

# Boston Songwriters Workshop *Newsletter*

February 2006

## Playing Open Mic Venues

An Original Tutorial by Alan Horvath

Many local clubs feature an "open mic" venue, where songwriters and musicians of all kinds can get their feet wet. It's a great way to find others to co-write with ... or others to form a band, duo, or trio with ... and perhaps most importantly, to perform for an audience and see what it takes to pull off a show of your own.

Coffee Houses and Churches make the best settings for creating an appropriate atmosphere. Clubs, or venues serving alcohol, are usually bad for "intellectual art," which is what open mics are, in my opinion. Let's face it, alcohol doesn't exactly put people in a state of focused awareness, eh? So, if you have a choice, or if you are thinking of starting your own venue, avoid the places that are offering alcohol. Of course, this isn't ALWAYS true, and often it isn't avoidable. But it is worth noting.

Open mics are a lot of fun! Instrumentalists, poets, solos, duos, trios, bands ... you name it ... will usually perform 3 or 4 pieces at a time - which makes it palatable for any audience to enjoy. If you don't like the act that's presently up, well, in 20 minutes they'll be gone and you can enjoy the next surprise. And, often, it is a surprise! You never know when some real talent might step up and do something uniquely from the heart. If you're just observing, you'll find yourself thinking how well you would do in comparison to all that you've witnessed ... but be forewarned! This is not as simple as it looks!

You may have done all your homework ... practiced to the max ... compiled songs that are pure hits ... vocals and parts

worked out to dazzle any audience ... until you're sure you're better than anything you've seen at the local open mics. But on your first try you will most likely drop a bomb as big as any you've seen - and in total disbelief! And, these will be the excuses you find dripping off your bottom lip: "The room was too noisy - I couldn't focus!" ... "I couldn't hear myself! That sound guy is a real jerk!" ... "The guitar wasn't loud enough." ... "The vocal mic wasn't even turned on!" ... I could keep on going, but what's the sense? Fact is, you didn't know what you were doing, and did a poor job. You didn't really think you'd pull it off perfectly your very first try ... did you? Of course you did! You worked hard at this! You prepared thoroughly! So what went wrong? Distraction. Unfamiliar surroundings. Lack of experience. That's what.


So. What to do? Go back next week, and do it all over again. Simple as that. This is what open mics are for! Let's face it ... until you pull THIS gig off, you aren't gonna be touring or getting paid for what you do. But if you focus, keep at it, and figure out all the little things that go on in a club atmosphere, it won't be long before you're a popular and welcomed face at the local open mic scene.

Understand this: Absolutely every person in the audience ... in ANY audience ... wants to see you do well. Really well. They are rooting for you from the moment you get on stage. Think about this for a minute, okay? Slow down ... give this some serious thought ... in fact, stop and dwell on this whole idea for a while, and recognize just how true it really is: The audience is not sitting there judging your talent. And, the audience is not sitting there waiting for the next big thing to strike America like a bolt from heaven, either. They don't care how "great" you are ... or how wonderful you think you are. They are very simply out to have a fun evening ... and when you get up on that stage, they are HOPING you will be wonderful! If they see you struggling at all ... with anything ... they are secretly praying for your success ... sending you their energy and their precious love ... why? Dig this: Because they are putting themselves in your shoes, man! They are being "you!" Isn't that what you do when you are watching and listening to an act? Meditate on this concept. It's a true concept ... and it's a healing one, too. When you get up in front of an audience, you start with them on your side.

See *OPEN MIC VENUES*, page 3

## *Announcement*

Luke MacNeil is the new editor of the *BSW Newsletter*.

If there is anything you would like to communicate to BSW members, drop a note to [lukemacneil@comcast.net](mailto:lukemacneil@comcast.net). We will be needing some member articles, so if you are interested in writing, interviewing, or being interviewed on some recent success, do let us know...please don't be shy! 

Next BSW Meeting  
**Tuesday, February 14<sup>th</sup>**

See page four for directions

## FROM THE WRITER'S ROOM, *Continued*

*(Editor's Note: This is the conclusion of "From the Writer's Room." Part One appeared in the January newsletter.)*

**The Cut** - Once the artist records the song, it still has to make the album. It is not unusual for an artist to cut 15 songs and only put 10 on their album. The album is also usually recorded in several stages over several months with 3-4 songs recorded at each session. Eventually, it is decided what songs will actually make the album. Example: John Michael Montgomery recorded "Home To You" during the second week of December. There was still to be one more recording session for the album in January. They would ultimately end up with 14 songs, 10 of which would make the album. At this point, everyone was VERY excited that he recorded the song and we were keeping our fingers crossed it would make the album. We eventually found out it made the album in late February when "Home To You" was among four songs John Michael previewed at a concert at the Houston Astrodome. We celebrated that night with pizza along with Sara's co-writer, Arlos and his wife Beth Ann.

