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# ***How I Made \$25K On A 2-Month House Concert Tour***

**(AND HOW YOU CAN TOO)**

**by Shannon Curtis**

**No Booker, No Bouncer, No Bartender:  
How I Made \$25K On A 2-Month House Concert Tour  
(And How You Can Too)**

**Shannon Curtis**

# **No Booker, No Bouncer, No Bartender: How I Made \$25K On A 2-Month House Concert Tour (And How You Can Too)**

By Shannon Curtis

Edited by Jamie Hill

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## INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2011 I got a Facebook message from a supporter of mine in San Diego: “You haven’t played in San Diego in a long time. You should come play here. You could do a show in my living room.” She suggested that she would invite her friends to come and would ask them for donations to support the event. I thought, “Well, that could be fun; San Diego is only a couple hours’ drive from my house, and we’ll probably collect enough donations to cover our gas there and back.” So I told her sure, why not, let’s do it.

What I thought “could be fun” turned into one of the best and most rewarding shows I’d ever played. There was a room full of people who had never heard my music before but who were eager to hear me play based on their friend’s endorsement. You could have heard a pin drop in the room, and there was a palpable sense of the emotional experience they were having with the songs. I hadn’t felt so connected to an audience in a long time. It was a concrete reminder of all the reasons I make music. And on top of that, I went home with a lot more than gas money in my pocket.

Fast-forward to the subsequent autumn and winter. We had planned a series of club shows up and down the west coast, doing 5 cities once a month each for 5 months. Since the club shows were mostly on weekends, we had a lot of dates in between shows on each leg where we didn’t want to be sitting around not playing. Like Mike Watt said: “If you’re not playing, you’re paying.” So we decided to experiment with booking house concerts in the model of the San Diego show as “filler dates” on those club tours.

Over the course of the next 5 months, we found that those filler dates were surpassing the club shows in every way – they were way more fun, way more profitable, and we were making way more connections with new supporters than at the club shows.

It was somewhere on one of our long drives down I-5 between Oregon and California that my husband and co-conspirator Jamie had the idea: “What if we were to schedule a summer tour made up entirely of house concerts?” It sounded crazy, mostly because it didn’t conform at all to what I had always thought was “the right way” to tour and build an audience, but our encouraging recent successes with house concerts were enough to convince me that we should give it a shot.

So I sent out a newsletter / Facebook post / tweet to my community of supporters. It went something like this: “You guys, I have this crazy idea; but if it’s going to work, I’m going to need your help. I’d like to spend a few weeks on the road this summer doing a house concert tour. I’m sending this message to gauge how many people would be interested in hosting one of the concerts on the tour. There would be no up-front cost to you to host a show in your home. If enough people say they’re interested, we’ll put together the tour.”

Then I crossed my fingers and waited for people to reply. What happened next was an overwhelming surprise. Within one month of sending that email, I had more people interested in hosting shows than we were able to accommodate that summer. Four weeks after that, I had the majority of a nearly 40-date house concert tour for the summer of 2012 booked, confirmed, and ready to go.

We had high hopes for our first summer house concert tour, both in terms of the money we had

tentatively projected we'd make and the fun we hoped we'd have. And we absolutely did have a ton of fun. By the end of the summer we had gone to bed literally every single night remarking upon how lucky we felt to be on such a great adventure and to be meeting so many wonderful new people. *We'd done much more than have fun; we'd made connections.*

And the money? To our astonishment, we had done two and a half times better financially than we had projected. Holy cow!

At the beginning of our 2013 and 2014 summer house concert tours, we revised our projections upward based on the previous year's numbers. And by the end of each summer, we had blown away those projections as well.

So I think we're onto something. And now I want to tell you all about how you can do it for yourself.



## WHO CAN HOUSE CONCERTS WORK FOR?

A house concert approach can work for **any artist who wants to grow his or her audience**. How many of us have struggled to see the number of names on our mailing list grow, or wondered how to reach new people with our music? At a house concert there is an audience primed and ready to be won over. There is no noisy bar to compete with, or indeed even any notion that talking during the concert is okay – you have a totally captive audience in an intimate space where they can't help but listen.

At a house concert, you're the star. You're not competing with other acts for a slice of each audience member's attention or, even worse, enduring the non-attention of people who are there to see someone else. There's only one act, so everyone's attention spans and interest are maximized and focused directly on you. This does confer some pressure – all of a sudden you're going to be the headline attraction at every show you play, with no support to warm up the crowd for you. I like to think though that this is a positive thing; there's nothing like having to carry a show to seriously whip your performance chops into shape (and to get you really honest with yourself about what is and isn't working in your set).

The audience at a house concert also has the unique quality of being curated; they are a handpicked group of people that your host has invited because they think they're the kind of people interested in having this sort of a unique experience. And every person in attendance has been given an endorsement of your music by the host, their trusted friend. They're already expecting you to be awesome.

All the circumstances point to one thing: you are set up for success in winning over new supporters at a house concert.

A house concert approach can work for **any artist who wants to actually make money performing his or her music**. How many of us have promoted the heck out of a club show, even gotten a good turnout, only to walk away with barely enough cash to cover our gas to and from the venue? There are so many people involved in putting on a club show, and each of them has to get paid – the promoter, the venue, the staff, the sound engineer, the other bands on the bill. At a house concert, there's no one else to take a cut; you, the performer, get 100% of the proceeds.

A house concert approach can work for **any artist interested in bypassing the traditional gatekeepers to success** in the music marketplace, like promoters, agents, and labels. We all know that only the smallest fraction of a percent of people who make music will ever see star status and income from their endeavors, and that number is shrinking all the time. To be one of that infinitesimally small group of people, an artist will need the help of all of those gatekeepers and more. And most of us will never have those sorts of resources made available to us.

The good news is that while the traditional music industry is on its head, *there is a growing piece of the pie available to those of us who are willing to work independently for it*. This is the new model available to us: find your niche, cultivate it, and thrive as a career artist without the help of anyone who traditionally had to tell you “yes” in order for you to get ahead.

I like what my friend, music industry veteran and artist manager Niels Schroeter, says: “Don't wait for permission.” If you have the passion, a good product, and a plan, you can empower yourself to



jumpstart your career on your own, without waiting for anyone to tell you it's your turn. And if stardom is your goal, you're still going to need to do the legwork building your career on your own first anyway before any of the bigger players will want to work with you.



## WHY ARE HOUSE CONCERTS AWESOME?

Let's start with the hard numbers from the two-and-a-half months of house concert touring we did in 2014. Spoiler alert: they blow away the numbers from any venue touring I've ever done:

- We added 550 names to my email list
- We averaged over \$600 in income each night
- We sold 1,100 CDs
- We sold 330 tees & totes

Since we did 60 shows altogether, we grossed a little over \$36,000. After you subtract tour expenses like gas, food, and lodging, we netted about \$29,000. You have to admit that's pretty great for less than three months of independent touring.

As a point of comparison, here are the numbers from my 2013 summer house concert tour. These are the numbers that were in the original version of this book. I'm including them here to underscore the viral way in which these tours grow over time:

- 500 names on the email list
- \$500 in income each night
- 700 CDs
- 250 tees & totes

Our gross on that tour was about \$25,000, and after expenses our 2013 net was about \$18,000. As you look at the two sets of numbers side by side, it's pretty good growth from one year to the next, right? And it's directly attributable to people leaving the show in 2013 saying "I want to do this with my friends" – and then doing a show with us in 2014. Viral growth in action!

As a career artist, I have to think about these kinds of bottom-line numbers, and they're an important part of the picture to be sure. But I wouldn't be recommending that you give house concerts a try if they weren't also the most *connective, rewarding, and fulfilling* shows I've ever been a part of. When I'm playing a house concert, I can sense an immediate response from the audience just from the energy in the room. I can hear people's audible reactions to meaningful moments, I can see them tear up during songs that touch them in a personal way, and I can feel them relax with me during the lighter moments in my set. There are equal amounts of "take" and "give" between the performer and the audience in the context of these intimate shows.

Putting on concerts in people's homes has also given us the opportunity to build some relationships with supporters of my music that have grown into meaningful friendships. Over a few years of doing this, we've essentially acquired a network of extended family around the entire country because of the relationships we've built on our tours.

From a practical standpoint, my experience is that house concert touring is *tremendously efficient in terms of the energy spent organizing*. I spend way less of my time booking a tour of house concerts than a tour of venue shows. (See later in the book for a [detailed explanation](#) of how I route an entire house concert tour.) Typically, I have a few conversations with each host about the date and the details of their show, and then we're confirmed and ready to go. Hosts are eager to talk with me and prompt in their communication, because this is something they're excited to do.

Does this sound like any interaction you've ever had with a promoter or club booker? How often have you emailed a promoter five times before you even heard back from them? And when you try to get the exact date and time slot that you want, do you get them at venues? Ever? You get them every show when you book a house concert tour.

Another huge bonus of house concerts is that I don't have to do an ounce of show promotion. As I'll explain further in the section about how we organize our house concerts, all the guests are there by invitation of our hosts. So once I've booked a host, getting people to show up is entirely up to them; and every host wants to put on a good show, so they're motivated to pack their house with enthusiastic listeners.

