



Practising for Playing Live

Playing live is a skill not too many guitar players practice for at all – but it's worth every minute you can spend doing so. When I say 'playing live' I mean performing in any situation where you might have a small-to-large audience – which could be a jam session, open mic, a church or school performance, cafe gig, a theatre or TV show etc.

No one wants to make mistakes or look inept when up on stage in front of an audience, but I have seen it happen many times, and some of those have been with people you wouldn't expect it to happen to. The common reason is that guitarists don't understand that practising in your normal space is very different to playing in front of an audience where there are all those extra pressures on you to look and sound professional in your performance.

Too many musicians never practice for playing live. They're so intent on getting their parts learnt and up to speed that they forget there's so much more going on when playing live. When things do go awry you are most probably in the moment, up on stage in front of an audience. Everything is working without any need for conscious focus and so you are on auto pilot, watching the crowd have fun and communicating with them. If your auto pilot experiences doubt for even a moment then mistakes are going to occur when least expected, and you will have only a split second to react and save the day. Here are a few things to try.

Practice while moving about

Most contemporary guitarists stand up and move about when they are playing, and you will most probably be to. Moving around while playing can be a difficult skill to master, but here are a few tips to get you started.

1. Find a song you'll perform that you know will need you to move about a lot.
2. Get started by moving only minimally while playing along.
3. Once familiar with minimal movement, then step it up a bit more.

Play with your eyes closed

Many of us like to close our eyes to really concentrate on the emotional aspects of a song we're playing, especially those slow ballads. It can even happen unconsciously, but playing with closed eyes isn't easy and you need to have complete confidence in your fretboard knowledge and ability.

Some exercises:

1. Pick something you find easy to play while looking at your fingers then learn to play without looking at your guitar neck or fingers for the complete duration of that song or solo.
2. Once you get good at the first exercise then increase the difficulty level by picking something faster or a bit more difficult to play.
3. At night turn the lights completely off and play your song or solo with eyes open.

Lights in your eyes

One thing that gets a lot of players into serious bother is when the stage lighting is changing all the time. Maybe you're relying on a chord chart and then suddenly you can't see it and have to use your ears.

Some tips:

1. If you have band lighting then set it up in your rehearsal room so there's a spot shining in your eyes while playing or soloing.
2. Use different configurations of the flood lights while playing.
3. Rehearse while using a mixture of spots and floods during songs.

Sound guys at your feet

Ever been on a gig and something is not working well and the sound crew are messing about with the monitor in front of you, or trying to change your cable mid-song? It can be very distracting to say the least, but it's easily practised for and well worth the time involved because you will get it a lot in your pro musician career.

Some tips:

1. Have a mate crawl around your feet while you're playing the most

difficult song or riff of your set.

2. Get your friend to make out they are a TV camera operator and filming around your head while playing that difficult piece.
3. Get your friend to bump into you or make other distractions while playing.

One string has just broken

Changing strings regularly can help avoid this, but strings will still break when you least expect them to. How can you practice for it happening mid-gig?

1. Take the first string off your guitar and play a simple solo piece that uses the first string. Then do the same with the second string missing, then the third string, etc. It's a good idea to do this occasionally while changing strings if you do change them regularly.

2. If you're not changing strings then just pretend you have broken the first string and are not allowed to play any notes on that string, then the second string, etc.

3. Now break a string on a Floyd Rose type guitar! This is where all the strings go out of tune all at once – what are you going to do?

Playing at different tempos than normal

Sometimes band members will count a song in at a much faster or slower tempo than you have been practising. This can throw any guitar player off immediately. Obviously it would be best to use a metronome for count ins, but few bands do that.

1. Try playing a difficult piece at 5 beats per minute faster and slower than normal. How does that feel to you? Get used to it.
2. Try that difficult piece at 10 bpm faster and slower than normal. How does that feel?
3. Play your difficult piece at 15 bpm faster and slower than normal.

Feeling a bit off colour

None of us are feeling 100% every day. There are many things that can keep us feeling a bit off colour – you might have not had enough sleep the night before, maybe feel a bit sick, have a cold, a family hassle etc. The most difficult thing is trying to keep your concentration levels high.

The best way to practice this type of thing is when you are actually feeling a bit unwell.

1. Rehearse something that's easy enough and try to keep your concentration for the whole duration of that piece.
2. Try smiling and looking like you're having fun, even though you are feeling miserable. It's surprising what effect you looking like you're having fun – as opposed to looking miserable – has on an audience, and yourself after a while.

Playing while your brain is fading quickly...

Occasionally you will be asked to play more than you had planned to. You've had a busy week at work and now you are on the gig, it's 2am and the hosts want you to play some more.

The easiest way to rehearse for this type of thing is when you feel like you are fading, eg. late at night.

1. When feeling jaded try to move about a bit more than normal while playing.
2. Try to play more up-tempo music when practising.
3. Having a cold wet towel close by to wipe your face can bring you back to life as well.

Practising for playing live isn't easy, and after all, who wants to practice for when things go wrong? But it is well worth the effort. Players who do this type of practice tend to just breeze through complicated situations that others might melt under. What other things are there you could practice in this kind of way?

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