

REVIEW | Performing Popular Music: The Art of Creating Memorable and Successful Performances

David Cashman & Waldo Garrido

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It is surprising to observe the limited number of books available to popular musicians who are interested in improving and expanding on their approach to live performance. Indeed, this is acknowledged by the authors of this book, which largely targets musicians who have reached an accomplished level of technical ability on their instrument: "There are very few books that discuss the nature of performance except in passing. It is this lacuna that this book seeks to address" (p. 3). Written in a relaxed, informal manner and drawing upon the experiences of the authors and a number of industry professionals, the book not only explores the mindsets of popular musicians when it comes to creating successful performances, but also those of jazz and classical musicians too. Touching upon areas such as individual and group rehearsal techniques, constructing dynamically effective setlists, engaging a band manager and navigating the various roles of musicians within ensembles, the various challenges and necessary skillsets are all outlined very well.

Cashman and Garrido take a two-pronged approach in advising budding performers: firstly, how to create memorable performances in a creative and psychological sense, and secondly, understanding and navigating the business of live music. Musicians who regularly perform already will find some of the information a little basic perhaps – planning, marketing and executing a gig effectively, for example – but others who are just starting their journey in live performance will likely find this guidance to be very useful. Some interesting discussion around the importance of showmanship versus musical technique is

summed up rather beautifully: “Showmanship creates the performance; technique gives you something to say” (2019: 50).

Those who are looking to move beyond the basics will certainly be interested in some of the more advanced topics under discussion – the book explores concepts in live performance psychology (from both a performer’s and an audience member’s perception) which makes for fascinating reading. Understanding an audience member’s drive for attending live gigs, with an ideal ‘sweet spot’ that can be found between entertainment, escapism, aesthetics and educational aspects of the event, certainly challenges a musician’s perception of their own performances. Effective advice with regard to individual practice and the philosophies of group rehearsal can be found, along with the idea of building professional, social and musical trust amongst peers.

Although touched upon towards the latter end of the first section, there is very little reference or practical guidance for counteracting performance anxiety, an issue often encountered by those stepping into the spotlight. The authors do offer some direction towards supportive literature, however. The second section focuses heavily on live music business, and there is naturally quite an emphasis on the success of a live performance being measured against commercial and financial success. Indeed, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, musicians were living in an industry where their recorded performances no longer generated the kind of income that can be garnered from live gigs and tours. There is some clear and useful advice regarding agents, managers and promoters, although a lot of the content seems targeted towards those trying to break their act. Points are contextualised quite usefully between artists like Ed Sheeran and Kylie Minogue and emerging, local acts. A breakdown of a hypothetical event provides a dollars-and-cents, realistic overview of what musicians can expect to earn from a mid-size ticketed performance (with around 500 attendees). Both authors reside in Australia but the advice here is very much applicable to musicians in the UK, Europe and USA.

The last chapter of the book could be considered compulsory reading for those looking to undertake a career in music. The idea of a long, hard road with just as many disappointments as fulfilments is one not easily communicated to those musicians who are just starting out, but Cashman and Garrido manage to be both realistic and encouraging in their approach. Those who are finding their feet in the industry will find this book informative and insightful, whilst those with more experience will enjoy the philosophical and psychological nuggets of wisdom with regard to live performance.