And the best part is that most of your host's friends will have never heard of you before, so each night is basically a bumper crop of potential new supporters ripe for the picking. Contrast this with the typical experience playing coffee shops in strange cities for the same 8 to 10 people as the last time you were there, hoping to grow your audience to 15 ... maybe one day to 20 ... every house concert set up on the model I've developed gives you the opportunity to grow your community by 20 or more new people *per night*.

So for the performer, a house concert is like a dream come true. But what is it like from the audience's point of view? I can only tell you what I've heard from our audiences all across the country. Something that I hear *every single night* that we do a house concert is this, or something like it: "Wow, I've never been to anything like this before. This is the coolest thing I've done all summer!"

## DIRECT-TO-FAN

I've done a lot of thinking about why a house concert is such an amazing experience for the average audience member, and I think it comes down to *the intimate and connective nature of the experience*. When you're listening to someone perform music in that intimate a space, you are an integral part of what's going on. Audience members are not merely observers; everyone in that room is an important contributor to the larger experience.

In addition to that, you're in a comfortable space where there are no barriers between you and the performer. In a traditional music venue, there might be a bouncer at the door, a 3-foot-high stage, and lots of lights and technical gear coming between you and the artist. But by contrast, without any of those things in the way, a house concert setting can be a disarming and penetrating experience; and I think an audience member is much more likely to engage with the music and to feel it more deeply in this setting than in a club. It's certainly been our experience. *By eliminating middlemen and bringing your music directly to people, you get to own 100% of each connection you create.*

## HYPERLOCALISM

One of the best things about being in the audience at a house concert is that it's just plain cool. You really get the feeling that you're a part of something exclusive and unique, and we all crave new and unique experiences. People are bombarded with corporate entertainment, advertising, and messaging literally thousands of times every day. As a result, they want (and *need*) badly to have experiences that are authentic and local and personal. This need is what's been driving the growing "hyperlocal" movements that have been sprouting up around the country. *People want to connect with their local communities; a backyard concert is an amazing way to do that.*

## SUPERFANS

You might be starting to roll your eyes a bit at this point; all this talk about intimacy and connectivity might sound a bit hippy-dippy. I get it. But stay with me, because these concepts will actually help to build your career in a meaningful way (read: help make you money long-term as a career artist). When you invite your community to partner with you in presenting your music as house concert hosts, and when you deliver an intimately moving experience to your audiences, you create deep connections with people through your music. As you continue to make and perform music throughout your career, those deep connections become long-lasting relationships with a hyper-dedicated community that will support you and your art for years to come.

Let's use high school dynamics as an analogy. When someone's a superstar artist, it's like they're the popular kid at school who has a whole bunch of casual friends. They definitely have a few BFFs, but most of their friends are really more like friendly acquaintances. But when you build a community of supporters through house concerts, it's like you have fewer friends overall than the popular kid, but every single one of those friends is a close and true friend who will stick with you through thick and thin. They don't just like you, they *love* you. You might even be able to develop truer, deeper supporters than a chart-topping pop star is ever going to be able to. Why? Because Katy Perry has never made them laugh and then cry over the course of the hour they spent with her in their friend's living room. *But you have.*

One of the big buzzword topics lately in independent music is “superfans” – a quick Google search will lead you to bunches of articles on how developing superfans is the key to a vibrant music career. *And if there's a better way to create superfans than community-driven house concert touring, I haven't yet found it.*



## **SO HOW DO YOU PUT ON A SUCCESSFUL HOUSE CONCERT?**

This is probably what you've been waiting for: the nuts-and-bolts "how-to" section. In it, I'm going to tell you what has worked for us over the course of a lot of trial and error, lessons learned, and tweaks tested during our first 200 or so house concerts. I'm going to go into quite a bit of detail because I really want to empower you to do this for yourself. I think that the more you master each of these details, and understand how each one of them can subtly but significantly affect the outcome of the night, the more success you'll have with this model. It starts with finding a good host, continues with giving them the tools to create a successful event, and culminates with executing the event in a way that maximizes your outcome (by which I mean your income).

## THE HOST

So how do you find someone to host a house concert? At bottom line, a good host is going to be someone who is a fan of you as a person: either a stranger who loves your music, or a friend or family member who wants to help spread the word. Your host will be inviting *their* friends to come hear you perform, so you want them to be excited and enthusiastic about working on this with you. Ideally, and typically, they'll be someone who is a supporter of your music; maybe they're on your email list, or maybe they follow you on Facebook or Twitter. So this is the first step: send out messages to your community asking who would like to be a house concert host.

In the method that we've used to organize our house concerts (which I'll explain in more detail as we go), *we've relied on audience donations to fund the event*. This is critical to the entire success of this model, because it makes it so that **it doesn't have to cost the host anything up front to host a show**, unless of course they decide to provide snacks and drinks for their guests, which is entirely up to them. Some people definitely love to throw a party and will want to put some time and money into it, and that's great; but they absolutely don't have to. The bottom line is that a host will be providing a space for a show and inviting their friends, and those things are free. You'll want to mention that when you're asking for people to volunteer – you'll get a lot more volunteers if they know it won't cost them a fortune to hire you to play a private show at their house.

Once you've sent out those messages, send out more messages. You will have to put out the offer many, many times, because not everyone sees all the posts you make or opens every email you send. Email list messages generally have around a 15% open rate, and Facebook posts can reach as few as 10% of your friends/followers per post, so be (gracefully) persistent in getting your message out there. Don't be afraid to ask – you will be surprised at how excited your community will be at the opportunity to do something unique and awesome with you.

If you don't yet have a substantial group of supporters from which to draw, then you can start out by asking friends and family members to be hosts. My mom has hosted a couple of shows, my dad has hosted a few as well, and one summer two aunts and an uncle of mine hosted shows in their backyards. If you have any amount of pride that keeps you from wanting to perform for your family and friends, you should work on getting over that immediately. These are the people who love you the most, and they can be a really great foundation upon which to build the group of people who will become your community of supporters.



## THE SPACE

Your host will need to have access to a physical space where people can gather for the event. Traditional home spaces work great: living rooms, backyards, even garages. But if a host doesn't have a house, alternative spaces can work really well too – like a community room in an apartment complex, a photo or art studio, or even a church meeting room. We've done "house" concerts in a winery, a small theater, and a gallery – these were places where our hosts had to pay a fee to use the space, but in each case it was something that the host wanted to do for the event. Obviously, it's ideal if the location is a place that doesn't cost anyone money to access. But if your host is really enthusiastic about doing something generous and out of the ordinary, it's a great idea to hand over the reins and let them create their ideal event. An enthusiastic host will frequently come up with something amazing that you wouldn't have thought of that will put you in a unique and memorable (and favorable) situation.

The only important (and non-negotiable) criterion for the performance space is that *it should allow all the guests to be seated as a group directly in front of where you are performing*. We've learned through experience that any guests who are in a physically separate space from the performance will be more likely to disengage, potentially creating a distraction for the other guests. If you're performing indoors, all the guests should be in the same room. Even being seated on the other side of a pass-through or doorway, even with a direct line of sight, can create a sense of separation and non-accountability to the event for the guests seated there.

If you're performing outdoors, there shouldn't be anyone sitting in alcoves or recesses or around corners or on the other side of the yard. The goal is to have you and the guests together in an intimate space; the special nature of the event and the bubble you are working to create around everyone will be diminished in direct proportion to the distance at which people are spread out. It's important to keep the performance space tight and focused, and you should let your host know that as you talk with them about their planning.

Along similar lines, it doesn't work well to have a physical obstruction between you and the audience. Someone put me on a ledge at the far side of their pool at one show, and while the effect was certainly dramatic and picturesque, it was nearly impossible for me to connect with the crowd. I was literally and figuratively removed from them. House concert touring is populist in nature, and you should take great pains to be among the people for whom you are playing – including during your performance.

The thing to remember is that you are not providing background music for a garden party; you are the focal point of a concert. Do what you can to ensure that the physical presentation and arrangement of the performance space work toward underscoring and enhancing that focus.

## THE GUESTS

Your host needs to be someone who will be able to get a minimum of 20 adult friends to come to the concert. **THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT.** This is another one of the linchpins of this touring model, and I can't underscore enough that it's very important that you adhere to this. Here's why.

First, in our experience, a group of fewer than 20 people is not a big enough group to make it feel like a proper event. It feels more like a few friends hanging out like they might normally, and it doesn't have that exciting buzz of a special gathering. When you sit down to play, it won't feel as much like a concert; and if it doesn't feel like a concert, it won't turn out as well financially. Also, frequently not all of a person's friends will know each other, and a gathering of 8 people who don't know each other has the potential to be a little awkward.

Second, even though house concerts are intended to be intimate experiences, most people still need to feel like they have a little buffer of anonymity in order not to feel awkward when you start performing right there in front of them. If the group is too small, some people might be uncomfortable because they're not quite sure what to do with themselves – should they look you in the eye? Would it be rude to look away? What if they get emotional? With a minimum of 20 people, it's a large enough group that they can feel close to you without feeling too close for comfort.

Third, you will make money in direct proportion to the number of people who are at the show, so you need to make sure that the planning, the travel, and your time performing will be worth it. That means having an audience that is large enough to collectively compensate you. We've found that 20 adults – i.e., grownups who have money to make donations and buy your merch – is the number at which a show starts making sense financially for us.

