

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: PERFORMANCE POINTERS

Having a great performance is for most musicians what keeps them persisting in their practice, and generally feeling motivated about music. But satisfying performances are not entirely reliant on good habits in the practice room. There are other considerations, some of which we can have direct control over, and which can be “practiced” in a broad manner of speaking.

The following performance pointers are aimed at creating more enjoyable and effective performances. Some of these can also be applied to band rehearsals, studio recordings and private practice.

PHYSICAL SETUP

The general aspects that combine to create your physical setup at a performance are:

- location on stage in relation to other instruments
- location of foldback monitors (if any) and the number of auxiliary sends
- surface area allowed for the bass player and his/her equipment
- audience size
- venue size
- lighting
- access (ramps/lifts/stairs)

It is wise to think about where you are going to be positioned, in relation to the stage, the other musicians and the audience, before you start lifting all of your equipment, and before you pack for the gig. Talk to the relevant people about your setup and try to imagine your position on stage. It may be that the sound and lighting people have a different idea than yourself or your band leader, so it's better to have a discussion and reach an agreement in advance of the actual performance or rehearsal.

My personal preference is to have a position that gives me visual lines to the drummer and guitarist and/or keyboard-player. I like to stand on the right-hand side of the drummer, which means my natural leftward gaze takes in their drum kit. I know other bassists who prefer to be next to the high-hat, which usually means being on the drummer's left-hand side. I am still able to see the drummer's high-hat very clearly from the right-hand position however, and for jazz I am in a good position - near the ride cymbal.

For larger shows, it is important to see where the P.A. system's foldback monitors are, where they are pointed, and whether they can be moved at all if they are not close to your ideal position. It is also good to know how many auxiliary sends the P.A. desk has for foldback, before you start demanding a

different mix to the drummer and the other musicians on stage. This would also apply to headphone mixes in the studio. Resources are usually limited in this regard, so be prepared for some compromise - you may have to receive the same mix as the drummer or even the lead vocalist.

More often than not, the sound from your cabinet will be better than anything that might come out of the P.A. system's foldback monitors, and although I like to have a monitor near me for the other sounds, I prefer to have no bass in it. The worst scenario occurs when the front of house (F.O.H.) speakers are so loud that the room sound of the bass overpowers your own stage sound. To me this never makes me play well, and alterations in the F.O.H. mix during my performance are distracting. In a nutshell, it is better to be in control of your own sound in the band, even if your good on-stage sound fails to be equaled in the audience.

I prefer a decent amount of space around me, especially behind, so that the bass cabinet can project to me. 4m² is ample space for yourself and your rig, most likely. I like to elevate the cabinet so to enhance its projection, often at an angle towards my ears. Milk crates or a guitar amp stand can provide this elevation. It is good to know the size of the venue and audience so you can bring the appropriate amplifier, if you have choice. I bought a small combo amp for small gigs and rehearsals and my back is very thankful for this. Remember that the sound produced by a small amp mightn't be as good as the big rig, but spinal cords are expensive these days!

I also like to have a well-lit space, especially from white-ish lighting directly above, as it aids my reading and peripheral vision of the fingerboard. When performing in a black stage pit where the only light comes from music stand lights (sconces), I set up an extra sconce on a high stand above the neck of my bass, to throw light down onto me.

Lastly, try to keep the floor area free of cables, so that they are not repeatedly stood on. Gaf tape any that are near thoroughfares or well-travelled routes.

THE SIGNAL CHAIN

It is important to understand the basics of how the electronic representation of your sound flows. This is important to maintain the best sound quality and is also useful for troubleshooting.

The flowchart in Figure 15-1 illustrates one possible pathway your signal takes from the moment the strings' vibrations are picked up, through to the delivery of the sound to the audience's ears. This illustration might seem complex, but it does not account for the numerous microscopic pathways that are either rare causes for technical problems or are so small as being out of the scale of this flowchart. Always address problems with signal flow in a systematic manner that follows along this flowchart.

The golden rule with signal chains and a quality sound is this: garbage in = garbage out. You'll hear sound engineers talk of “signal-to-noise ratios”, which are about maximizing signal in relation to noise. This doesn't mean boosting signals to the point of distortion! It means reaching some optimum