



Melbourne's Award Winning Singing, Music & Entertainment School

STARTING A BAND

Starting a band can be a lot of fun. Since you could be starting an original band or a cover band, I'll discuss the points that relate to both. Use the information that relates to your scene. Basically, you get a bunch of musicians together with similar goals, get your material together and go at it; you rehearse and do what you're going to do. Sometimes it's just that simple. Putting a band together to jam every week can be pretty straight-ahead. If you have goals that involve getting paid gigs or live in small town with a scarcity of musician's, things can be little more involved.

Deciding on Material

The material your group is going to do is determined by what kind of music you want to play, *modified* by the types of gigs you want. If you're doing original music, well... there's your material. You write it yourself or as a group effort. If you're getting together just to jam and have fun, your mate-rial could change every week. If the goal is getting paid work, you need to play the kind of music *people want to hear*—that is the main thing that creates a demand for your group. If this is the goal, you need to decide what style(s) of music to play that you can make money with. Getting gigs is fully covered in other articles but keep this in mind: *Immediate income means cover music*. Unless specifically going to an original music club or restaurant to see new artists, people like to hear music they are familiar with and that's what they will pay for. (Original artists make money by selling their CD's at gigs but that's a topic of different article.)

Getting Band Members

Elements that bring people together or hold something already established together are: friendship, future potential, similar goals, and money. In the long run the main thing that keeps a working-group going is money. When you make a living playing music, either you're eating and paying the bills or not.

You generally find band mates from:

- Friends
- Friends of friends
- Students of your instructor (if you have a teacher)
- Musician contact agencies
- Magazine ads
- Newspaper ads

- Music school referrals
- Bulletin boards at music stores, rehearsal studios and the like.

The idea is to get the word out that you either want to start a group or get in an already established one. It can be more hassle-free to get in an established band than to start one and throughout time you might do both.

To get in an already established group you promote a lot, find one who needs what you do, audition, then get the gig or not. If it doesn't work out you find other bands to checkout and keep looking till you find something.

Sometimes it happens quickly and you have your group. Sometimes it takes a long time. It can be easy to get discouraged which is normal. The key to this is to just never stop. You plug along until you have all the needed people. If someone quits or doesn't work out, fine—replace him. (If you have a cover band it's easier to get stable musicians when you have paying gigs.)

Have a “musicians” phone book to keep track of the phone numbers of people you meet.

Categorize it by instrument and keep little notes about each person to refer to in the future when needed. Take note of things like: “sounds good—needs a paying gig now”; “is interested but too busy—check back in a month”; “don't call back—the guy's a jerk”. The more people you know the better. This phone book is the beginning of your musician resources for potential new players, subs and people to call when *you're* looking for work or a new playing situation.

Qualifying Prospects

Once you start meeting interested people you have to establish some basic goals and logis-tics. Don't start up with just anybody who comes along. You could be setting yourself up for a bad time with hassles and problems galore if things don't click and you're already involved—No fun. Now is the time for honest, straightforward and clear communication.

Before making any commitments or agreements, establish the following as best as you can:

1. What kind of music do they like?

Are your tastes similar? Are the styles of music the same or at least compatible? Some musicians have very strong likes and dislikes, whereas some just want to play anything.

2. How serious are they?

Find out if they *really* want to do this. If you can't tell by a phone call or two, get together, hang out and check it out. Very often people who are just starting out don't know how serious they are and need to get involved in order to find out. In many cases they *are* serious about their career but haven't really accepted the “challenge” of it yet—fine. In this type of situation a person shouldn't casu-ally be canned but given a chance to try—up to the point of wasting your time—then it's time to move on.

If you want to work and you hook up with a musician where, “Sure, uh..., a gig sounds, like, uuh—fun, and...if I'm not tooooo busy with...” is the attitude, you'll probably waste your time.

The band member's intensity to do the project should be similar enough so everyone can actually make it to rehearsals and gigs, and have fun by playing good music.

3. How many times a week do they want to work?

If you're starting a working band, find out what the people are looking for. If you want to work five nights a week, let that be known. Don't join up with someone who only wants to work once or twice a week. This is an obvious point, though easily overlooked.

4. How many times a week can they rehearse?

How often would *you* like to get together and play? Make sure that others have a similar desire. When it comes to moneymaking bands you need to rehearse a lot unless you're already established in some zone of gigging. Getting together once a week to jam can be a lighter commitment.

If you're ready to get the band *happening*, make sure the new guys are too. Someone chronically missing two out of three rehearsals to go out of town or to attend Aunt Suzy's dog show will hang the band up and slow you down. Business is business. If you can work rehearsal schedules around a person's life excursions, fine. If not, replace them—don't mess around.