You will need to communicate the expectation of this attendance minimum to your prospective host and **have them commit to that attendance goal before confirming a date with them.** If they don't think they can get 20 or more people to show up on their own, you could suggest that they pair up with a friend to do a co-hosted event – twice the friends to invite!

It will definitely be the case that, despite the host's best efforts, there will occasionally be shows with 8 people. If that happens, don't be discouraged, and bring your A game. If you really wow someone, there's no telling how generous they may be. And you never know who's in your audience; one of those 8 people could sign up for your mailing list and throw a \$1,000 concert for you at their house next year.



## HELPING YOUR HOST PLAN A SUCCESSFUL HOUSE CONCERT

Once you've got a date secured with a host, it's up to you to empower them to create a successful event. You don't want to be a micro-manager, because it's important that you let them have ownership and pride in the event they're hosting. But you should communicate a few important steps for them to follow as they make their guest list, send their invitations, and plan the night. They will be really appreciative of your guidance; most people have never organized something like this before and would probably be a bit lost without your help. Plus, the more successful the whole event is in terms of attendance and execution, the better it will be for your bottom line (and for your host's enjoyment, which is also very important!).

After having done 75 or so house concerts, I finally put together the "Shannon Curtis House Concert Guide," which we now send out to all of our prospective hosts as a PDF in advance of booking our summer house concert tour. (There is a copy of this PDF on my house concert forum, at <http://shannoncurtis.net/community>.) The guide talks a bit about why house concerts are so great, gets into some detail about the requirements for being a house concert host, and starts down the road of giving tips for planning a great house concert. Mostly I put this together because I realized that I was sending these really long cut-and-pasted emails, and centralizing the info into a friendly attachment with pictures seemed like a smart idea. I'd advise doing this at some point, but you'll probably want to take a little time first and figure out what is and isn't working for you personally and what your process is before you commit it all to an official document.

I want to talk specifically about a few points that we always make sure to cover in-depth with each of our hosts after we've confirmed a show with them.

### **The guest list**

The first thing your host should know is that *they should invite double the number of people they hope will come to the event*. People are busy and flaky, and not everyone who is invited will show up. Even if someone RSVPs "yes" they still may not come. We've learned from our hosts over time that there is about a 50% "yes" rate for invitations. So, if they invite double the number of people they hope to have at the concert, then they should be well on their way to making their attendance goal. We've also discovered that when a host requires RSVPs from their guests as opposed to a "come by if you can make it" approach, it dramatically increases the likelihood that people will come. *So make sure your host asks their guests to RSVP.*

### **Adults only, please**

The second thing your host should know is that the house concert is an adults-only event. (Unless you perform children's songs, in which case you should ignore this section completely.) Due to the intimate nature of house concerts, kids running around or talking during the performance will distract the audience and highly diminish their experience. If the audience's experience is diminished – if the bubble that you are creating around them is broken – this will directly affect your bottom line in terms of decreased donations and merch sales at the end of the night.

I realize this might sound a bit harsh, but I'm speaking from some hard-won experience in attempting shows with kids and finding that it literally always undermines the show when kids are around. Even if a small child is really quiet and well behaved, their responsible adults are

guaranteed to be only half-engaged with the show because their attention will always be partly on their little one. Same for any kid-lovers in the room. It's impossible to compete with a cute kid! I love kids, and I love having them around, but this is one key detail that really makes a huge difference in the success of a house concert.

We've had many circumstances where a host was concerned that some of their guests wouldn't be able to come if their kids weren't able to come along. We've also had many situations where a supporter who has kids wanted to host a show. Something that works great in these situations is for the host to hire a babysitter for the event, who takes all the kids to a separate space away from the concert area during the time of the performance (physically *and sonically* separate!). That way, we can have happy, playful children around during the pre-concert and post-concert mingling times, but showtime is reserved for adults only to relax and focus on the music.

What age is the dividing line, you ask? In our experience, somewhere around 10. If someone is old enough to act like a grownup for 60 uninterrupted minutes, then they're welcome at my show.

### **This is a “donation-based concert”**

The third instruction to give a host when preparing their invitations is to let all their invitees know that the event is a “donation-based concert.” Use those exact words. This should be written into the invitations they send out to their guests, so that everyone knows what to expect the night of the show. “This is a donation-based concert; please come prepared to make a donation to the artist after the show” is a good starting point if the host is looking for a good way to phrase it.

There is one detail about this that we've found to be really important: ***the host should not specify a donation amount in the invitations.***

The reasons for this are twofold. One, it allows people who are experiencing lean times and who don't have extra money for entertainment to come without the pressure of a set price. They can come and donate nothing if they want, and that's perfectly all right; what this is really about at its core is sharing music and making connections with people through music, right? Besides, if you move someone, they will become a supporter, and you will be able to monetize that eventually.

Two, not specifying a donation amount puts no upward limit on those who may feel moved to make a more generous expression of their appreciation of the experience. Not giving them a ceiling allows them to donate as much as they'd like. Remember that first house concert we did down in San Diego? That night there was no set donation amount for the guests, and at the end of the night there was a hundred-dollar bill in the donation vase. Someone was really moved! What if our host had told everyone in advance that the concert was going to be worth ten bucks? *Don't let the host assign an arbitrary worth to your performance.*

### **Guarantee shows**

Every so often you will have a host who prefers not to ask their guests for donations and instead wants to pay a guarantee for the show. That is, of course, a perfectly fine arrangement. We've settled on a flat rate that we're comfortable with for people who want to pay a guarantee, and you'll have to figure out what that number would be for you.

But one suggestion – and a method that we used on our first house concert tour – is to take the host's expected attendance (with a minimum number of 20, of course), multiply that by \$10 (which

is a reasonable average donation), and there you have your guarantee amount. So if 25 people are coming, the guarantee would be \$250. The guests will obviously still have the opportunity to purchase your merch – and indeed may be inclined to spend more at the merch table if they're not also donating for the concert – so you stand to do really well at a guarantee show.



### **Stoking the guest list**

Last year when we were on tour, I noticed that there was something a few of our most successful hosts did really well: they stoked their invitees in the weeks leading up to the house concert with a steady stream of information that made everyone become more excited about (and reminded of!) the upcoming house concert. The messages ran the gamut: fun tidbits about the event, video clips of my music, a funny “listicle” of all the reasons the guests should make sure they RSVPed and came to the concert.

I saw a bunch of these updates because I was included in people’s email blasts / Facebook event posts / Evite updates. And I thought, “What a great idea!” So I promptly stole it. I started drip-feeding our remaining hosts little things that they could send out to their guest lists as their events approached. Press clips, links to streaming audio – anything to help continue to paint the picture.

It worked great. So on our next tour, it’s my plan to create a schedule of items to feed to each of our hosts that they can pass on to their guests – like one item or so per week for the month leading up to their house concert. I think this will help more of our shows be even more successful, both in terms of attendance and also in terms of getting an exciting feeling of anticipation going for the people who are coming.

## SETUP AND FLOW

There are several aspects of the setup and flow of the event that we've found contribute to delivering great results for a successful house concert. The physical arrangement of the performance space, the timing of the event, the way in which donations are collected, and the setup of your merch table can all make or break your outcome each night. So let's look at all of those things.

### Pre-game prep

The benefit of the house concert experience, from the perspective of the host and their friends, is that they get to have you in their world and hang out with you for an evening. Most people don't know many artists, and they're going to be eager to talk with you. So, you should spend every moment from when you arrive until when you leave interacting with your host and their guests. The connections you make over the evening, combined with the intimacy of your performance, will translate directly to your bottom line in the form of enthusiastic donations and merch purchases.

For this reason, you should plan to be "on" and be engaging for the duration of the time that you're at your host's house. What this means is that you should take care of your personal business before you arrive. Have a meal right before you show up; you probably won't have another opportunity to eat for the next five hours. You're most likely going to be working through dinnertime, and you want to be sharp and at your best for the duration of the event, not brain-dead from low blood sugar. Also, if possible, arrive dressed and ready to go. If that's not possible, get good at doing a quick change so that you're not unavailable for too long. You are the centerpiece of the event, and you owe it to your host and their guests to be available for the entire evening. Your host may graciously offer you a bedroom to use as a private "green room" – don't take them up on it. "No thanks; I'm here to hang out with you guys" is the impression you want to be making. It will be noticed, and it will make a difference.

### When should I arrive?

We stick to a pretty regimented schedule of events for each of our house concerts. It might seem kind of rigid as I describe it, but we've arrived at this after experimenting with dozens of approaches and finding what results in the best outcomes for us. I'm not trying to suggest that our schedule is the only way that will work; but I am definitely suggesting that you should consider every detail of your schedule very carefully, as any small adjustment to it can adjust the outcome of your evening significantly.

You will want to arrive at your host's house with plenty of time to greet them, chat for a minute, load in, set up, prep them for their donation announcement ([more on this later](#)), and be ready to go before guests start to arrive. Showing up late and being rushed is a bad idea; it causes stress and starts things off on the wrong foot. Be on time or even a couple of minutes early, and give yourself the time you need to get everything done in a relaxed fashion.

