

Christine Lavin's Tips For The Performing Songwriter

* Pop singer songwriter Livingston Taylor says: My job is to make people feel better." Woody Guthrie says, "My job is to disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed." I think my job is to entertain audiences by making them think, making them feel, making them laugh and if possible, teaching them something they didn't already know. Figure out what your goal is as a performer then use your performance to work toward that goal during the course of the evening.

* The late great blues and folk singer Dave Van Ronk once said, "When music of quality sells, it's good for all of us." Don't root against your competitor if what they are doing is good. The more good performers out there working, the larger the audience and the more work there is for all of us. Resist your impulse to criticize other musicians negatively. We all do it, but try not to. As folk artist Megon McDonough says, "There's room for everybody who's good. We are not competing for one record deal or one concert date. If you are successful, it does not mean that your competitor must fail. People don't have just one CD on their shelf. They have hundreds. They can have ALL of ours."

* There is no dignity in starving. If you are not presently making enough money to support yourself with your music get a day job that will pay the bills while you work on your music at night and on weekends. I worked temporary jobs for years, then was employed full time at New York's Bellevue Hospital. I performed on weekends. (At one point I was a wandering minstrel in a Mexican restaurant every Friday and Saturday nights for six months.) Don't borrow money if you can help it. Julie Gold (author of Better Midler's hit, "From a Distance," also worked full-time on day jobs until her music hit.

* The performance starts for me when the audience walks in the door. Pre-concert music, mailing-list cards on tables and post-concert music are all part of the show.

* Performing in a club is a team effort. Waiters, waitresses and sound people are all part of that team. If they serve alcohol and you've become friends with the wait staff, they might tip you off to "look out for the drunk at table 3" or "crazy talker at table 5." If these people act up during the show you'll know NOT to engage them. Learn the names of the staff if possible, especially the technical or sound person. THANK THEM ON MIKE. They LOVE that. If there's a wait staff, remind the audience to tip them generously. Even if you didn't order anything backstage, leave a tip for the wait person assigned to you. Dave Van Ronk taught me that.

* We are all in the communication business. Sing INTO the microphone. It's important to stay on mic. If you are brilliant off-mic, nobody in the back of the room will know. Do this enough times and they will start talking to each other and ignore you.

* Should you own your own microphones? Sure. Quite simply it's one less variable to worry about. I did this for a number of years, but now don't carry my own because of the weight restriction on bags at airports. But if you can carry your own, do.

* For me there are three kinds of performers: "Love me, love me, love me" (Liza Minelli), "I'll let you watch me" (Suzanne Vega), and "I'm one of you," (Bruce Springsteen). Which one are you? Knowing that will help you shape your performances.

* I've learned from doing, watching and from asking questions. Don't be afraid to ask. Put yourself in a position whenever you can to observe others' work. I go and watch other people ALL THE TIME and I learn something EVERY time.

*Tell the Garry Novikoff Lincoln Center story.

* Singer-songwriter Tom Paxton's rule is come right out. Don't touch microphones, just start singing. That means having everything set up perfectly ahead of time.

* Wear a watch – facing inside your left wrist. This way you can check the time without anyone noticing. Never obviously look at your watch. It breaks the spell you are weaving.

* Respect your audience. Don't work "blue." If you use bad language, you automatically limit the number of places that will book you.

* If you can stand it, listen to tapes of your shows. It will be painful, but you will learn so much that you will progress three times as fast!

* If something weird happens in the room, try not to focus on it. The audience will look where you look and you'll take the focus off yourself.

* Batteries. If I see one more person blow their show because of a dead \$2 battery, I'll scream. Some performers replace batteries every show. On TV battery-run microphones get new batteries ***every single time they are used. ALWAYS HAVE SPARES WITH YOU!***

* Plan your show. You must have a set list. You may want to abandon it midset, but you must start off with a plan. Making it up as you go along may, on occasion, turn into the work of a genius, but more often than not, will produce an unbalanced show. It's hard to think on your feet as you are performing.

* Flow of the show: You don't want to do three "flag wavers" (higher energy, the audience stomps, get ups, claps and dances) in row followed by three "wrist slitters" (quietly, sad, beautiful or emotional songs). Vary things and vary the keys of your songs.

* You are on a date with the audience. Do not talk about where you played last night. They don't want to know. They want you to be in the present, for them alone. Don't talk about the airport of the traffic on the way to the gig. I think that is boring. (Unless something unusual happened during your travels).

* You must always earn the encore. The audience must pull you back. You should never automatically take one. Resist the temptation of zooming back out there. The audience must feel like they are making it happen.

* Put a lot of thought into how you dress for the stage. Whether you want to acknowledge it or not, this is show business, and how you dress will be interpreted by the audience as a statement of some sort. Keep that in mind when you dress for the stage. (Personally, I like to wear things that sparkle. That way they see you in the back.)

