

One Photographer's Suggestions for Stage Vocalists

by Johnny Grace

Volumes have been written about vocal and stage technique, however I continue to see certain problems manifest themselves time and again, some of which haven't seen much coverage in the literature. My observations primarily relate to the visual aspects of live vocal performance, though I will also share some observations about important non-visual aspects that I witness so frequently.

CONNECT:

Microphones, mic stands, music stands and sunglasses obstruct the visual and psychological intimacy of your relationship with the audience, and reduce photographic impact. Enhancing the ability for your audience to connect with you, and your music, heightens their experience and builds fan loyalty.

Removing obstructions and making dynamic eye contact, allows each fan to feel they connected with you. Don't simply look straight ahead, even half the time. Address crowd right, crowd left, the back, balcony and pit. Share your eyes with everyone who's made the effort to come experience you in person. No one's there to see what you look like tracking in a studio, with eyes closed and mic stuck to face.

Also, occasionally look off into the stage wings, left and right, especially during the first three songs before perspiration builds and pro photography is often banned. This allows everyone to see your full face and profile while singing, without the obstruction of a microphone, and makes for some great images too, even from fan cams. It also enables low key shots to be picked off even on stages lit high key for television broadcast.

Leave your tinted glasses and sunglasses in the dressing room. Fans who come to see you live don't expect you to hide from them like they're the paparazzi. If stage or stadium lights bother you, try wearing tinted contacts to reduce light exposure, or having a talk with your ophthalmologist about prescribing drops that constrict your pupils.

Keep your eyes open. You don't look more sensitive or introspective with them shut. You look closed. It sounds simple but don't hide, be present and accessible at your own live performance.

Remember, every time you pull the mic away a bit, or face away to different angles into the crowd, your photographer will have an opportunity to capture you singing, without a mic and mic cable coming out of your face.

As you integrate such gestures and mic pull-aways into your natural stage presence, you'll get better photographs from any photographer, including the fans in the pit.

MIC STAND:

Hand-hold your mic whenever possible, and never stand behind a mic stand unless your mic is cradled. Standing a few feet to the side of the mic stand removes it, and its shadows, from the crowd's line-of-sight, and will greatly improve shot quality. If your photographer will be working an elevated position to stage right, position your mic stand stage left, and vice-versa.

If you do a little grooving and dancing during the bridge, consider hand-holding your mic instead of caddying it on the mic stand. It usually looks cooler, and keeps you from being behind a mic stand, and its shadows. Also, consider positioning your mic stand in the backline as a cradle to be used when entering and exiting the stage, or a place to caddy your mic during instrumentals.

A mic stand between you and the crowd can tempt you to leave the mic in the stand more than necessary. And watching someone sing into a mic that's on a stand for very long is like watching a guitarist whose sitting down while playing. It simply doesn't inspire fans to move to the music.

So unless you've got some hand percussion going, hand-hold that mic, even when you're grooving thru the bridges and instrumental solos.

MUSIC STAND:

If you absolutely have to obstruct the crowd's line-of-sight to you and your band with a music stand, don't use a huge traditional-sized music stand if you can avoid it.

Instead, purchase a miniature music stand that clamps onto a mic stand, and format your cheat sheets to fit on this much smaller, less obstructive stand. And get rid of it altogether as soon as you can.

VOCAL MONITOR:

If you do not own and use your own "in ear" monitor you will not be able to hear yourself. Over the last decade most singers on the rise have abandoned using stage monitors to hear themselves, instead relying on the much better isolation and clarity of "in ear" monitors. Not being able to hear yourself not only effects your vocal performance, but when I'm shooting I can often see the stress and uncertainty in the singer's face, or see them acquiesce to standing still directly in front of their stage monitor, trying in vain to hear themselves.

Use of "in ear" monitors has, in turn, allowed many sound techs, at all but the largest venues, to lose the skills of providing effective vocal stage monitors. Consequently, if you want to hear yourself perfectly, read up on "in ear" monitors and outfit yourself with one. You can split your mic signal on stage and siphon a feed directly to your "in ear" monitors on its way to the FOH sound board. You will be in control of how you hear yourself.

WARDROBE:

Have wardrobe pressed and hanging until five minutes before curtain, once changed do not sit down, otherwise shots may show creases and wrinkles.

MAKEUP:

It may sound obvious, but your voice emanates from your mouth, which is surrounded by lips, which are one of the key visual focal points during your performance, even if it's fleeting and subliminal. So, regardless of your other makeup choices, think about how you can make your lips attractive and visible. Even if you're into the "no makeup" look, at least apply some lip gloss!

And if it's a critical photo shoot or you're taping for HD, strongly consider airbrush makeup, and guys, a close cold kiehls shave within an hour of curtain.