5. Where do people live?

If someone lives too far away it might or might not be workable. Living locations, work locations and rehearsal locations all come into play. Seven o'clock rehearsals won't work if the drummer lives forty mins away and doesn't leave until 6:30, unless he works close to the rehearsal studio and is coming from there. If distance is involved, you need to see if people are *willing* to do what it takes to arrive on time. You have to arrive at rehearsals to do them.

6. Do they have their own equipment and a car?

If you are a teen starting a band, having the folks give you rides to rehearsals is great. Mine did, as well as many of my student's. But for an adult, someone not having a car could mean *you* being their chauffeur. Think about it: Wake up at 7:00 am, go to work, work all day, then drive twenty miles to get a band member, rehearse, drive him/her home, go to bed at 2:00, then do it again tomorrow, and next week and next month. If you don't mind, fine. But people need to have their own transportation. If someone's car is being fixed and they need a ride or is between cars, no big deal. But if someone doesn't have transportation and isn't planning on getting any—"Well man, ah, ya know...uh, Yeah! I can get a ride from my cousin on Tuesdays...and maybe..."—FORGET IT! This person will leech you to unhappiness. Guaranteed.

Make sure they have enough gear to cover what you want to do. A small practice amp usually won't cut it on stage so equipment arrangements need to be made. Make sure the people already have the gear they need, or are at least willing to arrange it. (I realize this might be obvious, but to a new person it often isn't. When starting out in a new field a person usually doesn't have enough experience to observe the big picture and put things in the correct perspective.)

7. Are there any major personality clashes?

You might not know this until you've been around each other for a while: you don't necessarily need to like someone to gig with them. But why make the whole thing a drag? If you don't get along—forget it.

8. How honest and reliable do they seem?

If a guy never returns phone calls, chronically shows up late, doesn't do what he said he'd do, and cancels rehearsals at the last minute—forget him. Do it or don't do it. Occasional mishaps are normal, but the above are signs of a low responsibility level so don't depend on him.

So:

- What kind of music do they like?
- How serious are they?
- How many times a week do they want to work?
- How many times a week can they rehearse?
- Where do they live?
- Do they have their own equipment and a car?

- Are there any major personality clashes?
- How honest and reliable do they seem?

An individual looking for a band needs to know the following information:

- What kind of music do they play? Is it what you want to do or will it at least be okay if the gigs pay enough? (If you looking for paid work.)
- Do they have management, self-book, or haven't they got that far yet? If you want to work right away, the band needs to have this together already. However, if you're not in a hurry it might not matter.
- How many times a week do they rehearse, and where are they? You have to be able to fit your schedule into theirs.
- How many times a week do they want to gig, or are they already gigging?
- How much do the gigs pay? Is it enough?
- Do there seem to be any major personality clashes?
- Do they seem straightforward or flaky? Do they return your calls when they say they will? Do they sound stoned or out of it?
- What kind of equipment is required: do you have what's needed?

Once you find your musicians or band and make sure you're headed in the right direction, it's time to start making it happen.

Having a Band Leader

If you're starting a "serious" band, someone needs to make sure the band as an organization runs smoothly. Someone needs to run rehearsals, organize what's happening, handle any problems or squabbles, and ensure that the things that need doing actually get done. (Even if it's a group effort there should be at least one person who has a final say or influence.)

If you're playing just for the fun of it you might not need a band leader. When I was in a band at the ripe age of twelve, we didn't have a band leader and we didn't need one. We had some school gigs, church and family gigs, and rehearsed every weekend and... Who needed a band leader? Well, my father drove us around, made phone calls and fixed the drums when they broke. So my father, with his infinite support and goodness, was essentially the band leader. My point being that someone will end up being the band leader sooner or later so you might as well do it now.

The band leader has two main zones of responsibility: Internal coordination and external coordination. Internal coordination mainly consists of establishing the band, running it, and keeping it alive. External coordination mainly consists of being in communication with clients, club owners, management and anyone the band has dealings with. Without one person in charge, things can get very confusing.

In every successful band I've played in there was ONE person in charge. Even if he didn't do everything himself, he made sure that everything needing to be done was done. I had a partner in a main band years ago and it was very confusing until we had our personal zones of responsibilities so clearly defined that we acted as one. (One of us was mainly in charge of internal communications and the other in charge of external communications.)

Now, having one band leader doesn't mean that no one has a say. When you put a band together, things are generally mutually discussed, worked out with specific agreements and decisions made. The band leader makes sure that all activities are coordinated so your plans are actually implemented. This person essentially governs any organization's prosperity. This is

the boss, the manager, the executive director—whatever the title and capacity. Someone has to run the show or the show might have a very short run if it opens at all. On the other hand, an individual band leader booking gigs and using sidemen to play them is a different ball game—it's his show and you do what's needed or you don't work/play for him anymore.

