask for a scope of work rather than a contract. Most players use word of mouth and a verbal agreement but that usually becomes the root of an a issue later with

the band leader. It is best to get something in writing and it doesn't have to be a formal contract, it could be a scope of work expectations. The more information you have in pre-production the better the production and the better the outcome.