PHYSIOLOGY:

Exercise everything but your vocal chords the day of the show. You will almost always look better in pro photos. The difference in vitality comes through. Besides it makes you naturally want to move with your music too.

And of course, on show days don't exercise your voice, or even speak unless you have to, until a few hours before curtain when you begin your warm up. Never whisper, it's much harder on your vocal chords than speaking softly.

Be well hydrated the day before, and day of, a show. But don't sip water on stage unless it's a long set or your pipes are in trouble. Many pros report that sipping between songs actually has the counterintuitive effect of drying up your vocal chords.

VERIFY YOUR PERFORMANCE:

Most venues will allow you to patch in a recorder to their FOH sound board. You can get a simple digital recorder and some patch cables for a few hundred dollars.

Since it's a sound reinforcement mix, and not a mix intended for personal listening, it's often not good enough to distribute. However, I see good bands systematically capturing all their live shows so they can spot check both their performance, missed notes and timing, and understand how the crowd heard them, which you can never really tell from the stage.

Memory is fallible, selective and quite elastic. Board feed recordings are sometimes devastating to listen to, but you will never rise above flaws you do not face and work to correct or avoid.

SOUND & LIGHTING CHECKS:

Perhaps the most crucial window for seizing or forfeiting so many opportunities is during the sound/lighting check. To gain the most advantage from the check, learning the lexicon used by the crew is essential to precisely communicate with them, and achieve your best.

First, know the colours you like for your key lighting, and how to communicate them to the stage manager or lighting crew. They almost always have several different predefined key sets, or fronts, they can punch up. Likewise for follow-spot gels.

Unless it's a big venue, the lighting crew are often quite unsophisticated, and may think you just look so cool glowing pink, or as blue as the *Blue Man Group* most of the show! Poor lighting has a deleterious effect on both the audience's experience and the quality of your photographs. So often much time and money spent in hair/makeup is squandered with poor lighting.

If you have a pro shooting you for an event, have them come to the sound/lighting check. Some venues don't allow it, except for perhaps select photographers, but if possible it can really pay off. First, a seasoned pro can stay completely out of the way of the crew while they do their jobs, and pick off extraordinary shots of you on the cool, low stress stage from vantage points that are prohibitive when the house is filled, including from the stage itself, or even the lighting catwalk if your pro is in tight with the crew.

If you're relying on the venue's sound crew to add effects to your vocals, know the names and types of reverbs and levels you like, otherwise you'll sound different at every venue, and certainly not as good as you could. Home in on the effects best for you when you're in a studio, and learn to communicate these important preferences to the sound crew. Do you find yourself asking for a plush reverb with 100-150 milliseconds delay, a tile reverb with 250-300 milliseconds of slapback delay, or "Hey, can you put a little less echo on my voice?"

Same goes for equalization. Know what EQ makes your voice shine, and how to communicate it to the sound crew. Know the center frequencies, spreads and cut/boost db's so they can dial them right in for you on a parametric EQ, or translate them to the sound board's bands.

When you're working with top sound pro's, specify as bands to "cut" instead of bands to "boost," when possible. Though this was more important in the analogue days to avoid excessive noise, it's still the preferred practice of pro's, and will identify you to them as the singer who's in tune with this subtle difference out of the pack of performers who are all asking for boost, boost, boost!

Offering the sound crew an intelligent starting point for your EQ will assure your voice sounds great even after they've tailored your EQ to accommodate the venue's acoustics.

STAGE DEBRIS:

If you're playing smaller clubs, remove stage debris before going on. If there are any water bottles, beer bottles, or anything not essential for your act, on the stage area where you'll be singing, at your feet, near floor monitors, on the amps, or in the mic stand drink holders, have someone remove that junk, or just do it yourself before curtain.

Many times at smaller venues stuff is left scattered around the stage, old song sheets, beer bottles, etc. They don't have a squad of Live Nation or tour roadies to scour the stage between acts.

LOOK ALIVE!

Unless you're going for that distant, heroin-addict look, sing every bar of every song as if you wrote it, whether you did or not, and embrace the emotion of the lyrics in your gestures, movements, phrasing, eye contact, and facial expressions. Both you and your fans will receive more enjoyment from the magical transient experience that you *together* are creating. And your shots will be fantastic!

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[Johnny Grace](#) is a long-time professional celebrity and live performance photographer who shoots in Los Angeles and San Francisco. He has been legally blind from birth, having only low resolution monochromatic night vision, but, remarkably, excels at capturing cinematic-style images in low or difficult lighting conditions. He shoots existing light only, never using a flash, even in the darkest settings, primarily with longer telephoto lenses. Consequently, he generally shoots from a distance, allowing him to be completely unobtrusive at live performance and celebrity events.