Showing up at the host's house an hour before guests are scheduled to arrive has proved to be the magic amount of time for me. Given the specific audio equipment and merch display that I bring with me, it seems to work perfectly; we're typically just finishing setting up merch as the first guests start to arrive. Sometimes if I know I'm going to have a particularly large crowd or a

particularly challenging space to work in, I might stretch my arrival time to an hour and a half before guests show up, but that's a rare exception. You'll learn after a few shows how much time it takes you to get set up.

### **Setting up the space**

The number one thing to keep in mind when setting up the space is that you are performing a house *concert*, not at a house party or as background music for a gathering of friends. What you want to help your host create is a space where during the performance part of the event, people will have a comfortable place to *gather and sit and listen* to the entire show. That means that everyone should have a place to actually sit down for the entirety of the show. This could mean blankets on the lawn in the backyard if there aren't enough chairs for everyone, or maybe carpet seating inside a packed living room; but there should not be anyone standing for this part of the night.

The reason for this is that you want every audience member to be fully engaged in listening to and participating in the show. If people are standing around, they're much more likely to start talking with the people next to them, or moving around or fidgeting and generally creating a distraction for someone else. It's pretty much impossible to stand still for an hour. Remember, you don't want anything to break the bubble once you've started performing, so create an environment conducive to settling in and going on a journey.

It may be tempting for a host who has a really big space, like a large yard or something, to want to spread out the seating over a wide area. *I strongly recommend not doing this*. Even if people are going to be spread out during the pre- and post-show mingling times, it's really important that for show time you gather them all in and create a close-in, intimate space. The intimacy that proximity creates is an important contributor to people engaging in and getting the most out of the house concert experience – which has a direct impact on your bottom line.

The further back people are seated, the more susceptible they seem to be to distraction and disengagement. Just like in high school. For this reason, it's far better to set up the seating to let the crowd spread sideways rather than away from you. 4 rows of 8 seats are way better than 8 rows of 4 seats; you want the furthest-away seat to still be as close to you as possible. Semicircular chair arrangements are your friends; they put the people on the ends closer to you.

How close the front row is to you depends in part on your comfort level as a performer, but also on human nature. In my experience, people don't seem to want to be closer than about 8 feet from a performer. I've had shows in close quarters where the front row was 5 feet in front of my keyboard, and I'm fine with that, but those seats were definitely filled dead last.

Finally, try at any cost to avoid obstructed-view seating. If someone can't see you, they're going to look at something else, which generally means they won't be engaging with your performance.





### **Setting your volume levels**

When you're setting up your PA for the show (I'll give you some [specific suggestions](#) about good tools we've found for this a bit later), I suggest setting the volume at a level that will effectively cover the close-in audience space, but that doesn't overwhelm the space. The balance that you want to strike is to make it loud enough for people in that intimate area to hear you clearly, and to create a sonic environment that is enveloping, but without being so loud that it's off-putting.

Louder is not always better – give the audience a reason to be drawn in. When music is loud, sometimes people take that as a cue that it's okay to chat with the person next to them. If you perform at a volume where talking would be rude, no one will talk and everyone will engage more.

Also, think about the psychology of how we give our attention. Are you more likely to be interested in what someone has to say who is shouting at you, or who is talking quietly? Probably the latter. Be that person in the conversation you're having with your audience. Draw them in.

Also along these lines, pay attention to how your PA is sounding each night. The weather and the physical space you're in (or not in, for outdoor shows) can have a huge effect on how sound travels, so the same settings won't work in every situation. In particular, you may need to play with the treble and bass knobs on your mixer to make sure that nothing is either boomy or piercing.

### **The merch table**

Make sure to set up your merch table in an area that is directly visible to the audience from the performance space. That way, when you're talking during your show about the CDs and t-shirts you have for sale, you can point to your merch table and people will make a visual connection with where they can buy your stuff when the show is over. (By the way, if you're not talking at some

length during your show about what you have for sale and why everyone should be going home with some of it, you need to start doing so immediately.)

It's a bad idea to set the merch table in a place that's not visible to the audience during the show, because you want them to make that connection and then to connect that awareness with an expected action. You also want to be sure to put your merch in a place that is going to get natural foot traffic after the show is done; if the show is in the backyard, for example, maybe you would put the merch by the door leading back into the house. You want to force people, by virtue of the natural physical layout of the space, to walk directly past your merch.

Someone may have loved every minute of your performance, but if your merch isn't right in front of their face after the show, they may get distracted talking with their friends or refilling their drink, and go through the rest of the night without being given an easy opportunity to show how much they loved the show by buying your stuff. (I'll have more to say about [selling merch](#) a bit later on.)



### **Guests' arrival time**

*We have every host ask their guests to arrive one hour before the concert is scheduled to begin.* So if you plan to start playing at 8pm, guests should be invited to arrive at 7pm. The one-hour slice of time before the show allows for a couple of things to happen. One, it allows latecomers an ample buffer of time in which to get there without disrupting the show when they arrive. Two, it gives people a chance to get inside, say hello to their friends, pour a drink and munch a few snacks, and get comfortable.

If the pre-show mingling time is shorter than an hour, then people don't really have enough time to get acclimated and be at ease by the time the performance starts. The whole evening feels a bit rushed, and less like a special event. On the other hand, if the pre-show mingling is much longer than an hour, the focus of the event starts to get fuzzy – it starts to feel more like a house party than

a house concert.

Also, for people who are drinking, it seems like any more than an hour gives them the time to have that one extra drink that can push them over the line from relaxed to unfocused. You want people to be in that magical place where they're relaxed and their guard is a little bit down, but they're still with you 100% while you build your bubble.

### **Background music**

You should put some music on your iPod through the PA before guests start to arrive, at a nice background mingling level. The ideal music is something that's complimentary to your style, but from a different era. If you put on something that's a reference point in current popular culture, some people will have negative opinions about it, and you don't want to subconsciously prejudice people against you. Also, this is a special event – so people shouldn't walk in and hear the same stuff they hear on the radio every day. I recommend putting on something classic from 40+ years ago; it sets a fun, different, and civilized vibe. I generally put on Stan Getz or Django Reinhardt or something like that. Al Green works well too. Pick an old favorite and set the mood.

And what are you doing while people are showing up? You're hanging out and making friends. The more people you can chat with before you go on, the more people will already be on your side when you start performing.

### **5-minute warning + programs**

About five minutes before the performance is scheduled to start, someone should go around to all the guests and give them a 5-minute warning to take care of things like going to the bathroom, refilling their drinks, and finding their seat for the show. I know this might sound a bit like handholding, but remember that most people haven't been to a house concert before, and so they might not understand the etiquette of the listening experience. In an unknown situation, people generally like being given structure anyway, so it will help them feel more comfortable being told what they're supposed to do.

If the 5-minute warning stretches to 10 minutes because the bathroom line was too long or something, it's no big deal. But try to start as close to on time as possible. It's professional to do so, and people will take you and the event more seriously if things proceed punctually.

Something new we did in 2014 was to print out programs for each house concert – enough for each guest at the event to have one – and pass them out while giving the 5-minute warnings. They had a short bio, info on where people could find me on social media, a suggested hashtag for tagging their photos of the event on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, and info on how to contact me if they were interested in hosting a house concert at their home on our next tour.

The programs became a great tool for a couple of reasons. First, it's one more detail that lends an air of "this is an actual official concert" and not just "some lady playing music in the corner of my friend's yard." A program in hand suddenly makes the guest take the whole event more seriously.

Secondly, the program was a great tool for executing the 5-minute warning. It went something like this: "So sorry to interrupt your conversation, but I want to make sure you each have a program for the concert. Here you go. This also serves as your 5-minute heads up for music time. This will be a seated listening event lasting about an hour, so if you need to do anything to prepare for that, now's

the time. Maybe make a trip to the restroom, refill your drink if you need to, and then please go find a seat and get settled in for an amazing show!"

### **Showtime!**

By the time you take the "stage," everyone should be gathered, seated, quiet, and ready to listen. It's a good idea to have your host give a brief introduction of who you are and why they invited you into their home for the evening. Remember, you're probably a stranger to most of these people. You're still going to need to win them over – but having the host start the connection for you goes a long way. Also, this introduction helps quiet down any stragglers who might be late getting to their seats or finishing up conversations.

And then it's up to you to put on an incredible show. Your number one job is to command the audience's attention and to engage them from beginning to end of your set. You need to bring your A game and play for those 20 or more people as though you were playing for 2,000. Pick your best songs, plan out all of your banter and between-song stories, and play your heart out. Give them a show to remember. *Entertain* them.

It seems like many of us performers can get more nervous playing for a smaller group of people in a well-lit place than for an anonymous crowd in a dimly-lit club. This is not the time to indulge your self-consciousness about performing your music. This is the time to lay out all you have to offer without fear or insecurity.

There is an important principle at work here: the more you believe in what you're playing, the more the audience will believe right along with you. At a house concert, there's nothing to hide behind; everything's right there out in the open. You have to bring the real deal or they'll see right through you.

But remember, you are set up for total success in this setting, so you have nothing to lose by giving your all. In fact, the more you give of yourself to the people in that room, and the more present you are in each song you play, the more magical the experience will be for everyone.

I always keep my set to right about an hour. It's a good amount of time that feels like a proper show but doesn't start testing the limits of people's attention spans. I'm sure you've heard it before, but it bears repeating because it's completely true: *always leave them wanting more.*

### **Sample schedule**

Just to tie together everything that we've been talking about over the last few pages, here is an example of how a typical evening might go. In this example, the host wants the music to start at 8pm. (When I schedule shows, I have the host first decide when they'd like the performance to start, and then we build the rest of the schedule around that.)

