

Open Mic Etiquette



Not be a minute. I'll just tune up.

Can I have the music stand please. It's a bit low for me, can you raise it please?

Now what will I sing? I Oh I know. It's in my book here. Now let me find it. Sorry about this I had it a few minutes ago.

Right, here we go (Strums a chord) Hang on that's in a different tuning, not be a minute. Has anyone a tuner I could borrow?

(Spends two minutes tuning his guitar)

Right, here we go. No idea who wrote this, I got it off an old LP. I must remember to give it back Ha Ha.

(Finally begins with a 60 second guitar instrumental introduction before he starts singing)

Oops – I can't sing in that key! Anyone got a capo I can borrow? Right here we go again.

Damn I can't read my own writing. I'll need my specs. I'll just get them out of my jacket – not be a tick. Oh hi Sid, how are you doing? Haven't seen you for a while.

Here we go.

(Begins again – full guitar intro again – and finally does the song. Huge applause from his friends at the back – all of whom chatted to each other throughout his song.

Thank you so much. I've had a request, but I'm still singing. Ha Ha.

Now, what next. I know – its in my folder here somewhere. Got it.

Oh I need a harmonica for this one. It's in my guitar case, not be a tick.

Right here we go (Strums a chord). Ha ha, not in this tuning I'll not be a minute.

(Retunes his guitar then finally begins with a 60 second guitar introduction then plays a note on the harmonica)

Oops I've put my harmonica in the rack upside down. Ha Ha. I'll just fix that.

This is called Crossroad blues by the way. No idea who wrote it. Anybody know?

(Begins again – full intro once more and finally does the song. Huge applause from his friends again – none of whom really heard it)

Thank you, thank you. Pardon? I thought we got three songs? I've only done two. Oh OK then.

(Whips the lead out of his guitar making a noise like a shotgun come out of the speakers. Sits down with his mates and talks loudly and continually for the rest of the evening).

The guy above is fictional (any resemblance to any person, living or dead etc.etc), but I have seen all of the antics above at some time or other in open mics.

The standard of the performers at open mics is very variable but the audiences are usually very kind. It is nice if you are kind to them too. Here are a few guidelines – all common sense really.

It's worth **having a visit** to any new open mic before you commit to play, even if its just a quick look before you get your instrument out of the car. The styles vary very much. That said, most will accommodate any genre, but you may feel more comfortable at some than others.

Have your **instrument in tune** before you get in front of the audience. Tuners are cheap, and you can usually tune up while someone is playing. YOU don't have to hear the strings as you pluck them, the tuner will use the vibrations and no-one will hear you above the PA.

If your instrument has a pickup and it needs a battery **make sure the battery is in good condition** – and keep a spare in your bag.

Don't get up and say "Now, what will I do..." **Decide what you are going to do** before you get up.

If you sing with while playing an instrument, then **start in the right key**. Make a note of the key or capo position that you use for that song.

If the organizer says 3 songs, he is probably assuming you will take 10 minutes. Do a brief hello and maybe compliment the previous performer. Do your songs with a brief pause between (its really nice to acknowledge the song writer). Don't chat to your friends in the audience, don't tune up, don't change tunings in short set, or rummage through a huge folder of songs. The extra time you take may prevent another performer playing at all, as time get short at the end of the night.

If the organizer says 15 minutes – he means 15 minutes including your hook up time, tuning, and chat. The next performer will be expecting to start 15 minutes after you stand up – not 15 minutes after you finally start.

Don't look at the mic when you are singing. You will look cross eyed.

Don't fiddle with your controls on your pickup. Put them in the middle position. The sound man will over-ride anything you do so **NEVER UPSET THE SOUND MAN**.

When the sound man is setting up, play your instrument slightly loud. It is my experience they usually set the instrument volume to be the same, or louder than the vocals. Then they walk away for the rest of your set. You can then play normally and your voice can still be heard over your instrument.

If there is no monitor (there usually isn't) don't assume that your performance sounds the same to the audience (in front of the speakers) as it does to you (behind the speakers). Trust the sound man.

In a quiet venue you may be able to have the mic a foot (30cm) or even more from your mouth. But in a noisy venue you will need to get your mouth a couple of centimetres from the mic at most. It's all to do with a phenomena called "gain before feedback". Basically the soundman can only turn up the amplification so far before that horrible feedback noise takes over. The only way to get more volume after that point is to increase the volume of sound going into the mic. Get closer to it – similar to talking into a friends ear so he can hear you above the surrounding noise.

Take your own guitar lead. Some open mics expect this.

If you must have the words and chords, have them on a couple of sheets or a small folder. (Tablets and mobile phones are becoming increasingly popular too) A music stand is usually provided, but they won't take a big thick folder. A clothes peg, bulldog clip or fridge magnet may help to stop your sheets blowing away.

Don't expect people in the bar to listen, or even be quiet. They have a perfect right to chat to each other in a pub – that's what pubs are for. Having said that, as a performer, have some consideration for other performers and don't make too much noise when they are singing and playing.

Have a few extra songs in hand – I went to one in Betty Nichols in Kirkcaldy and the two performers in front of me sang three of the songs I had been planning to do.

When you are finished don't remove the lead from your instrument until the sound man says its OK. You can damage the speakers.

Have fun – you may get a free pint from the bar, but not always (or even often!). Chat to other performers (ideally between songs), see where they play, pass information about.

A few words for the Sound Man

The standard of the sound man (it usually is a man, but it is sometimes a woman – but I'll use the term "sound man" as it's shorter and sounds better than "sound person") also varies greatly from open mic to open mic. The worst I have seen experienced simply pointed to the mixer and said "there you go". Most are much better. Here are the habits of good sound men:-

THEY START ON TIME. If they advertise an open mic to start at 8:30pm. The first act (it may well be the soundman himself) starts to play (not do a sound check – that has been done already) at 8:30

They have the mixer in front of the performers where they are listening to the same sound the audience is hearing. If they can't get the mixer to the middle of the audience they, or their assistant goes to that point and then adjusts the mixer till it sounds right.

They use their ears to get they balance right – not the LEDs on the mixer. They know that if they just use the LEDs the instruments will overpower the vocals.

They do not ask the performer to be the judge of the balance. Behind the mic is the worst place to get a feel of the overall balance.

In small to medium venues they keep the mixer's PAN controls centred. They realise that all of the audience wants to hear all of the performers.

They know that if a performer asks for an adjustment to a setting (eg – can I have a bit more guitar please) he means the monitors – not the main speakers. The performer cannot judge how it sounds from the audience's position.

If one singer can't be heard, or a guitar is drowning the vocals and other instruments – it is usually the sound man who is at fault.

If they do not have monitors they try to position the speakers so that the performers can hear something of their own performance above the noise of the audience talking.

A good soundman is a great asset for any performer. A bad one can discourage less confident musicians from ever playing again.