* Strength in numbers. A fun side project is to create a group show with others who do what you do. A few years back, I was part of the Four Bitchin' Babes tour and have done other group theme shows ("Three Men and a Babe" at New York's Bottom Line). New audiences might not take a chance on a solo artist they don't know, but four for the price of one, they might spring for it. Creatively, it's inspiring too.

* Never drink alcohol onstage. You are working. If you went into a doctor's office, how would you feel if he was sipping a beer while treating you? Have respect for the stage. No matter how nervous you might be, drinking will not help and can possibly lead you down the wrong path. If you play in places where alcohol is served, sometimes they give you free or half-price drinks. It's easy to develop a drinking problem this way. I'm not saying you have to abstain completely, but while you are working, you must not drink. After the show is a different story. But still, you should watch it.

*Don't go onstage barefoot. When you're on the stage alone, you think everything is copacetic. But you didn't know last night there was a jazz trumpeter and trombone player who emptied spit on the stage floor between songs. Or stepped on a giant bug. A word to the wise.

* Be prepared for anything that might come your way. If asked to do a radio or TV appearance, know exactly how long your songs are. Timing is everything. If they need a 2 and a half minute song, you'll know what you have that fits. When you make CDs make sure that the timing of every cut is accurate and displayed in easy-to-read numbers on the back of the jewel box. I host a radio show and am shocked at how many CDs did not contain this information. It made my job harder.

* If you hit a dry spell or writer's block, don't panic. What I do when I don't feel any songwriting ideas coming is read more (novels, non-fiction). I go to movies. I learn a song by someone whose work I admire. Hopefully one of these things will spark my own songwriting. Learning someone else's song seems to help most, because a new chord progression can lead in new songwriting directions.

* Learn from a bad night. No matter how good you are as a performer, no matter how big you get and how famous you are, there will be nights when things go wrong – you have a performance that doesn't quite click. Understand that this happens all of us. Ask yourself why this performance didn't work, or "What can I do to make sure this doesn't happen again?" But do not get discouraged. Once you have figured out why this one particular show didn't go that well, you can tell yourself that it will go much better the next time. And it will.

* Make sure you pay attention to the rest of your life too. Make time for family and friends, eating healthy, exercising, reading, meditating, exploring other interests and having fun. Tom Paxton calls downtime "filling up the tanks." In order to have something to give the audience, you've got to have a full, interesting life. If all you do is work, work, work, you will be missing out on all that life has to offer. Being a performing songwriter is one of the greatest careers I think one can have, but make sure you have other things in your life that make you happy too. Knitting is a very compatible hobby – makes travel time easier, too!

*Here's the best CD pitch I've ever seen (compliments of John McCutcheon). Hold up a CD and say, "I've got some of these for sale tonight. If you buy one you get to take home a little bit of me . . . and I get to take home a little bit of you." Works every time. Makes them smile . . . and it's true.

***Never** get paid in front of any audience members. Always do financial transactions in private. You never know who is watching, who might follow you home. It's happened. Not to me, but to a friend.

Christine Lavin's Petit Pan Au Chocolat Recipe (Start the night before)

1 packet yeast (1 Tablespoon)
1/4 teaspoon ground ginger
approx 3-1/2 to 4 cups all purpose unbleached flour
1/4 cup nonfat dry milk powder
2 Tablespoons sugar
2 teaspoons salt
3 Tablespoons softened unsalted butter
1-1/4 cups water (total amount)
8 oz. milk chocolate (Favergé or Ghiradelli are excellent)
4 buttered baby loaf pans

1. In a medium size bowl, dissolve 3/4 cup hot water, 1/4 teaspoon ground ginger and 1 packet yeast. Stir, then mix in 1 cup of flour. Stir with a big wooden spoon til it's all mixed. Then cover bowl tightly with plastic wrap and leave it on the counter overnight. It will rise, then fall, and look like a weird sponge from outer space.
2. In the morning, stir down the sponge. Then add 1/2 c. warm water, 1/4 c. nonfat dry milk, 2 Tablespoons sugar, 2 teaspoons salt, 3 Tablespoons softened butter. Add flour, 1/4 cup at a time until you have a good, elastic bread dough. The amount of flour varies, based on humidity, but around 2-1/2 to 3 cups is what you'll use, but it's OK if it's less or more. Dough should no longer be sticky.
3. Turn out onto floured counter and knead for 8 minutes. Add extra flour a tiny bit at a time if it is still sticky. It will be smooth and shiny after 8 minutes and feel 'alive.'
4. Put in a greased bowl, cover with plastic, let rise for 1 hour.
5. Punch down, separate into 4 small balls, cover with a towel and let rest for 5 minutes.
6. Flatten each ball into an oval, kneading out the bubbles, then place approximately 2 oz. of cut up Favergé milk chocolate into each oval, fold over, pinch tightly closed, fold under ends, then put into a greased baby loaf pan. If you can't find Favergé, use a good baking chocolate like Ghiradelli. You can use semi-sweet chocolate instead of milk chocolate if that's your favorite.
7. Line up the 4 baby loaf pans and cover with a sheet of wax paper. After 20 minutes, preheat oven for 375 degrees. Let bread rise for another 20 minutes while oven is preheating.
8. Uncover breads, then place them in the oven, spaced apart. Bake for approximately 25 minutes. Top of bread should be golden brown. Tap the bottom of loaf and it should sound 'hollow.' Cool on a rack for 20 minutes, and serve very warm. Or wrap in aluminum foil and freeze. When you are ready to serve it, thaw, then place in a 200 degree oven for about 15 minutes to soften the chocolate. Or zap it in the microwave for 90 seconds or so (but unwrap it first!) Enjoy!