- 6 pm: Arrive at host's house; get set up
- 7 pm: Finished setting up; guests start to arrive; mingling
- 8 pm: Showtime!
- 9 pm: Show ends; sell merch and talk with guests
- 10 pm: Start packing up
- 11 pm: Thanks, goodbye, and wheels up

As you can see, a house concert tends to be somewhere around a 5-hour experience from arrival to

departure. It's a jam-packed 5 hours, though; you'll be tired at the end of the night for sure. But it'll be that wonderful kind of tired that can only come from an evening of making connections through music.



## DONATIONS

This is where you stand to make most of your money, so we're going to spend a fair amount of time delving into the specifics of what works and what doesn't work as you navigate the potentially perilous waters of asking people for money. Ready? OK, here we go ...

### The "ask"

We have found that the absolute best time for audience donations to happen is immediately after the performance has ended. That way the audience is still inside the bubble with you, and will be able to make a direct connection between what they've just experienced and how they feel and how they can show their appreciation and support for it.

Here's how we do it. While the last note of the last song is still ringing in the air, and the audience is still applauding, the host gets up front with a vessel of some kind (vase, basket, box, hat, etc.) and makes an announcement that goes something like this:

"Thank you all for coming tonight. I hope you enjoyed this as much as I did. I want to remind you that this is a donation-based concert. Your donations tonight will all directly benefit our artist, and will show her our appreciation for this amazing experience she brought us tonight. I'm going to leave this vessel right here and encourage you to give generously. Thanks again!"

### Why the host?

*It's important – even imperative – that the host be the one to make the donation announcement.* Because it's their house that everyone's gathered in, and because the guests are their friends, a request for donations from them carries far more weight than if it's some other essentially random person making it. Sometimes a host will get a case of last-minute stage fright or cold feet; if you or they think that this might happen, you should let them know as you coach them for the speech that making a strong donation announcement is the single biggest thing they can do to help you have a successful evening. They want you to be successful, so this should be an easy connection for them to make.

### Prepping your host

*I can't underscore enough how important it is that, before you confirm a show with a host, you prep them that they will be the one asking for donations at the end of the night. You absolutely do not want this to come as a surprise to them on the night of the show.*

Then, on the night of the show, you should go over in detail with them the points you'd like for them to cover. Some people will be really shy about getting up in front of the group and will be really grateful for the script.

Some hosts will be natural public speakers and might take the opportunity to riff on your script with their own take on supporting independent art on a grassroots level, paying it forward, or that sort of thing. Obviously if that happens it's fantastic, but in our experience it's the exception rather than the rule. Not everyone is a born fundraiser.

So, don't overlook this very important part of your setup process. Talking with hosts about the donation side of things can feel awkward for some of us; it certainly was for me at the beginning. If

that's the case with you, I want to be blunt: you need to figure out a way to get past those insecurities and really do a great job of thoroughly prepping your hosts on this every night. How well you prep your host will directly affect your income!

The bottom line is for the host to know that *the financial success of the night will be in direct proportion to the enthusiasm with which they encourage their guests to donate*. And trust me, every host wants you to have a good night money-wise at their house. They will probably ask you at the end of the night how the donations went; every host seems eager to know. I think it's a point of pride for them that they and their friends supported you well.

### **Give it gravity**

Don't be afraid of this part of the process. When you talk your host through donations, don't rush through your spiel. Be engaging and fun about it, but definitely linger on it. Give the moment some gravity, and make sure that the significance of the message registers with your host. I'll say it again: *the financial success of your night depends in large part on how well you prep your host to make the donation announcement*.

Something that works well is to communicate to the host early on, as you're setting up your equipment, that you will need a few minutes of their undivided attention before the guests arrive to go over the donation part of the evening. Planting a seed before you actually have the conversation lets it linger in their subconscious longer, and will help underscore the importance of what you're communicating.

In the same way that the length and gravity you give to prepping your host translate into how well the host's pitch goes, so too do the length and gravity with which your host delivers their pitch to the audience translate into how well the donations turn out. If your host nervously rushes the announcement, people won't take it seriously. If on the other hand the host takes their time and really communicates to the audience why this is important, the audience will take that to heart, and it will be reflected in their subsequent actions. *You should communicate this correlation to your host when you're walking them through this*.

### **Walk them through it**

We've found that it's helpful when talking the host through the donation announcement not only to talk in broad terms about the timing and what their goal is, but actually to walk them through it in real time with the vessel they're planning to use so they can start to visualize how it will look and sound when they're the one doing it. It's a great idea to take the vessel from them, and say, "Here's how it might look," and then pretend you're them doing the announcement from start to finish. That gives them sort of a goal to hit, and will stick in their mind better than just an explanation.

### **Terminology**

It's very important that the host use the word "donation." These are not "tips." This is not "gas money." Both of those imply crumpled-up one-dollar bills. *Explain this distinction to your host*. In the same way that you don't want the host to put an artificial limit on your earning potential by putting a suggested donation amount in their invites, you also don't want them to negatively influence your evening's financial outcome by using words that suggest small contributions.

And of course they wouldn't want this either. But sometimes in the heat of the moment people

choose the wrong words. If you tell them the right words to use ahead of time, and also what words specifically not to use, you will significantly lower the chances of something going wrong. So, to repeat: *the guests should be asked to make generous donations to show their support for the concert they just saw.*

## **Cheat sheet**

Something we're going to implement on our next tour is to print out a short "cheat sheet" for our hosts to take with them if need be when they come up front to make the donation announcement. It won't be anything too involved – just an index card-sized thing with a few bullet points on it in large type. It's our hope that this will help hosts who get nervous in front of groups, or who are concerned about their ability to remember what points they're supposed to hit, to make an effective donation announcement nonetheless.

I wouldn't necessarily encourage hosts to read from the script verbatim, because that's not nearly as compelling as speaking in the moment and from the heart. But if the cheat sheet will prevent someone from choking at that crucial moment, then it's good for them to know they have it as backup.

It's worth noting that this situation rarely comes up. Our experience is that it's like a bell curve – most hosts do just fine on the donation announcement, a few do exceptionally well, and every so often someone does really poorly. So, hopefully most people won't actually need to use this. But a bad donation announcement can have decidedly negative effects on your income for the night – so it's best to cover your bases. Plus it'll still be a good reminder, even for effective speakers, of the points you're hoping they'll cover.

## **The donation vessel**

It's important to have your host decide upon their donation vessel before guests arrive. I like to have them find something right when we start to talk about the donations. If you're playing outdoors, make sure the vessel is something impervious to a little wind. Vases and pitchers work great; bowls and hats work less well. I tend to think that vessels you can see through work to encourage people to contribute, as they can see the contributions grow, but that's just my personal observation. Experiment to see what works best with your crowds.

The host should have the vessel with them at their seat while you are playing your set. *Tell them this.* This way they can get up as your last note is hanging in the air, prepared to make their pitch. The host having the vessel in their hand while they make their pitch allows the audience to connect what they just heard with the physical object in the host's hand and the idea of giving. And you should absolutely tell your host this. *The more you can educate the host on the psychology of how the donation process works, the more they will internalize it and make it their own.*

## **Location, location, location**

As for where to put the donation vessel: we ask our hosts to leave it right on my keyboard. You'll want it to be somewhere visible and accessible, and on stage is good because you're definitely not going to be there for the rest of the night. Don't put it at the merch table, because you'll be standing there, and you don't want people to feel like you're looking over their shoulder while they're making their contribution. It should be in a place where they can take care of their donation with relative privacy and no pressure.



Well-meaning hosts may want to put out a donation vessel at the beginning of the evening before their guests arrive. *Do not let them do this under any circumstances. Indeed, if they try to, politely insist that they not.* Why would someone who doesn't know you, who has never heard your music, who has no drinks in them yet, be inspired to be generous with you? They don't know you. You need to wow them first, and *then* ask for money.

### **Details, details, details**

If you haven't noticed by now, I want to point out that we take great pains to pay attention to every single small detail that can affect the overall outcome of each night. It's not just one thing that makes or breaks a house concert – we've found that a successful house concert is made up of a whole bunch of little details, each executed in the best possible way, all acting in support of the overall goal of the night, which is to create an event that maximizes the guests' ability to connect with and engage with you and your music.



## **GO SELL YOUR STUFF**

The moment that your host is done with their donation announcement, you should make a beeline to the merch table. If you're traveling with someone who can help you sell merch, then they should position themselves there before anyone else has even gotten out of their seats. And even if you have someone helping you – explaining to folks what is available and taking people's money – you should still be standing at the merch table from the time you're done performing until the crowd has left the event. Guests will want to talk with you after the show, and if they're talking with you while they're standing next to the stuff you want them to buy, there's a greater chance that they'll see something they want and buy it.

A few notes about merch. On our 2014 house concert tour, merch sales accounted for 41% of the total income we made on the tour. Our total income was about \$36,000, and merch made up almost \$15,000 of that. This figure underscores how important it is to create a good merch strategy. There are plenty of resources available out there to help you generate ideas for this, but here are a few points that have been essential for us:

### **Always have new stuff to sell**

If you went on a tour last year with a new album, make another new album for this year's tour. Have a fresh batch of t-shirt designs. If you travel with the same merch tour after tour, you'll see diminishing results on your bottom line. Also, people really seem to like to buy "whatever the new one is."