**The Single** - Often the record company releases the first single before the album comes out. This is to try to build up demand for the album so sales will be high the first week of its release. The album release date is often a month after the first single comes out. Example: When the first single, "Hello L-O-V-E" was released in early April, the new album was still untitled. Eventually, we learned that the album release date was scheduled for late May and would be titled, "Home To You". And on June 16th, John Michael Montgomery announced at Fan Fair that "Home To You" was the second single.

**The SongPower Index** - Before the official radio "add" date, the new single is reviewed and ranked in the SongPower index by several radio programmers across the country. While a high ranking in the SongPower index does not guarantee chart success, it is statistically more probable. A song will usually appear in the SongPower index for two weeks along with the other new singles due to hit radio. Example: "Home To You" was ranked second in the SongPower index for new singles the week it was reviewed. Interestingly enough, the song which came in first in the SongPower index, "I'll Go Crazy" ultimately failed to break top 10 and the song that scored third "Start Over Georgia" failed to break the top 40. Still, industry professionals give a lot of weight to the SongPower index ranking.

**The Music Video** - The ultimate goal of the single for the record label is to sell albums. Record labels and artists, unlike the songwriter, do not make any money from radio airplay. With that in mind, the record label's goal is to increase exposure for the song on both radio and TV to try to convince consumers to buy the album. One of the tools used to generate such exposure is the music video. Example: The "Home To You" video was shot at a truckstop in southern Tennessee and eventually became the #1 video on CMT in addition to becoming one of the top music videos for 1999.

**The Charts** - There are basically three music industry charts (Billboard, R&R and Gavin) that professionals watch to determine how well a single is doing. All three charts monitor various radio stations across the country that report every week how many "spins" a song is receiving. The more spins a song receives, the higher up the charts the song moves. Since a songwriter will receive money based on airplay, the ultimate goal is to move slowly all the way up the charts, generating as much airplay as possible.

Depending on the artist and the competition at the time, it can take a song as long as 26 weeks or more to "peak" at its highest chart position. While a song is rising up the charts, it is said to have a "bullet." Once a song has peaked, it is said to have lost its bullet, meaning that it is now moving downward on the charts and receiving less radio airplay. Example: "Home To You" took 23 weeks to "peak" at #2 on all music industry charts. . It actually held the #1 spot briefly on a

### BSW Newsletter

**Editor:** Luke MacNeil  
**Graphic Layout:** Don Gnecco  
**Feature Columnist:** Geoffrey Keith  
**Mailing:** Jeff Reilly and Joyce Josephson  
**Labels:** Stan Lyness

Contributions from members are welcome. Deadline for the next issue: On or before 15<sup>th</sup> of the preceding month. Send submissions via E-Mail to: Luke MacNeil: [luke@lukemacneil.com](mailto:luke@lukemacneil.com) or phone Luke at (774) 573-8963

See **WRITER'S ROOM**, p. 4



## OPEN MIC VENUES, *Continued from page one*

If you get up there trying to prove how good you are, you're likely to do just the opposite. Try to let go of your ego ... this isn't easy, 'cause it takes quite a bit of ego to get up there in the first place, eh? But get this straight - you are there for them ... they are not there for you. The performers who have this one twisted around, are very obvious ... and it's offensive ... not entertaining.

Now here comes Mr. Dichotomy: Forget about the audience and just do your thing ... don't think about them, or how they are going to react ... just do what you usually do ... you know, when no one's around ... and let them witness that. Go inside yourself ... focus on what you love ... and let it happen. If you are thinking about the audience, you are not going to be focused about what you are doing and you are going to make a mistake ... and then you'll be thinking about what the audience is thinking about you for making that mistake ... and while you are concentrating on that dilemma, you'll make yet another mistake and then ... oh, man.

In short, it all becomes a matter of what you really care about. If you're overly concerned about what an audience is thinking of you, you are bound to blow it. On the other hand, if you care about what you are doing, it'll show as a sincere presentation of whatever talent you have ... and that is all anyone can ask for - including you.

Just know that any audience, from the very start, is on your side ... so, be there for them by focusing on your song and giving yourself over to that. It's not easy to develop this kind of trust in yourself, let alone a room full of strangers ... but you may as well, because in the end that's the way it's going to be - or you won't be playing in front of people for very long.

