



with Kevin Downing

Coping with Pressure and Stress

It's that time again and of course I hope that you have a great Christmas and New Year – and that Father Christmas brings you that new guitar you have been dreaming about. With that possibility in mind it's good to start thinking about next year in terms of what you want to achieve with your music. Hopefully this article will help you get to a new level.

Many guitar players wonder why they can't perform under certain types of pressure, then get all stressed over it. There are many different degrees of pressure depending on your level of skill and the level you are playing at. Proper preparation is the key to minimising it all, preparation helps heighten confidence and lower pressure and stress.

Let's look at each of the different levels you might be at currently, or heading to in the near future.

Playing for yourself. At this level there is not much pressure on you to perform, so there is not much stress. Unfortunately because of this many don't learn their material very well. A good example of this is a student who practices something, but continually starts and stops all the time, with no continuous flow or time in the music being played.

Playing for your teacher – or just playing in front of someone who is more experienced than you can definitely introduce some pressure. "I can do this no sweat at home, but when I come to the lesson I can't," many students say. The main reason is as above – they simply haven't put the required time in, or practised effectively to really get the music and techniques required into their brain and fingers.

Playing in front of friends / family. This can be scary for a first timer, but friends are normally very complimentary. You do however need to have the material well learnt so you feel comfortable playing without too much bother. It's a good idea to play regularly in front of friends and family to gain performing confidence. Even if you only play one or two songs I'm sure they will appreciate it, and your confidence will grow accordingly. However, don't listen to their advice too much as they really can't give you valuable opinions on your musicianship unless they are experienced musicians themselves.

Jamming with others. At this level you might feel some extra pressure, especially if you are jamming with players who are a lot more experienced than yourself. One good idea is to find out what those musicians normally jam on and practice that material more thoroughly before going to the session. When jamming it's normal to encounter music you're not familiar with. You need to be prepared for this by listening to a vast array of music – easy these days with the likes of Spotify, YouTube, etc.

Busking. Many of my students find busking is a very rewarding thing to do – not only in terms of money, but also testing your skills on audiences you don't know. Both areas can add pressure and stress if you don't know what you're doing – if you're playing the wrong sort of music for the passing audience it's likely you won't get very much cash in your hat. And if you are testing your performance and audience communication with inadequate skill sets you won't have much success either.

Open mic night performances. These can be very stressful to some because the room is normally full of other musicians, so it really pays to know the material you are going to play much better than the previous level. Meeting and talking to the other performers will help you relax and perform better, and meeting with them will help you understand that they are most probably just as nervous and under pressure as you are.

Performing for small audiences, like those of pubs, clubs, etc. At this level you are normally getting paid for your efforts, which requires you to know your material much better than at prior levels. Knowing your material better and developing the ability to cope with distractions (like cameras in your face, the audience moving about, soundmen around your feet, etc.) will help you succeed at this stage.

Live television. Here the pressure tends to go up again, mainly because there is only one chance to get things right and the audiences are much more critical. You just don't know who is going to be watching your performance; there could be famous performers, newspaper critics, bloggers etc., out there critiquing the show.

Performing to large audiences – for instance as support act for a town hall gig. By this stage most have either got over stage fright or learnt to cope with the pressure and stress of this type of performance. That said, I know of many who have never got used to the pressure and stress of performing.

Sight-reading gigs – where you don't know the music to be played very well, or haven't seen the music score before. These are only for a certain type of player. You need to have sight reading skills up to a very high level and be able to play different styles of music well. You also need to enjoy being in pressure cooker-type situations to come up with parts to suit the music of the moment, and to suit the MD.

Performing arenas and stadiums. The dream? Getting to play for 10,000+ people is only for a few. Still, it's not a bad thing to get your skill level up there because every person I know that plays at this level never ever thought they would be doing that. You can too if you work your way through each level, keep improving and get used to the different levels of pressure and stress.

It's getting used to the different levels of pressure and stress that hold most people back in advancing their careers in music. Don't let that happen to you. The easiest way to get ahead is to realise that at each level you have to know your stuff much better than previously, and to get out there and perform at every opportunity you can.

If you have trouble understanding any of this, or need help to get to the next level, seek out the services of a professional guitar teacher.

Kevin Downing is a professional guitarist, teacher, and author. His contact details, along with many other articles and freebies, are on his website at www.guitar.co.nz

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