### **Have a variety of items and price points available**

For example, have items that cost as little as \$5, but also have package deals that cost \$30 or more. Give people a lot of options – CDs, T-shirts, posters, art prints, tote bags – some people will want one of everything you have, so make sure you're giving them a lot of good stuff to take home. Free stickers can get people to the table, which is a great place to start.

Helpful tip: since you'll most likely be playing a stripped-down acoustic set at a house concert, make sure you have something stripped-down and acoustic to sell them after the show. You can record a full-length album of acoustic versions of your most popular songs for very little money, and "this one sounds the most like what you heard me do tonight" is a no-brainer for a lot of people.

### **Make your own merch!**

I taught myself how to silkscreen a couple of years ago, so I've been making all of the t-shirts and tote bags we bring on tour. It's a HUGE cost savings that gives us way better margins on the soft merch we sell. Plus you can experiment with designs without having to get 50 of them made, which is most screen printers' minimum order.

### **Make your merch area attractive**

Think of it like the window display to your street-side shop – from a distance people should see it and want to come check it out just because it looks fun and inviting. We use vintage suitcases from secondhand shops with incandescent rope lights mounted inside; the warmth of the low-wattage

incandescent lighting and the nifty vintage interiors definitely draw people in. And you definitely *will* want self-contained lighting; outdoor shows can get dark!

Helpful tip: LED lighting is cold and harsh looking; avoid it. Use good old-fashioned incandescent lighting to create a warm, inviting space.

### **Have the ability to take credit cards (duh)**

We use Square, and it's great. PayPal also has a credit card reader, and I'm sure there are others available as well. You're leaving lots of money on the table if you're not taking credit cards. LOTS of money: credit card transactions account for as much as 80% of our sales at some shows. Make sure to tell people from the stage that you take all major credit cards; this will absolutely increase your foot traffic and sales after the show.

Helpful tip: if the host has wifi that covers the merch area reliably, get your credit card device on the network before guests arrive. Faster transactions = more sales.

### **Have your email list on the merch table**

Ask every single person who visits the table if they'd like to sign up to receive updates from you. They may have good intentions to like you on Facebook or follow you on Twitter and Instagram, but they will likely forget about doing that the second they leave the show. And you probably know by now anyway how irresponsible it is to rely on social media as your only way to stay in touch with your community – algorithms change every other day, only a fraction of your Facebook followers see your posts, people lose interest in one social media portal and jump ship to the next new thing. Having their email addresses ensures that you will be able to keep your new supporters informed of what you're doing on your own terms.

Talk about your email list from the stage during your show. Tell everyone that signing that list is the single best way that they can show you their support. Don't shy away from asking for this – that list will be invaluable to you as you build your community.

In fact, it'll probably directly help you build your next house concert tour. Nearly every night we put on a house concert, some guest at the show says to me, "Are you doing this again next summer? I want you to come and play at my house." If they're on your email list, they'll be sure to get the message the next time you're looking for house concert hosts in their area. It's happened to us in several cities on each tour we've done. In Houston, for example, we played one house concert in 2012; but when we put the word out for hosts in 2013, we had three people volunteer. We went from one Seattle-area show in 2012 to six in 2014. Viral multiplication, baby.

Helpful tip: if a younger person who might be a student goes to sign up on your list, ask them to put their Gmail address, not their school email address, because the school address will most likely go dead as soon as they graduate.

### **Have your record playing while you sell merch**

Something has to be playing after the show while people are hanging out, and it might as well be helping the cause. Put it on at a nice background mingling level. That way, if someone at the merch table asks you what your latest record sounds like, you can say, "It's playing right now!"



## **SO HOW DO YOU SET UP A WHOLE TOUR?**

Up until this point, we've been talking about the organization and details of a single show. But what about setting up an entire tour of house concerts? I'm going to take a little time first to talk about building what you're doing to the point where a tour is your next logical step – and then I'm going to talk a bit about the nuts and bolts of how I go about putting the tour together.

## **Start with what you have**

Some of you are probably thinking, “But I don’t really have that many people on my mailing list yet,” or “But I only have a handful of Facebook likes and Twitter followers ... so how could I possibly schedule an entire tour?” My simple answer is: start with what you have. Book just one show at first, and do it really well; and then watch your connections build, and your community grow, in a viral way.

I mentioned earlier that I’ve played multiple shows at the homes of family members. If you have family and friends who are supportive of what you do, then you should absolutely ask them to help you get started. Schedule your first show with someone who supports you – anyone! – and knock the show out of the park. Work with your host, using all the principles you’ve learned so far in this book, to organize an awesome event and put on a really great show for the guests. Also, make sure to document the entire experience as much as you can with photos and videos. The importance of this documentation is something we’ll come back to in a moment.

## It's a virus

Chances are pretty good that, if you've really wowed the crowd, someone at that first show will ask you about doing a show at their house. In fact, I would even encourage you to mention toward the end of your show that you'd love to talk afterward with anyone who is interested in hosting their own house concert with you. I always put a little blurb about this in the programs I pass out, along with my email address, so that if anyone decides to reach out to me about this after they've left the concert, they have the info they need.

The growth of my career over the last few years is a testament to the viral nature of house concerts. And if you bring an unforgettable experience to the people at even your very first house concert, you too will see what you're doing start to spread in a similar way. It will take some time. Nothing good happens without effort. But it will happen. I am convinced, having done this for a while now, that people *need* this sort of experience in their lives, and don't get nearly enough of it. So keep at it, and you'll keep discovering those people.

Remember those photos and videos I said you should take lots of at your first show? Use them, in your email newsletters and in your posts on social media, to show others what an amazing time it was. The visual images will help potential future hosts to get a better idea of what this house concert thing is all about – what it looks like, what it sounds like, and why it's an awesome thing to be a part of.

Most people we encounter at house concerts have never been to anything like this before, or even heard about anything like it, so you may have to educate your community about what a house concert *is*. The pictures and videos you share, and your posts and newsletters about your house concerts, will encourage people to begin imagining what it might be like if they hosted a show for you with their group of friends. The more you can help people paint the picture, the quicker you'll see what you're doing start to spread.



## **TAKING THE SHOW ON THE ROAD**

You'll probably initially start building your house concert empire in the region near where you live, and that's great. You'll be saving a ton of money by not having to shell out for gas, food, and lodging. But there may come a time when it makes sense to expand your reach and plan an actual tour. In the rest of this section, I'm going to talk about how I go about planning our summer house concert tour, and then I'm also going to give you some tips about how to travel in such a way that you can maximize your profits on the road.

### **I don't choose the tour, the tour chooses me**

You might be surprised to hear that I never ever decide where we're going to go on tour. And yes, I realize that this sounds wrong. Usually, when you're planning a tour, you first figure out where you want to go, and then you figure out a route that makes sense, and then you try to find shows to fit that route ... right? But in this model, we don't do that.

Instead: what I do to start is that I put the word out to my community that we're planning a house concert tour, and I ask who would like to host a show on the tour. If enough people in a given part of the country express interest in hosting a show, then I will consider bringing the tour there.

I take into consideration how much it would cost me to travel to that region, I estimate about how much I think I can earn at each of the shows I'll be scheduling, and then I decide if the math works in my favor. If I can make enough profit for it to be worth my time, then I'll schedule it and go!

There have been times where I did the math and it turned out that, given the number of shows I thought I'd be able to book, I would most likely not turn a profit in a particular region, but instead would maybe more like break even. In a couple of those instances, because I could afford to subsidize that stretch of the tour with profits from other shows where I knew I'd be doing well, I decided it could be worth breaking even on that first visit as a way of establishing myself in that part of the country. In cases like that, the plan is that on subsequent tours I would hopefully have more shows in that region, which would turn it into a moneymaker (given the viral nature of house concerts that we've been talking about).

It's totally paid off for us. The first year that we included the east coast on our house concert tour (which originates in California, by the way), we had only a handful of shows – just barely enough to break even given the long drive out there. But that investment came to fruition the following year when, on our second trip to the east coast, we had several more shows than on the first trip, at which we did far better than break even. And I expect that those numbers will continue to grow as we keep expanding in that area on our future tours.

### **The call for hosts**

Our summer house concert tours the last couple of years have started in mid-June and lasted through roughly mid-September (with a couple of strategic breaks in the middle). I typically send out my first "OK guys, we're looking for summer house concert hosts" newsletter and social media posts at the end of March. That gives me about two-and-a-half months to get things organized before I hope to be starting the tour.

That said, I typically have the vast majority of the tour on the books by the end of April – just one



month after I've started the process. That's lightning fast compared to booking a traditional venue tour. This is possible because I'm not dealing with traditional venue bookers, who can be slow (or impossible) to communicate with. I'm working with supporters of my music, who are eager to do this with me and therefore generally very prompt in communication.