Relax. Pull back. I'm tellin' you ... this is a hot tip! Play your instrument ... sing your songs ... quietly! Don't be fooled! This applies to rock and roll bands too! I repeat - pull back and play softer than you think you should ... especially in a noisy room! There is something that happens when you do this ... it can not be explained ... but you'll see what I mean when you successfully apply this technique. It seems to create a "controlled tension" in your performance that adds magic and professionalism to any performance.

There was an open mic I used to hate playing. It was a long narrow room with the stage all the way back at one end ... the acoustics in this room sucked so bad it was unbelievable! And to add to it, the place was usually packed with loud, drinking, partying college students. I honestly dreaded the thought of playing there, but went faithfully every week. I knew it was one of the most important gigs I could play ... because it was the toughest. I use to say, "Man, if you can play this room and pull it off, you can play anywhere." And that's why I did it. And, the first time I conquered that room was the first time I played that room. I followed a popular rock band who had the place filled with their fans ... no one knew, or cared who I was ... and with just me and my guitar, I got on stage and set up ... by the time I was ready to play my first song, the room was so packed and so loud I couldn't hear anything that mattered! I focused ... started playing WAY softer than usual ... and with a quiet ballad, to boot! By the time I reached the end of the first verse, I had the attention of the entire room. And, man ... I can't tell you how good a feeling THAT is! The next song was upbeat, and from then on, they were all "mine." And, afterwards, every time I played that room I had their attention ... because "first impressions are lasting ones." If I would've tried to beat the noise of the room, instead of creating "my own quiet, private party," I would never have done it.

Learn how to apply "controlled tension" by pulling back and focusing on having your own private party on stage ... and everyone will want to join you!

If you are using a mic on your guitar, don't place it directly in front of the sound hole ... just slightly below the center point of the sound hole, pointing up at a 45 degree angle is better ... I prefer using a pickup, for the same reason I prefer using a headset mic ... I like the freedom to move around, and I don't like seeing a "silver stick" in front of my face and body.

Try and get there early, and place your guitar/equipment near the stage ... there's usually a designated area - find out where it is, and when you are called to play, be organized and quick about your setup without sacrificing your satisfaction with the monitors and sound.

When you feel your performances are up to snuff, ask the club owner to listen to your sets and let him/her know you're interested in a paying gig - be ready, also, with a promo package for her/him to look at and listen to, and be sure your name and phone number are on every thing.

Be supportive of every act that performs ... no matter what your opinion may be. Everyone needs encouragement - especially those who may "seem" to be wasting your time. If they have the guts to get up there, they deserve your attention and applause.

While you are on stage, keep an eye on the head-honcho-in-charge for any signals ... he/she may want you to do another song, or they may want you to wrap it up. Act like a pro.

Don't make excuses about or for anything. No one wants to know whether or not you have a cold, etc., etc. - there's nothing so unprofessional as making excuses about your voice, or rambling on about some other unrelated issue. If you have a cool story to relate about a song, tell it like a friend, and it can truly add to the show ... but keep it to the point and, for the most part, let your music speak for itself.

Last, but certainly not least, don't play any song you haven't practiced to the hilt. As my other tutorials point out, you should know your stuff backwards, forwards and upside down if you ever expect to let the muse have it's way.

Last, but certainly not least, don't play any song you haven't practiced to the hilt. As my other tutorials point out, you should know your stuff backwards, forwards and upside down if you ever expect to let the muse have it's way. 🎸

*(Read the unedited tutorial at: [www.alanhorvath.com/LSN6.php](http://www.alanhorvath.com/LSN6.php))*

### BSW Executive Team

**Director Emeritus:** Elliott Jacobowitz

(978) 749-8857 •

[elliott\\_a.jacobowitz@bostonbbs.org](mailto:elliott_a.jacobowitz@bostonbbs.org)

**Director & Membership Chair:** Geoffrey Keith

(508) 460-8171 • [bswmembership@earthlink.net](mailto:bswmembership@earthlink.net)

**Webmaster:** Larry Manning (617) 739-6876

[ldmstudios@comcast.net](mailto:ldmstudios@comcast.net)

**Newsletter Editor:** Luke MacNeil • (774) 573-8963 • [luke@lukemacneil.com](mailto:luke@lukemacneil.com)

**Finance Committee Chair:** Brent Hall, Assisted by

Mark Stepakoff (508) 655-2311 •

[bch@eight.com](mailto:bch@eight.com)

**Special Events Co-chairs:**

Joe Carotenuto (978) 264-4692 •

[jcaroten@mindspring.com](mailto:jcaroten@mindspring.com)

Karl Steudel • [ksteudel@yahoo.com](mailto:ksteudel@yahoo.com)

**BSW Hotline:** (617) 499-6932

(For special events, membership, etc.)