For the perfect Sunday breakfast you must start the night before
take a large glass mixing bowl and into in you pour
packet of yeast, pinch of ginger, 3/4 cup hot water, cup of flour
stir, cover with plastic, let sit for six hours

In the morning when you wake up stir the sponge down
add 1/4 cup nonfat dry milk swish that all around
add 2 teaspoons of salt, 1/2 cup warm water,
3 Tablespoons of softened butter just like a farmer's daughter

Add 2 Tablespoons of sugar, 2-1/2 cups or so of flour
til it forms a shaggy mass, get ready to feel the power
knead if for 8 minutes, the dough feels fantastic
put it in a greased bowl, cover it with plastic

Let it rise for an hour as you go back to bed
listen to the radio anticipate the bread
punch it down, separate into 4 little ball
let it rest under a towel for 5 minutes, that's all

Uncover, flatten each ball into an oval, that won't be too much trouble
it makes popping sounds as you press out all the bubbles
in the center of each oval put 2 ounces of the best
chopped chocolate you can find, try Favergi, it's French!

Fold each oval into a loaf, pinch the seam closed
tuck under the ends put in a greased baby loaf pan to doze
under wax paper for 20 minutes it will rise
now preheat the oven, 375 degrees Fahrenheit is wise

20 minutes later pop the breads into the oven
set the timer for 25 minutes, perfect for more lovin'!
bread is done when the top is golden,
bottom sounds hollow when you tap it
put one loaf aside, in aluminum foil -- wrap it!

Stick it in the freezer save it for a rainy day
eat the others while they're warm and you'll hear your darlin' say
"this is the most delicious bread! I must have the recipe!"
Guess what? Now you do! *Bon Appetit!*

French Toast Bread Pudding © Christine Lavin

Who doesn't like bread pudding?
Who doesn't like French toast?
If you know me at all you know that I am
not one to boast

But I am going to sing the recipe
the best thing you'll ever bake
good news 15 minutes
Is all the prep time it will take

To make French toast bread pudding
French toast bread pudding
French toast bread pudding

Crack 7 eggs into a big bowl
Whisk 'em all around
Add 2-1/2 cups 2% milk
cinnamon finely ground
1/2 a cup of sugar
2 teaspoons of vanilla you're halfway there
that took less time than Donald Trump takes
to arrange his hair

I'm talking French toast bread pudding
French toast bread pudding
French toast bread pudding

Rip up half a loaf of bread:
Challah, brioche, Pepperidge Farm
Any white bread, stale is fine
You cannot do this recipe harm

Put the ripped up bread
in two well-buttered aluminum loaf pans
Pour on the eggy milk mixture
Divide as evenly as you can

Voila! You're making I'm French toast bread pudding

French toast bread pudding
French toast . . .

BRIDGE:

With a spatula smush the bread down
Get it good and soaking wet
Sprinkle with freshly grated nutmeg
You're almost done but not quite yet

Wrap each pan in aluminum foil
Put 'em in the fridge then go to bed
In the morning put 'em in a cold oven
Yes, a cold oven is what I said

Set the oven at 350 degrees Fahrenheit

***[FOR OUR CANADIAN NEIGHBORS UP NORTH,
THAT'S 176. 66 66 66 66 66 66 69 DEGREES CELSIUS
SORRY FOR THE INTERRUPTION]***

That's OK

Bake for 30 minutes wrapped
But it shouldn't be wrapped too tight
after 30 minutes you unwrap
Then bake for 35 minutes more
By now half the neighborhood
Will be pounding on your door screaming:

***I WANT FRENCH TOAST BREAD PUDDING
GIMME FRENCH TOAST BREAD PUDDING
I NEED FRENCH TOAST BREAD PUDDING
[AD LIB -- I KNOW IT'S IN THERE -- I CAN SMELL IT!
I'M STARVING! DON'T HOG IT ALL YOURSELF!]***

When it's done it's all puffed up **OOOOOH**
Like a pretentious Parisian soufflé **AHHHHH**
When it's not jiggly but firm to the touch in the middle
get it out of the oven right away

Serve it with maple syrup
Serve it with bacon on the side

Serve it with a smile
Take your tastebuds for a ride

A ride called French toast bread pudding
French toast bread pudding
French toast bread pudding

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