As you know by now, my "call for hosts" lets people know that just about anyone can host a house concert – the basic requirements are 1) a place to gather, and 2) a minimum of 20 adults to attend the event. I ask anyone who is interested in finding out more about the process to send me an email. As soon as someone contacts me expressing interest in hosting, I send them my [house concert host guide](#) (the PDF document that I mentioned earlier in the book). At the end of this host guide, I have a section with a short list of questions for people to answer in order to be considered as potential hosts. In that list of questions are two important things that I'll need in order to develop my route for the tour:

1. In what city and state do you live?
2. When are you *unavailable* to host a house concert in the months of June through September? (e.g., dates you have vacation plans, a wedding to attend, recurring weekly commitments, etc.)

The reason I ask for *unavailable* dates is that it gives me a lot more flexibility to find each host a date than if I asked everyone for the dates they want to host a show. If I did that, everyone would inevitably say something like, "These 4 weekend nights sound good to me," and those are not enough options for me to make this whole thing fly, given the number of hosts and locations and schedules that I'm juggling. I need to get as many available days as possible from everyone, and asking for their unavailable dates accomplishes that.

### **Weekends vs. weeknights**

I have a section in my house concert host guide that explains in very clear terms that we ask all of our hosts to be open to hosting their show on a weeknight as well as on weekends. Basically, in order to make a tour work financially, I have to play as many nights a week as possible, and weekends only make up 28% of each week. So, realistically, the odds are nearly three to one that any given show will land on a weeknight.

That said, we've had some of our best shows on Tuesday and Wednesday nights. The nature of a house concert is that it's not an event that lasts particularly long, and it's usually scheduled earlier in the evening than a typical show in a venue, which makes weeknight shows totally doable for most people. Also, since we do our big tour in the summer, people tend to be more apt to plan and attend weeknight gatherings than they might be in the colder, busier fall and winter months.

### **The 4-dimensional math problem**

Once I've collected all of our potential hosts' data – their locations and unavailable dates – that's when the fun really begins. This process usually takes me at least a few hours. Here's how it goes: I get a big cup of coffee, I pop open a Google map and a blank calendar in my computer, and I start placing hosts on the calendar based on their data. I draw a (hopefully somewhat) logical route that hits as many hosts as I can in the most efficient way possible. It's totally mind-bending work, but when I'm done, I have a route that works for most people who want to host shows, and a plan for a really excellent tour.

(As a side note: if my memory serves, I think that on my last tour I was only unable to accommodate two hosts who had expressed interest; and, in both cases, their range of unavailable dates was quite large, so they were much harder to fit into the matrix than the typical person. I think this nicely underscores the power of the “unavailable dates” method.)

I feel like I should confide that this part of the process doesn’t typically happen smoothly or simply, for me anyway. It’s a bit of a brain teaser. If your experience is anything like mine, you will get halfway in and realize that it isn’t working and you have to start over – it happens to me every year. But, eventually, you will start to see the patterns in people’s schedules and how they fit together, and the logic of the route will start to present itself. So I don’t want to tell you that this is a simple thing to do – but I also very much DO want to tell you that it’s doable! I’m definitely not a math genius. If I can do it, you can do it.

Anyway, as soon as the route is drawn, I start contacting each of my hosts with their date that I’ve selected for them, and we confirm the show. Then I immediately pivot into helping them plan for and execute a successful house concert.

The benefit of allowing the hosts’ availability and locations to drive the planning of the route is that I’m giving myself more opportunities to schedule as many dates as possible. If I decided on the route first, then tried to cram hosts into the dates and locations that I had arbitrarily decided upon, I would miss out on a lot of opportunities for shows. With every missed show come missed opportunities for new connections with new people. So don’t leave any shows on the table.

### **What if someone flakes?**

It has totally happened that people have canceled their shows after my route has been finalized. And it will no doubt happen again. People are human. This is one reason why I try to book shows as many nights a week as possible when I’m on tour. That way, if someone cancels last-minute and I can’t fill the date, I can just take the night off, knowing that it’s not going to make or break the overall success of the tour.

One hugely valuable thing about staying in regular contact with my hosts in the planning phase of the tour, and also as their date approaches, is that I have regular opportunities to check in with them and make sure we’re on track for a great show. If the communication starts to fall apart at some point, and it starts to appear that perhaps the host isn’t going to follow through with their show, I still might have enough time before the date arrives to try and make alternate plans. It’s happened more than once that we’ve had a sudden, unexpected hole appear in our schedule after we’ve already begun our tour, but a few email blasts and posts to social media targeted at people in that region have landed us a last-minute fill-in date somewhere. And some of those last-minute shows have been awesome.

Of course, whenever a host has to cancel, it’s important to receive the news with kindness and compassion. You are, after all, dealing with regular folks here, not seasoned music promoters, and it’s more important for you to preserve your relationship with that supporter than to vent any frustration you might have at your schedule being thwarted. And if you’re unable to fill the date with another show, it’s probably because the tour gods knew it would be good for you to have an unexpected, restful night off.



## **KEEPING YOUR TRAVEL LEAN AND MEAN**

There are a couple of great side benefits to house concert touring in terms of tour logistics and budget. One big one is that many times you'll find that your host will invite you to stay with them overnight after the show. It's such a huge cost savings to be able to take advantage of free lodging as opposed to paying for a hotel every night. On our 60-show 2014 house concert tour, I think we stayed in a hotel a total of about 10 nights. That helped to increase our bottom line by a lot. And the coolest part is that our hosts view it as a perk for them, too, so it's a total win-win. I know for a fact that a lot of our hosts really love having us in their homes and spending the extra time with us.

And we love it too. House concerts are all about developing and nurturing direct relationships with the people who support your music, after all. And this is a great way to invest in those relationships with your hosts, who are by definition some of your biggest supporters. Jamie and I have made great, lifelong friendships with many of our hosts this way. These are people who were once strangers, whom we met because of music, and to whom we now say "I love you" when we leave their homes because of the depth of the connection we feel with them. I can't tell you how rewarding this is, and how sustaining it is for me as a human being to have these people in my life, especially when we're on the road, thousands of miles from home. Our community has become a second family.

Another nice side benefit of house concerts is that there is often food at the shows, which can be a big help with keeping your food costs low. We always have a light meal before arriving at a host's house, so that we're energized for the night, but by the time the show is over and guests are headed home, we're starving – and we're usually able to grab a delicious late-night meal of leftovers to tide us over until breakfast. Party food dinners are kind of the best.

But besides the cost-saving perks inherent in house concerts, it's important to think about how to keep your travel costs low overall. Every dollar you spend affects your bottom line, and since you are looking at your touring as a business, you want to maximize that bottom line.

### **Gas**

Our biggest cost on tour by far is gas. Second to that comes food, and then lodging. (Lodging would normally be #2 on this type of list, but as mentioned above, we stay with our hosts most of the time. Cost savings in action!) Gas prices will fluctuate – there's not much you can do about that. But you can choose the vehicle you're using. Remarkably, we've managed to do all of our house concert touring thus far in our 2002 VW Jetta. The gas mileage we get in that amazing little car has no doubt saved us a ton in fuel costs over what a larger vehicle would have cost us.

So, if you're thinking about doing some serious touring, take the vehicle you're using into account. Spending an extra \$5,000 on a more fuel-efficient second-hand car might save you \$10,000 in gas over the next few years. Do the math, make some projections, and see what's going to work best for you.

### **Lodging**

As great as staying with hosts is, it's essential to have a comfy and private place to land in every once in a while. Every so often you just need to be able to wander around in your undies and dork

out on some HGTV. It's possible to get some great deals on hotels at sites like Priceline and Hotwire, and I would urge you to master the ins and outs of how those sites work. Because we took the time to learn how to become Priceline ninjas, we'll very often end up staying in a 3-star hotel for what a Super 8 would cost – and there's a huge psychological boost that comes from staying in a nice place as opposed to a sketchy dump, so this is an important thing. So do a little research, and learn the ins and outs of Priceline's bidding scheme, and treat yourself to a free upgrade.

## **Food**

We usually grab a café breakfast each morning on tour (and coffee. Don't forget the coffee). Nothing fancy or too heavy – we don't like a big meal weighing us down for our drive to the next city, and we're also not trying to spend \$30 each morning. It's totally possible to feed and caffeinate two people for \$10 – Starbucks is your friend in this regard, and local coffee shops can be an even better deal than that.

We keep some healthy snacks in the car that can help carry us through the day – nuts and apples are favorites – so that we don't necessarily have to stop for a big lunch. And then we always have a light meal directly before arriving at our host's house for setup. We typically go for something relatively inexpensive, but that has enough protein to get us through the next several hours. (And since dairy and singing don't go so well together, I avoid anything with cheese or cream.) Mom-and-pop Asian restaurants are great choices that tick all our boxes. A quick check on Yelp can typically find you a killer Vietnamese or Thai place that will feed two people on a shared entrée for less than \$10, and it'll be healthy, and it won't weigh you down. Win/win/win.

## **Tour smart**

Touring smart is a big subject in its own right, and some great books have been written on the topic (including a wonderful one whose name I stole for the title of this little section. [Highly recommended](#)). Indeed, if you've done any amount of touring yourself, you probably know a lot of this already. My point here is just to point out that, as your three largest cost centers, these are areas that deserve your laserlike focus.

The biggest thing to keep in mind as you start to scale your tours larger is that small expenses get magnified. If you can cut a \$5 expense from your day, you've just increased your bottom line by \$150/month without lifting a finger. That's like having your cell phone, gas, and electricity bills all taken care of. Be mindful of the little daily details as you're traveling, and you'll significantly improve your financial picture.