The band leader's basic responsibilities are to:

1. Make sure rehearsals are efficient and the band members are in good communication with each other.
2. Ensure the group has work or the right playing situations.
3. Run the gigs.
4. Handle external communications with clients, management agencies and potential new band personnel.
5. Make sure everything stays on track and whatever needs doing gets done—even if he doesn't do it himself.

The key to being a leader is responsibility. You must be willing to be responsible, be capable of responsibility, and actually BE responsible by *doing* the necessary actions to accomplish what is needed. Part of this picture entails ensuring that others are being fully responsible for what they should be doing. Each band member could be in charge of different things but one person should monitor all the activities of the group.

Starting a group deals with people's attitudes as well as the music-side of things. If there are difficulties, aligning personal attitudes and viewpoints with the *group's goals* is the best way to keep everyone on track. Setting band policy is the way to achieve that. Policy is the guideline that keeps the show on the road and enables people to know where they stand in relationship to the whole. All successful businesses, families and groups of any kind have leaders because they need to. When individuals just do whatever they want in a *group setting*, very little gets accomplished unless the activities are coordinated together.

When many people undertake a mutual activity, different personal life elements come into play that could easily clash. Part of starting any group is having a clearly delineated game plan plus some policy to help achieve the objectives.

Game Plan and Policy

The game plan should include: (1) What kind of music you want to play and for what purpose, e.g., work? fun? a CD? (2) If gig oriented, your market—where do you want to gig and what will it take to get there, (3) How soon do you want to be gigging or playing out? (4) How do you plan on getting the work, and (5) Any other logistics needed to get you going. The more organized you are the better. But at the start, as long as you have an idea of what's going on you can brainstorm and organize as you go.

Band policies should simply be the governing factors that enable you to move ahead efficiently; align factors to remedy disputes, and to create a fun and productive atmosphere to work in.

Workable policies are those that promote useful production. Unworkable policies are those that serve no real purpose and are randomly created. Though I'll give you policy examples, YOU are the one who needs to decide what's relevant or not—it's your band. The following policies might be perfect for you, or too strict. Your group might only need a handful of policies or you might need thirty—whatever it takes.

Let's say you have a group goal of "Let's get working right away."

Examples of workable policies:

1. When a rehearsal is set for a specific time, that's when we start playing—not arriving. If you want to chat, get there early. A 7:30 rehearsal means a 7:30 downbeat (start of playing). If it takes thirty minutes to set up, get there at 7:00. Arriving late either cuts back our time, e.g. 8:00–10:30 versus 7:30–10:30, or makes us go later than planned.
2. Never cancel or no-show to a rehearsal unless you are extremely ill, physically damaged or have some kind of major emergency. Not rehearsing equals not being prepared equals not getting our act together equals not working and sounding bad.
3. Unless impossible, prepare whatever you need to prepare *before* the rehearsal. If you need to have tapes, charts or food, get it beforehand and bring it with you. Taking extended breaks to do chip and coke runs can waste time.

Having a Band

When you run through all of the above-mentioned steps you should have your band. Have fun and do what you gotta do. Be true to your personal goals and don't let anyone persuade you to do what you truly don't want to.

Getting Gigs

Whether an ensemble books itself or uses management, the idea is for someone to be fully responsible for CONTACTING PEOPLE and booking the gigs.

Large management agencies have their staff make continual phone calls and run ads in magazines and phone books. Self-booking bands can send out weekly mail, call clubs or hand out flyers. Individual musicians call people for gigs until their appointment books are full. It's just a matter of contacting enough of the right people or already being in a social scene that provides enough contacts to keep you gigging. (By the way, a manager is a person who personally handles the band. He manages it. He'll work with your image, sound, plans and material. He gets gigs through a booking agent or personal contact and assists you along the way with your career. The *booking agent* gets the gigs. Different states have various laws about what these two people can and can-not do or charge. Though things vary, casual bands, club bands and various entertainers deal di-rectly with booking agencies, whereas individual artists, original bands and groups crossing into original music will have personal managers. (A "*Casual Band*" is a group that specializes in one-night gigs such as private parties and weddings.) Some management firms consist of both personal managers and booking agents whereas some specialize in one or the other.)

Everything is relative to what you want to do. As you adventure into the band-starting game, keep in mind that other people have their ideas about things too. Someone having their own ideas doesn't necessarily make them right or wrong—you could just have a different take on what's happening. Different experience levels enter the equation as well. Maybe you're starting your first band and one of the musicians has done it before—fine. Let him/her contribute what they know and maybe have that person be the band leader. If they're too pushy and won't let things go in the direction *you* want to go—handle them or replace them.

Keep it simple, have fun, and go for your dreams.