## FINAL THOUGHTS

This last little section is for all the random ideas that didn't quite fit elsewhere in the book. So, without further ado ...

### **They're not my fans – they're my community**

Something that you may have noticed throughout this book is that I don't refer to the people who follow my music as my "fans." I used to – indeed, anyone who has a copy of the first edition of this book will notice that I've gone through and replaced that word pretty much everywhere it used to appear.

This change in nomenclature is a conscious personal decision that I've recently made. It reflects a growing understanding on my part of what my relationship really is with the people who support my music, and also my intention for what I want that relationship to be.

The word "fan" has always felt a bit like a piece of baggage that I've had to carry somewhat uncomfortably as I make my way in this life I've chosen. I always just sort of had the understanding that if I was going to be an "artist," that I had to have "fans" – that's how it works, right? But it always felt a little bit fake to me – as though I should somehow be up on a pedestal, different from and separated from the people for whom I'm making my art.

That delineation has come to feel artificial and off-putting to me, and so I've made a decision to remove it from my vocabulary and from my thinking. I don't want to have fans. I want to have a rich, vibrant community of people in my life – and music has proven to be an excellent way of growing that community. I communicate directly with everyone who is gracious enough to honor me with their time by reaching out to me, and I've nurtured many wonderful, fulfilling, even sometimes familial relationships with people whom I've met on this journey. We're all humans, and we're all doing this together.

I'm not telling you how to do things. This is just my take on the situation. But I thought I'd take a moment to explain my point of view, in case you might find it interesting.



## **Innovate**

In the same spirit, I want to emphasize that there are probably a thousand different ways that you can innovate and create and add on to the model I've just shared with you – and you should definitely do that. Part of the fun in pursuing a music career in a non-traditional, grass-roots way is figuring out new and unique ways to engage your audience, and then seeing the fruit borne from those efforts. I'd love to hear about any new ideas and innovations you come up with. If you feel like sharing them with me, my email is [skc@shannoncurtis.net](mailto:skc@shannoncurtis.net), or you could check out the ...

## **Online house concert forum**

It's true! We've started an online message forum for artists who are doing or are learning how to do community-based house concerts. It's a place for us to gather, share ideas, ask questions, and get resources and inspiration. Please come join our conversation at <http://shannoncurtis.net/community>.

## **Send thank-you notes**

I know this sounds old-school, and I sort of hear my mother talking when I say this, but send your host a thank-you note in the mail a day or two after the show. Not email – the kind of mail with a stamp that's delivered by a person in a blue uniform. Remember, house concerts are all about building relationships with your supporters, and a personal note saying “thanks for an amazing night” will be a hugely pleasant surprise that will go a long way toward cementing that connection with your host. Plus, they can't stick a Facebook message on their fridge.

I have an app on my phone called Over, which can take a photo, add some text, and generate a postcard that Over will then put in the mail for you to a destination of your choosing. It's genius for sending a one-of-a-kind memento, and you can do it all right from your phone – all you need is a photo from your host's concert. Who knows if Over will still be around by the time you're reading this, but hopefully if the idea interests you you'll be able to find something similar.

## **Record your shows**

On both our 2012 and 2014 summer house concert tours, we multi-tracked several of the shows (by which I mean we recorded two inputs – my vocal and my keyboard). We also made a stereo recording in the room with a little digital recorder, to capture the audience reactions and the room sound. When we got home, we picked the best performances, mixed the recordings, and released a “Summer House Concert Tour LIVE” album. We made the digital version available as a [pay-what-you-want download](#) (in the spirit of our “donate-what-you-want” house concerts – see what we did there?), and we made a limited run of handmade CDs as well. It was a very cool document of the summer's adventures, a great way to continue engaging our community after the tour was done, and a nice way to generate another little chunk of income.

## **Grow your show**

On last summer's tour we added some color-shifting stage lighting to my show, which was a big win, and not very expensive at all. The next challenge we're taking on is figuring out how to introduce a visual element. Our plans are still taking shape as I write this, but the goal is to bring a bit more of a “wow” experience to people's homes on our next tour. How are you going to take your show to the next level?





### **Go get ‘em!**

I want to leave you with this idea: if you have music that you want to share with people, and you want to earn money while you do it, you don't need to wait for anybody in the traditional music industry power structure to open the door for you.

All you need is for someone to open the front door of their house to you, and you're on your way.

Good luck!

## TECHNICAL APPENDIX

When I first started doing house concerts, I didn't use a PA at all. We put my electric piano through a little speaker, and I sang directly out into the space without a microphone. That worked all right for a while, and it might be a fine way for you to start out as well if you don't have the equipment to plug in.

But since we've transitioned into traveling with a small PA, we have a lot more flexibility. For example, the PA has given me the ability to perform outdoors; you can't reliably guarantee that you'll be able to cover an outdoor listening area with just your voice, even if you have good projection. Also, having your voice be amplified (and having a microphone in front of your face) makes it seem like more of a "show," and more professional, which will increase the size of your donations. Most importantly, once you have a PA, you have a lot more control over delivering the kind of experience you want your audience to have. I use a vintage reverb to set a dreamy mood; what sonic environment will you create?

## A PUBLIC ADDRESS SYSTEM THAT FITS IN A BACKPACK

Below is a list of the equipment we use for our PA. It's tiny! But it gets the job done. We use the PA indoors too, just turned down to an indoors-appropriate level. Sometimes for indoor shows my vocal mic is turned down really low, but we still have it going through the reverb so the audience still gets that nice full sound.

We tour in our Volkswagen Jetta with this PA, my 88-key electric keyboard, all our merch and back stock, and our luggage. What I'm trying to say is, this PA is *small*. I should also mention that my husband is a music producer and engineer (read: he's really particular about how things sound), so even though this gear is affordable and physically small, it's well chosen and it sounds great. None of these equipment manufacturers are paying me to endorse them (yet ... Mackie, I'm looking at you) – I paid for all this stuff myself, and I'm recommending it because it works well.

Visit <http://shannoncurtis.net/houseconcerts> for detailed pictures and explanations of how we set up our PA: connections, EQ settings, and more.



### [Mackie SRM150 active speaker](#)

This is a self-contained powered speaker, slightly smaller than a breadbox, that has two mic/line inputs and an RCA input that's perfect for plugging in your iPod. It has a three-band EQ that you can use to shape the overall sound for the space you're in, and it puts out an astonishing amount of clear sound over a startling distance. It only has a 5-inch speaker, so it can't reproduce deep low frequencies, but the typical house concert artist will probably be playing an acoustic guitar or a keyboard, and this works fine for that. And if you're playing a place that has a bigger PA, you can run a line out from the Mackie into the bigger PA and it'll pass your sounds cleanly through. Amazing.

### [Behringer Xenyx802 4-channel mixer](#)

We got this because it's the smallest mixer we could find that has an effects send. And we need the effects send so we can have reverb on the vocal! You shouldn't overlook the reverb; it adds a simple but highly effective layer of production and professionalism to your show. While Behringer has a well-documented history, this mixer is actually really good. Maybe old dogs can learn new tricks after all.

### [Electro-Harmonix Holy Grail Nano reverb pedal](#)

This is our secret weapon; we use it in the studio, too. It's a studio-quality reverb unit in a reasonably-priced pedal that's built like a tank. While this is technically a guitar pedal, it can take line-level inputs without distorting, so you can patch it in via your mixer's effects send and it will work great. We put some reverb on both the keyboard and the vocal for my show; it really ties the sounds all together and makes the whole presentation sound both evocative and polished.

### [Shure SM58 mic on a boom stand](#)

Enough said. A timeless classic!

You can buy all this stuff brand new, including all the cables you'll need, for under \$600. I've put handy links to all of it on the aforementioned web page, as well as directly above. The relatively small investment we made in this very basic PA has paid us dividends so many times over. I highly recommend it.

*Note: you can buy small mixers with built-in reverb, and that could be another great way to go. I like having my reverb come from a separate piece of hardware, because a) it's a special-sounding reverb that works well with the ambience I'm working to create, and b) I can bring the return back into a mixer channel and EQ it some – reverb generally fits around a vocal better with some highs and lows taken out. But you should do whatever works best for you.*



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shannon Curtis is an independent songwriter, singer, performer, and recording artist. Her second full-length record of downtempo dreampop, *Metaforma*, was released in June 2014, one day less than a year after her 2013 debut album *Cinemascope*.

Curtis has also previously released three EPs, two acoustic LPs, two 10-track maxi-singles and two live albums, all on her own Saint Cloud Records label.

Curtis's pioneering use of the house concert touring format has brought her to about half the states in the US so far, and also to Canada.

Curtis lives in Los Angeles with her husband, producer/engineer [Jamie Hill](#).



## CONNECT WITH SHANNON

You can find Shannon on Facebook at [/shannoncurtismusic](#), on Twitter at [@shannoncurtis](#), on Instagram at [@shannoncurtismusic](#), and at her website: [shannoncurtis.net](#).

Visit Shannon's forum for artists who are doing or are learning how to do community-based house concerts, at <http://shannoncurtis.net/community>.

###

Thank you so much for reading my book. If you liked it, will you take a moment and [leave me a glowing review](#) at Amazon? It would make a huge difference. Thank you!

- Shannon